

The Philippines pushes for a leading role in the US "war against terrorism"

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In the wake of the Bali bombings on October 12, Philippine President Gloria Arroyo is aligning her administration even more closely with Washington and pressing ahead with "anti-terrorist" legislation to give the police and military far-reaching powers to crack down on all forms of opposition.

Two days after the Bali attack, the Arroyo administration announced that it would take the lead in convening a regional security conference in Manila on November 8-9. Commenting on the cabinet decision, Arroyo's National Security Adviser Roilo Golez declared: "I think the timing's perfect right now, because everybody's concerned about the Bali incident."

In the course of the conference, Arroyo held a private meeting with Bush's coordinator for counter-terrorism, Ambassador Francis Taylor, reporting to him on the delays in passing the anti-terrorist legislation. After the consultation, she suggested that Philippine and US police and intelligence officials conduct joint counter-terrorism exercises.

Arroyo is pushing for the Philippines to play a leading role in the US "war on terrorism" in the region. At a summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Phnom Penh the previous week, she called for closer regional collaboration between police and intelligence agencies and indicated the Manila would host a multilateral terrorist response simulation game in the next two months.

Arroyo's promotion of the Philippines as the regional leader in anti-terrorism serves two purposes: to ingratiate her administration with the Bush administration and to bolster her credibility at home in order to deal with the growing opposition. Over the past year, there have been protests both against the proposed anti-terrorist laws and the presence, earlier

this year, of US troops in southern Mindanao under the guise of a training mission.

On November 11, in the immediate aftermath of the regional security conference, Lieutenant-General Narciso Abaya, who heads the country's Southern Command, announced that 300 US troops would arrive in February to train Filipino troops in counter-terror methods. The new US troop deployment will concentrate on training two light reaction companies and four light infantry battalions, as well as providing Filipino helicopter pilots with night-flying and intelligence-gathering abilities.

On November 21, Arroyo overrode parliamentary opposition and signed an agreement with the Bush administration to further strengthen Philippine-US military ties. The Military Logistics and Support Agreement (MLSA) will allow the US military to use the Philippines as a supply base. While both governments have attempted to downplay the deal's significance, the MLSA permits the US military to establish storage centres for supplies of ammunition, food, water and fuel, and to set up billeting, transportation, medical and communications support services.

One of the Bush administration's aims has been to use the "war on terrorism" as a means to bolster its military presence in South East Asia, particularly in the former US colony of the Philippines, where it was forced to shut its Subic Bay naval base and the Clark Airfield in the early 1990s. While the MLSA stops short of allowing the US to reestablish military bases in the Philippines, it is major step in that direction.

As well as signing the MLSA, Arroyo has been seeking to press ahead with her stalled anti-terrorist laws. There are currently seven draft bills before the national legislature, which, taken together, constitute a

major assault on democratic rights. Police will be given increased powers of surveillance and communication interception, the right to detain suspects without warrants for 72 hours and the power to freeze bank accounts. Those who provide information to the media about cases related to terrorism will face fines and jail terms.

The definition of “terrorism” is so broad that virtually any political opposition, including strikes and protests by workers, will be included. As well as the destruction of lives and property, terrorist acts will include “disturbing public peace and order” in order to advance “any ideological, political, religious, ethnic, or cultist belief, or any form of belief espousing any cause or purpose”.

Arroyo has already extended the scope of her “anti-terror” campaign from southern Mindanao, where the army has been fighting a brutal and protracted war against an Islamic-based separatist organisation, to include the New Peoples Army (NPA), the military wing of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The NPA has conducted an ongoing guerrilla war since the late 1960s amid a wave of popular opposition to the Marcos dictatorship. But no one has linked the NPA or the CPP to Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Al Qaeda.

In early August, armed forces chief General Roy Cimatu declared that the growth of the NPA, estimated to have 11,000 fighters, had become “too alarming”. He claimed that the number of rural villages with an NPA presence had grown by 20 percent since 1995, so that 5.5 percent of all villages were now “affected”.

Cimatu’s comments were timed to coincide with a trip to Washington by Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes to discuss US-Philippine military relations. More than 1,000 US troops had been in southern Mindanao over the previous six months as part of “a training exercise” aimed at destroying the Islamic fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf militia. But the previous agreement had expired.

By targetting the NPA, the Arroyo and Bush administrations established a fresh pretext for continued US military operations in the Philippines and, moreover, one that would justify the extension of the “war against terrorism” beyond southern Mindanao. While in the US, Reyes announced that half of the \$US50 million in US anti-terrorist aid would be to fight the NPA.

On August 10, the US State Department added both the CPP and the NPA to its list of foreign terrorist organisations. At the end of October, following a mission by Philippine Foreign Secretary Blas Ople, the European Union also designated the NPA as a terrorist organisation. Ople pressed the EU to expel the CPP founder Jose Maria Sison, who is currently living in exile in the Netherlands.

While the NPA has been branded as a major threat, the overriding concern in ruling circles is with the growing hostility to Arroyo administration being generated by the country’s deepening social crisis. Unemployment has reached an all-time high of 14 percent and an estimated 40 percent of the population of 80 million live below the official poverty line.

In a speech on August 6, Arroyo made clear that the new police powers would be used not only against terrorists and criminals but against “those who terrorise factories that provide jobs”. In other words, the government intends to crack down on striking trade unionists, protesting workers and, by extension, anyone who threatens its economic restructuring agenda.

Already the democratic rights of workers are under siege. Since Arroyo came to power in 2001, the Centre for Trade Union and Human Rights has listed 226 legal violations, including illegal arrests and detentions. Over half of the cases were attacks on picket lines. In the countryside, as the military has stepped up its offensive against the NPA, 23 members of legal leftwing organisations have been killed in less than 18 months.



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