

Philippines President Gives a War to Bush

by Mike Billington

Philippines President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was treated to a state dinner at the White House on May 19, only the third such honor bestowed by President George W. Bush so far in his Presidency. The reason for the high honor was obvious: President Macapagal-Arroyo had offered total support to the U.S. imperial war against Iraq, including pledging to send humanitarian troops and workers to support the effort. She also had opened the Philippines to U.S. military deployments over the past year, in combat situations in the troubled Muslim regions in the South, despite Constitutional restrictions against foreign troops fighting on Philippine soil.

One week before her visit to Washington, Macapagal-Arroyo sent her Defense Minister, Gen. Angelo Reyes (ret.), to the United States, to call on his close friend, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, a leading “chicken-hawk” in the imperial cabal which has seized power over the U.S. Presidency. A year earlier, Reyes and Rumsfeld had established a Defense Policy Board between the civilian officials in the two Defense Departments, to better coordinate military operations in the Philippines. General Reyes presented Rumsfeld with a massive military shopping list—between \$1 and \$2 billion, according to some sources. Rebuilding the decrepit Philippine Army was the hoped-for reward for such faithful service from the former U.S. colony.

Nonetheless, Reyes went home empty handed. Something more was needed.

Military Escalation

On the eve of her departure for the United States, Macapagal-Arroyo issued up another offering to the gods of war in Washington—a full-scale military assault on the Moro Islamic Liberation Movement (MILF), ending all efforts at finding peace with the Islamic Moro people in the Province of Mindanao. Just a week earlier, the government had given the MILF a deadline of June 1 to prove that they were not responsible for the terrorist bombings and raids in the region—a charge which the MILF denies—or face being declared a “terrorist organization.”

But the timing of President Macapagal-Arroyo’s visit to Washington appears to have moved up the timetable considerably. On May 17, the Philippines military launched the first attack, involving 3,000 troops, and “selective aerial and artillery attacks to dislodge embedded terrorist cells,” as described

in the order issued by the President only hours before departing for the United States. Over 50 people were killed in the first wave.

Army Chief of Staff Rigoberto Tiglao, when asked why the assault targetted the MILF, rather than the terrorist bandits in the Abu Sayyaf gang (who were the target of earlier joint U.S.-Philippines military operations), replied, “It’s irrelevant now if it’s MILF or Abu Sayyaf. The military have been ordered to go after *any* armed groups which could be, or have been identified as having undertaken terror attacks, or planning to have these attacks” (emphasis added).

Fawning Praise

If President Macapagal-Arroyo expected a change of heart on the billion-dollar request, she was to be disappointed. President Bush offered \$30 million in military aid, 20 UH-1H helicopters, and the declaration of the Philippines as a “non-NATO ally,” which allows for easier access to military hardware and training. He also accepted an invitation to visit the Philippines—perhaps to visit the U.S. troops who will be deployed soon to engage in another round of live combat “exercises.”

If the Macapagal-Arroyo government carries out its threat to declare the MILF a “terrorist organization,” it is more than a possibility that the United States will end up engaged in a war with the mass-based MILF, rather than the criminal Abu Sayyaf gang—providing an excuse for those in the war-party in Washington to achieve their stated goal of establishing a full-time military presence in the Philippines.

With leaders around the world now openly protesting the criminality of the pre-emptive U.S. war on Iraq, and the lies regarding “terrorist connections” and “weapons of mass destruction” which were used to justify that war, President Macapagal-Arroyo chose instead to lavish praise on President Bush—which will prove most difficult to explain when the dust settles.

In her toast to Bush at the White House dinner, Macapagal-Arroyo said: “And how do we define a man or woman of firm resolve and goodwill? It was once thought difficult to take a firm stand against tyranny, and nearly impossible to cope with terrorism. Now, the world knows better, especially after March 20 [when the Iraq War started]. Indeed, it’s not easy, but, clearly, it can be done, with fearless leadership and iron resolve, combined with a bold strategic vision, and an unfailing sense of justice. I’m describing President Bush.”

While Macapagal-Arroyo was being wined and dined in the White House, 300,000 people in Mindanao were forced to flee their homes. Sen. Aquilino Pimentel, who represents the region in the Philippines Senate, denounced the war on the MILF as “state-sponsored terrorism,” as the death toll passed 100. Lt. Gen. Roy Kyamko, who heads the assault in Mindanao, told the press, “There is no war, we cannot call bombing a war. What we are doing is dropping bombs and shelling in their selective areas.”