

Police attack demonstration outside US embassy in Manila

Our reporter
21 October 2016

Philippine police attacked a demonstration outside the US embassy in Manila on Wednesday called by two Maoist front organisations, BAYAN and SANDUGO. The demonstrators were demanding the withdrawal of US troops, bases and military facilities.

Around 1,000 people participated in the protest. Police responded to the demonstration with brazen violence. Footage, widely shared online, shows a police van plowing into a crowd of demonstrators, before driving back and forth and running over a number of people.

According to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Jessica Augustin, one of those hit by the van, was pinned under the vehicle. Its front tyre missed her head by centimetres. Other photos online showed an elderly man apparently trapped underneath the vehicle's back wheels.

Police later dispersed the protest using tear gas. They reportedly arrested 26 people before releasing all without charge. Among them were two young girls from Mindanao, just 14- and 15 years-old. A rally organiser told the *Inquirer* that 50 demonstrators were treated for injuries sustained in the clashes, with 10 remaining in hospital.

Manila police chief, Oscar Albayalde, blithely declared the protesters "weren't really run over," and said they had attacked the van. Police accused the protesters of "provoking" them by being "unruly," burning a mock US flag and spray-painting slogans on the embassy.

The latest violence follows the repression of a protest outside the Mindanao military headquarters on Tuesday, calling for an end to counter-insurgency operations on the southern island. The rally, attended by 1,000 and organised by SANDUGO, was dispersed by a water cannon.

SANDUGO, which describes itself as an umbrella organisation for national minorities, has called for the removal of US special forces from Mindanao.

The police attack in Manila is a warning that any social

opposition will be the target of state-backed violence. It occurred amid an ongoing anti-drug crusade by President Rodrigo Duterte's administration that has resulted in more than 3,600 extra-judicial killings by police and vigilantes.

In an attempt to quell public anger over the attack on the demonstration, police authorities stood down nine officers, pending an investigation. Duterte responded to the furore cautiously, saying he was "not going into the blame-game."

Duterte is in a political alliance with the Maoists, who occupy three cabinet positions in his government. The protest was called in a bid to divert the widespread hostility to the crimes of American imperialism among Filipino workers and the poor behind Duterte's foreign policy manoeuvrings.

The demonstration was timed to coincide with the president's visit to China, which is part of a foreign policy "reconfiguration" aimed at establishing closer economic and trade relations with China. On Thursday, Duterte declared that the Philippines would "separate" from the US militarily and economically, and orient to China and Russia.

The president's statement followed an extended period during which the erratic, right-wing populist has sought to balance between the country's strategic alliance with the US and its close economic ties with China.

At each turn in Duterte's balancing act, the Maoists have echoed the government's foreign policy line. Quoted in reports on the Manila protest, BAYAN secretary-general Renato Reyes stated: "The Duterte regime has made some significant pronouncements and actions that are greatly appreciated by the people's movement... Most significant among the accomplishments of the administration is Duterte's consistent assertion of national sovereignty and his pursuit of an independent foreign policy."

In reality, Duterte's foreign policy reflects the interests of substantial sections of the Philippine ruling elite, anxious to cash in on closer economic and trade ties with China.

At the same time, the Philippine president has not broken off relations with the US, maintaining the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), signed in 2014 to provide for the expansion of US basing arrangements. The Maoists have focused on the demand for the removal of US special forces from Mindanao, rather than denunciations of the EDCA, because Duterte called for the expulsion of the troops from the island in September.

When President Benigno Aquino's previous administration backed Washington's military build-up against China and aggressively prosecuted the Philippine's territorial claims against China in the South China Sea, the Maoists held a series of anti-Chinese protests. They echoed the US State Department's denunciations of Chinese and Russian imperialism.

One typical statement, by Mong Palatino, chair of BAYAN Metro Manila, in 2014 concluded: "Hate China? Then join the people's army, strengthen the people's movement, and be prepared to fight for the motherland."

In addition to supporting the Philippine ruling elite's foreign policy, the Maoists have backed the government's attacks on the democratic rights of workers and young people.

Amid mounting opposition to Duterte's anti-drug campaign, which is resulting in dozens of extra-judicial murders every week, the president last month likened himself to Hitler, and declared: "There are three million drug addicts. I'd be happy to slaughter them."

BAYAN cynically stated: "We still believe though that despite his tactless reference to the German dictator, the President is no Hitler and is capable of advancing meaningful pro-people reforms."



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