

U.S. Military Plans in Philippines Collapse

by Michael Billington

The plan to launch a small U.S. combat operation into the southern islands of the Philippines has collapsed, with egg all over U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's face. As reported last week in *EIR*, an anonymous, leading official from the "chicken-hawk" faction at the Department of Defense, was authorized on Feb. 19 to reveal a supposed secret deal with the government of Philippines President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. It called for U.S. military forces to go to war against the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas (and perhaps other armed organizations) on the island of Sulu, off Mindanao in the southern Philippines—the first U.S. military engagement in Southeast Asia since Vietnam. As such a deployment totally breaches the Philippines Constitution, the Philippines government (and the population) exploded at the news, and the President's spokesman vigorously denied that any such deal existed.

Defense Secretary Gen. Angelo Reyes, who was suspected by some in the Philippines to have set up just such a deal, perhaps behind President Arroyo's back, flew off to Washington to meet with his friend Rumsfeld. Last August, the two defense secretaries had set up a Defense Policy Board, providing what they described as "civilian to civilian" direction to U.S./Philippines military cooperation. They intended to circumvent the military-to-military line of command and the role of the State Department, whose Secretary Colin Powell had spoken out against either a U.S. combat role or any attempt to create a permanent U.S. military presence.

But the Rumsfeld/Reyes meetings failed miserably. An expected joint press conference at the Pentagon on Feb. 28, to report on the "ironing out of differences," turned into separate press conferences, with fumbling by both to cover up the collapse of the plan. Behind the collapse was the fact that the President's office in Manila had announced that there would be no compromise with the Constitutional restriction against foreign military operations on Philippine soil—and even suggested that the entire U.S./Philippine "exercise" may be postponed or even scrapped.

Rumsfeld found it difficult to cover over the apparent intent of the authorized "leak"—to force the Philippines to give in to U.S. military demands. General Reyes, for his part, according to press reports, made a statement that may come back to haunt him: He said that in the Philippines, a soldier's training is not done until he has live combat experience, and therefore, U.S. soldiers joining Philippine soldiers in combat

was just part of training!

By the time Reyes arrived back in Manila, he was less equivocal. "Our agreement is that we will consider other options. Now when we say options, it doesn't only refer to the site; it might be in the complexion of the entire exercise." President Arroyo's spokesperson Ignacio Bunye went further: "The Balikatan exercises will be conducted under absolute Constitutional standards. The people of the place—wherever it will be held in the future—will be consulted"—something which did not occur in the case of Sulu, an island whose population still vividly recalls the killing of thousands of its citizens in the 1906 battles with the U.S. military. "Ethnic sensibilities will be respected," said Bunye, a sure indication that the war on Abu Sayyaf's main base in Sulu is not to involve American troops.

As if in response, a hideous terrorist bomb attack took place at the Davao City Airport in Mindanao on March 4, killing 21 civilians, with over 150 injured. One of the dead was an American missionary, and President Bush immediately offered to help find the perpetrators. But President Arroyo, who flew to the scene of the bombing, in her first personal statement on the issue since the U.S. leak on Feb. 19, welcomed U.S. help but said that there would be no combat role for the Americans.

The bombing is being blamed on the Moro Islamic Liberation Movement (MILF), one of the major separatist movements in the South, which has been under attack by the Philippines Army for weeks. The destruction of several power lines, which threw the entire region into darkness, has also been credited to the MILF, but they strongly deny attacking civilians.

The collapse of the U.S. military scheme could be accredited to the arrogance of the U.S. war party, as well as their blundering incompetence. But there is also the possibility that the release of the supposed "secret deal" with the Arroyo government by the U.S. Defense Department—regardless of whether it was a highly confidential and secret agreement, or a total fabrication—was intended to destabilize or even bring down the Arroyo government, to force concessions for the wider U.S. global war plans. Former Sen. Kit Tatad, in an interview in this issue of *EIR*, warns that the Rumsfeld team could well be repeating a ploy by the United States in the 1950s, when support for fighting insurgents was used to manipulate a U.S.-controlled asset, Ramon Magsaysay, into the Presidency. Perhaps, says Tatad, Rumsfeld is planning to put General Reyes or some other favorite into power, through discrediting the current Presidency.

However, in a March 4 article in the *Daily Tribune*, Senator Tatad indicated that President Arroyo may be "ready to deal with the problem." She ordered her military to defeat the Abu Sayyaf within the next 90 days, while ruling out direct U.S. support. Tatad wrote that this was "a move seen by many as a clear prelude to her sacking Reyes if the military fails to wipe out the kidnap-for-ransom gang within that deadline."