

US 'training exercise' in the Philippines sets stage for broader military operations

John Roberts
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According to the US and Filipino governments, the 660 American troops that began to arrive in the Philippines in January, are involved in a six-month "training exercise". Two months on, however, a different picture has begun to emerge with the US military playing a leading operational role in search and destroy missions, directed, initially at least, against Abu Sayyaf rebels on the southern island of Basilan.

The term "training exercise" was only ever a flimsy cover designed to circumvent the Filipino constitution, which bars the deployment of foreign troops on the country's soil, and to allay President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's fears of a political backlash. Such is the sensitivity of the issue that even conservative political figures raised concerns about the threat to national sovereignty posed by the presence of soldiers of the former colonial power.

A recent article in the *New York Times* described the cynical logic involved: "The Bush administration was prepared to send troops to battle Abu Sayyaf guerillas. But the Philippine Constitution, laws and domestic politics made that impossible, so Philippine leaders came up with the idea of a training exercise... lawyers from both countries negotiated language to describe the exercise and the rules... American forces will be allowed to fire only in self-defence. But American and Philippine officers said the American troops will undoubtedly come under fire, making it likely that they will engage in combat."

And that is exactly what is being planned for. Already the 160 US Special Forces troops are operating side-by-side on patrols with Filipino troops hunting the Abu Sayyaf group that is holding three hostages—a US missionary couple, Martin and Marcia Burnham, and a Filipino nurse, Ediborah Yap. On March 5, at least nine US soldiers accompanied 200 Philippines marines into the Upper Mahayahay hills, an area where Abu Sayyaf is known to be active. While no contact was reported, it was clearly intended.

Further information came to light after the crash of a US Army Chinook helicopter north of the city of Zamboanga on February 22, killing all 10 on board. US Army spokeswoman Major Cynthia Teramae, based in the Philippines, reported the loss and the aircraft's immediate replacement, disingenuously describing its mission as being one of three "night air ambulances"

But Teramae also revealed the model—the MH-47E. While the US Army has hundreds of Boeing-built Chinooks, it has only 25 of these specially designed models, which are described in the *International Directory of Military Aircraft* as being for "covert troop insertion and extraction". The helicopter is loaded with

sophisticated equipment including GPS navigation gear, chin mounted AAQ-16 Forward Looking Infra-Red night fighting equipment and APQ-174 radar for ground mapping and terrain following, jam resistant radios, radar, laser and missile warning systems and chaff and flare dispensers.

The helicopter is designed to "insert and extract" a team of up to 44 Special Forces troops under cover of night. A number of press reports indicate that Philippine troops are neither trained nor equipped to carry out night fighting, which indicates that US Special Forces, perhaps with a token Philippine presence, are already roaming at will over the island of Basilan. The MH-47Es are backed up by three special warfare versions of the Blackhawk helicopter—the Pave Hawk.

Interviews with Philippine Brigadier General Edilberto Adan in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* shed some light on the functions of the other 500 US military personnel, based in Zamboanga. These "support troops" operate a sophisticated command, communication and intelligence centre, exploiting a battery of surveillance systems similar to those in use in Afghanistan.

While the Philippine armed forces may be nominally in charge of operations on Basilan, it is the US military that has the information and therefore calls the shots. Without the intelligence supplied by US aircraft and satellites, the Philippine forces are operating in the dark. US commanders choose what to tell their Philippine counterparts and therefore set the framework for the timing and planning of any operations.

As Adan explained, electronic intelligence and surveillance P-3 Orion aircraft are constantly circling overhead feeding information to US specialists on the ground to analyse. "We've had the aircraft for a while, but there was no one on the ground to interpret what they were picking up. Now they are in place," Adan said. "This has increased our awareness dramatically." These systems have now been supplemented by unmanned spy planes—Gnat UAVs—similar to the Predator drones used in Afghanistan.

One officer described a hi-tech operations room with detailed displays, covering every part of Basilan Island, updated by incoming information. US Special Forces troops are able to communicate directly with the Orion aircraft and therefore with command centre. Until their arrival, Philippine soldiers were limited to the use of two-way radios with a range of less than two kilometres.

The Balikatan, or "shoulder-to-shoulder," exercise is scheduled

to last for six months but all the signs point to a determination on the part of the Bush administration to extend and broaden the use of US troops in the Philippines. For nearly a century, US bases in the Philippines were regarded by military planners as vital strategic assets for defending American interests in East Asia. Having been forced to quit the bases in 1992, Washington is now seeking to reestablish a military presence in the Philippines and other parts of the region.

Balikatan 2002 is a first step. The stated rationale for the operation is a flimsy one. A number of commentators and political figures, including President Arroyo, have pointed out that there is no evidence of ties between Al Qaeda and Abu Sayyaf. Even *Time* magazine, which has recently been highlighting the dangers of “terrorist hubs” in South East Asia, was forced to conclude that the group’s links to Al Qaeda had “atrophied” and that attacking Abu Sayyaf “as beneficial as it would be to local security, will likely have little impact on eradicating global terrorism”.

Moreover, the size of the operation is out of all proportion to that of the alleged threat. An estimated 3,500 Philippine soldiers along with 660 US troops backed by sophisticated intelligence and military hardware are involved in chasing a group of poorly armed guerrillas estimated to number around 80. The involvement of two American hostages provides the US administration with an added excuse. While their release would provide a propaganda boost for Bush, Washington has its sights on bigger targets.

Basilan is also home to around 1,000 members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), one of the two large armed guerrilla groups that have been fighting for a separate Islamic state in the southern Philippines for nearly two decades. The origins of the war, which has claimed the lives of about 120,000 people, lies in the discrimination and appalling poverty faced by the predominantly Muslim population in the region. Abu Sayyaf is a tiny breakaway from the MILF formed in the late 1990s.

While Arroyo is nominally in peace talks with the MILF, the government, bolstered by the US presence, appears to be taking a tougher line and setting the stage for a new offensive. Last week, negotiations were delayed as the Philippines military accused the MILF of breaking the truce and harbouring Abu Sayyaf members. MILF officials deny the allegations and accuse the military of breaking the truce. The sudden brake on talks by Manila is an ominous sign. With US Special Forces already on the ground on Basilan, it would not be difficult to engineer a provocation that would rapidly shift the focus from Abu Sayyaf to the MILF.

The US media is also preparing the ground. On March 3, an article in *Time*, while casting doubts on Abu Sayyaf’s links to Osama bin Laden, alleged that three men held in the Philippines on immigration charges are all part of an Al Qaeda “terrorist cell” with connections to the MILF. The magazine described one of the three, Mohammad Sabri Selamah, as an associate of Mohammad Jamal Khalifa—“the Philippines point man for Osama bin Laden”—and claimed he was “in regular touch” with the MILF. The article provided no proof for any of the allegations. It nevertheless concluded that all that remained to be established was whether the contacts involved rogue MILF officials, or the MILF was “importing terrorism as a matter of policy”.

In similar vein, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on March 8 that

Abu Sayyaf had received support from the MILF and that a former Abu Sayyaf hostage had testified before a Philippine congressional committee that he had been handed over to the MILF for a month.

An offensive against the MILF, which is estimated to have as many as 12,500 armed fighters in the southern Philippines, would be a far more protracted affair than the hunt for 80 Abu Sayyaf guerrillas—and would provide one pretext for a more permanent US force in the Philippines. Another may be the Maoist guerrillas of the New Peoples Army (NPA) led by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Arroyo has already accused critics of the US deployment of being dupes of the CPP, and directly linked the NPA to Abu Sayyaf, even though the Maoist leadership is hostile to the group.

The US military is preparing for far more extensive operations. The latest issue of *Time* bluntly described the purpose of Balikatan 2002 as follows: “[T]he joint exercises are just a warm-up. Abu Sayyaf is more a gang of local kidnapers than a global Islamist terrorist organisation. But two groups linked to Al Qaeda [MILF and Jemaah Islamia] are in the Philippines. Better-trained soldiers and intelligence agents could help contain Al Qaeda operations inside the country and in nearby Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia.”

In testimony before US Congressional committees in late February, Admiral Dennis Blair, the US Commander-in Chief of the Pacific, confirmed these wider ambitions by calling for a substantial expansion of special warfare troops for the region. “Over 5,000 additional billets are needed to address the full range of force protection, anti-terrorism, and counter-terrorism missions throughout” the Pacific command, he said.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the Balikatan 2002 operation, it provides an ideal opportunity for the US military to test out its troops, equipment and tactics for deployment in other arenas in the Philippines, the region and further afield. The “Philippines model” is already being cited as the guide for the deployment of US “training operations” in Georgia and other countries.



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