

Setback for US plan to send combat troops to the Philippines

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14 March 2003

Washington's plans to deploy more than 1,700 US troops in a joint operation on the southern Philippine island of Jolo suffered a setback earlier this month when Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes ruled out any active combat role in the country.

Reyes flew to Washington to try to patch up a compromise, telling a press conference that the basic problem was simply one of finding the right "definitions and semantics". Reyes met with US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld but the two failed to come up with any agreement. The Balikatan 03-1 exercise was put on hold even though, according to the US media, 1,000 marines had already boarded ships in Japan.

Clearly, more than "definitions and semantics" was involved. The Arroyo administration attempted to present the aborted operation as nothing more than a re-run of last year's Balikatan 02-1 exercise on the island of Basilan. In what was billed as a "training exercise," US special forces worked closely with Philippine troops in tracking down members of the Islamic extremist group Abu Sayyaf, which was holding three hostages, including two American missionaries Martin and Grace Burnham.

The exercise violated the Philippine constitution, which prohibits "foreign military bases, troops or facilities ... except under a treaty duly concurred by the Senate and, when the Congress so requires, ratified by a majority of the votes cast by the people in a national referendum." No such treaty was agreed to.

In order to sidestep the constitution, US "trainers" were only permitted to fire in self-defence, and the exercise was limited to six months. But by the middle of the year, US special forces, at the urging of the Arroyo administration, began openly conducting foot patrols with Philippine troops in what has been a combat zone for years.

Moreover, the "training" continued beyond the six

months. A group of 160 troops remained in nearby Zamboaga City with another 900 added later last year. Some were deployed in Cebu City in the central Philippines, ostensibly monitoring a "long term security assistance program". Since January, another squad of 90 soldiers, including 12 Green Berets, has been training six infantry battalions in Zamboaga city. In all, 17 military training exercises are scheduled for this year alone.

The Bush administration was not prepared to continue with the pretence in the latest operation. In late February, a spokesman for Arroyo declared that the exercise was going to be "more or less" the same as last year's. Senior Pentagon officials reacted by telling the US media that an agreement had been reached with the Philippine military to allow US troops to engage in combat during an open-ended operation aimed at wiping out Abu Sayyaf on Jolo.

The scope of the Balikatan 03-1 exercise was revealing. Some 300 to 400 US Special Forces soldiers, backed by another 400 support personnel, were to be directly involved in the fighting. Another 1,000 marines were to be stationed on two large amphibious assault ships as a "quick reaction" force. Air cover was to be provided by Cobra attack helicopters and Harrier AV-8B warplanes. The whole operation was to be overseen by Major General Joseph Weber, US Marine commander for the Pacific.

News of the operation provoked a storm of opposition in the Philippines. Vice President Teofisto Guingona told a press conference: "If US forces will be involved in combat operations and possibly kill Filipinos, they will be violating our sovereignty." Guingona was a former ally of Arroyo, until he was forced to resign over his public opposition to the deployment of American troops in Basilan last year. He is now one of the leaders of the local antiwar movement and has condemned US plans to invade Iraq.

The Philippine Congress also weighed in. Senator

Manuel Villar, chairman of the Senate committee on foreign relations, expressed fears that Mindanao would become a “killing fields for innocent civilians”. His counterpart in the lower house, Congressman Jun Lozada, released a press statement, warning that the planned deployment would “reopen the wounds of the war between the Muslims and the American soldiers”. In the early 20th century, American troops killed thousands of people in largely Muslim southern Mindanao during the US struggle to assert its colonial control over the Philippines.

The protests cut across party lines. Senator Aquilino Pimentel, an ally of deposed President Joseph Estrada, who is presently jailed on corruption charges, accused Reyes of treason. He denounced the defence secretary for conspiring with the US military to create a “deadly laboratory for testing the effectiveness of US troops, tactics and weaponry against so-called terrorists”.

House Representative Satur Ocampo, formerly of the National Democratic Front and now a member of the leftist Bayan Muna, found himself on the same side as Representative Imee Marcos, daughter of late dictator and his former jailer, Ferdinand Marcos. Like Pimentel, Marcos accused Reyes of treason. Ocampo, in turn, threatened to conduct congressional hearings into the extent and nature of the activities of US troops in the country. Meanwhile, leftist non-government organisations such as Bayan and Sanlakas vowed to stage protest demonstrations if the proposed operation went ahead.

Arroyo’s opponents expressed concerns over the increasingly prominent role played by the military in national affairs. Although the military already has a large slice of the national budget, graft and corruption and the low value of the peso have limited its ability to upgrade. By collaborating in the US “war against terror,” it is able to gain access to sophisticated weapons and training.

As well as targeting Abu Sayyaf, the Arroyo administration has declared the New Peoples Army, linked to the Communist Party of the Philippines, to be a “terrorist organisation”. It is also fighting the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Force (MILF), effectively ending attempts over the past year to negotiate a peace deal.

In mid-February, the military suddenly launched an offensive against the MILF in Northern Mindanao; initially claiming the operation was directed at a kidnapping gang. A one-week battle ended with the reported deaths of 40 MILF rebels and three government soldiers. It created some 20,000 refugees, mostly Muslims, and left the peace talks in shambles. Renewed

fighting erupted this week.

In the debate over the US troops, opposition senator Pimentel accused Reyes of “subverting the Constitution by militarising the policy-making process even in relation to the maintenance of law and order and the establishment of peace in the country”. The House minority leader, Carlos Padilla, was even more direct. “Reyes is a dangerous man. He must be fired,” he said.

The protests of opposition politicians reflect broad discontent over the US presence in the Philippines and the increasingly anti-democratic measures being implemented in the name of “fighting terrorism”. The opposition is also bound up with growing outrage over the Bush administration’s planned invasion of Iraq.

In the largest antiwar protest to date in the Philippines, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people joined rallies in Manila on February 28 organised by churches, opposition politicians and leftist groups. The demonstrations were directed against both the war in Iraq and the planned joint exercise. Vice President Guingona called for “the cessation of hostilities in our land and a permanent stay of serenity in Iraq”.

The groundswell of opposition left Arroyo and Reyes with little option but to insist that any US operation in the Philippines had to respect the country’s constitution. Arroyo is keen for the “exercise” with the US military to go ahead as part of a package of economic and other assistance promised by Washington. The Bush administration has been pressing to strengthen the US military presence in the Philippines as part of its broader strategic ambitions within South East Asia and beyond.

Negotiations between Manila and Washington are continuing. Arroyo has declared a three-month deadline for the military to defeat Abu Sayyaf. Asked about the deadline, Reyes declared that it “would be far easier” to meet “if we are assisted and supported by American forces”. However, the two sides are yet to find appropriate “semantics and definitions” to give the US military the freedom of action that the Bush administration wants, while allowing Arroyo to pretend that the country’s constitution remains intact.



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