

Mindanao Bombs Grease U.S. Slope to Asia War

by Michael Billington

On the April 20-21 weekend, 340 U.S. Marines and Seabees joined the ongoing joint U.S./Philippines military offensive against the Abu Sayyaf, the kidnapping gang in Mindanao, bringing the total U.S. troop presence to 1,000 in the region, while 2,700 U.S. troops disembarked at Subic Bay, the former U.S. naval base near Manila, to participate in a huge “exercise” on the northern island of Luzon. Then, on April 21, three terrorist bombs exploded in General Santos City on the southern tip of Mindanao, killing 15 and wounding dozens more. Investigations have led to the arrest of five suspects as of April 25, who have multiple links to every major armed movement in the country: the Abu Sayyaf itself; the two Islamic separatist movements in Mindanao (the Moro National Liberation Front, MNLF, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF); and the New People’s Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Both the Abu Sayyaf and the NPA are on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations.

General Santos City is a strategically critical location. It sits near the Philippine Trench off the eastern edge of the Philippines, a deep cavity in the ocean floor which serves as a submarine haven for operations across all of Asia. General Santos City also sits just above the strategic Indonesian shipping lanes. In the 1990s, the United States built a state-of-the-art commercial port and airfield for the city, which could also serve as a military base.

China Targetted

EIR Founding Editor Lyndon LaRouche warned in February that the U.S. military deployment into the Philippines had little to do with the so-called “war on terrorism,” and everything to do with the military encirclement of China, a primary target of the “Clash of Civilizations” policy faction now running amok in Washington. While both the Philippine and U.S. governments have denied this, in the past month both sides have acted in a manner which confirms that warning. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s administration has back-tracked on every pledge it made to gain the approval of the Philippine Congress for the joint military operation in Mindanao.

The operation was only an “exercise,” they argued; but U.S. troops, aircraft, and other equipment are directly involved in search and destroy operations against the Abu Say-

yaf. (A U.S. helicopter went down off the coast of Basilan on Feb. 21, killing all ten U.S. airmen on board, in still-unexplained circumstances.) The U.S. troop strength was not to exceed 660, they insisted, but 340 more were added this week without a blink, and more are now expected. The “exercise” would end precisely after six months, it was said, but now it is admitted that it will be longer. Several Philippine Senators have noted that the U.S. presence is becoming “permanent,” even without changing the Constitution to allow the United States to re-establish military bases in the country.

Also, and most importantly, the Arroyo government insisted that the U.S. military deployment would be strictly limited to operations against the small but brutal Abu Sayyaf gang, and not against the mass-based MILF, MNLF, or NPA. However, the arrests in the General Santos City terror bombing demonstrate the difficulty of such strict differentiation between the armed groups. Of the five suspects now in detention, one is reported to be a member of Abu Sayyaf, one or more MILF, and one MNLF. Three of them were apprehended in an office run by a front group for the NPA. Members of the various armed movements have often shifted alliances; the MILF was a split off from the MNLF, and the Abu Sayyaf came from the MILF. The recent bombing is suspected to be the work of a “Lost Command,” a term used for renegade members of Muslim separatist groups.

As for the supposed al-Qaeda connection to the Abu Sayyaf, much touted in the Western press, this is a hoax—which even President Arroyo has acknowledged to be an artificial construct. The last known connection between al-Qaeda and the Philippines was in 1995, when Afghan militants were involved in establishing support groups in the country.

The more relevant question is the role of Western intelligence in the various insurgencies. In the 1980s, dozens, perhaps hundreds or even thousands of militant Islamic Filipinos, mostly from Mindanao, were recruited directly by U.S. intelligence, which took them to Afghanistan and trained them in armed insurgency, in order to fight the U.S. proxy war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. When the Soviets withdrew, these trained insurgents returned to the Philippines (and to other nations around the world), many joining armed separatist movements in the South. The continued role of U.S. intelligence assets within their ranks would be denied only by fools or liars.

The second “exercise” which is now under way in Luzon, called *Balikatan II*, was originally reported by American officials, although unofficially, to be an anti-China war game dealing with an imagined Chinese invasion of the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. This aspect has been carefully omitted from subsequent press reports. Nonetheless, the exercises are taking place in a region of Luzon considered to be an area of operations of the NPA. The 33-year war between the Philippines Army and the Maoist NPA is far from settled—in 2001, at least 189 NPA fighters and 120 government troops were killed in 350 military engagements and ambushes. In early April 2002, an NPA spokesman called

on the approximately 12,000 active NPA soldiers to “inflict severe casualties on the invading U.S. forces” if they infringe on NPA territory. The U.S. forces in both “exercises” are authorized to return fire, if fired upon.

Israeli Commandos Involved

To make matters worse, a team of Israeli commandos was brought into Subic Bay in late April to train the Philippine National Police (PNP) in “anti-terror operations.” Several Senators denounced the deployment as an affront to the Muslim population in the South, given the Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians over the past weeks.

The United States chose to rename the exercise in Mindanao soon after it began, from the Philippine *Balikatan*—translating as “shoulder to shoulder”—to “Enduring Freedom Philippines.” Using the same term as the Afghanistan operation made clear that the “exercise” was in fact an East Asian continuation of the war in Central Asia. Adm. Dennis Blair, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, visited the troops on the jungle island of Basilan, off the coast of Mindanao, and in Zamboanga (see map), on April 15. The United States then essentially dropped the pretext that the American troops were only advisers, by announcing on April 24 that Admiral Blair and the Philippines government had agreed to deploy U.S. Special Forces troops directly on combat missions with the Philippines Army. U.S. Air Force Gen. John Rosa revealed that, under the plan, yet another increase in troop strength would be required, and admitted, “It would greatly increase the possibility of our forces needing to defend themselves.” The announcement that same day that Gen. Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would visit the Philippine war zone the following week, indicated that the slippery slope is indeed getting greased for another ground war in Asia, and the desired clash with China.

General Ramos Threatens Arroyo

As *EIR* has reported (see “Marines and Mini-Coup Hit the Philippines,” *EIR*, Jan. 25, 2002), the senior U.S. asset in the Philippines, retired general and former President Fidel Ramos, has been manipulating President Arroyo to submit to his direction on security matters, under the thinly veiled threat of yet another military-run “people’s power” coup d’état, like those that overthrew Presidents Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, and Joseph Estrada in 2001. This coup threat escalated in the days following the General Santos City bombing. Cardinal Jaime Sin (a key Ramos asset in both previous military coups) “revealed” that several leading players in those coups—including Rep. Jose “Peping” Cojuangco, the brother of former President Corazon Aquino, and Pastor “Boy” Saycon—had approached the good Cardinal for his blessing for the creation of a “collective leadership” of generals to take over the government.

These gentlemen are well-known allies of General

American Military Forces in the Philippines



Ramos, from the elites (Cojuangco) and the non-governmental organizations (Saycon). Cardinal Sin’s “revelation” demonstrates that the threatened action was not real, at least at this time, but was intended as another warning to President Arroyo, at a moment when she is being told to compromise the nation’s sovereignty, again, to the demands of the U.S. war faction.

President Bush, whose Presidency is now stumbling since the Venezuela fiasco and the insulting defiance of the fascist marauder Ariel Sharon, has allowed the war faction increasingly free rein over American policy. In the 1960s, the same “Clash of Civilization” proponents, including Samuel Huntington and Henry Kissinger, pushed for war in Vietnam as a surrogate for attacking China. As then, so now in the Philippines, when U.S. colonial-style military operations provoke a response, either military or terrorist, by those under attack, such a response is used to justify further escalation. As then, there is a point of no return, which is approaching.