

## *Closer Military Ties May Mean Deepening War in the Philippines*

By John Gershman

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo arrives in Washington on November 18 for three days of meetings with U.S. officials and President George W. Bush. The visit follows a speech at the UN General Assembly and talks with Filipino and Filipino-American communities in San Francisco and New York. The agenda for bilateral talks includes a range of issues, such as increased economic and military aid and support for the Filipino Veterans Equity Act that would provide Filipino veterans of the U.S. military during World War II benefits equal to those of their U.S. counterparts.

The major issue, however, will be the Philippine role in the Bush administration's war on terrorism. The Arroyo administration has reopened the former U.S. military bases to provide refueling and repair services to U.S. ships and aircraft. Arroyo and Bush will sign an agreement allowing U.S. military forces to purchase supplies, spare parts, and services in the Philippines under commercial arrangements. The agreement would complement the 1999 RP-U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement that allows the limited large-scale presence of U.S. troops during annual joint and combined military exercises. Washington's plans for the anti-terror campaign in the Philippines primarily involves support for Philippine authorities in tracking terrorist sources of financing and sharing intelligence, as opposed to direct military action. The Bush administration is concerned that the Philippines may be used as a base of operations by Islamist terrorist organizations, including those with ties to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. For example, two years after bombing the World Trade Center in 1993, Ramzi Yousef and some accomplices planned to target 20 U.S. commercial airliners for mid-air explosions. They tested a bomb on a Philippines

Airlines flight from Manila to Tokyo in December 1994, killing a Japanese businessman—under whose seat Yousef had placed the explosives—and injuring 10 others. A month later, Yousef made a mistake while mixing various chemicals, causing a fire to break out in his Manila flat. He fled and escaped to Pakistan, where he was later arrested.

Arroyo, on the other hand, is hoping for an avalanche of military aid in return for her government's all-out support of the administration's war effort. In particular, Arroyo wants more equipment for Philippine troops fighting the Abu Sayyaf, an Islamic extremist group in the southern Philippines. Until 1992, U.S. military assistance averaged about \$200 million annually. That fell to zero after the Philippine Senate refused to approve an extension for a lease for the U.S. naval base at Subic Bay (Clark Air Force Base had been rendered unusable after the 1991 eruption of Mt. Pinatubo). In 2000 the U.S. provided \$2 million in military aid, \$1.4 million in military training, and a used C-130 cargo plane. Military assistance in the form of Economic Support Funds increased from zero in FY2000 to an estimated \$9 million in FY2001 and \$15 million are requested for FY2002. Financing for weapons purchases are scheduled to increase from \$1.4 million, to \$2 million and \$19 million over the same period.

On November 13 Washington and Manila agreed to expand bilateral defense and military cooperation, making counterterrorism efforts part of their future work plan under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. Signed by Admiral Dennis Blair, U.S. commander-in-chief of the Pacific Command and Philippine Armed Forces chief of staff, General Diomedio Villanueva, the new five-year work plan details a series of joint military activities, including the

annual large-scale bilateral “Balikatan” exercises. More U.S. military advisers are expected to conduct commando and similar special operations-type training activities in the country. Last month, a 26-member U.S. Special Operations Assessment Team stayed in the country for two weeks to evaluate the performance of Filipino soldiers fighting the Abu Sayyaf on the island of Basilan.

A Filipino who fought with the mujahedin in Afghanistan founded Abu Sayyaf, which emerged in the early 1990s. In April 2000, Abu Sayyaf committed its first international crime, seizing 20 Asian and European hostages from a Malaysian resort. It later released them for more than \$20 million, in a deal brokered by Libyan officials. Abu Sayyaf used the ransom to recruit new members, swelling its ranks to about 1,000, up from a few hundred. The money may have gone to other uses as well. In June, after a 12-hour standoff, in which Abu Sayyaf forces were pinned down at a hospital by tanks, helicopters, and 3,000 soldiers, commanding officers called troops away from the rear of the building. The guerrillas melted quietly into the jungle. The Philippine Senate has launched an inquiry into allegations that the mili-

tants bribed their way to freedom, which commanders deny. Philippine military officials claim that the Abu Sayyaf received material and financial aid as well as training from Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda network until 1995, and that the two groups have maintained contact since then. Abu Sayyaf is currently holding three hostages—two U.S. citizens and a Filipina—kidnapped earlier this year.

The renewal of closer military ties raises significant concerns given the Philippine military’s poor human rights record. Many of these abuses, including extra-judicial killings, are associated with the military’s fight against communist and Muslim insurgents, which has displaced large numbers of civilians. Over-emphasizing military ties also risks ignoring important social, economic, and political issues facing Muslims in the Philippines. Muslim majority regions in the Philippines rank in the bottom on per capita income as well as social indicators like health and education. While development funds through the U.S. Agency for International Development are scheduled to increase from \$30 million in FY2000 to \$49 million in FY2001 and \$52 million in FY2002, the overwhelming majority of the increase is from

security-related Economic Support Funds.

Two other Moro (Muslim Filipino) movements for self-determination, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have either signed peace agreements (the MNLF) or are in ongoing negotiations with the Philippine government (the MILF). The Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, which is holding elections for officials on November 26, remains starved of resources from the central government, and the Philippine military has routinely violated ceasefire agreements with the MILF. There are legitimate Philippine defense needs, but more attention needs to be paid to the social, economic, and political grievances of Moros throughout the Philippines if the conditions that facilitate the operations of the Abu Sayyaf are to cease to exist.

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