

The US military and the Philippines

Bill Van Auken
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In a brief statement last week on the impact of Typhoon Haiyan on the Philippines, President Barack Obama declared it a “heartbreaking reminder of how fragile life is.”

As the head of a government that has visited death and destruction upon impoverished peoples from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to Libya, Yemen and Syria, the US president hardly needed to wait for nature’s fury to be visited upon the Philippine people for such a reminder.

The US military, the principal instrument for carrying out this carnage—inflicting 100 times the number of deaths caused by Typhoon Haiyan during the last dozen years of aggressive wars waged by Washington—is now being promoted as the indispensable Good Samaritan in the Philippines.

Some 50 US warships and military aircraft and 13,000 American sailors, airmen and marines have been brought into the relief effort, led by the naval battle group of the nuclear-powered super-carrier, the USS George Washington, along with the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade.

“We will be present as long as we are needed—no longer than required,” Marine Corps Lt. Gen. John Wissler, the commander of the US military operations in the Philippines, said on Monday.

The people of the Philippines have ample reasons, rooted in both their country’s tragic history and its present geo-strategic position, to treat such promises with extreme skepticism.

There is perhaps no more egregious example of the US military overstaying its welcome than in the Philippines. It was there, at the end of the 19th century, that US imperialism first cut its teeth, becoming a colonial power by means of military conquest and savage repression.

In testifying before the US Senate Tuesday on relief operations in the Philippines, a State Department

official cited the “close historic ties” between the two countries. Neither government officials nor the media, however, show any inclination to examine these “ties” in any detail, for the obvious reason that it would serve only to expose a historic crime.

The US military’s first appearance in the Philippines came in the form of a navy squadron commanded by Commodore George Dewey, who sailed into Manila harbor on May 1, 1898 and within hours sank the entire Pacific fleet of Spain, which had ruled the territory as a colony for the previous 300 years.

Brought back from exile aboard Dewey’s warship was Emilio Aguinaldo, the leader of a nationalist movement that had been fighting to end Spanish colonialism for three years before the US armada arrived. US forces were able to take Manila only because it was surrounded on land by these independence fighters. Washington posed as their ally and the liberator of the Philippines just long enough to secure control of a territory it coveted as a market, a source of cheap labor and raw materials, and a base for the projection of US power in the Pacific, particularly toward China.

It then turned savagely against the Filipinos and signed a treaty with Spain paying it \$20 million for a land the Spanish no longer controlled. The Filipinos, who had proclaimed an independent republic, the first to be formed in Asia as the result of an anti-colonial rebellion, were excluded from these negotiations.

What followed was the imposition of a US colonial regime and over a decade of bloody counterinsurgency operations that would claim at least several hundred thousand Filipino lives. In 1901, Gen. Franklin Bell, who commanded US forces in Luzon, the island group that included Manila and roughly half the country’s population, told the *New York Times* that there alone some 600,000 had been killed in military operations or died from disease.

As another American general put it, “It may be necessary to kill half the Filipinos in order that the remaining half of the population may be advanced to a higher plane of life than their present semi-barbarous state affords.”

Mark Twain, the most prominent and passionate opponent of the US war in the Philippines, defied the “support our troops” rhetoric of the day, denouncing the US military for massacres that left “not even a baby alive to cry for its dead mother.” The celebrated American author referred to US occupation forces as “Christian butchers” and “uniformed assassins.”

The Philippines campaign was among the first counterinsurgency operations waged by the US military, and it introduced all of the atrocities that would later be visited upon Vietnamese, Afghans and Iraqis, from massacres, to torture, to “re-concentration” camps.

US colonial rule continued until the end of World War II, after which Washington backed a series of semi-colonial governments, including the hated martial regime of Ferdinand Marcos, who ruled the country for two decades. Until 1991, the Pentagon maintained control of the massive Subic Bay naval base and Clark Air Force base, which played crucial roles in both the Korean and Vietnam wars.

This is no mere ancient history when it comes to the plight of the Philippines in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan. The widespread poverty, social inequality, inadequate housing and government corruption that are the legacy of colonial and neo-colonial oppression played at least as great a role as the blind forces of nature in inflicting so much death and destruction.

Nor are US designs on the Philippines a matter of a bygone era. Reuters news agency noted Wednesday: “As US ships deliver food, water and medicine, they are also delivering goodwill that could ease the way for the United States to strengthen its often-controversial military presence in one of Southeast Asia’s most strategic countries.”

If the US military first came to the Philippines as the instrument of a rising imperialist power seeking to secure new markets in Asia, it now returns as the spearhead of a waning one, determined to encircle and contain a rising regional and global rival, China.

The Philippines is strategically crucial to the Obama administration’s so-called “pivot” to Asia. Its

government, having closed the giant US military bases in 1992, has since allowed US special operations troops to return for training and for carrying out joint operations and has hosted visits by 72 US warships and submarines at Subic Bay during the first six months of this year alone. Meanwhile, negotiations are ongoing to secure US rights to bases for ships, planes, supplies and troops.

Naval base construction is proceeding at Oyster Bay on the island province of Palawan. Officials are referring to the facility as a “mini-Subic,” and plans have been reported for stationing both US warships and Marines there. Situated on the country’s western-most island, it is in close proximity to the Spratly Islands, the site of a provocative territorial confrontation between Manila and China egged on by the United States.

Thus, the “humanitarian” operation of the US military in the Philippines is inextricably bound up with war plans that could well drag the country into a global conflagration.

The predatory calculations of the US ruling class aside, there exist among the masses of American working people genuine feelings of sympathy and solidarity with the workers of the Philippines. The deep ties are expressed most concretely in the estimated presence of 4 million Filipino-Americans in the United States.

The catastrophe wrought by Typhoon Haiyan only underscores the necessity of a united struggle to sweep away the conditions of poverty and inequality in both countries, along with the capitalist profit system that has created them.



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