

The end of an era in the Philippines

by Lydia Cherry

Following the formal rejection of a new U.S. military base treaty by the Philippine Senate on Sept. 16, it is just a matter of time before the United States leaves Subic Bay naval station. The base was unique for its deep water port and protected harbor; the United States cannot replace this capability. And yet, the agreement that the U.S. hammered out with the increasingly economically weakened country, offered the Philippines nothing: no financial compensation, no increased sovereignty in the military area, and no transfer of military technology. The policies of the United States raise doubts that it was ever serious about holding Subic Bay.

In a column in *Philippines Newsday* Sept. 11, Francisco Tatad wrote that the U.S. and President Corazon Aquino should review "their past mistakes." The "original sin," he wrote, came in 1986 when the U.S. State Department and the Pentagon decided that President Ferdinand Marcos "should go" because "he had become unpredictable on the bases." The U.S. supported Aquino who, Tatad noted ironically, had earlier committed herself to removal of the bases. U.S. officials, however, viewed Aquino as controllable, "saying what she said in private about the bases did not match the public statement."

The next mistake, Tatad wrote, was that one month after she acceded to power, Aquino discarded the Constitution and sacked duly elected local government officials and 200,000 civil servants, "all of this cheered by the U.S. who organized Mrs. Aquino's international support."

Then, the U.S. looked the other way in 1987 when senatorial candidates of the Grand Alliance for Democracy—then the only potentially potent opposition grouping—"were cheated wholesale in the first high-tech electoral cheating in the country's history." (In some districts, Aquino candidates got votes totaling 160% of all registered voters).

Another mistake, Tatad insisted, was U.S. sending flights of Phantom jets "that turned the tide against the otherwise victorious coup of December 1989."

The U.S. high-handedness would have made Douglas MacArthur turn over in his grave. The Manila daily *The Chronicle* gave insight to this dynamic: "In trying to steamroll the Senate, the U.S. has probably not yet gotten over the euphoria of its decisive military victory over Saddam Hussein's army. So it does not matter whether the bludgeon tactics are used on either friend or foe." The daily noted

that "this comes after the U.S., taking advantage of the Mt. Pinatubo eruption that reduced Clark Field as a Filipino bargaining chip in the negotiations, slashed the compensation package and rammed it down the throat of the Filipinos on a take it or leave it basis. The Americans smelled blood and went for the kill."

The June 9 eruption of the long-dormant volcano was one of the biggest and most damaging of the century. The country hasn't recovered. Hundreds of displaced families now live in crowded refugee camps in which children are dying of disease. The U.S. walked away from Clark Base, declaring it unusable and not cost-effective to repair.

The so-called 'master stroke'

Richard Fisher of the Heritage Foundation, a U.S. think-tank, in August called the base agreement "a master stroke"—only \$203 million in military aid per year was specified for the 10-year agreement. Special base negotiator Richard Armitage "has persuaded the Filipinos—for the first time—to separate economic relations from the two countries' military relationship," Fisher said. "And, at the same time, the U.S. will retain access to its best naval base in the Pacific and its best Asian transit point to crises that may threaten American interests in the Persian Gulf." The only problem Fisher foresaw was that it "may not survive the nationalists in the Senate."

It is clear that the Philippine military has resented the "technological apartheid" policy of the United States. Air Force Chief Maj. Gen. Loven Abadia Sept. 17 blamed the U.S. for the sorry state of the Philippine military. "You have not seen fit to transfer top-of-the-line equipment to the Philippines, yet you have been quite generous to other allies who are not even hosts to the biggest military facilities out of the U.S.," Abadia said, during ceremonies turning over a portion of Clark Air Base, at which U.S. Ambassador Frank Wisner was present. Abadia noted that the Americans had barred the Philippines from participating fully in advance phases of joint U.S.-Filipino exercises for lack of advanced equipment.

The Philippine economy has continued to nosedive, with unemployment—doubling since last year—now at 18% officially. Adding in the semi-employed would put the figure at close to half the labor force. The country is no longer food self-sufficient. Fisher indicated further U.S. plans, which would add to the misery: "Washington has already indicated it wants to discuss Philippine progress in economic reforms. . . . Manila must proceed with dismantling monopolies, selling government-owned companies, ending fuel and food subsidies; the free trade agreement being negotiated with Mexico can serve as a model."

Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile concluded Sept. 16: "This day will be variously called the end of an era, a turning point, a crossroads in the life of our nation. We are on the side of history."