

Philippines government to withdraw troops from Iraq

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In another blow to the Bush administration and its occupation of Iraq, the Philippines government, one of the staunchest US allies in the “war on terror”, has begun withdrawing its military contingent. The pullout from Iraq—one month ahead of a mandated August 20 exit date—came despite top-level appeals from US officials that the troops remain.

Philippine Foreign Secretary Delia Albert announced the withdrawal on Wednesday, declaring: “The Foreign Ministry is co-ordinating the pullout of the humanitarian contingent with the Ministry of Defence. As of today, our head count is down from 51 to 43.”

Her brief statement came amid a deepening political crisis for President Gloria Arroyo Macapagal, provoked by the kidnapping of a Filipino contract worker in Iraq. Angelo de la Cruz, a 46-year-old father of eight was taken hostage last week as he was driving a truckload of crude oil from Saudi Arabia through Fallujah.

In a video released July 7, an Islamic terrorist group calling itself the Khaled bin Al-Waleed Brigade, demanded the Philippine government remove its troops by July 20 or de la Cruz would be executed. Screened on Al-Jazeera television, the footage showed de la Cruz surrounded by three armed men wearing balaclavas.

A second video released three days later carried a plea to Arroyo from de la Cruz: “I beg you to withdraw the troops from Iraq.”

Within days, de la Cruz’s capture became the focus for antiwar sentiment in the Philippines, fuelling demands for an immediate end to its troop commitment in Iraq. Millions attended church services across the country, with Catholics and Muslims coming together to pray for his release. In Hong Kong, Filipinos demonstrated Sunday outside the Philippine consulate. Two days of protests followed in Manila, despite a media blackout imposed by Arroyo, with hundreds

dispersed by police water-cannon. Placards included, “De la Cruz: Victim of Poverty” and “Stop supporting US war!”

Angelo De la Cruz’s relatives also urged the president to act. De la Cruz travelled to Saudi Arabia for work after lengthy unemployment. According to Reuters, his niece, Wilma de la Cruz told a press conference: “Mrs Arroyo should make a firm stand. She should save my uncle’s life and not consider what benefits she might get from supporting the US war in Iraq.”

This antiwar sentiment is rooted in the bitter historical experience of the Philippines and is linked inextricably to the most basic social problems facing the Filipino masses. A US colony until 1946, the archipelago remains beholden to US economic interests. More than \$3.4 billion in direct investment flowed into the country from the US last year. Eight out of ten Filipinos live on less than \$US2 a day and about 40 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line. Unemployment, currently at 11 percent is steadily rising.

De la Cruz is one of eight million Filipinos who have been forced to seek work abroad. Most are contract labourers and house servants, with an estimated 1.4 million stationed in the Middle East. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are often employed in dangerous and backbreaking work. Their status is akin to that of slaves because they lack the protections afforded to citizens and because UN and ILO conventions governing working conditions have not been ratified in many of the backward Gulf states.

The plight of overseas Filipinos resonates throughout the country. Popular support for de la Cruz recalls the events of March 1995 when a Filipino maid was convicted of murder and executed in Singapore. Mass

demonstrations protesting her innocence and condemning the inhumane treatment of OFWs swept the Philippines with two senior ministers forced to resign.

The reactionary nature of the Khaled bin Al-Waleed Brigade is underscored by the fact that they have captured and threatened to execute de la Cruz, who represents one of the most oppressed sections of the international working class.

White House officials were caught off-guard by the Philippines troop withdrawal. Prior to the hostage crisis, it was widely reported that Arroyo was preparing to extend her country's troop commitment to Iraq. Instead, the Philippines is following in the wake of Spain, which withdrew its contingent just four months ago following the Madrid bombings and subsequent fall of the conservative Aznar government.

Since the September 11 attacks on the US, the Philippines president has aggressively promoted herself as Asia's leading proponent of the "war on terrorism". She backed Washington's military aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq and allowed US troops to operate in the Philippines against Islamic separatist rebels in southern Mindanao. In addition, a Military Logistics and Support Agreement (MLSA) gave the US military extensive storage and other facilities in the country for the first time since the Clark Airfield and Subic Bay naval base were closed in 1992.

These moves provoked protests in the Philippines where there is deep-rooted antagonism to the former colonial power and its heavy handed methods. But Arroyo ignored popular sentiment and maintained the military arrangements. In return, the US provided substantial military and financial aid to prop up her administration and the heavily indebted economy.

It is a measure of the domestic opposition to her policies that Arroyo is now prepared to risk her close relationship with the US—and her political future—by defying the Bush administration.

Over the last week, Arroyo has attempted a desperate balancing act between the demands of Washington and political sentiment at home. After talks between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Arroyo on Sunday, Philippine Foreign Affairs spokesman Gilberto Asuque announced on Monday there were no plans to withdraw the troops by the July 20 deadline. National Security Advisor Norberto Gonzales echoed this, saying any

troop withdrawal before August 20 would harm the nation's international standing.

But Arroyo, who was inaugurated on June 30 after a narrow election victory, faced the prospect of mounting disaffection which threatened her presidency. An op-ed piece in the *Philippines Star* indicated what was at stake: "President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo does not or refuses to understand the magnitude of the crisis now spreading over the Philippines. If Angelo de la Cruz should die any hour now in Baghdad, the nation will turn on her as it would on a riptide and seek to eject [her] from power."

On Tuesday, Foreign Undersecretary Rafael Seguis read a statement on Al Jazeera television promising that Philippine troops would be withdrawn "as soon as possible". But his message was ambiguous and officials refused to confirm a withdrawal by the deadline. The White House responded with its standard refrain that any troop withdrawal would "send the wrong signal to terrorists" and the US State Department called for "clarification".

The announcement on Wednesday of a Philippine withdrawal provoked an angry response from the US, as well as denials that its "international coalition" was breaking apart. All of Washington's allies, however, confront similar pressures from antiwar opposition at home.

Spain, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic have already pulled their troops. Thailand and New Zealand are set to exit in September. By Thursday the Bush administration was in damage control, claiming to have increased troop pledges from El Salvador and Australia. After meeting with Mongolia's president on Thursday, Bush declared that the continued presence of 130 Mongolian troops in Iraq showed the strength of the multinational effort.

As for the Philippines, the message was clear. Asked if US-Philippines relations would be affected by Arroyo's decision, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher replied menacingly, "we'll have to see".



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