

# Philippine president uses September 11 attacks to forge closer ties with US

Keith Morgan, Peter Symonds  
13 December 2001

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has exploited the opportunity to establish a closer relationship with the US. She immediately condemned the attacks and gave full support to the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism," offering the use of the former US military bases—the Clark airfield and the Subic Bay naval facility.

Last month, Arroyo received a substantial payoff when she visited Washington for the first time since ousting former president Joseph Estrada in January. Timed to mark the 50th anniversary of the Philippines-US Mutual Defence Treaty, her visit secured an extensive package of military and economic assistance for her administration.

Desperate for financial aid to bolster the flagging Philippine economy, Arroyo could scarcely contain her glee when she told the media: "It's \$4.6 billion and still counting." The package included a \$2 billion military and economic grant from the Bush administration, plus a further \$2 billion in investments from US companies and \$261 million in multilateral aid.

Deals with US corporations included a \$100 million project involving Kellogg Brown & Root and the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority to establish a ship repair facility at the former US naval base and a plan by Ford to use the Philippines to export 65,000 vehicles over the next five years. Six US companies plan to set up call centres employing an estimated 11,300 people. "American business says that the Philippines is back on the radar screen," Arroyo declared after arriving back in Manila on November 23.

Prior to her visit, the stock market hit a 10-year low on October 9 and the peso remained weak at over 50 to the US dollar. The economic downturn in the US and

the continuing slump in Japan have hit the country's exports—60 percent are electronic products. From January to the end of September, merchandise exports fell by 14.1 percent compared to the same period last year. Of the Bush administration's aid, \$1 billion comes in the form of Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) benefits or zero tariffs on specific Philippine products entering the US.

The economic package provides a short-term boost for the Philippine administration, which has come under increasing fire over its failure to push ahead rapidly enough with economic restructuring. The 2002 budget has yet to be ratified and all attempts to push it through have failed, due to opposition in both the Congress and Senate. Arroyo has been forced to rely on the 2000 General Appropriations Act.

Speaking at a joint press conference, Bush praised Arroyo "for her uncompromising leadership in the global campaign against terror" and expressed appreciation for her "efforts to forge a regional ASEAN [Association of South East Asian Nations] approach to combatting terror". Arroyo has seized on the issue of "terrorism" to promote the Philippines as a base for US operations, trading on the fact that, unlike Indonesia and Malaysia, it does not have a Muslim majority population.

Arroyo's visit has cemented far closer defence ties with the US, which has offered substantial military assistance to crack down on Islamic separatists in the Southern Mindanao region. The Bush administration has included the Abu Sayyaf group, which has been involved in a series of kidnappings over the last year, on the US list of organisations with suspected links to Osama bin Laden.

Bush confirmed he would work with Arroyo on a "vigorous integrated plan to strengthen the Philippine

security forces capacity to combat terrorism and to protect Philippine sovereignty”. He bluntly said he had offered to assist “in any way she suggests in getting rid of Abu Sayyaf”.

The US is to provide about \$100 million in defence aid, including Cyclone-class patrol boats, 30,000 M16s and 120,000 M16 magazines. The Philippines has already been given a C-130 transport plane, a Point class patrol boat and 100 trucks. Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes was to meet with the US military chiefs to discuss the supply of further military hardware.

At least two groups of US military advisers have already visited the southern Philippines to assess the military operations against Abu Sayyaf. Last Friday, a team of 15 US personnel disembarked with a large van at the Edwin Andrews military base in the city of Zamboanga. Over the weekend, Arroyo’s spokesman Rigoberto Tiglao indicated that Washington had offered US troops for operations against Abu Sayyaf guerrillas who are holding hostages, including two Americans.

It is clear, however, that the defence ties are not going to be limited to Abu Sayyaf. The US lost access to the Clark airfield and Subic Bay in 1991 and is now seeking to reestablish the Philippines as a platform of operations in South East Asia. The basis for broader military operations by US forces inside its former colony is also being laid with the announcement over the weekend that Washington was including the New Peoples Army (NPA) and its Alex Boncayao Brigade—guerilla groups connected to the Communist Party of the Philippines—on its “terrorist exclusion list.”

For their part, Arroyo and the Philippine military are intensifying their operations in southern Mindanao where the brutal war against Islamic separatist groups has claimed the lives of an estimated 120,000 people over the last two decades. A peace deal with a section of the Moro National Liberation Front led by Nur Misuari has broken down, leading to fighting on the island of Jolo in which at least 100 people have died. Southern Mindanao, with a largely Muslim population, is one of the poorest and least developed areas of the Philippines.

The army has even more ambitious plans. On December 1, military spokesman Brigadier General Edilberto Adan declared that he found it “funny” that “we have some 25,000 rebels in our midst and we still

do not regard [it as] an emergency situation”. The following day, army chief Lieutenant General Jaime delos Santos called for the recruitment of 20,000 extra troops in order to deal with the “crisis of insurgency”. Such an increase would require Congressional approval.

Arroyo has seized on the events of September 11 to make significant inroads into democratic rights. She has released a 14-pillar policy to combat terrorism and appointed Executive Secretary Alberto Romulo to take charge of the Cabinet Oversight Committee on Internal Security. Romulo will be given sweeping powers based on those of the Office of Homeland Security set up by President Bush.

The Arroyo government has rammed an “Anti-Money Laundering Bill” through Congress aimed at confiscating the funds of alleged terrorist groups. On October 18 she announced the lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty, telling a news conference that criminals had been emboldened by her suspension of the death penalty.

Arroyo is also pushing ahead with plans for a national ID card system. Initially not part of the 14-point plan, Presidential spokesman Roberto Tiglao only announced the ID proposal later. First introduced under the Marcos dictatorship, plans for an ID card system have previously provoked strong opposition.

While these measures are being implemented under the guise of fighting terrorism, the main target is the working class. Arroyo’s economic restructuring, including privatisations, budget cutbacks and a wage freeze, will inevitably provoke opposition. The tougher police powers are aimed at bolstering the security forces and their capacity for dealing with any movement against the government.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**