

Will Philippines be Bush's next Panama?

by Lydia Cherry

On Feb. 14, U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Nicholas Platt lamely attempted to disclaim widespread rumors that the Philippines is next on the Bush administration's hit-list for the "Panama treatment." In a radio broadcast, Platt tried to differentiate between the two countries: "In Panama's case, it was the government itself that was threatening these Americans and, therefore, the U.S. in order to protect Americans had to step in. In the Philippines, the government has undertaken to protect American lives, and we have a lot of confidence in the Philippine government's efforts and willingness to do that."

But Platt's statement is clearly too little and too late in a country where the consensus—right, left, and center—has markedly shifted into agreement on one issue: the assessment that United States is no longer an ally. Philippine Senator Joseph Estrada, as reported by the *Philippine Newsday* Feb. 7, put the issue fairly succinctly: "History has shown the repeated duplicity and treachery of the United States."

Speaking on the floor of the Philippine Senate in early February, Sen. Wigberto Tanada speculated that the United States, if provided with the right reasons and timing, could launch a military operation similar to the one in Panama. "Because American lives and property could be managed to be endangered and the integrity of the [military] bases agreement made to appear threatened, they could launch a version of 'Operation Just Cause' in Panama here in the Philippines," he warned, according to *Newsday*.

More rumors of a coup

Meanwhile, the Philippine military has once again declared a "red alert" amid rumors of a new coup. Armed Forces chief General Renato said it was a precaution against any attempts by mutineers to disrupt the Feb. 18 gathering of political and military leaders at the Philippine Military Academy, and the visit on the following day of U.S. Defense Secretary Richard Cheney. On Feb. 6, the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM), known to have a strong support apparatus in the Philippines, told the United States to stay out of the internal affairs of the Philippines. "The U.S. government will be solely responsible for whatever actions we

might consider to take against them," the RAM statement said.

During the first two weeks of February, U.S.-instigated points of contention, almost as if designed to split the two countries apart, came to the fore in rapid succession. First, just a few weeks before new talks between the two sides on the U.S. bases were to begin, Washington informed Manila that the U.S. side had unilaterally cut \$96 million from the compensation money which had already been promised as part of the \$360 million overall agreement earlier negotiated. Editorials and public statements from across the political spectrum called on President Corazon Aquino to cancel the new base talks. "If the American government continues to treat the Philippines like a mendicant when it comes to funds which it rightfully owns, then there is no use dealing with these Americans," a member of the House committee on foreign affairs, Hernando Perez, is quoted in a debate in the lower house.

On Feb. 6, the Philippines government issued a formal protest to the Bush administration over the U.S. abstention in a vote at the World Bank on whether to lend Manila \$390 million to back energy development. Finance Secretary Jesus Estanislao is quoted by Reuter: "We mind it very much that they're playing around with our economic policy and our economic programs for reasons that are only known to them." He explained he had told U.S. Ambassador Platt: "This is a very bad signal at a very bad time. I don't like these signals . . . it is not the appropriate way of delivering a message—very contradictory to what they say."

President Aquino announced on Feb. 11 that she would not meet with Defense Secretary Cheney when he visits the Philippines in mid-February. Aquino announced in her weekly radio address that her government would demand explanations from Washington on why aid was being cut.

The Bush administration's long-range planning instructions to U.S. military leaders, according to U.S. press coverage, instruct the military services to plan for the possibilities that the U.S. might have to give up its bases in the Philippines and set up new bases in Asia. A senior Defense Department official told the Washington press corps that the document in effect tells the services to start considering Singapore and other places for new Pacific bases and to plan for forces of greater range to compensate for the possible loss of bases in the Philippines after the 1991 expiration date.

The spokesman made no reference to the fact that Subic Bay Naval base, with its deep-water port, is irreplaceable. Without Subic Bay, the only alternative for basing U.S. submarines is to bring them back to the United States.

Some Asian leaders think that it is a given that the United States is pulling out of Asia, and that the only question is whether or not Communist China will take up the slack. "It will be left to China, India, and Japan to contest for the leadership of this region," noted Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Goh, speaking in Kuala Lumpur Feb. 4.