

The Philippines: whose victory?

by Linda de Hoyos

The public coordinating body of the Iran-Contra caper is the "208 Committee," the official covert operations coordinating agency of the U.S. government comprised of officers of the CIA, State Department, and Defense Department. *EIR* readers will recall that the 208 Committee, whose members include Deputy CIA Director Robert Gates and Assistant Secretary of State Michael Armacost, ran the successful campaign to bring down the government of Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos in February of this year. In the last week of November, it was the committee's operations around Iran that dominated the news, but sources indicate, the 208 Committee and its operatives were also instrumental in the dramatic events that unfolded in Manila beginning Nov. 23.

Those events were hailed as a triple victory for Philippines President Corazon Aquino, but further down the line they may well appear as a defeat for the Philippines. In quick succession, beginning Nov. 23, Aquino fired her defense minister Juan Ponce Enrile, and appointed the highly respected Gen. Rafael Ileta in his place. The remainder of the cabinet handed in its resignations in order to give Aquino the ability "to make a fresh start," as she put it.

Three days later, the communist insurgent New People's Army (NPA) agreed to a 60-day ceasefire, scheduled to begin on Dec. 10—just in time to permit all the varied forces on the left to mobilize behind passage of the draft Constitution, scheduled for a national referendum in January.

Lastly, Aquino announced Nov. 28 that she had accepted the resignation of Natural Resources Minister Ernesto Maceda and Public Works and Highways Minister Rogaciano Mercado, members of the coterie surrounding her regarded by the military as overly sympathetic to the NPA.

These agreements appeared to end the crisis that had been precipitated by Enrile's increasingly bold challenges to Aquino over her policy of appeasement-at-all-costs to the NPA. The greatest cost, Enrile and the military pointed out, was the lives of soldiers of the Philippines Armed Forces, who have been deployed without adequate equipment in a sitting duck stance toward the insurgents.

Tensions between the military under Enrile and the pro-NPA human-rights-mafia in control of Malacanang Palace broke out into the streets Nov. 16, in a round of assassinations

and counter-assassinations. Enrile's sacking was prompted by reports of troop maneuvers in and around Manila in preparation for a military coup against the Aquino government. However, General Ileta and others have indicated that the coup rumors lacked substance—but they did give Aquino the pretext for removing Enrile.

Armed Forces Chief of Staff Fidel Ramos reportedly convinced Enrile to cease and desist. The military then "put a gun to Aquino's head," as one well-placed source in Manila put it, and forced her to appoint in his place General Ileta, a counterinsurgency expert who is believed able to rally the military behind him. While the Enrile-Ileta exchange appears to have boosted the military's presence in the government, the overall effect has been to weaken the line-up of national forces that would draw the lines against the NPA and could muster the political leverage to force an economic policy independent of the International Monetary Fund and the supranational looters of the country's resources.

The U.S. role

Given the actual results, it is not surprising to find that indeed, Filipinos were not the only players in the month's maneuverings. On Nov. 18, according to knowledgeable sources, the State Department's Philip Habib—known now in Manila as the "gravedigger" for his role as special envoy in bringing down Marcos in February—arrived secretly in the Philippines, via Clark Air Base.

The United States had already made public its desire to "quash Enrile"—who is regarded in Washington within 208 Committee circles as "too independent." In early November, as Enrile began to openly attack the Aquino government, the State Department began issuing statements of 100% backing for Aquino, and presidential spokesman Larry Speakes indicated that Enrile had been informed through private channels to "cool it." In his last public statement two weeks ago, Enrile attacked U.S. interference into Philippines political affairs.

Other Americans have arrived on the scene as the stage managers for the crisis. In Manila, Gen. John Singlaub, a leader of the World Anti-Communist League who has been caught holding the bags on the illegal Iranian arms deal, along with Ray Cline of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, were seen meeting with Philippines leaders.

The 208 Committee policy toward the Philippines is dubbed "constructive disengagement"—a phrase that conjures up images of Vietnam. In the Philippines right now, state Manila sources, a situation of dual power already exists. The NPA controls a full 20% of the countryside, levying taxes and carrying out an administration. Now, this NPA has come into Manila to prepare for its final campaign for power. A full 7,500 armed NPA cadre came into the capital city for the funeral Nov. 21 of slain trade union leader Rolando Olalia. These armed cadre are now deployed throughout the desperately impoverished barrios of the city.