

# An American 'Posse' Heads for Philippines

by Mike Billington

On Feb. 19, a senior official at the U.S. Department of Defense, on condition of anonymity, revealed to the press that the United States was preparing to send 3,000 Special Forces, Marines, and support troops into the southern islands of the Philippines, to engage in combat with the Abu Sayyaf terrorist gang. A total of 1,700 ground troops were to be joined by others aboard two ships offshore, loaded with Cobra attack helicopters and Harrier jets—a small-scale invasion force. The operation was to begin Feb. 24. The problem is that the operation—the only American combat mission in the world after Afghanistan—is entirely illegal under the Philippines' Constitution!

The unnamed Defense official was also quoted by the *New York Times* claiming that President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was backing down on “the scope of an operation that had already been agreed upon in private”—a statement which could only be intended to destabilize the Philippines President whether she had, in fact, made such an agreement, or not. Such underhanded diplomacy is the stuff of “dirty tricks.”

When the story hit the headlines on Feb. 20, the Philippines went into an uproar. Ignacio Bunye, spokesman for President Macapagal-Arroyo, told the press that the anonymous U.S. official was lying: “He is a loudmouth,” Bunye said. “Please write that. He doesn't know what he's talking about.” White House spokesman Ari Fleischer confirmed that the “leak” was accurate! Bunye then threatened to cancel the planned U.S.-Philippine training exercises altogether: “I can assure you, there will be no joint military exercises if the U.S. insists on a combat operation—the President [Macapagal-Arroyo] wanted a military exercise that is in accordance with the Constitution.”

Even the leading establishment newspaper in the Philippines, *The Inquirer*, went ballistic, recognizing that the “pre-emptive strike” doctrine pronounced by the Bush Administration last year could soon be coming to the Philippines. “The disclosure can mean only one thing,” read the *Inquirer's* Feb. 23 editorial. “The cowboys in the White House will wage their war on terror any which way they want, and the rest of the world, their so-called allies included, be damned. . . . In other words, the White House—and the U.S. Defense Department under tell-it-like-it-is Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—has rounded up a posse, and it is time to ride.” In fact, on Jan.

27, at a meeting in Washington of the American Enterprise Institute, Richard Perle, head of the Defense Policy Board and a spokesman for the “chicken-hawks,” described the “coalition of the willing” he and his ilk are preparing for a strike on Iraq, and others, in the following terms: “The coalition of the willing is really a posse riding out of town to get the miscreants.”

*The Inquirer* also sensed that someone in the American Administration was out to discredit the Philippines government: “Leaking the news in a way that pulls the rug from under the Macapagal administration's feet, is to send an unambiguous message to its allies here and around the world: If you can't solve a problem, we'll do it for you, regardless of what you think.”

## Enter Rumsfeld

The Philippine Secretary of Defense Gen. Angelo Reyes was initially more evasive, saying only that any presence of U.S. troops would be within the Constitution, then flying to Washington to meet Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who has been demonstrating personality disorders increasingly similar to those of Dr. Strangelove. Last year, soon after Secretary of State Colin Powell travelled to the Philippines and assured the government that the United States had no intention to establish a permanent military presence in the Philippines, Rumsfeld invited General Reyes to the United States to form a “Defense Policy Board,” a civilian-to-civilian institution to oversee U.S.-Philippine military relations. Perhaps not coincidentally, this is the same name as Richard Perle's Board, one of the primary planning centers for the civilian chicken-hawks at the Pentagon who are notorious for promoting utopian imperial schemes, often behind the backs of the traditional military.

The new Rumsfeld-Reyes board strengthened the chicken-hawks' hold over American Philippines policy, at the expense of the uniformed military and the more sensible Powell at the State Department. *EIR* warned at the time that such a separate line of command could be used to run a destabilization of the Philippines, of the sort being seen today.

The question must be asked: If this utterly undiplomatic declaration of an illegal war, by an unnamed Defense official, was done without the approval of President Macapagal-Arroyo, is there an effort to undermine her authority? The United States has directly sponsored the overthrow of two governments in the Philippines in the past two decades. Is another “regime change” in the cards, whose end would be to have the Philippines again become a staging area for U.S. military operations in Asia?

It is of note that the leading advocate in the U.S. Administration for war and regime change in Iraq, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, has recently been bragging of his personal role in the U.S.-run 1986 coup d'état against Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos—a coup which left the country in the hands of the International Monetary Fund,



*"Leaks" and actions from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other "chicken-hawks" in his Pentagon, have destabilized the government of Philippines President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo—perhaps intentionally.*

which proceeded to loot the economy into its current state of utter poverty and near bankruptcy. Wolfowitz even uses the coup against Marcos as a model for the removal of Saddam Hussein. Is Wolfowitz the "anonymous Defense Department official" who launched this destabilization?

Further evidence of such a plan was published in the *Wall Street Journal* on Feb 25. The *Journal*, which has outspokenly promoted the utopian policy for a new American Empire, ran an editorial demanding that the U.S. military be unleashed in the Philippines, without "being asked to undertake a dangerous mission with their hands tied" by such niceties as Philippines Constitutional law.

Even more revealing, was the *Journal's* report that they had placed a call to the former head of the police in the Philippines, Sen. Panfilo "Ping" Lacson (who until recently was damned in the American press as a crony of deposed President Joseph Estrada). Senator Lacson supposedly told the *Journal* that "any support from the U.S. is welcome here," and that getting American troops "more involved in eliminating terrorists . . . is the only way [the people] can lead peaceful, safe lives in the future." President Macapagal-Arroyo, they complain, is subject to intimidation by those who oppose the American military operations on their soil, and, they point out, Lacson is "a leading opposition candidate for President in next year's election."

### **Another Moro War?**

The official target of the U.S.-Philippine "exercise" is the Abu Sayyaf, a kidnapping and terrorist gang made up of a few hundred drop-outs from the Islamic separatist movements

which have long battled for the independence of Mindanao. The Abu Sayyaf had direct al-Qaeda connections in the mid-1990s, but those have long been severed, and all political or religious aspirations replaced by those of a criminal kidnapping gang. Nonetheless, the Philippines recently obliged the United States by claiming that there is an Iraq connection to the Abu Sayyaf, based on a reported phone call from one of the gang to the Iraqi Embassy in Manila! This was played widely in the American press.

More seriously, however, the Philippines Army has, over the past month, renewed full-scale military operations against one of the leading Moro separatist groups, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which operates across the region. If the United States engages in combat against the Abu Sayyaf, it could easily spread to the long-standing armed political movements like the

MILF, and start United States policy down the "slippery slope."

There is a long, ugly history to U.S. operations in Sulu, the island off Mindanao which is the target of the American operation. "It's like committing suicide," said Sulu Congressman Hussein Amin, "given the historical background of Sulu against the U.S. colonization way back in the 1900s." Gov. Parouk Hussin of the Autonomous Region in Mindanao told *The Inquirer* that the people in Sulu "have not forgotten their horrible experience" under U.S. occupation, when thousands of Tausigs, the local ethnic group in Sulu, were killed by American soldiers.

Defense Secretary General Reyes, on his way to Washington, stopped in Hawaii to meet with the head of the Pacific Command, Adm. Thomas Fargo, on Feb. 26. After the meeting, Reyes announced to the press that Americans will not be allowed to engage in "offensive combat operations" on Philippine soil, and even indicated that the "we would rather hold deployment" of the exercise "until after the final agreement on exactly the size and shape is reached."

Of course, if we look at the current U.S. drive to buy supporters for an Iraq invasion with multibillion-dollar promises, we must assume that General Reyes will be subjected to further armtwisting and bribes when he reaches Washington. But even if the popular outcry against the breach of the Philippine Constitution and national sovereignty prevents the U.S. military operation from proceeding as announced, it may be that the political damage has already been done, and that more "empire-compatible" leaders are being groomed, to force President Macapagal-Arroyo to acquiesce or step aside.