

This week on War News Radio, government military offensive against rebel groups in the Philippines, updates on anti-government protests in Ukraine, journalists charged with conspiracy in Egypt, a zone of peace in Latin America and the Caribbean, tensions over Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and more.

Pendle Marshall-Hallmark: From War News Radio at Swarthmore College, I'm Pendle Marshall-Hallmark

Caroline Batten: And I'm Caroline Batten. At least 37 people were killed on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines this week, as the Philippine government launched a military offensive against rebel groups. The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, or B-I-F-F, opposed a peace deal made last week between the government and another rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The group was granted control of an autonomous area of Mindanao in exchange for a ceasefire. But the B-I-F-F, along with the al-Qaeda-linked group Abu Sayyaf, continue to seek the establishment of an Islamic state. Government officials have expressed concern that opposition to the peace deal might affect future negotiations. In a statement, Colonel Ramon Zagala noted, quote, "There is no direct link between the signing of the peace agreement and this operation, but it has an effect on the peace process."

Pendle Marshall-Hallmark: The President of Ukraine has taken sick leave – but without signing a repeal of harsh restrictions on free speech and assembly passed earlier this month. A statement on the website of President Viktor Yanukovich says he is suffering from respiratory illness and does not indicate when he will return. The streets in the capital city of Kiev were reported calm Wednesday, but tensions remain high. Opposition leaders say a measure freeing two hundred eighteen activists and urging an end to protests is unacceptable so long as efforts to overhaul the Constitution fail. Russia has also withdrawn financial aid to Ukraine, a move designed to put economic pressure on the country as it considers aligning with the West. Protests began in November when Mr. Yanukovich rescinded a trade deal with the European Union and instead drew closer to Russia.

Caroline Batten: It has been seven months since US Secretary of State John Kerry launched Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations and tensions within the two camps continue to threaten their success. The Secretary of State's plan calls for the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state drawn along the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Earlier this week, Naftali Bennett, the leader of the religious-nationalist Jewish Home Party, criticized a statement made by the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The statement alluded to the likelihood of some Israeli settlers living under Palestinian authority as minority citizens, should a peace deal be brokered. Bennett argued that, quote, "imposing Palestinian sovereignty over Israeli citizens is dangerous and it was my duty to remove this idea immediately from our agenda." The Prime Minister's office warned that if Bennett did not apologize, his seat in the cabinet would be threatened. While no official apology has been given, Bennett's criticism reveals the deep fractions within the Israeli government over the existence of a Palestinian state and its potential nature.

Pendle Marshall-Hallmark: The 33 countries of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean states agreed to respect the right of all countries in the region to select their own political systems, as representatives convened at a summit in Cuba this week. The announcement is significant, as Cuba is the only one-party state in the Western Hemisphere. At the summit, the leaders also agreed to, quote, “not intervene, directly or indirectly, in the internal affairs of any other state and to observe the principles of national sovereignty.” Cuban President Raul Castro proclaimed Latin America and the Caribbean a, quote, “zone of peace.”

Caroline Batten: Tunisia’s new caretaker government, led by Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa, was sworn into office earlier this week. Jomaa and his cabinet replaced the Islamist Ennahda party, which came under fire for failing to combat terrorism and stabilize Tunisia’s economy. The power transfer comes just days after the country’s national assembly passed a new constitution. The caretaker government will preside until elections are held later this year, supervised by an electoral commission. Ennahda’s leader spoke out in favor of the regime change, stating, quote, “Ennahda handed over power for the benefit of our country.” Jomaa will be the fifth prime minister to take office since the 2011 revolution that overthrew former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

Pendle Marshall-Hallmark: The first peace talks between the Syrian Government and the opposing Syrian National Coalition began earlier this week, facilitated by United Nations Arab League mediator Lakhdar Brahimi. At the beginning of the talks, Mr. Brahimi noted a large gap between the two sides but a growing interest in continuing dialogue. Both parties have agreed to use the “Geneva communiqué,” a document produced by UN Security Council members, to illuminate possible steps to ending the violence in Syria. As talks continue, twenty-five hundred Syrians living in the Old City of Homs remain under siege, and await a UN aid convoy of food and medicine that has yet to be approved by the Syrian government.

Caroline Batten: Edward Snowden has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by two members of Norway’s Socialist Left Party. Snowden leaked National Security Agency documents in 2013 that revealed mass surveillance of individuals in the US and around the world. The nomination letter claims that Snowden has contributed to making the world more peaceful, because President Obama was encouraged to make changes in surveillance programs, after the public backlash resulting from Snowden’s whistleblowing. White House officials claim that Snowden should be tried as a felon for damaging security interests, rather than receive the same prize won by President Obama in 2009. Snowden currently has temporary asylum in Russia.

Pendle Marshall-Hallmark: Earlier this week, Egyptian prosecutors charged 20 Al Jazeera journalists, including 4 foreign correspondents, with aiding a terrorist group. Prosecutors have accused the journalists of, quote, “manipulating video footage to produce unreal scenes to suggest abroad that what is happening in the country is a civil war that raises alarms about the state’s collapse.” If they are convicted, the journalists could spend several years in prison. Many see the charges against the journalists as only the latest in government attempts to stifle public dissent. In a statement by Al Jazeera, a spokesperson called the detainments a, quote, “challenge to free speech, to the right of journalists to report on all aspects of events, and to the right of people to know what is going on.”

Caroline Batten: If you want to hear more from War News Radio, visit us online at War News Radio.o-r-g. This week's newscast was written and edited by Caroline Batten, Amy DiPierro, Joelle Hageboutros, Allison Hrabar, Sabrina Merold, Dylan Okabe-Jawdat, Jerry Qin, Tyler Welsh, Zoey Werbin, Chloe Wittenberg, and Rachel Yang. I'm Caroline Batten.

Pendle Marshall-Hallmark: And I'm Pendle Marshall-Hallmark. Until next time, thanks for listening.