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## Interview: Fr. Eliseo Mercado

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# Philippines Becoming Just U.S. War Appendage?

*Father Eliseo Mercado, currently at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. as a Fulbright New Century Scholar, was President of Notre Dame University in Cotabato City, Mindanao, Philippines, from 1992-2002. He has served as the chairman of the Independent Cease-Fire Monitoring Committee of the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and now chairs the National Peace Council in Mindanao, working for a resumption of the peace process between the government and ethnic, religious, and political organizations in Mindanao. Fr. Mercado is a Doctor of Divinity and Humanity, and completed Islamic and Arabic studies at the Gregorian University in Rome and at the Oriental Institute in Cairo. He was interviewed in Washington by Michael and Gail Billington on April 14.*



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**EIR:** Father Mercado, you were the official negotiator between the Philippines government and the MILF under both the Estrada and Macapagal-Arroyo Administrations, but in both cases you resigned those positions. What were the circumstances that led to your resignations?

**Fr. Mercado:** To begin with, the negotiators, understanding that they would be coming from the non-government organizations, the NGOs, they know that they are not supposed to be either with the MILF or with the government, that perhaps they would be more effective in bridging the two, moving towards resumption of formal peace talks. So after Estrada's all-out war, we were all upbeat when Macapagal declared an all-out peace initiative in the South. But, of course, things changed last Feb. 11, because the . . . Armed Forces of the Philippines conducted new military initiatives attacking the MILF council, and the peace talks broke off again. I saw this, and that's when I came here.

Before coming here I talked to different people, including the Defense Secretary, and I saw the hopeless attitude, and I believe nothing will happen as long as [Gen. Angelo] Reyes is Defense Secretary of the Philippines. He was the Chief of

Staff during the Estrada Administration, and he articulated the doctrine of the use of force as "softening the position" of the MILF. Now as the Defense Secretary, I believe that he follows the same doctrine.

**EIR:** General Reyes has very, very close relations with U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who is certainly the leading promoter of the war policy in the United States. What is your perspective on his relationship to Rumsfeld and the United States?

**Fr. Mercado:** Personally, I believe that Reyes follows the same school as the people running the Defense Department in the United States. That is to say that if you really show your muscles, then you can really demand the terms of surrender on your enemies, by showing your superiority. But to me that will never solve any problems. Secretary Reyes also believes, and the Philippines government, for that matter, believes we will only be able to modernize the Armed Forces of the Philippines if we dovetail the policy and priorities to that of U.S. policy. So that means the Philippines Defense Department will be really practically becoming a department or an extension of the U.S. Defense Department, or our foreign policy will really appear now as an extension of the State Department policy. For them that is the only way to modernize the Philippines military, because they have no money.

**EIR:** Ideologically, we have shown recently in the pamphlet, *Children of Satan: The 'Ignoble Liars' behind the Bush No-Exit War*, that the civilian leadership at the Defense Department, under Rumsfeld and Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz and Perle, comes from the Leo Strauss school—himself a student of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Carl Schmitt fascist apparatus in Germany. You're familiar with that school?

**Fr. Mercado:** I am familiar.

**EIR:** And it certainly appears that what you are describing is a Nietzschean form of thinking, that you need to assert power, to show that you are capable of doing anything evil to terrorize your opponents into submission. What is your thought on that?

**Fr. Mercado:** The way they are doing it, our armed forces under the leadership of Reyes follow that particular school. At least there are indicators that point to that. That's why Reyes has always been called a military "hawk" in the Philippines, more hawkish than anybody else in the country. And for what purpose? They want to show manifestations of might and supremacy over all the enemies of the state, so called.

**EIR:** Since the launching of the war on terrorism after 9/11, the U.S. military has been participating in "exercises" in Mindanao, actually live combat operations against the Abu Sayyaf; many contend that this is a breach of the Philippines' Constitution, which forbids foreign troops in combat in the

Philippines. LaRouche has warned that this is part of a broader effort by the war party in Washington to create basing rights in Asia, with a view to confronting China. How do you see that?

**Fr. Mercado:** The first time they launched the Balikatan [military exercises] in the southern Philippines, we thought that the United States had definitely opened Southeast Asia as the second front in their war against terrorism; and, lo and behold, they issued a report about terrorist networks in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and the southern Philippines, which fully occupied newspapers, local as well as international. So there is a real necessity to my view then, that they had to start this in the Philippines, not necessarily to get a military base, but definitely what you call a launch pad; and that definitely Mindanao needed to be open, for example, not necessarily to the old understanding of bases; but all military bases in the Philippines, and Philippines airports, accessible to the United States without the actual bases—unlike before, with Subic [Bay] and Clark Field. But then by tying the interest of the Philippines government and the U.S. government, and then tying together also the U.S. defense interest as well as the Philippines’ defense interest—then you have the bases without the name, without the label.

So, I think they have accomplished that. I don’t think really the target is the Abu Sayyaf, because before 9/11, these were only a few hundred people, lawless elements. It’s really a police matter, not a matter for the military, and definitely not for a coalition of international forces, because there are only some 200. And after the first Balikatan, the Abu Sayyaf problem is never solved. So this is something different, definitely, than Abu Sayyaf . . . definitely, it is really the consolidation of Southeast Asia. At one time I thought it was the anti-terrorist coalition second front, but I think there is a bigger agenda than simply the terrorists. . . .

**EIR:** What is your view of the adoption of the new U.S. strategic doctrine of unilateral, pre-emptive warfare?

**Fr. Mercado:** To me it is particularly dangerous, to say the least, a dangerous doctrine. Practically, the United States now dictates world policy, and can disregard the whole United Nations at will, you see? It is a unilateralism based on military might. The so-called “coalition of the willing,” is really what you call a shell. There are only about three or five, and the rest you never heard! I don’t know who believes in this “coalition of the willing.”

**EIR:** In general, I know you are here studying the relationship between the peace process and religious militants. What is your sense of the terrorist problem in Southeast Asia and, in particular, do you agree with those who describe it as an adjunct of international terrorism, or do you think it is something domestic?

**Fr. Mercado:** Personally, I believe that most of the so-called terrorist groups labeled by the White House or the State Department are genuine ethnic, and perhaps even national,

groupings and movements, and they do have legitimate grievances, and they are not part of an international terrorist front or coalition. There might be, of course, radicals within the groups, but a few radicals within the group would not make the whole group part of a so-called terrorist coalition against the West. So they really try to make something very big out of this very little minority within these different Islamic groups.

**EIR:** What do you think is their purpose in calling this international terrorism?

**Fr. Mercado:** Personally, I believe it is to consolidate their interests in Southeast Asia. It is a big territory, particularly Indonesia and the whole southern Philippines, including Malaysia now, and the whole of ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] for that matter.

**EIR:** The RAND Corporation did a series of studies on Asia and China, which said that the only nation on Earth capable of becoming a threat to America’s role as the only superpower, was China, and that therefore, this was the nation they wished to confront; in doing that, they proposed, in one of their documents, that they had to “hedge in” China by establishing a military presence in Southeast Asia, and named, in particular, the Philippines and Singapore.

**Fr. Mercado:** Yes, by history also, the Philippines and Singapore formed a military alliance against China. the old SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, which corresponded with NATO, was actually composed of certain ASEAN countries. The power to check them was China, and it is still China that has the power to check them, in the eyes of the United States. So historically, ASEAN, and for that matter, Southeast Asia will form that alliance to check any expansionist threat from China. But they never label *their* expansionist and hegemonic impulse in Asia, while they always protect their interests. They have expanded U.S. interests, in establishing their own hegemony, but they don’t call it a threat. It’s the language of power, part and parcel of the unilateral definition of relations and politics.

**EIR:** Do you have a sense that China can play a positive role both in Asia generally and in global efforts to counter this move toward global warfare?

**Fr. Mercado:** First, I think China is trying to present to Asia and ASEAN, in particular, that it does not desire to establish hegemony in the whole of Asia, and, definitely, even if they have conflicts with some countries in Southeast Asia, they would rather see that it be negotiated peacefully, than resorting to war. I think it is precisely because of that presentation that the United States is afraid, because ASEAN and Asia may believe, may be convinced by China’s peaceful intent of co-existence, and living together, and really advocating for the use of the new millennium as belonging to the Asia-Pacific. . . .

If that happens, of course, it is really seen as a threat to



*Philippines Defense Secretary Gen. Angelo Reyes (right) has made his department an "extension," says Father Mercado, of Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon. The result is no reconciliation process in the Philippines; and now, a plan to export 100,000 Filipino cheap laborers to "reconstruction of Iraq."*

U.S. interests in the whole of Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular. China, I don't think, personally, will come like the United States to Iraq, conquering, for example, a particular country in Asia, and asserting its so-called "divine right" to order and systematize, or even to change the regime, in any Asian country. I don't think China will do that.

**EIR:** Mindanao is a region, which is a mix of Muslims and Christians, and it is in a country, which is the largest Christian nation in Asia. What is the nature of the cultural and religious diversity, and the role of that in the character of the Philippines nation?

**Fr. Mercado:** I believe really that the Philippines government, and, for that matter, the Filipino nation, must open up to the reality that we are not a mono-nation-state; that we are polyethnic groups, and we are a "poly"-nation-state. We are always defining the Philippines as a "mono"-nation-state; that is to say, one culture, one people, and hence one country. It's possible to have many ethnic groups, and many nations, and still form one country, one republic. That is the first thing. The second thing is to see the root causes of the insurgencies and rebellions over the problem of separatism. I think what lies beneath the political separatism will be not only the policy of economic inequality, but also the policy of iniquity. People have experienced so much battering, since the time of the Spaniards, so this is a policy of iniquity, not only inequality. But this needs to be addressed, and also the participation of people in government, as well as greater self-determination in local affairs, a distinct nature, a distinct culture, at the same time participating in the whole national politics.

**EIR:** The conflict in Mindanao has been going on for over 30 years. What do you think are the necessary preconditions, or circumstances that are needed to end the fighting and bring peace and development to the region?

**Fr. Mercado:** I think by this time people in the military should be convinced that military force does not work, because it really just exacerbates the situation. I don't know why military people believe that they can compel people to follow them by exercising their military might. I think they have to change paradigm.

First, the military so-called "solution" to the problem, I think, is a bankrupt solution. Secondly, we definitely have to take a really serious look, even perhaps a constitutional amendment, to the so-called unitary form of government in the Philippines. Perhaps it is high time that we move to a federal system, and give greater autonomy to the regions, that takes into consideration the ethnicity and culture of the people, but without fear of partition. I also don't think that partition is a solution, but greater autonomy, and then also cultural identity. But cultural identity and greater autonomy *need not* lead to partition.

**EIR:** How do you see the difference between the Communist movement, the New People's Army (NPA), for example, and the Moros?

**Fr. Mercado:** The NPA has a strong political ideology, while the Moro struggle is governed by strong cultural and ethnic identity. Religion plays a very important role in the Moro struggle, as well as ethnicity, both as the identity of the Bangsamoro, setting them apart from the rest, but that setting

apart does not mean secessionism. The Communist rebellion is definitely political in nature, and ideological, so in that sense it is very different. Of course, the Communists will say that it is the peasant revolt and workers' revolt, and so on. . . .

**EIR:** What is the role of the NPA in Mindanao?

**Fr. Mercado:** They are pretty strong in provinces where Christians are the majority, while the MILF will be strong in provinces where Muslims are the majority; that will be five provinces and about two cities. In other provinces, the National Democratic Front will be strong. As a matter of fact, the military was so afraid of the strength of the National Democratic Front because in the 2001 election, they were able to get 11% of the entire electorate. That's why they got maximum representation of party lists in Congress—you need only 6% of the vote to get the maximum percentage of representatives. Most of their votes are coming from Mindanao.

**EIR:** You have criticized in the past the so-called "blueprint" for the development of Mindanao. Why is that, and what is needed?

**Fr. Mercado:** The blueprint of development in Mindanao is what people call an "agricultural corporate blueprint," really reducing Mindanao to agri-corporations, introducing cash crops, such as bananas or rubber. They would like to move some of the rubber plantations from Malaysia to Mindanao, because Malaysia is industrializing, so they need larger plantations in Mindanao. This is the kind of blueprint the government is presenting to the BIMP-EAGA; that is, the four-nation (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines) East Asian Growth Area.

The other proposal is development of palm oil. The plan is for corporate agriculture, but without consulting the population. The population would just be the workers, plantation workers. But what people want is land reform. It goes against the hope and aspirations of the people, who want to own the piece of land they till, and not to become farm workers, or seasonal workers.

**EIR:** What else would be needed for Mindanao, other than a competent land reform program? What about the industrial or infrastructural development?

**Fr. Mercado:** Definitely, one of the main features must be infrastructure. You see Mindanao is always Manila-centered. What we need now is the physical integration of Mindanao; that means more roads! I was told that in the United States, post-war—was it Eisenhower?—that all of your interstate roads were called "I" for Eisenhower, who launched the interstate road system connecting all the states for greater communication and interaction among the states. In Mindanao, we cannot even interact, because of the lack of major infrastructure. We need roads and bridges that connect provinces and surrounding areas. That is a big problem. Also we need sea-ports, because Mindanao is a big island, we need shipping.

This is basic infrastructure that can really boost the economic development of Mindanao. Then, you can facilitate the movement of people and trade. People now are at a great disadvantage, because they cannot move their goods.

**EIR:** You first heard about the Eurasian Land-Bridge in 1997, when you were President of Notre Dame University in Cotabato City. How do you view this idea? How do you see the Philippines' participation in that kind of great infrastructure program?

**Fr. Mercado:** To me, when I saw it, it's another concept of globalization, but globalization that is physically connecting the land-bridges, and restoring the connectedness of nations and countries. This is very good, because it includes not just the movement of goods and merchandise, but also of people. But I personally believe that this kind of plan will need a new paradigm for nations, for such a plan to work. The current paradigm cannot work for that kind of grand scheme, because of the interconnectedness, greater facility of movement of people and merchandise—not only interconnectedness in terms of trade, but interconnectedness of culture. It is redefining the relationships of people and countries, and nations; no longer based on who is stronger, an army or military, but the connectedness of peoples. That is a new paradigm.

**EIR:** A dialogue of civilizations.

**Fr. Mercado:** Yes, a dialogue, actually. . . . Personally, I believe that when the present paradigm is proven bankrupt, the failure of the present paradigm, this will open the eyes of many people. But until they see the collapse of the present dominant paradigm, they won't come over to this new paradigm.

**EIR:** This has always been LaRouche's view, that you have to prepare for changes that most people think are completely impossible, because at the moment that the old paradigm is proven to be a failure, then you must be ready to provide a solution.

On the economic crisis, with the Western financial system now in the final stages of breakdown, the Philippines is threatened with being treated the way Argentina was, basically left to rot. How do you see the crisis, and what does the Philippines have to do to deal with that?

**Fr. Mercado:** First, I think when they see that happening in the Philippines—the very reason why the Philippines government is following the U.S. policy is to be able to *prevent* being

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abandoned, but rather expecting the United States to come to the assistance of the Philippines. I think this is their whole reason behind this submissive policy, becoming an extension of the policy of the U.S. State Department and the Defense Department, hoping that when things really take a turn for the worse, the United States will come in shining armor, with the World Bank and IMF, which they control, and not allowing this to happen to the Philippines.

**EIR:** It doesn't seem to be working very well—the economy is a disaster.

**Fr. Mercado:** Yes, but that is the policy they are following. That's why the Philippines is always number one in supporting Bush and the White House. Instead of playing a neutral policy, the Philippines is right in the front. Now they are sending workers to help in the so-called reconstruction of Iraq.

**EIR:** President Macapagal-Arroyo jumped in last week, pledging to send a 500-person humanitarian task force to Iraq. At the same time, it was being reported that the Philippines was already negotiating through the Ambassador in Washington with the companies associated with what we call the chicken-hawks—Cheney's Halliburton, Bechtel, and American companies—for reconstruction of Iraq.

You have the Philippines government saying they are already negotiating for 100,000 jobs for reconstruction in Iraq, but why do they not seek to create 100,000 jobs to build the Philippines? Why not transform the Philippines?

**Fr. Mercado:** The Philippines has no money, but Iraq has the *oil!* Actually, it's that oil shouldering any development there. It's not U.S. money, either. Remember the first Gulf War, they froze all the assets of Iraq? Billions of dollars. Plus, all the oil revenues will be used for developing Iraq. So, they cannot do that in the Philippines. Who would pay for development?

Now, just yesterday, Manila is saying that they will prioritize Muslim Filipinos for reconstruction jobs in Iraq. That's a way of dealing with the Moros! And this is how Iraq pays for the spoils of war waged by the United States! But the spoils given to the Philippines is the dirty work, labor, while the corporations are from the United States.

**EIR:** You were President of Notre Dame University in Mindanao. What is the state of education in Mindanao, and, especially, the difference in education policy of Christian and Muslim communities, if they are different?

**Fr. Mercado:** Actually, Philippines education is highly centralized, from Manila. It is one culture, one educational system. This is one of the root causes of political separatism. Education is the consolidation of state policy, an *extension* of state policy, to make state policies sustainable. . . . The Muslims would like to have their own university, but who would fund it? Most of the Islamic universities in Southeast

Asia are financed by the Saudis, and have the Saudi stamp. It would be useful, but it would have to be pluralistic.

**EIR:** Is Notre Dame criticized for not having enough Islamic studies?

**Fr. Mercado:** Notre Dame is a Catholic University, but is a unique university because it is the only Catholic university where students are given Islamic studies. We have Islamic professors who teach Islamic studies to the Muslims. This is the reason why we have an increasing number of Islamic students. When I came in in 1993, the percentage of the students who were Muslims was only 20%, but when I left in 2002, we had 43% of the student population were Muslim.

In Mindanao, the Muslim population is approximately 20% of the total, and 70% Christian. In 1900, the Muslim population in the southern Philippines constituted 90%, but in 1972, they constituted only 20%, that's why they are only a majority in five provinces. From 1911, the U.S. policy was to move Christians into Mindanao, and that began after 1915.

**EIR:** Let me ask you about the role of the Vatican. The Pope has been extremely outspoken denouncing the U.S. unilateral war policy; and yet, the Philippines, a Catholic nation, has supported the United States. Why is this, and what do you think will be the consequences on relations with the Vatican?

**Fr. Mercado:** The influence of the Vatican is a moral influence and moral suasion, and the Philippines government is persuaded more by economic and political, rather than moral suasion. While they cannot oppose openly the positions of the Catholic Church, they continue to support Bush in the war on Iraq. I don't think the Catholic Church and the Vatican dictate politics in the Philippines. I recall Cardinal Sin appealing to the President not to join the "coalition of the willing," because the war was against humanity, but, nevertheless, she joined the coalition.

**EIR:** What are your own plans?

**Fr. Mercado:** I will be based in Rome starting in June. For one year I will be working in *Justicia et Pax* [Justice and Peace]. I will be coordinating Justice and Peace movements in the Congregation worldwide, from Rome. We would hope that people listen to peace before they listen to war, but people don't always buy that, so we are in the minority.

**EIR:** Do you have anything else you'd like to say to our readers?

**Fr. Mercado:** What I would like to say is about your role, at *EIR*, that you are presenting an alternative to the leaders around the world, a contact between the existing paradigm and what you are offering. As people get disgusted with this paradigm, they will be more open to your alternative. You are not only doing a good job, but fulfilling a role in the realm of ideas, a great role, giving alternatives.