

U.S. 'Phase II' Escalation Pushes The Philippines Closer To Chaos

by Michael Billington

Phase two of the U.S. "war on terrorism" has commenced in the Philippines. Although the deployment could, conceivably, remain small-scale, with the 650 U.S. combat troops limited to a purely advisory and training function, the reality is that the Philippines is threatened with a military, social, and political catastrophe. As reported in last week's issue ("Marines, and Mini-Coup, Hit the Philippines," *EIR*, Jan. 25, 2001), the effort on the U.S. side has been promoted especially by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. Given the leading role that Wolfowitz is playing in the attempted coup d'état in the United States itself, commencing with the Sept. 11 attacks, aimed at pushing the United States into a global religious war, it is certain that the intention of at least some of those behind this reckless deployment is to increase the global tension, with the Philippines caught in the crossfire.

In the center of this mess is General (ret.) and former President Fidel Ramos. Ramos has dutifully represented the interests of the New York and London financial oligarchy since at least 15 years ago, when, in 1986, as head of the Philippines Army, he turned against his Commander in Chief, President Ferdinand Marcos, turning the country, lock, stock, and barrel, over to the looting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This was called the "Edsa Revolution." Then, just one year ago, Ramos again used his influence (and the power of his sponsors in Washington) to coerce the military leadership to repeat his earlier exercise, withdrawing support from the elected President, Joseph Estrada, and installing his Vice President, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (this was called "Edsa II").

But President Arroyo, whatever her intentions, has had no room to maneuver, has been overshadowed by Ramos and his cohorts, and is now deemed expendable. Perhaps she was too friendly with other leaders in Asia, who are increasingly aware of the need to build alternatives to the bankrupt and moribund IMF system. Or, perhaps she was too reticent to approve of the U.S. military deployment—the Philippines Constitution explicitly forbids foreign troops to engage in combat on Philippine soil. Whatever the reason, Ramos and the circles responsible for past coups—the Makati Business Club, the corrupt Catholic Church officials around Cardinal Jaime Sin, the press, and the non-governmental organizations under Ramos' control—have moved to destabilize the Arroyo Administration.

Challenge To U.S. Deployment Fails

As of Jan. 23, the effort of Teofisto Guingona—who serves as both Vice President and Foreign Affairs Secretary to President Arroyo—to stop the illegal U.S. military deployment, has failed. At an emergency meeting of the National Security Council (NSC), Guingona challenged the policy, and publicly threatened to resign from the government, were it to proceed without his approval. Several aspects of the military deployment, including the granting of the right for foreign troops to remain in the country for more than four weeks, and a new "logistics agreement" being negotiated between the two countries, require his signature as Foreign Minister.

However, the NSC meeting ended with apparent unanimity in support of the so-called "exercise" between U.S. and Filipino troops. The "exercise" will last at least six months; it will be held on the front lines of an active war between the Philippine Army and the terrorist bandits, the Abu Sayyaf, while armed confrontations with three other small armies are taking place in the immediate vicinity; and the rules of engagement allow the U.S. forces to use full military power in self-defense. The pro-Ramos press pictured Guingona as having "bowed" to the decision, but it is also possible that Guingona recognized that his resignation could potentially bring down the Arroyo government. He chose to temporize. After the meeting, Ramos denied that he had applied any pressure on Guingona. The legality of the U.S. military deployment was crudely sidestepped by a decision of the Department of Justice, that President Arroyo could sign the agreements herself, bypassing Guingona at the Foreign Ministry. Guingona did not acquiesce completely, saying that he remains opposed, but that he had "no choice."

The Philippines Congress is in an uproar. As we went to press, there were hearings scheduled on Jan. 24, called by Sen. Rodolpho Biazon, who is a former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces. The head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Blas Ople—primary author of the Visiting Forces Agreement (which governs foreign military involvement in the Philippines)—described the U.S. deployment, as currently constituted, as strictly outside the law, and said that it "must be stopped." Congresswoman Imee Marcos, the daughter of former President Marcos, warned that the new logistical agreement being rammed through by executive or-

der, contained appropriations which can only legally be initiated by the Congress.

Ramos' Open Threats

The character of Ramos' maneuvers was revealed on Jan. 20, the anniversary of the "Edsa II" coup against President Estrada. At the Edsa Shrine, the scene of the mass demonstrations associated with the coups against Presidents Marcos and Estrada, Ramos taunted the population, and directly threatened President Arroyo. He ridiculed the popular uprising of May 1, 2001—a series of demonstrations of hundreds of thousands which had threatened to bring down the Arroyo government, calling for Estrada to be reinstated to the Presidency he had won by the largest majority in Philippines history. This movement, known as "Edsa III," was not in line with the wishes of the business and "civil society" oligarchs who had carried out the previous coups, so it was militarily crushed, with much bloodshed. Ramos, on Jan. 20, dismissed this movement as "nothing." "There was no Edsa III," he said, because the business community and the military had not supported it! "And," he added, "this is the most important thing: Edsa I and Edsa II succeeded." Such disdain for the population can only have been a calculated provocation, intended to fuel the potential for anarchy.

Ramos referred to such anarchy as a warning to Arroyo. He had earlier instructed Arroyo that she must stop her public efforts to identify with the poor: This, he said, showed too much interest in getting reelected. She should "concentrate on the economy," he said, meaning the dictates of the IMF and the Makati Business Club. On Jan. 20, he spelled out what he meant: While the May 1 events were not a real Edsa III, he said, there might yet be another such upheaval, if Arroyo did not "secure the support of civil society and the business sector in the next 12 months."

President Arroyo has responded to these threats by trying to appease Ramos and the IMF/Makati Business Club. Ramos was appointed head of a newly created Council of State, with advisory powers on all issues of concern to the nation, although that is unlikely to satisfy him at this point. On the economy, the President's economic team released a set of nine "free-market reforms" to be rushed through the Congress, further selling off the economy to foreign and domestic speculators at fire-sale rates. President Arroyo has been boxed into an untenable position, unable to defend the nation either economically or strategically.

Thus far, most of the opposition to the Arroyo regime has recognized the coup plotting by the oligarchy. Sen. Ping Lacson, a possible candidate against Arroyo, has called for his supporters to "stand down" from the calls for mass demonstrations against the administration, so as not to be used by the plotters around Ramos. Commentator Herman Laurel, an associate of Estrada who regularly features *EIR* reports and analyses in his columns and radio broadcasts, has called on the organizations which filled the streets on May 1, 2001, for

Edsa III, to remain calm and avoid anarchy, while forging economic and social policies and alliances to deal with the real problems in the next elections.

A New Quagmire?

The military situation is extremely dicey. Abu Sayyaf, the ostensible target of the deployment, is composed of several hundred well-armed bandits, with arms purchased with the ransom money from kidnappings (their primary occupation). The Abu Sayyaf are no revolutionary or Islamic force, but simply bloodthirsty criminals. That does not lessen the likelihood of a military confrontation with U.S. troops, however.

But Mindanao, the southern island where the troops are based, and the smaller adjacent islands of Basilan and Jolo, where they will deploy in search and destroy operations against Abu Sayyaf, are also home to two substantial Islamic armed movements, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MILF has been at war with the Army for many years, although it has recently signed a fragile cease-fire, and is engaged in peace negotiations. Occasional shootouts still occur, and the number of incidents could explode overnight.

Just such an explosion has already taken place with the MNLF, which had been at peace for nearly a decade, and had assumed official leadership in an autonomous region of Mindanao. In November, the MNLF split, and supporters of the founder and leader of the group, Nur Misuari, led an armed assault on an Army camp which left over 100 people dead. Misuari is now a prisoner of the government, but confrontations continue. If either the MNLF or the MILF were to come into conflict with U.S. forces, it could trigger a social and political explosion among the Muslim population in the region.

Even more incendiary is the possibility of an encounter with some combination of the extensive Communist Party guerrilla organizations in the Philippines, which have about 12,000 armed cadre across the country—including in Mindanao. The New People's Army (NPA), the military wing of the Communist movement, has been placed on the official U.S. terrorist list, although it has no known connections with the Afghansi. If U.S. troops engaged in the "exercise" are attacked, by chance or by intention, by the NPA, will the United States root them out, throughout the country?

President George Bush, together with Secretary of State Colin Powell, has thus far successfully frustrated the efforts of the Wolfowitz faction in his administration to start a war in the Mideast, against Iraq or some other Islamic nation. But Wolfowitz has demonstrated in the Philippines that he can play the British game of imperial manipulation—and he is looking beyond the Philippines to Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world. Wolfowitz has openly called for "Phase II" to commence in the Philippines and Indonesia. Senator Ople's words should be heeded: Such operations "must be stopped."