

Waltham Concerned Citizens

"VIETNAMS OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM: IRAQ, THE PHILIPPINES AND COLOMBIA"  
Thursday, June 27, at 7:30 p.m.

More than 1600 U.S. troops and about 160 Special Forces are currently fighting the Abu Sayyaf, a Muslim separatist group on the island of Basilan at the southern tip of Mindanao in the Philippines as part of President Bush's "War Against Terrorism." [MAP] President Bush has put the Abu Sayyaf on his honor roll of terrorists charging it has links to Osama Bin Laden though many dismiss the connection as dubious. The Abu Sayyaf, which once fought for an Islamic state, has degenerated into a kidnap for ransom group.

The U.S. says it is there to train Filipino soldiers on how to fight terrorists. But many see this just as a pretext for intervention and a way to regain its foothold in the Philippines.

Mindanao is home to the Moro people -- Muslims and other ethnic groups who are neither Christian nor Muslim. It is also the home of several insurgent Muslim rebel groups, which have been fighting the central Philippine government for the past 30 years. And now, Mindanao is famous as the kidnap capital of the world.

Recent events in the Philippines have put the 100-year old Mindanao conflict in the spotlight once again. For the last 30 years, a civil war has been raging there. This war has been dismissed as simply a religious one. But the issues are more complex than that. Ever since Spain's attempts to conquer the south in the 16th Century, Islam has been the Moro people's articulation of their identity as a people. Although coastal footholds were secured, the Spanish attempts at colonization never succeeded.

In 1898, the U.S. went to war against Spain for Cuba, and ended acquiring Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. Spain sold the Philippines to the U.S. for \$20 million. Included in that cession were the islands of Mindanao and Sulu, even though Spain did not own them.

After acquiring the Philippines from Spain, the U.S. signed a peace treaty with the Sultanate of Sulu [MAP] in January 1899 to buy time to put down resistance to its occupation in the north by Filipino nationalists who have practically won their war of independence against Spain.

After the U.S. consolidated its rule in the north in 1901, it broke the peace treaty with the Sultanate and began its campaign to colonize the area. The resulting war in the south officially lasted for 12 years from 1901 through 1913. But resistance to U.S. rule continued. Meantime, the U.S. began its policy of relocating people from the north to the south to prevent a potential peasant uprising in the north and to change the ethnic landscape in Mindanao. The resettlement of Christian northern Filipinos to Mindanao created a lot of disparities that eventually rendered the non-Christian a stranger in his own land.

Mindanao was virtually Christian-free before the arrival of the U.S. In 1913, Moros made up 98% of the population. By 1972, the percentage had fallen to 40. Today, a century

later, Christians outnumber Moros 9 to 1 in mainland Mindanao though Sulu still remains 95% Moro. Only 15% of the land in Mindanao today are still in Moro hands.

In 1946, on the eve of Philippine independence from the U.S., the Moros begged the U.S. to not incorporate Mindanao and Sulu into the new Philippine republic. But the U.S. bowed to pressures from Filipino politicians who argued that they were ready to rule Mindanao.

The Philippines was under U.S. colonial rule for 46 years, from 1899-1946. Even after gaining its independence, the Philippines was saddled with numerous military and economic treaties. One of these treaties was the U.S.-Philippine Bases treaty, which allowed the U.S. to keep about 35 military bases and installations throughout the country. The largest of these bases were Clark Air Force Base and the Subic Naval Base. These bases were used as staging grounds in its war against the Vietnamese people in the 1960s-70s and against Iraq in 1991.

In 1991, just before the U.S.- Philippine Bases Agreement was to expire, the Philippine Senate voted not to renew the agreement. This was in part a reaction to the support the U.S. government had given, both militarily and economically, to the 17-year dictatorial rule of Ferdinand Marcos.

U.S. policymakers reacted very negatively to this rejection but decided not to fight it when Mt. Pinatubo erupted and caused extensive damages to both Clark and Subic bases. It was too costly to repair and the U.S. abandoned these bases leaving behind a lot of toxic wastes. After a few years, the United States realized it needed at least access to the Philippines. Other than Japan, other countries in the region did not allow the U.S. to use their countries for servicing of military planes and ships while in transit to "hot spots". Then, in 1999, a more conservative senate approved a Visiting Forces Agreement or VFA, which allowed U.S. troops to conduct military exercises in the Philippines.

It is through this VFA that the U.S. and Philippine governments are justifying the use of U.S. troops in Mindanao. The current VFA with the Philippines is being watched carefully. The U.S. is looking at this agreement as a new model for its role in Southeast Asia replacing the old model of physical military bases. Under this arrangement, U.S. forces conduct frequent joint exercises with Filipinos. The current training in Basilan could make or break this shift in policy because the original terms of the agreement has been stretched with a large number of troops operating there, training lasting more than 30 days and training in a combat zone. Several Moro separatist groups operate in Basilan. As in Vietnam, how is one to tell the Abu Sayyaf from the MILF and their supporters? Already, reports say that these troops have terrorized civilian population on mere suspicion that they are sympathizers of the Abu Sayyaf.

The exercise in Basilan sets a very dangerous precedent in Philippine politics and U.S. foreign policy as well. Both governments have militarized what is essentially an internal police affair in the Philippines. The U.S. could find itself involved in what is purely a domestic issue--an internal insurgency. Unfortunately the lesson we are left with is that the U.S. can push its weight around anywhere it wants in the world and get away with anything it wants to do.

The Abu Sayyaf issue was a perfect opening for the U.S. to enhance its military power in

Southeast Asia, which had been weakened by the closing of its military bases in the Philippines in 1992. As one U.S. diplomat recently said, "What the U.S. needs is capability to station its military aircraft and vessels for a short while for reconditioning and the Philippines is a very ideal spot."

Mindanao is centrally located in the Asia Pacific region. It is the Philippine's closest point to the East ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Growth Area (EAGA) and Australia's Northern Territory and is within three hours flying time to all major Asian markets. Makar Sea Port, located along Sarangani Bay on the southeastern tip of Mindanao, which lies directly on international shipping routes in the mainstream world trade and can accommodate huge ships.

In 1996, the U.S. Aid for International Development (USAID) began pouring a lot of money into Mindanao, supposedly to engender economic growth. It funded the construction of a \$48.6 million airport in General Santos City in Cotabato. This is the only Mindanao airport that can accommodate large cargo planes. There's also the \$15 million expansion of the Makar Sea Port and the \$63.3 million all-weather road network linking 10 towns to General Santos City.

In 2000, the Nuclear Free Philippines, a Philippine-based NGO, suspected that these projects were designed especially to service the "access" of U.S. naval and armed forces in the near future. Their suspicion gained evidence when a deputy undersecretary of defense under Clinton that the "Center of gravity of the world economy has shifted to Asia. And U.S. interests flow with that." A U.S. State Department report "Vision 2002" laid out a plan of reconfiguring its policies in Asia. The U.S. fears Asia to be a potential threat to its vital interests and therefore, the most likely arena for future military conflict.

Now we see all that unfolding.

The U.S. is also opening the stage for putting down Islamic and ethnic rebellions in Southeast Asia, which have destabilized the region, making it unprofitable for U.S. business interests. The conservative think-tank, Stratfor Report said recently that the U.S. decision to stay longer than six months in the Philippines "is another step to use the Philippines as a base in case it needs to launch aggressive anti-terrorism efforts in Southeast Asia."

The Philippine government is an eager partner in the U.S. "War on Terror" because it desperately needs the money to upgrade its military to stamp out a 30-year old rebellion in the Muslim south and a festering communist insurgency in the North. For this cooperation, it got \$100 million in military aid up from the annual \$19 million it received since the closing of U.S. bases there in 1992. Plus a promise of \$4.2 billion in security assistance. This prompted NYT columnist Nicholas Kristof to write:

. . . The Abu Sayyaf has perfected the art of extorting money from foreigners. And now President Gloria Arroyo seems to be learning the art as well. (2/8/02)

The U.S. is poised to stay for the long haul. From an initial training of Filipino troops,

they are now allowed to patrol in search of "terrorists" with Philippine troops. Already, U.S. Special Forces are doing "civic action" work like providing vaccinations, teaching in schools, repairing and building roads. They say they want to win the hearts and minds of the local people. Rings a bell? Remember Vietnam? In those days, it was fighting communism. Today, it's terrorism. But it's all the same game: U.S. intervention.

For the past 30 years, the Manila administration has been unable to resolve the Mindanao conflict. This region has long suffered impoverishment, with an average income of only a fifth of the national average. A 1996 peace accord with one of the major insurgent groups, the Moro National Liberation Front, did very little to improve people's economic security. Animosity towards the Manila government continues to mount.

Even if the U.S. succeeds in crushing the Abu Sayyaf, unless drastic change comes to Mindanao, continuing discontent with Manila will spawn the growth of new rebel groups-- bandit or otherwise. The Philippines will most likely label them terrorists to justify more U.S. military support. Already opposition to U.S. troops is growing. The Arroyo administration is getting desperate and has resorted to calling those opposed to U.S. troops "terrorist lovers." The U.S. will conveniently oblige her in order to maintain it's military positioning in Southeast Asia.

Madge Kho