

US Special Forces involved in declaration of martial law in the Philippines

Joseph Santolan**12 June 2017**

The US Embassy in Manila and the leadership of the Philippine military revealed on Friday that US Special Forces have been involved in the battle of Marawi in the Southern Philippines since it was launched on May 23, coordinating the activities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and without the knowledge of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. The conflict in Marawi, which has now killed nearly 200 people, provided the military with the pretext to declare martial law on the island of Mindanao, and its population of over 22 million.

The battle erupted on May 23, as Duterte arrived in Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The military launched a raid against what it claimed was the headquarters of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) forces in the Philippines. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana exploited the fighting to justify the declaration of military rule, compelling Duterte to cancel his visit and return immediately to the Philippines.

It was the military brass, not the president, who imposed martial law in Mindanao. Duterte is not using the military to impose his dictatorship on the country, but rather the military is moving to usurp the reins of civilian government. Duterte is gradually being reduced to a figurehead.

Washington is using the machinations of the AFP to discipline the Philippine president and reorient Manila's geopolitical ties away from Beijing and Moscow, and firmly back into the camp of US imperialism. Revelations that US forces were involved in the conflict from its onset, without the knowledge of Duterte, provide strong evidence for this.

On Friday, an Associated Press (AP) journalist photographed a US P3 Orion Surveillance aircraft flying over Marawi, reporting that it "flew above rocket-firing Philippine helicopters that struck militant positions, causing plumes of smoke to billow skyward."

When asked on Saturday about US involvement in the fighting, US Embassy spokesperson Molly Kascina stated that US special operations forces were assisting the AFP in Marawi. They were providing technical assistance and training, she claimed.

Duterte has, since he took office in mid-2016, vocally postured as an opponent of Washington, in an attempt to reorient Philippine ties toward China. Speaking to the press on Sunday, he declared that he had neither requested nor been informed of US involvement. His press conference revealed that when the US Embassy spoke of the "government of the Philippines," it was referring, not to the civilian government, but to the military brass.

With Defense Secretary Lorenzana, head of the martial law administration on Mindanao, standing directly behind him throughout his 30-minute press conference, Duterte stated, "I am not aware of [US involvement] but when I declared martial law I gave the powers to the defense department." He did not even pretend to be responsible for Philippine sovereignty, handing the responsibility for foreign military activity in the country entirely to the AFP brass.

Duterte noted, "Our soldiers are very pro-American, that I cannot deny," adding, "Almost all our officers go to the United States to study military matters. They have a rapport and I cannot deny that." He attempted to present his acquiescence to the military dictating the foreign relations of the country as if it were a matter of personality. "I have no problem with America, my fight is only against that son-of-a-bitch Obama. ... Now with Trump, my friend, he says I'm right."

Lorenzana then held a press conference in which he declared that US military advisors had been coordinating the AFP's activity in Marawi not only throughout the two and half week conflict, but even before the initial raid on May 23. In other words, undisclosed to the president, US forces worked with the Philippine military brass to

prepare and carry out the raid that allowed Lorenzana to declare martial law.

Both the presidential and military spokespersons claimed that US Special Forces were supplying weapons, training and technical assistance, but that they had no “boots on the ground.” These statements are demonstrably false.

Leading Filipino journalists have posted photographs on twitter of heavily-armed American combat forces, unloading supplies in Marawi during the past two days. Most significantly, the crew manning the P3 Orion is directly responsible for surveilling and coordinating the aerial bombardment of the city. The airstrikes being carried out on Marawi’s trapped civilian population are being directed by US forces. Washington is not merely involved “on the ground;” it is literally calling the shots.

As of Sunday, official Philippine government figures reported that 58 soldiers, over a hundred “rebel fighters,” and 20 civilians had been killed. These figures are highly suspect, as the government has given no criterion for distinguishing between civilian and combatant casualties. Since the city continues to be indiscriminately bombed, it is unlikely that all of the deaths are being reported.

Marawi, a historic and beautiful city on the northern shores of Lake Lanao, has been reduced to rubble, while nearly 200,000 people have fled their homes. Without shelter or provisions, they have become internally-displaced refugees, throughout Mindanao and the Visayas region.

Thousands remained trapped in Marawi. They hang articles of clothing from their windows, in the hope that the aerial bombardment, directed by the US military, will see the makeshift flags and spare their lives.

The forces occupying portions of Marawi, which Washington and the Philippine military have labeled “ISIS,” are the private army of an influential, elite family named Maute. Like all their rival oligarchs in the country, the Mautes have built a sizable squad of mercenaries, largely recruited from out-of-school and unemployed teenage youth, many as young as 13.

Philippine elections are bloody affairs, particularly in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), where Marawi is located. The 2009 election saw the Maguindanao massacre in the same region, in which the private army of a candidate for governor slaughtered 58 people, including 34 journalists.

Recognizing in ISIS a brand name that would provide them with a fearsome reputation in the lead-up to the 2016 election, the Maute Group began flying the ISIS

flag, and even kidnapped several mill workers, dressed them in orange jumpsuits, and beheaded them, in imitation of the activities of ISIS in the Middle East.

Omar Ali, the incumbent mayor of Marawi, to whom the Maute Group was allied, lost a closely contested election in June 2016 and filed an appeal. In the nearby town of Butig, Dimnatang Pansar, a rival to the Maute group, was elected mayor. In December, the private army of the Maute Group, flying their ISIS flags, raided the town of Butig. Duterte and the military did nothing.

That the actions of the alleged ISIS group in the Philippines are rooted in electoral politics and traditional clan warfare, is highlighted by the fact that Omar Ali, and his brother, Fahad Salic, also a former mayor of Marawi, who lost in his bid for governor in 2016, have both been arrested on charges of rebellion for supporting “ISIS.” These are major political players, representatives of the United Nationalist Alliance (UNA), a leading national political party, whose ranks include the former Vice President Jejomar Binay, and boxer-turned-Senator Manny Pacquiao.

There have been claims of the involvement of foreign operatives in “ISIS” in the Philippines, but no evidence has yet been presented. What is clear is that clan warfare and electoral politics have taken on the coloration of the brutal geopolitical conflict created by Washington in its drive to destabilize and control the Middle East.

This bloody ISIS imitation in the Southern Philippines provided the ideal pretext for martial law, allowing Washington to move towards re-establishing control over its former colony through the Philippine military, whose apparatus it built from the ground up and whose leadership it has trained.



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