

The US extends "war on terrorism" into the Philippines

Peter Symonds
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Under the guise of conducting a joint training exercise with the Philippines Armed Forces, more than 650 US troops, including 160 elite special forces soldiers, have begun landing on the southern island of Basilan where the separatist Abu Sayyaf guerrilla group is based. The deployment marks a significant extension of the Bush administration's so-called global war against terrorism and an aggressive reassertion of US interests in its former colony and more broadly in South East Asia.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo insisted last Friday that the US troops were to provide training not to help destroy the rebels. All the evidence, however, points to the contrary. The "exercise" is being conducted in the Abu Sayyaf stronghold and is due to last at least until June. To provide "realistic training", armed US troops will accompany Filipino units in hunting down Abu Sayyaf fighters to "observe" and "make assessments" and will be authorised to "defend themselves".

Presidential spokesman Rigoberto Tiglao made it abundantly clear that the "exercise" was in reality a military operation aimed at eliminating the separatist group. "Our biggest problem really is the Abu Sayyaf. Not in terms of a military threat but the Abu Sayyaf really has created the perception that we are an Afghanistan. If this [joint exercise] could result in the wiping out of the Abu Sayyaf, we'll really just have to roll with the punches."

Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes was even more explicit. He indicated that the exercise could be extended until the end of the year, then added: "In the course of this joint effort, we expect the Abu Sayyaf neutralised and the hostages recovered." Abu Sayyaf has been responsible for the kidnapping of a number of hostages, including a group of foreign tourists and staff seized from the Malaysian diving resort of Sipadan in April 2000. It is currently holding an American missionary couple, Martin and Gracia Burnham, and a Filipina nurse Deborah Yap.

The operation represents a marked escalation of US military involvement in the Philippines. Previous joint exercises held between 1981 and 1995 involved around 3,000 US and Filipino troops but were scrapped in 1996. Until the Philippines signed the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with Washington in 1999, no more than 20 US personnel have been involved in

training at any one time. A greater number of US troops have participated in more recent exercises, but only in secure areas and for short periods of time—two weeks to a month.

Arroyo admitted she was asked by President Bush to allow US troops to conduct operations against Abu Sayyaf when she visited Washington last November. She claims to have refused, telling Bush that Filipino troops were capable of dealing with the guerrillas. The Philippine president had two reasons for being nervous about agreeing to an overt US military operation: firstly, it is prohibited under the country's constitution, and secondly, given America's long record of interference in Filipino affairs, it was likely to provoke opposition.

A number of political figures have already criticised Arroyo, pointing out that the current joint "exercise" is a transparent ruse to enable Bush to expand his "war on terrorism" into the Philippines. Former senator Francisco Tatad described the decision as a "deceptive and treasonous move" that makes "the Philippines a virtual extension of Afghanistan". Along with other critics, he has insisted that the influx of US troops onto Basilan was unconstitutional and warned that Arroyo could be impeached.

"CNN may not mind it when she says the US troops are here to train Filipino soldiers on anti-terrorist warfare," Tatad said. "But we mind it very much when we are treated like morons and lied to in this manner." He accused Arroyo of turning government into "one-woman rule" in order to further her ambitions for the 2004 presidential election.

Tatad and others reflect concerns in ruling circles over the consequences of US military intervention. They are also seeking to capitalise on anti-US sentiment. According to a poll conducted by the Ibon Foundation Databank and Research Centre, a majority of Filipinos—52.73 percent—disapproved of the joint training exercise on Basilan. Senator Rodolfo Biazon warned of the political dangers, saying: "All it will take is one bullet fired by an American soldier that would kill a Filipino citizen, such as what happened in Afghanistan, and the political stability of the country will be adversely affected."

Leftist groups in the Philippines have also opposed the US military deployment. Exiled Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) leader Jose Maria Sison issued a statement saying that Abu Sayyaf was being used as an excuse for a "war

of intervention and possibly a war of aggression” against “the people of the Philippines and their revolutionary forces”. He predicted that the US military presence would help precipitate the “relatively peaceful removal” of Arroyo within one year.

Sison and other “left” leaders may now emphatically denounce Arroyo but they bear a direct responsibility for her administration. This month marks the first anniversary of the ousting of former president Joseph Estrada and the insertion of Arroyo in what is known as “Peoples Power II”. Having failed to impeach Estrada on grounds of corruption, sections of the military, political and business elite with the support of the Supreme Court declared their support for Arroyo as president and forced Estrada out. A key role in providing a democratic veneer for this manoeuvre was played by figures like Sison who fed the illusion that Arroyo, a scion of the political establishment, would somehow benefit the masses and was preferable to Estrada.

A year after coming to power Arroyo has proven to be just as vicious as Estrada in her assault on the living standards and democratic rights of working people. Arroyo’s support for Bush’s war against Afghanistan and the deployment of troops is a bid to shore up her shaky political position. Her meeting with Bush in November resulted in a significant injection of US economic aid and investment into the country’s flagging economy—to the tune of \$4.6 billion—as well as military hardware to boost the armed forces.

Moreover, Arroyo has sought to use the “war on terrorism” to deflect the growing discontent with her administration. Just a year after coming to office, support for the Philippine president has slumped. A recent poll for the Ibon Foundation found that her net satisfaction rating was negative 8.27 percent—more people disapproved than approved of her administration—for the last quarter of 2001, as compared to a positive 19.2 percent for the previous quarter.

Arroyo came to power promising to end corruption and to boost the economy by implementing the IMF’s restructuring demands. However, economic growth has slowed to 3.1 percent for the first nine months of 2001 as compared to 4.1 percent over the same period in the previous year. As a result, at least 500 companies shut down last year and 60,000 workers lost their jobs.

Among Manila’s poor, there is open hostility to Arroyo. Commenting on a large anti-government protest last May, one local leader told the press: “If we were angry with Gloria then, we are three times angrier now and we will make her feel our anger threefold the next time.” A housewife expressed her hostility by saying: “Gloria should not stick with the rich because their stomachs are already full. She should pay attention to people like us whose stomachs are growling.”

Around 40 percent of the country’s population live on incomes below the official poverty line. Basilan, where Abu Sayyaf is based, is part of southern Mindanao—one of the poorest and most deprived regions of the Philippines. Years of

neglect and repression by successive governments in Manila have fueled resentment among the largely Muslim population and led to the formation of the separatist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Two decades of military operations against the MNLF and its various offshoots, including Abu Sayyaf, has resulted in an estimated 120,000 deaths and caused widespread suffering.

Having failed to arrest the country’s economic decline, Arroyo also faces opposition in ruling circles. Her husband Jose Miguel “Mike” Arroyo, a wealthy lawyer and businessman, is already embroiled in allegations of corruption. He was questioned by a Senate panel over allegations that he took nearly \$1 million in bribes to persuade the president to reverse a veto of a telecommunications franchise deal.

A statement last week by former President Fidel Ramos also points to waning support for Arroyo in the ruling elites. He said that she should focus on fixing the economy rather than preparing for the next presidential election, pointedly adding: “I hope she avoids what Erap [Estrada’s nickname] did and this was a very big mistake”. Given that Ramos was central to the ousting of Estrada, his comments effectively put Arroyo on notice—either shape up or meet the same fate as Erap.

Arroyo’s decision to allow the US military to operate on Basilan is a calculated gamble aimed at ensuring the continued backing of Washington and galvanising support in ruling circles for her administration. But it is a move that could easily backfire if opposition and protests escalate.

The US administration has obviously pressured the Philippines into accepting US involvement in the military operations against Abu Sayyaf. While Bush may be hoping for a short-term boost from any release of the two American hostages, the US move has broader motives—to establish the Philippines as a US base of operations with the region and to set the precedent for similar interventions, particularly in South East Asia. As elsewhere, the US is pursuing its aims with complete indifference to the potentially destabilising consequences for the Philippines.



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