

Philippines president orders offensive against Maoist guerrilla army

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19 July 2006

Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, in a bid to whip up anti-communist hysteria and shore up the narrow social base underpinning her tottering regime, has ordered the military to launch an offensive against the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New Peoples Army (NPA).

Arroyo issued the orders in mid-June, just one week before petitions were filed in the Philippines congress to renew impeachment procedures against the president over allegations of vote rigging during the 2004 presidential election, corruption and attacks on democratic rights. She instructed the military to wipe out the insurgents in two years, especially in the three critical provinces of Luzon, Southern Tagalog and Northern Luzon, which surrounds Metro Manila.

The offensive effectively ends the already moribund negotiations between the insurgents and the national government.

The allocation of \$US19 million for the campaign came barely weeks after her education secretary inadvertently revealed a shortage of 6,832 classrooms for public school students due to lack of funds. This amount is in addition to \$US30 million already allocated for the so-called modernisation of the armed forces. Additional funds are also to be made available to procure surplus attack helicopters and command aircraft from the US.

“They will give us a decisive edge against the NPA,” Arroyo said, according to a *Philippine Daily Inquirer* report. But Arroyo let slip the real intent of the campaign when she declared, “The fight against the Left remains the glue that binds.”

The campaign is aimed at healing rifts in the anti-communist officer corps. Last February, Brigadier Gen. Danilo Lim, commander of the elite Scout Rangers, and Marine commandant Maj. Gen. Renato Miranda were stripped of their commands after allegedly helping plot a coup attempt against Arroyo timed for the 20th anniversary of the first “People Power” uprising that toppled the Marcos dictatorship.

Meanwhile, according to a *Newsbreak* report, the officers, who were allegedly involved in the 2004 presidential election vote rigging for Arroyo, have either been promoted or received pay rises. Foremost of them are Lt. General Hermogenes Esperon, who is now the incoming Armed Forces chief of staff, and Lt. Gen. Gabriel Habacon, who has received two promotions since 2004—from Brigadier General to Major General, to his present rank. This has caused resentment within the military.

Top military officials immediately welcomed Arroyo’s

declaration. Retiring Armed Forces chief of staff Generoso Senga had complained that 90 percent of the current defence budget was for salaries of its 120,000 military personnel. The very next day, Maj. Gen. Jovito Palparan, commander of the 7th Infantry Division, announced the expansion of military operations into the towns of Lubao and Sasmuan in Central Luzon.

The current offensive is a war of terror, not only against NPA combatants but also against its unarmed and alleged supporters. This can be seen from the central role of officers like Palparan.

Palparan is hounded by accusations that he masterminded the 2003 murders of human rights activist Eden Marcellana, secretary-general of Karapatan (Rights)-Southern Tagalog province, and Eddie Gumanoy, a peasant leader on Mindoro Island, about 150 km southeast of the capital. Removed from Mindoro, Palparan was reassigned to the Leyte and Samar islands, where almost immediately a string of vigilante-style killings of Bayan Muna (People First) party activists and other human rights advocates erupted.

Reassigned to Central Luzon, Palparan was accused by the provincial governor of Bulacan of unleashing three vigilante bands, allegedly conducting illegal raids and searches on various towns. All in all, more than 500 cases of alleged human rights violations from Mindoro to Samar to Central Luzon have been linked, directly or indirectly, to Palparan.

The renewed war against the NPA has been preceded by a rising toll of unsolved murders and “disappearances” of members and officials of various leftist organisations accused by government and military officials of being fronts for the CPP and its allied movements in the underground National Democratic Front.

The Bayan Muna party alleged that, along with 98 of its own members, over 600 political activists, members and officials of cause-oriented organisations have been murdered since Arroyo came to power in 2001. In addition, 152 activists have been abducted and remain missing. This brutal campaign, initially beginning on Mindoro Island, has spread since 2004 to the provinces of the Ilocos regions, Central Luzon, Southern Tagalog, Bicol region and Eastern Visayas.

Despite pressure from international human rights groups and even criticism from the government’s own Commission of Human Rights, the Arroyo regime has consistently refused to launch any serious investigation into this bloodbath. National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzalez suggested that the murders were part of an ongoing “purge” conducted by the CPP among its own

members. Finally, in a bid to quiet critics, a police task force headed by the local government department secretary was formed last month. But its remit is severely limited to “coordinating the investigation and submitting regular reports” without any definite timetable.

Needless to say, the murder toll has continued to rise.

While the military offensive is part of Arroyo’s efforts to shore up her support among the top military hierarchy, she has also pandered to other members of her narrow social base among the business elite, religious fundamentalists and local government officials.

To blunt criticisms from the Roman Catholic Church, Arroyo recently signed a law abolishing the death penalty, while stopping sex education in public secondary schools.

To keep the business sector on board, in June the Metro Manila wage board, which sets the minimum wage in the capital, pared down the \$1.38 daily increase requested by the trade unions to an outrageous 46 cents. The increase lifts the minimum daily wage in the capital to \$6.48, little more than half the \$12.04 required to cover basic needs and the rising cost of living. Meanwhile, the labor department revealed that 57,821 workers were retrenched in 2005, a 60 percent increase from the 2004 figure. More than half of those retrenched—31,852—were from Metro Manila.

To curry favor with international financial institutions, Arroyo has pushed aggressively to sell off the National Power Corporation’s major plants by the end of 2007. This is despite the taint of corruption that surrounds the largest privatisation to date of the 600 MW Masinloc Power Plant. The estimated \$US388 million plant went to a winning bidder with a paid-up capitalisation of only \$11,600. Moreover, the government has set a September 2006 date for bidding for the concessionaire contract for the National Transmission Corporation.

Maneuvering with congressional allies, the Arroyo regime has effectively aborted the approval of the 2006 national budget, which automatically reenacts last year’s budget. This would cut back social services funds to last year’s levels, even as a 6.7 percent inflation rate continues to wrack the Philippine economy.

Funds for public education have been particularly hit, according to the Congressional Planning and Budget Department. Basic education will lose an estimated \$53 million for 4,578 new classrooms, \$50 million for the hiring of new public school teachers and \$30 million for tuition subsidies of the 475,000 high school students in private schools.

Not coincidentally, this move also freed up an estimated \$1 billion from already finished projects and can now be disbursed by the regime without congressional oversight.

In an even more sordid manoeuvre, Arroyo has cobbled together a rickety coalition of businessmen headed by Philippine Chamber of Industry and Commerce president Donald Dee, congressional representatives led by House Speaker Jose De Venecia, provincial governors, city and town mayors, and former president Fidel Ramos, to revise the 1987 constitution and remove term-limits for all incumbent local officials and congressional representatives. Shifting the government from a presidential to a parliamentary form would effectively extend Arroyo’s term while allowing Ramos, who is barred from contesting for a second term, and De

Venecia, to run again for a national office—the prime minister’s seat.

Arroyo’s administration is committed to transforming the Philippines into another global platform for low cost labour and cheap source of raw materials. It is organically incapable of progressively resolving any of the social and economic problems of the Filipino workers. Unable to do otherwise, the Arroyo regime is following the well-worn path taken by former presidents Marcos, Aquino, Ramos and Estrada—the violent suppression of the Filipino working class. The offensive announced against the NPA is a clear indication of what is to come.

There is no doubt that the politics of the Maoist leadership of the CPP/NPA has prepared the way for the new military campaign. While they have fuelled the peasant rebellion in the countryside, the Maoists have, along with other Stalinist and “left” factions, consistently blocked the development of any independent road for the working class. The Maoists have relentlessly tied the masses to one or other faction of the ruling elite. This is in accord with their Stalinist two-stage theory in which the struggle against the national bourgeoisie must be subordinated to a non-existent common fight against imperialism and foreign domination.

The CPP joined other radical organisations in an alliance with Arroyo, former president Corazon Aquino, sections of business and the Roman Catholic Church to depose President Estrada in 2001. The CPP leadership therefore shares full responsibility for the existence of the Arroyo government.

Then, without batting an eyelid, in 2005 they joined forces with followers of Estrada and former dictator Ferdinand Marcos in a bid to depose Arroyo following the eruption of ballot-rigging allegations in the 2004 presidential elections. When the Arroyo regime declared a state of siege last February 2006, the Stalinists refused to draw the Filipino working classes into a political struggle to bring down the regime.

The offensive against the CPP and its New Peoples Army is unlikely to succeed in “gluing” the entire ruling elite behind Arroyo’s regime. It is certain, however, that the rural masses will pay a heavy price for the political isolation imposed on them by the manoeuvres of the CPP, Stalinists and “lefts”.



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