Philippine bomb blasts provide excuse for expanded US military presence

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A series of bomb blasts last month in the southern Philippine city of General Santos has been used to argue for greater US military involvement in the country. Most of the casualties were caused by a single blast on April 21 from a bomb placed under a tricycle taxi in front of the Fitmart-Gensan shopping mall. The 14 dead and 60 injured were shoppers, passers-by, tricycle drivers and their passengers.

Police had been warned that 18 bombs had been planted around the city. Text messages had been sent to a number of journalists identifying crowded places as targets. Three bombs went off despite police claims to have taken extra security measure at both government buildings and privately owned complexes. Mindanao police commander Bartolome Baluyot lamely stated that the bombers "still outwitted us".

The following day, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo seized on the arbitrary act of terrorism to declare a state of emergency throughout the city, including the imposition of curfews. She urged the Philippine Congress to pass new anti-terrorist legislation under consideration that significantly bolsters police powers.

The *New York Post* also exploited the opportunity on April 23 to declare: "Anyone who thinks that the War on Terror needn't go beyond Afghanistan's borders has a bit of explaining to do, given the horrific bomb attacks in the Philippines on Sunday." The blasts demonstrated, the newspaper stated, that the Islamic fundamentalist militia Abu Sayyaf—"an ally of Al Qaeda"—was "still a force to be reckoned with".

More than 1,000 US troops, including 160 special forces soldiers, are currently in the southern Philippines as part of a six-month "training exercise" targetted at an Abu Sayyaf group, which is holding an American missionary couple, Martin and Gracia Burnham, and a Philippine nurse, Ediborah Yap, on the island of Basilan. No evidence has been provided that Abu Sayyaf has links to Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organisation.

The only evidence linking Abu Sayyaf to the General Santos bombings is a caller to a radio station who claimed responsibility on behalf of the group. At least five suspects have been rounded up but it is still not clear who is responsible. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), one of the two main separatist groups operating in the predominantly Muslim southern Mindanao, has denied any involvement.

According to Superintendent Baluyot, the suspects include former members of the MILF, the Moro National Liberation Front and the New Peoples Army, which is controlled by the Communist Party of the Philippines. A *New York Times* article on April 27 suggested a range of theories but indicated that neither US nor Philippines officials believed the caller who claimed responsibility for Abu Sayyaf. Some American officials thought the blasts "were most probably the work of local criminals seeking to extort money from businesses".

One article in the *Manila Times* on April 24, citing unnamed senior intelligence officers, pointed to the involvement of retired and active military officers. The sources dismissed the claims of government critics that Arroyo had approved the bombings to provide the basis for an extension of the US training mission to the Mindanao mainland. But they did reveal that the detained suspects were recently "in constant touch with some military and police officials" and that "some sectors, including the right, want a stronger response in Mindanao".

Whoever was actually responsible for the atrocities in General Santos, the bombings have helped to create the political atmosphere for more extensive US military involvement in the Philippines.

In the week prior to the bombings, Admiral Dennis Blair, the US Pacific forces commander, called on the Arroyo government to remove restrictions on US soldiers operating on Basilan. He called for US troops to be integrated with Filipino forces at company and platoon levels, instead of at battalion level, so as to allow them to give "real time" intelligence and advice. The change would enable US troops to engage in patrols—a move that is likely to provoke opposition.

The joint US-Philippine operation on Basilan has been

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termed a training mission because the Philippines constitution forbids the involvement of foreign troops in combat roles on the national territory. But the exercise is due to begin winding down this month and to end in June.

Behind the scenes, as the *New York Times* article of April 27 made clear, the US military is chafing at the restrictions being imposed on their operation. Far from "training," the immediate aim was to secure the release of the Burnhams, which Abu Sayyaf has failed to do even after the payment of $300,000 in ransom.

"Lack of cooperation between Philippine security agencies, and even between branches of the armed forces, has hampered previous hostage-rescue efforts and become a serious impediment to the Bush administration's war on terrorism here," the article noted, adding: "American and some Philippines military officers argue that patrols by small units of highly trained soldiers are needed to locate and rescue the Burnhams."

From the outset, the Pentagon has held open the possibility of extending the US mission on Basilan. The exercise has far broader aims than releasing the two Americans. Ever since the US defeat in Vietnam in the 1970s and the loss of its two major military bases in the Philippines in 1992, the US military has been seeking ways to reestablish operations in South East Asia. The "war on terrorism" provides an ideal pretext.

The importance of the Philippines to US interests in the region was underscored by a trip by US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, General Richard Myers, in late April. Myers made a point of flying to Basilan to meet with US and Filipino troops. He told the media that the Pentagon was concerned that Al Qaeda was looking for training bases in South East Asia. "The US government would be very receptive to requests from the Philippine government for future assistance and advisory roles for the US armed forces if that's what the Philippine government wants, " Myers said. Arroyo has already publicly called for more US assistance.

The recent arrival on Basilan of 340 US navy engineers and their marine security guards is another indication of plans for a longer term US presence in the Philippines. While their deployment has been dressed up with references to the provision of aid to impoverished villagers, their main purpose is to upgrade transport and other facilities required for military operations.

Air Force General John Rosa, US deputy director of operations of the Joint Chiefs Staff, outlined their tasks as building roads, bridges, port facilities, helicopter landing zones and fresh water facilities. Basilan's broken down infrastructure has made supply of large forces difficult, he noted, adding: "If you've got a rutted out road, if you've got a bridge that's out, you must stop, and it tends to get folks to bunch up and you become more of a target."

In late April, 2,700 US troops joined their Philippine counterparts in a larger, three-week military exercise on the northern island of Luzon. Around 544 US marines and 80 Navy engineers arrived at the former American naval base of Subic Bay. The marines were to be involved in jungle warfare and small unit manoeuvres while the naval personnel were dispatched to former US Clark Air Base.

There are signs of nervousness in Philippine ruling circles at the growing US military presence.

In late April, opposition leader Senator Edgardo Angara warned the US against extending its operations and coming into conflict with the larger separatist organisations such as the MILF. Recalling the Vietnam War, he told the media "We will pay a high price if we entrap and engulf the Americans into fighting our insurgency war. The whole Arab world would go against us. Our own Muslims will become more fanatical and I think we will ultimately lose Mindanao."

Last month a group of 14 parliamentarians, academics and activists from nine countries visited Basilan to examine the consequences of the US presence on the island. University of the Philippines Professor Roland Simbulan, a member of the International Peace Mission, questioned the necessity for US training, remarking: "When it comes to counterinsurgency, the Philippine army, which has been fighting counterinsurgency wars almost continuously for the last 50 years, has probably more to teach the United States." The mission suggested that the US-aided hunt for Abu Sayyaf was merely an excuse to enable Washington to expand its military presence in the region.

While protests in the Philippines against the US military presence have been relatively small to date, clearly there are concerns that the longer the troops remain, the more opposition will grow.

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