

US troops to be involved in combat operations in the southern Philippines

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In a major escalation of the US military presence in the Philippines, the Pentagon plans to send up to 3,000 personnel to take part in a joint operation next month with the Philippine army against the Islamic fundamentalist militia Abu Sayyaf on the southern island of Jolo. Unlike last year's operation on neighbouring Basilan Island, which was disguised as a limited six-month training exercise, US Special Forces will be directly involved in combat alongside local soldiers. There will be no cutoff date.

A spokesman for Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo announced on Monday that she had given formal approval for a joint training exercise on Jolo that would "more or less" resemble the Basilan mission. US officials, however, reacted on Thursday with a series of statements to the American press, making clear that the scope of the next operation would go far beyond the previous one.

"The intent is for US troops to actively participate. At this point we're going into it saying the mission will go on until both sides agree it is finished," a Pentagon official told the *Washington Post*. Another told Reuters: "In this effort, the US soldiers will work side-by-side in an offensive effort with the Philippine military." A third explained to Associated Press that the purpose of the operation was to "disrupt and defeat the Abu Sayyaf group" and would continue as long as both governments agreed it was needed.

The very nature of the forces being committed makes it difficult to disguise the character of the operation and who will be in charge. Some 350 special operations troops will be operating directly on Jolo—alongside Philippine troops but, according to the *Washington Post*, still under US command. They will be backed by 400 support personnel stationed at Zamboanga on the main southern island of Mindanao.

Another 1,000 Marines will be stationed as a "quick reaction" back-up force on two large amphibious assault ships stationed off the coast. The vessels are manned by 1,300 sailors and equipped with Cobra attack helicopters and Harrier AV-8B warplanes to provide air support, logistical assistance and medical help.

The operation will be led by Major General Joseph Weber, Marine commander for the Pacific—a further indication of its importance and the command structure. US military assessment

teams are due to arrive on Jolo "within days" and the rest of the force is likely to follow within a month. The two ships will be dispatched from their base in Japan.

The Arroyo administration is deliberately seeking to downplay the operation in an effort to head off opposition to the presence of US troops in the Philippines—a former American colony. In 1992, the US was compelled to shut down major facilities—the Subic Bay naval base and Clark Airfield—after the Philippine senate refused to approve a treaty that had permitted their presence for more than four decades. Under the constitution, foreign troops are only allowed on Philippine soil with the agreement of the senate.

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, Arroyo has backed the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism" as a means of consolidating close ties with Washington and securing financial and military support. Despite public criticism, she pressed ahead with last year's operation on Basilan, arguing that it was constitutional because of the tight restrictions imposed on the activities of US soldiers. They would operate under local command and could only use their weapons if fired on.

Sharp opposition has already been expressed to the latest operation. Vice President Teofisto Guingona, who resigned last year as foreign minister after clashing with Arroyo over the presence of US troops on Basilan, declared that the US would be "overstepping its bounds if it [engages] in combat in the Philippines, even against terrorists... If US forces will be involved in combat operations and possibly kill Filipinos, they will be violating our sovereignty."

On Friday, Senator Aquilino Pimentel accused Defence Minister Angelo Reyes of treason for turning the Philippines into "a deadly laboratory for the testing of the effectiveness of US troops, tactics and weaponry against so-called terrorists in Moroland [a reference to the predominantly Muslim (Moro) population in the southern Philippines]."

The opposition politicians are clearly concerned at the potential for broader popular protests against the presence of US troops. Already parallels are being drawn with the ruthless methods used by American forces at the turn of the twentieth century to crush Muslim opponents of US colonial rule. "The wounds over the massacre of our forefathers by the American

colonialists have not been healed,” Temojin Tulawie, leader of a newly formed opposition group, told a local radio station.

Defence Minister Reyes reacted to the criticisms by declaring that details of the operation had yet to be finalised and categorically ruled out any measure that breached the constitution. Presidential spokesman Ignacio Bunye insisted that “American soldiers will not engage in offensive operations... and will only fire back in self-defence.” Reyes is due to leave for Washington tomorrow for discussions with US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on “defence and security issues of mutual interest”.

Whatever face-saving devices are finally provided for Arroyo, the latest operation will represent a significant expansion of the US military role in the Philippines. Top US officials, including Rumsfeld, have been involved in months of planning with their Philippine counterparts, including Arroyo. According to the *New York Times*, President Bush “signed off” on the operation last week after being briefed by Rumsfeld.

Pentagon officials claim that the reason for the operation is increased activity by Abu Sayyaf rebels on Jolo. The Islamic fundamentalist group is a small breakaway from the larger Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which, along with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), has been engaged in a protracted civil war for a separate state in southern Mindanao. Allegations that Abu Sayyaf and the MILF have connections to Al Qaeda have never been proven.

The immediate aim of last year’s training exercise on Basilan was to free two American hostages—Martin and Gracia Burnham—who were captured in 2001 by Abu Sayyaf rebels along with Filipina nurse Ediborah Yap. Two of the three—Martin Burnham and Ediborah Yap—were killed during a botched rescue attempt by Philippine troops last June. US and Philippine officials declared, however, that the exercise had been a success in hunting down Abu Sayyaf guerrillas on the island.

Nearly 300 of the 1,300 US troops remained in the Philippines beyond the July 31, 2002 deadline, ostensibly to carry out “civil action” and support projects. On the pretext of helping the impoverished local population, military engineers have been engaged in upgrading roads, ports and other infrastructure to provide better access for the military. Some Special Forces troops also stayed. A US Green Beret soldier was killed in Zamboanga last October, along with three Filipinos, when a bomb went off at a small restaurant near an army base.

The latest US operation on Jolo is being billed as part of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism”. Pentagon officials claim to have established links between Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah, which allegedly carried out the Bali bombing last October. The death of the US soldier in Zamboanga as well as a string of other small bomb blasts in the southern Philippines have also been put down to the Abu Sayyaf group.

A Department of National Defence report submitted to the Philippine Congress late last year put the strength of the Abu Sayyaf group at just 250 fighters, down from 800 in 2001. Just over a fortnight ago, Philippine defence officials did a “recheck” of their figures and upped the total to 500—mostly based on Jolo.

The reasons behind the US decision to mount a large operation on Jolo go far beyond the task of hunting down small groups of guerrillas. Washington never accepted the loss of its bases in the Philippines over a decade ago, nor, in the broader context, the decline in American influence in South East Asia following its defeat in the Vietnam War. Right-wing thinktanks and sections of the Pentagon have repeatedly called for the reestablishment of a strong US military presence in the region, including in the Philippines.

As well as defending significant US economic interests in the immediate region, a military presence in the Philippines forms a component of the string of US military bases, stretching from South Korea and Japan to Central Asia, that encircle China, which Bush has branded as a “strategic competitor”. Moreover, Washington’s ability to be able to maintain large military contingents in Central Asia and the Middle East, most immediately for the impending war against Iraq, depends on its ability to establish and maintain lengthy supply lines.

As part of its growing military ties with the Philippines, Washington signed a long-mooted Military Logistics and Support Agreement (MLSA) with Manila which allows US military forces to use the country as a supply centre for its operations in the region. While both sides deliberately downplayed the significance of the deal, it allows for US forces to have access to billeting, communications and medical services. The MLSA permits “reciprocal logistic support” between the two militaries for “approved activity,” including “combined exercises and training, operations and other deployments”. The meaning of “other deployments” has been left deliberately vague. But it may well be invoked by Washington to include supplying US forces in the Persian Gulf in the very near future.



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