

New Iran-Contra War In the Philippines?

by Michael Billington

A recent series of bombings in the Philippines—both in the volatile province of Mindanao in the South, and in the capital, Manila—in the wake of the Oct. 12 bomb which killed nearly 200 in Bali, Indonesia, has thrust the country into a new financial and strategic crisis. The bombings in Manila remain unsolved, while the Mindanao attacks demonstrated that the joint U.S.-Philippine military operations earlier this year, aimed at destroying the Abu Sayyaf kidnapping gang, have not eliminated the problem. The Philippine economy, already reeling from a runaway budget deficit, a collapsing manufacturing base, and a mounting unsustainable debt crisis, is now being hit by a run on its currency and equity markets, and a further decline in foreign investment.

Strong opposition within the Philippine Congress—and even from Vice President Teofisto Guingona—to the participation of U.S. military in combat operations against Abu Sayyaf, prevented the “training exercises” which ended in July from sliding down the slippery slope into a Vietnam-style military adventure. Such foreign military operations on Philippine soil are proscribed by its Constitution. The leadership of the U.S. Pacific Command—Commander-in-Chief Adm. Dennis Blair and his successor Adm. Thomas Fargo—with backing from Secretary of State Colin Powell, generally kept the “exercises” within these constitutional restrictions, despite cries from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the war-party in Washington to expand them.

However, the creation of a new “Defense Policy Board” in August, jointly by Rumsfeld and the Philippines Defense Department, provided a stronger voice to the Utopian war-party among the leadership at the Pentagon, as opposed to the military chain of command. It was rightly feared as an effort by Washington “Chicken-hawks” to use the Philippines, toward unilateral, pre-emptive warfare and confrontation with China. These issues are not yet settled, although the Bush Administration’s adoption of the new strategic doctrine, encompassing pre-emptive war, indicates the danger.

The new wave of terrorism in the Philippines has rekindled a political fight over security measures. Efforts by the government of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to push through draconian anti-terror legislation, and even to implement a National Identification Card system, have met fierce opposition in the Congress. Sen. Aquilino Pimentel, from Mindanao, warned that the bombing may have had as its “immediate objective” to “stampede” the Congress into passing

such legislation. The left opposition is blaming President Arroyo herself for staging the bombs, while others question whether certain military circles tied to the United States may be responsible, to justify a military coup creating a “Musharraf-like” situation, in which the U.S. military could re-establish bases in the country. (The reference is to the Oct. 12, 1999 coup in Pakistan, by Gen. Pervez Musharraf.)

American ‘Private Army’ Deployed

Perhaps the most dangerous news, however, is not the new wave of bombings, but the report that an American “private army” operation has been set up to replace U.S. military forces deployed in Mindanao; an operation with a smell like that of the “Iran-Contra” private drug-and-gun running operations in Central America carried out by Lt. Col. Oliver North under the direction of then-President George H.W. Bush.

An organization called the Asia-Pacific Initiative has been set up by the Washington-based American Foreign Policy Council, whose purpose is to “strengthen democracy and deter the spread of transnational terrorism and militant fundamentalism in the Asia-Pacific Region.” The Institute’s first assignment is on the islands off the coast of Mindanao—the same region where U.S. Special Forces were deployed earlier this year to train and provide air and technical back-up to Philippine troops in combat against the Abu Sayyaf. Some U.S. troops remain in the region today, supposedly only engaged in civil construction projects. According to Bill Gertz of the *Washington Times*, who is a primary media voice for the anti-China war faction in the administration and the Congress (as well as being a member of the Reverend Moon cult), the money for this project ran out in July, and the private operation is taking its place.

The head of the project is Al Santoli, who was already well known in the Philippines. A Vietnam War veteran who never stopped fighting that war, he and Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) teamed up to run subversive operations over the past decades against the governments of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos—all three of which enjoy diplomatic relations with the United States. In Santoli and Rohrabacher’s view, these “communist dictatorships” are guilty of innumerable sins, and subservient to “Red China.” The team has also tried to provoke a confrontation between the Philippines and China over the issue of the disputed Spratly Islands.

Just as Project Democracy began its Iran-Contra operations under the guise of “humanitarian aid,” Santoli is running a multimillion-dollar “humanitarian aid” project in the combat zones of Mindanao, to “win the hearts and minds” of the peasants, and “turn back the tide of terrorism.” Doctors are provided by Knightsbridge International, set up by the American Priory of the Knights of Malta, who appear to have emerged from the crypt to join the new Crusade.

Santoli, who also edits the *China Monitor* for the AFPC, said that the Philippines operation will be expanded into Indonesia, southern Thailand, and India.