

US to launch drone bombing campaign in the Philippines

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The Pentagon is planning to launch drone air strikes on the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines, NBC News revealed Monday citing two unnamed US defense officials. The story was published as US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in Manila in the wake of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum held there over the weekend.

The island of Mindanao, with a population of over 22 million, has been under martial law for nearly three months as the Philippine military has carried out a bombing campaign, with the direct support and guidance of US military forces, on alleged Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) elements in the city of Marawi.

What has been done to the people of Marawi is a war crime. Hundreds of civilians have been killed and over 400,000 driven from their homes, turned into internally displaced refugees. They are scattered across Mindanao and the Visayas in search of shelter in the midst of the typhoon season, often malnourished and some even starving.

Martial law serves the interests of US imperialism. The US military was involved in the initial attack by Philippine forces that led to the declaration of martial law, special forces operatives have participated in assaults carried out throughout the city, and US surveillance planes have directed the daily bombing barrages.

Since his election a year ago, Duterte sought to rebalance Philippine diplomatic and economic ties toward Beijing and, to a certain extent, Moscow, and proved intractable to Washington's interests. Over the course of his predecessor's term in office, US imperialism had through legal and military means sharply escalated its war drive against China, using Manila as its leading proxy in the region.

When the volatile and fascistic Duterte took office, Washington funded his murderous "war on drugs," but, when he began to distance himself from US dictates, the US State Department found that they were concerned with "human rights." The pressure of this campaign only opened up a far wider gulf between Manila and Washington, as Duterte lashed back denouncing US crimes during the Philippine American War. Clearly, alternative and more drastic means to either control or eliminate Duterte were needed.

Washington built the military of its former colony, and the top brass were all trained in and loyal to the US. As Duterte flew to Moscow to meet with Putin to negotiate a potential military agreement, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, working with Washington and behind the back of the Philippine president, launched an attack on the private army of a ruling class family in Marawi which they claimed had pledged loyalty to ISIS. The attack allowed Lorenzana to declare martial law and compel the president to return to the Philippines.

Washington began calling the shots in Marawi and effectively throughout the country. Duterte disappeared from public life for two weeks. Lorenzana, using the authority of martial law, restored joint maritime exercises with US forces which Duterte had scrapped as they clearly targeted against China. The US Embassy in Manila began directly interacting with the military brass, circumventing the presidential palace of Malacanang entirely.

Duterte reemerged to the limelight as a man disciplined by Washington. The message was clear, if he wished to remain in power he had to toe the US line. Washington had no problems with his war on drugs, which has killed over 12,000 people in the past year, provided he served US interests. Tillerson declared that

he would not be raising issues of human rights in his meeting with Duterte.

In a press conference with Tillerson, Duterte groveled. “We are friends. We are allies,” he declared. “I am your humble friend in Southeast Asia.”

Washington is not content with securing Duterte’s loyalty, however. In essence they are looking to effectively re-colonize the Philippines, establishing military bases throughout the country, and directly dictating the course of its politics.

Already Washington has begun operating with the hubris of the colonial master. The plan for the US to launch a campaign of drone bombing in Mindanao is in an advanced stage of readiness, yet by their own admission, neither the civilian government, nor the Philippine military brass have been informed of the plan.

In July, General Paul Selva, vice chairman of the US Joint Chiefs, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Washington intended to give a name to its mission in the Philippines, a move which would secure greater funding for the US operations in the country.

Selva stated, “Particularly in the fragile areas of the southern Philippines, I think it’s worth considering whether or not we reinstate a named operation, not only to provide for the resources that are required, but to give the Pacific Command commander and the field commanders in the Philippines the kinds of authorities they need to work with indigenous Philippine forces to actually help them be successful in that battle space.”

Washington already has “boots on the ground”—special forces participating in the battles in Marawi, and its surveillance planes determining targets in the bombing campaigns. An escalation beyond this to additional “kinds of authorities” would involve the direct US bombing of the city.

The Duterte administration attempted weakly to fend off the US encroachment on Philippine sovereignty, responding to the reports that US would begin a bombing campaign in the country by declaring that the combatants in Marawi were “ISIS inspired.”

The US-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) of 1951 only allows US combat operations in the country if it is directly attacked by a foreign power. Herein lies the significance of the labeling of what is essentially the private army of a ruling class family as ISIS. Under

the terms of the MDT, Washington can argue that the forces in Marawi are a foreign invasion force.

The fiery anti-imperialist posturing of Duterte is gone, and his press secretary is weakly attempting to preserve national sovereignty by claiming that the enemy combatants—largely children and young men recruited and armed by a section of the Mindanao elite—are only “inspired” by ISIS.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines meanwhile put out a press statement, saying, “we appreciate Pentagon’s reported desire to help the Philippines,” but added that “we have not yet received formal notice” of the offer.

The ultimate target of Washington’s drive to re-colonize the Philippines is China. On August 4, U.S. Embassy Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Klecheski opened a Joint Maritime Law Enforcement Training Center (JMLETTC) on the island of Palawan, which is the closest to the disputed South China Sea. At the facility US forces will be working with and training the Philippine military in order to enhance the country’s “maritime domain awareness capabilities” and to “stop large-scale weapons from transiting through or near Philippine territorial waters,” including by means of the “use of force.”

“Large-scale weapons” “near Philippine territorial waters” is a clear reference to the stationing by the Chinese of materiel on the disputed Spratly Islands.

The events of the past three months in the Philippines reveal yet again that US imperialism will go to any lengths to achieve its ends. US forces manufactured the threat of ISIS out of a private army largely comprised of child soldiers, oversaw the bombing of a beautiful city killing hundreds of civilians and turning four hundred thousand more into poverty-stricken refugees—all to orchestrate the declaration of martial law and set the stage for military dictatorship.



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