

Terrorism in Southeast Asia: Balikatan Exercises in the Philippines and the US 'War against Terrorism'

George Baylon Radics¹

National University of Singapore

The Philippines serves as a good example of a country dealing with "terrorist activities."² One of the longest running histories of terrorism and conflict in the world, the Moro-Christian clash in the Philippines began with the establishment of the Spanish Fort Pilar in Zamboanga in 1718.³ This directly challenged the autonomy of the Muslim indigenous communities, and a series of anti-Christian campaigns took place throughout the next couple of centuries to retaliate against the virtual enslavement of Muslims by the Spanish. Thus began the nearly 450-year war between Christians and Muslims in the country. This conflict was to serve as one of the factors that contributed to the colonization of the Filipinos by the Spanish and eventually by the United States in 1898.

The United States, under international and domestic pressure, granted the

Philippines its independence in 1946 with the Tydings-McDuffie Act. However this was not until after the US had effectively constructed the liberal-democratic political foundation, the public educational system,⁴ and the socioeconomic infrastructure of the country. With this in effect, in addition to its past relationship with the United States as a colony, the Philippine government to this day remains one of the staunchest allies of the United States. Furthermore, with the existence of bilateral economic and military arrangements between the two nations, and in spite of the withdrawal of US troops from Philippine soil in 1991, the Philippines continually sides with US policy and supports American overseas involvement.⁵

This is not a one sided relationship. The Philippines is of strategic interest to the US. Situated on the western edge of the South China Sea, the country serves as a perfect

¹The following paper is the product of six months of field research conducted in the Philippines from July to December of 2002, while I was based at the University of the Philippines, Diliman in Quezon City. The materials compiled for this research paper come from various sources. These sources range from meetings with professors and government officials to attending conferences and community education events on developments in Basilan. Additionally, visits to non-governmental, community based organizations, the Batasan, House of Senate, and the various libraries of the University of the Philippines helped supplement the project greatly. Sincere thanks to Professor Aileen Toohey and Professor Stephen Shalom for their comments on previous drafts.

²Although the term "terrorism" is used here, this is not meant to be an evaluative statement in regards to the activities of true Moro liberation movements. The quotation marks are used here by the author to cite the fact that recently activities are being labeled as conducted by "terrorists" regardless of whether or not this is true.

³"Moro" was the Spanish term applied to Philippine Muslims. Since then it has been adopted as the term used to describe the Muslim population in the Philippines. See Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People*, 8th ed. (Manila: University of the Philippines Press, 1990), 114-115.

⁴According to Professor Barbara Gaerlan of UCLA's Department of Southeast Asian Studies, while the Americans can be held responsible for the introduction of public education to non-Spanish controlled areas, in fact, the Spanish had created locally based elementary school system that taught in the vernacular.

⁵Stephen R. Shalom, *The United States and the Philippines* (Manila: New Day Publishers, 1986), 103-110.

116 *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*

Southeast Asia

launching point for military intervention into Southeast Asia, as well as Northeastern Asia and the Middle East. In addition, the Philippines is of economic and political importance to the United States.⁶ Recognizing the strategic importance of the island nation in the region, the United States made sure that before the country was freed from American control that the succeeding administration would sign a series of defense treaties that would provide the United States with exclusive access to its national territory.

In light of the Filipino colonial mentality, US strategic interests in the Philippines, and the long history of Moro-Christian conflict in the region, the Philippines seems to serve as an excellent site to launch the second front to the war on terror.⁷ However, this argument ignores the importance of public sentiment, which has persistently had an anti-US position. Furthermore, the pro-US front in Filipino politics has become highly fragmented.⁸ Also, the alliance of anti-US nationalists which had, after the People Power Revolution of 1986, united to remove one of the most ubiquitous signs of neo-colonial control in the Philippines – the US military bases – has made conducting military operations in the country very difficult. Since neither this nationalist spirit nor the enduring sentiment opposed to US neo-colonialism has abated, an all out war in the region would not be possible. Thus, as the United States launched its “war on terrorism” in Southeast Asia via the Philippines, it had to be very savvy in approaching this complicated situation. With a Philippine House of Representatives and

Senate that was split by ideological positions, motivated by the desire for reelection, possessing genuine anti-US sentiment, and facing a largely anti-US public, the United States had to draw upon existing bilateral military agreements as well as lean on the staunch support of Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo when it began its military intervention in the Philippines.

As part of ongoing military-to-military relations between the United States and the Philippines, the Balikatan Exercises served as a perfect opportunity to evade potential controversy that would have been associated with launching an all-out war in the region, while allowing the US to enter the Philippines militarily under the guise of a yearly, legally substantiated operation. This was done as a means to obscure the fact that the US intended to deploy troops in the Philippines with the purpose of launching the second front of the war on terrorism in order to weaken the Al Qaeda network.⁹ On January 15, 2002, the United States was able to send the first post-September 11 set of troops outside of Afghanistan to the Philippines.¹⁰ However, in order for actual warfare to take place, the US had to increase its realm of jurisdiction over the exercises. It was speculated that this had been done through the signing of a treaty between the United States and the Philippines, conducted in secret during President Arroyo’s visit to the United States in November of 2001.¹¹ This agreement, now identified as the Military Logistical Supports Agreement (MLSA), was rumored to be a document that

⁶ Richard E. Hull, “The South China Sea: Future Source of Prosperity or Conflict in Southeast Asia?” *National Defense University: Strategic Forum, Institute for National Strategic Studies*, no. 60 (1996), 1-6.

⁷ “War on Terror’s Second Front,” *Radio Nederlands*, January 31, 2002.

⁸ “Philippines not to support call for Cease-Fire in Iraq,” *The Philippine Star*, March 30, 2003.

⁹ Sheldon W. Simon, “Southeast Asia and the US war on Terrorism,” *NBR Analysis* (published by the National Bureau of Asian Research), vol. 13, no. 4 (2002), 1-3.

¹⁰ “Balikatan Report Card,” *Sun Start Cebu*, April 18, 2002.

¹¹ Juan V. Sarmiento Jr., “Macapagal denies secret pact with Bush in the works,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, November 19, 2001.

would allow the United States to return as a permanent military presence in the country.¹² Filipino Congresswoman Imee Marcos has called the MLSA a “Trojan horse,” which when combined with the controversial Visiting Forces Agreement of February 1998 would lead to the reintroduction of US troops in the Philippines.¹³ Senator Juan Ponce Enrile has been quoted as saying that although Malacanang (the presidential office) is claiming the MLSA to be simply an accounting contract, it is in fact a “basing right agreement.”¹⁴ Furthermore, as mentioned by Representative Marcos, when combined with the already existing Visiting Forces Agreement, the scope of jurisdiction that the US can enjoy in these exercises increases as well—thus shedding light on another document steeped in controversy. It should be noted that only after nearly a decade of revisions, the Visiting Forces Agreement finally passed on its third try on the Philippine Senate floor.¹⁵

Yet these controversial documents serve as merely a backdrop to the highly contentious Balikatan Exercises. Unlike past exercises, the most recent Balikatan Exercises took place in Basilan, an area that has been highly militarized since 2000 due to the presence of the kidnap-for-ransom bandits, Abu Sayyaf. Terrorist violence currently continues here.¹⁶ In its Terms of Reference (TOR), the

Balikatan Exercises were to last six months to a year, one of the longest training exercises ever held in the Philippines. A noted researcher of US military exercises in foreign countries, Roland Simbulan, declared that he “has never come across any ‘military exercise’ with that long duration.” Lastly, the amount of American military forces for a simple training exercise grew from the initial limit of 600 to over 2,500—the largest deployment of military personnel ever sent to the tiny island of Basilan.¹⁷ In fact, it has been the largest US military deployment engaged in actual combat against “real actual targets” on Philippine soil since the Philippine-American War of 1899-1901.¹⁸ As a response, two international fact finding / peace missions have visited Basilan to research human rights violations due to the heightened militarization.

For these reasons, the Balikatan Exercises have proven to be a converging point of several controversial issues. These exercises thus serve as an

excellent case example in analyzing international relations in light of the new “war on terrorism.” This article will, in particular, examine the issues of: 1) ongoing “terrorist” activities in the Philippines; 2) the neo-colonial relationship of the US to the Philippines and its effect onto policy decisions; and 3) the constitutionality of, as

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ “MLSA Denounced as a New Bases Pact: Malacanang Denies Imee Marcos’ Remarks,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 30, 2002.

¹⁴ “MLSA Fears Allayed,” *Manila Bulletin*, August 8, 2002.

¹⁵ The Visiting Forces Agreement was proposed in 1991 and adopted in the Senate in 1999. See “Agreement Between the Republic of the Philippines and the Government of the United States of America Regarding the Treatment of United States Armed Forces Visiting the Philippines,” February 1998. Accessed in Legislative Library, House of Representatives, Manila, Philippines.

¹⁶ The Abu Sayyaf is identified by the US Department of State as an international terrorist organization.

¹⁷ Roland Simbulan, “A Personal Account from the Basilan War Zone,” March 2002, <http://www.yonip.com/main/articles/war_zone.html>.

¹⁸ Roland Simbulan, “The Renewed Phase of US Military Intervention in the Philippines,” January 15, 2002, <http://www.totse.com/en/politics/the_world_beyond_the_usa/166581.html>.

well as public reactions to, these exercises themselves. The first section will provide a brief sketch of the controversies associated with the legal documents that make the Balikatan Exercises possible. Next a brief discussion on the history of “terrorist” activities will serve as a backdrop to the final section which will discuss the effects of the Balikatan Exercises on the lives of those living in Basilan. Toward the end, hopefully the reader can draw a connection between the gradual loss of national autonomy and the rise of US militarization.

Visiting Forces Agreement

Drawing upon the precedence of the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951 (MDT), the Balikatan Exercises are just one in a series of exercises that extend throughout the year. The purposes of these exercises are to enhance the skills and capabilities of the armed forces of the Philippines and the United States, improve the interoperability between the two nations’ armed forces, as well as upgrade the knowledge and equipment of Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).¹⁹ These exercises are conducted pursuant to Article II of the MDT, which states that both parties would “separately and jointly by self-help and mutual aid . . . maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.”²⁰ As part of their mutual responsibilities as agreed upon in the MDT, the exercises help to upgrade the capacity of the AFP in case it is called upon to fulfill its obligation of engagement in battles related to

attacks on US property or territory. In addition, these exercises provide the United States with the opportunity to train its forces in the Philippines for greater operability in similar terrain.

The problem is, however, that while US troops engaging in these exercises could previously operate either within the jurisdiction of the military bases, or within a reasonable distance from these territories under US authority, this option was no longer possible with the withdrawal of these bases in 1991 and 1992. Joint US-Philippines military exercises that had taken place yearly since 1981 were also put on hold in 1995. As nationalistic forces applauded their victory in ridding the nation of US military bases, they

also led popular protests to stall the passing of a series of agreements or treaties that would have provided US troops with a legal status on Philippine soil. However, the US and pro-US Filipinos introduced the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in 1998, which was vigorously

opposed by several groups such as the “Junk the VFA” coalition headed by Roland Simbulan and Maria Soccoro Diokno. The VFA was regarded by anti-US groups as heralding the re-entrance of US troops into the Philippines a mere six years after their departure, but nevertheless passed the Senate with majority support.

Daniel Schirmer has previously argued that there would be three important consequences of the passing of the VFA.²¹ Firstly, the passing of the VFA would lead to an inequality in the relationship between the

“ [DANIEL] SCHIRMER ARGUES THAT WITH THE PASSING OF THE VFA, THE ENTIRE TERRITORY OF THE PHILIPPINES CAN THEN BE USED AS A MILITARY BASE FOR US ACTIVITIES. ”

¹⁹ *Primer on the Balikatan: Joint RP-US Military Training Exercise* (Manila: Office of the Press Secretary Operations Center / Presidential News Desk, February 2002).

²⁰ Mutual Defense Treaty Between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States, August 30, 1951.

²¹ Daniel B. Schirmer, “VFA: Shape of things to come?” <<http://www.boondocksnet.com/centennial/sctexts/schirmer99b.html>>.

two states. Although the VFA grants equal benefits to both parties, in theory and in practice these token provisions are disproportionately beneficial to the US. For instance, although both nations may station troops in either country for the purposes of forward military operations, the fact is that Philippine military capacity and foreign policy make the deployment of Philippine troops on US soil highly improbable. Also, although US troops are allowed a clause in the VFA that exonerates them from prosecution by Philippines courts, if a Filipino soldier is caught conducting illegal activities in the US he merely gets a guarantee of his rights under the US constitution.

It is Schirmer's second point that has generated greater controversy. According to Schirmer, greater repression on Filipinos will result from the passing of the VFA. This is because although training between the two nations has been stated as for the purposes of protection against external attack, given the fact that the Philippines is not involved in any external conflicts as of this writing, the military training is not targeted toward existing external aggression, but toward the ongoing internal conflict. In a speech on his vote against the VFA, Vice President and former Foreign Affairs Secretary Teofisto Guingona reminded his colleagues that the US had failed to officially recognize the Philippines' claims in several international disputes. Therefore, even if external aggression were to arise, he continued, the US has not formally stated its intention to defend the Philippines' interests.²²

Finally, Schirmer argues that with the passing of the VFA, the entire territory of the

Philippines can then be used as a military base for US activities. With the shutdown of all US military bases in the Philippines in 1991, the United States lost its logistical facilities in the Philippines. Since then, the US has been looking for ways to regain the same type of privileges its forward strategy in the region depends on. Thus, according to Schirmer, with the passing of legislation such as the VFA, all that is needed is legislation that would allow for the presence of US logistical supplies. This type of legislation would then allow for the US to station its supplies anywhere in the country. Therefore, with the existence of legislation that allows for US troops to conduct activities anywhere in the country, along with legislation that allows for US supplies to be stationed anywhere throughout the country, the entire territory of the Philippines would serve as a military base for US operations in the country and in the region.

Mutual Logistics and Support Agreement

While the VFA helps construct the legal basis that allows US troops to operate on Philippine soil, legislation that regulated the transfer of materials was also enacted. The Mutual Logistics Support Agreement, Malacanang argues, is an accounting agreement that facilitates the transfer of materials and services from the United States to the Philippines and vice-versa in the cases of joint military exercises, international tension or national emergency, and under the United Nations.²³ According to the document, such materials or "logistical supplies" are defined as "food, water, petroleum, clothing, ammunition, spare parts, and components."²⁴ In regards to the

²² Philippine Senate Official Transcripts for Resolutions of the 11th Congress (July 27, 1998 - June 30, 2001), Resolution Number 18.

²³ Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (RP-US-01) Between the Department of National Defense of the Republic of the Philippines and the Department of Defense of the United States of America, 2002, Section II (1)(a)(b)(c).

²⁴ *Ibid*, Section III (a)(1).

120 *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*

Southeast Asia

support and services rendered under the MLSA, these activities are defined as “communication services, medical services, base support operations, storage services, training services, repair and maintenance services, calibration services, and port services.”²⁵ The aforementioned supplies, services, and support requested by the receiving party are to be delivered upon by the requested party in exchange for currency, replacement-in-kind, exchange of supplies, or services of equal value. As part of the terms and conditions, both parties agree to “exert [their] best efforts, consistent with national priorities, to satisfy the requests from the other party.”²⁶

As argued in the preceding section, however, with the existence of the VFA in place, the passing of such legislation could effectively convert the entire country into a military base for US enterprises. Many Philippine scholars and activists recognized the implications of the passing of the MLSA. According to Guingona, there are two important ramifications of the Agreement. Firstly, the MLSA can be applied not just to the facilitation of transferring materials from the Philippines to the US and vice-versa, but also to operations associated with the United Nations, therefore altering the intent of the Mutual Defense Treaty by turning the bilateral agreement into a multilateral agreement. Under this condition, the Philippines no longer fulfills its responsibilities to the UN as a member-state, but under obligation to the United States. Secondly, Guingona argues that the MLSA can also be applied in times of “national emergency,” therefore legitimizing the actions of either states when conducting

operations against internal citizens. Since the likelihood of Filipino troops entering the United States to regulate the civilian population seems dim, this provision is one-sided, especially since US troops have been deployed throughout Philippine history to control popular movements such as anti-imperial and anti-dictatorial protests.²⁷

In her July 29, 2002 speech “Beware of the Trojan Horse,” Congresswoman Imee Marcos argued that the MSLA allows for the increase of US troops on Philippine soil, increasing the potential for nations with hostile relations with the US to target the Philippines. Guingona added that this situation may be problematic since the US has refused to recognize Philippines’ claims to the Kalayaan Islands or Sabah, which the country has been quarreling over with China and Malaysia respectively.²⁸ Furthermore, Marcos added that the MLSA may lead to the use of the Philippines as a springboard for US intervention in nations throughout Southeast Asia.

Lastly, although Malacanang may consider the MLSA as merely an accounting agreement, according to the Undersecretary of Planning in the Philippine Department of National Defense, the MLSA is actually an agreement that allows for the cross-servicing of US ships, planes, and troops on Philippine soil.²⁹ Therefore, with the MLSA in place, the US can enter any region of the country and receive the same type of services it would have on its own military bases—fulfilling Schirmer’s prophesy and effectively turning the Philippines into a huge military base.

After several months of debate, the MLSA was eventually signed in a very

²⁵ Ibid, Section (a)(2).

²⁶ Ibid, Section(a)(3).

²⁷ Roxanne Lynn Doty, “Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of US Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines,” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3 (1993), 309-17.

²⁸ Philippine Senate Official Transcripts for Resolutions of the 11th Congress (July 27, 1998 - June 30, 2001), Resolution Number 18.

²⁹ Interview with Antonio C. Santos, Undersecretary of Planning, Department of National Defense, Republic of the Philippines, November 20, 2002.

clandestine manner late into the evening of November 21, 2002. One hour before it was signed by Commodore Ernest H. de Leon (on behalf of the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines) and Colonel Mathias Velasco (representing the Commander of the US Pacific Command), Foreign Affairs Secretary Blas Ople presented the finalized MLSA to select members of the houses of Congress.³⁰ The privileged few who had access to this document were Senate President Franklin M. Drilon, Speaker Jose de Venecia, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senator Manuel Villar, Chairman of the House Committee of Foreign Relations Apolinario Lozada, and Vice Chairman of the House Committee of Foreign Relations Imee Marcos—five people in all.³¹

Therefore, with the signing of the MLSA, the Philippines has arguably taken yet another step in the direction of becoming a permanent site of US military activities. Through reviving the Mutual Defense Treaty by carrying out the controversial provisions of the VFA and pushing forth with the signing of the MLSA, the Arroyo administration has exhibited an unparalleled drive to align the policies of the Philippines with those of the United States—making the re-entrance of the US into the Philippines only easier. These legal documents make it easier for the US to

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exploit the Philippines for its own interests. These also have produced severe and tangible effects onto the lives of regular Filipinos as well. The following section will explore the history and context of US militarization in the Philippines ending with a description of the activities associated with the Balikatan Exercises.

Terrorist Activities in the Philippines

As previously mentioned, the Philippines has experienced one of the longest running histories of terrorist activities in the world. Coincidentally, the ongoing conflict is one between Christians and Muslims—a relationship that mirrors conflicts elsewhere. The clash in the Philippines grounds itself in the history of Islam and of Christian Spain. Speculated to have been introduced in the southern region of the Philippines via Arab traders in the 1400s, Islam spread quickly amongst the previously animistic society.³² The arrival of the Spanish nearly 200 years later marked the beginning of a three century-long battle for control of the south. When the Philippines gained independence in 1946, the Moro community had hoped the Americans would grant them independence as well. In spite of this, Moro claims were overlooked and the fight for an independent state separate from the predominantly Christian north raged on.³³

³⁰ “SFA’s Statement during the briefing for leaders of Congress on the RP-US Mutual Logistics Support Agreement,” Malacanang Office of the Press Secretary, Press Release no. 283-02. November 22, 2002.

³¹ “No secrecy in MLSA-Ople,” Malacanang Office of the Press Secretary, Press Release no. 285-02, November 23, 2002.

³² Salah Jubair, *History of the Muslims in the Philippines: A Nation Under Endless Tyranny*, Second Edition (Lahore: Islam Research Academy, 1997).

³³ Professor Stephen Shalom has argued that socially, tension between the two groups has eased since the 1970s. However, I would argue that the hostility has manifested itself not in the form of vigilante groups such as was the case in the 1970s, but rather in the militarization of certain areas due to issues related to ethnic tension, either as a response to military campaigns launched by the government against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and vice versa (the MILF is a spin-off group of the MNLF) or other groups such as the Abu Sayyaf.

122 *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*

Southeast Asia

By the time that President Ferdinand Marcos rose to power in the 1960s, the situation for Filipino Muslims had deteriorated to a breaking point. According to Philippines census data, by the mid 1950s eighty percent of the Moro population was unemployed.³⁴ While Muslims once constituted the three-fourths of the population of Mindanao, state-subsidized migration programs had caused the Moro population to drop to twenty percent.³⁵ To complicate issues further, in order to put pressure on Malaysia to relinquish its claim for control over the southern state of Sabah, Marcos trained Moros as insurgents to operate in northern Borneo.³⁶ Launching a campaign of guerilla warfare, the Moro National Liberation Front was established in the early 1970s to advocate an independent state separate from the Philippines.³⁷ Since then, a series of spin-off terrorist groups have also staked claims to struggling for “Moro Liberation.” One of the most notorious groups that arose was the Abu Sayyaf—a kidnap-for-ransom group that emerged in the mid-1990s after many of the more established fronts had signed peace agreements with the Philippine government.³⁸

In May of 2001, the Abu Sayyaf had been held responsible for the kidnapping of twenty hostages from a high-end resort in Puerto Princesa, Palawan. Three of these

hostages were American while the remaining hostages were Filipino.³⁹ While 17 of the hostages were released after payment of ransom, of the three remaining hostages, all were American. Of these three, one was reportedly beheaded, while the other two—a Christian missionary couple—were kept captive until June of 2002, nearly a year after their kidnapping.⁴⁰ In a June 7, 2002 attempt to rescue the remaining hostages (the missionary couple, Martin and Gracie Burnham, and Filipino nurse Ediborah Yap, who was kidnapped from a hospital in Lamitan) Martin Burnham and Ediborah Yap were caught in the line of the crossfire, and only Gracie Burnham escaped alive.⁴¹

Remarkably enough, the long and drawn-out efforts to rescue the remaining hostages had taken close to an entire year to conduct—and in the end only one hostage lived. This tragic public relations blunder served as a thorn in the side of President Arroyo who since November 2001 had been assuring the family members of the remaining hostages that rescue efforts were underway and would be successful.⁴² Questions remain as to why efforts had taken so long, and whether or not the perpetrators have been captured.

Providing the United States with the opportunity to “lean forward” with their military exercises in Southeast Asia, the

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³⁴ See Jubair, chapter 3.

³⁵ Philippines National Economic Development Authority, *Philippines 1980 Population, Land Area, and Density: 1970, 1975, and 1980 (Special Report No. 3)* (Manila: National Census and Statistics Office, 1980).

³⁶ CIA World Fact Book, “Philippines,” <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/rp.html>>.

³⁷ See Jubair, chapter 3. It should be noted that the MNLF was recognized by the Philippine government as the legitimate authority for Moro claims.

³⁸ Many would argue however, that the Abu Sayyaf are not fighting for an Islamic state but have engaged in its “terrorist” activities for the money.

³⁹ Julie Alipala-Inot, “GMA to Sayyaf: Force with force,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 29, 2001.

⁴⁰ Arlyn De La Cruz, “Burnham says government rescue not working,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, November 26, 2001.

⁴¹ Martin Marfil, “Martin Burnham was shot in the back,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 15, 2001.

⁴² Dona Pazzibugan, “President Assures Burnham’s Family,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, November 23, 2001.

hostage situation gave the Balikatan Exercises live targets and real world situations.⁴³ This was not without consequence. Without a doubt, the presence of the US military in Basilan had added excess pressure on the kidnap-for-ransom group. The improved technology and effective monitoring techniques had led to the location and speculated assassination of Abu Sabaya, the spokesperson for the Abu Sayyaf.⁴⁴ Regardless of whether or not Sabaya is dead, the results of Balikatan 02-01 (the official military designation for the 2002 exercises) have been portrayed as “successful.” The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported that the “US forces in Basilan have brought local people an added sense of security and are also helping improve the area.”⁴⁵ In addition the Philippine government thanked the United States for gains achieved from Balikatan in August of 2002, claiming that with the “new sense of peace and security there will [be a reduction in] the cost of doing business, facilitat[ion of] the movement of goods and services . . . and a greater access to the province . . . entic[ing] back entrepreneurs and help[ing] . . . Basilenos.”⁴⁶ The United States reciprocated these sentiments in a speech delivered by Colin Powell to Asian journalists in Washington, DC. Powell recommended that “future ASEAN military exercises be modeled on the successful Balikatan . . . exercises between the United States and the Philippines.”⁴⁷ Local officials were also grateful. Maluso mayor Sakib Salajin stated that “now there are no armed bandits; if ever, they are in hiding.”⁴⁸

These encouraging words paint a picture of a very successful first half to the Balikatan Exercises. However, although it seems as if the consensus is one of support for the exercises, in actuality, many contested the claims of success. In fact, two international peace missions made their way down to Basilan to investigate claims concerning human rights violations committed during the exercises. Moreover, out of eight congressional inquiries into the Balikatan Exercises, five have been concerned with human rights violations issues.⁴⁹ Thus this “success” could very well be a “smoke in the mirror” case.

Bearing the Brunt of the Militarization: The Situation in Basilan

Under the thinly veiled excuse of “military exercises,” Balikatan 02-01 constitutes an actual war in the region. Considered the “second front” in the war on terrorism according to University of the Philippines Professor Randy David, “it’s a show of force, a show of determination to the world . . . it’s an attempt to warn the Muslim population in Southeast Asia, especially radical Muslims, that America is not going to just stand by if its interests are threatened.”⁵⁰

Beginning in January 2002, 1,650 US troops entered the tiny island of Basilan, which has only 332,828 inhabitants, to deliver this message.⁵¹ Coupled with the 3,800 Philippine troops sent to the island for training, the total amount of troops, if concentrated on the island at one time, equaled one soldier to every sixty residents.⁵²

⁴³ “US Leaning Forward to Help Philippines Fight Terror,” *Defense Department Report: Afghanistan, Philippines*, January 16, 2002, <<http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/02011606.htm>>.

⁴⁴ “Abu Sabayaf, 2 others killed in shoot out; 4 captured,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 12, 2002.

⁴⁵ Simon Ingram, “US troops dig in on Basilan,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 29, 2002.

⁴⁶ “RP thanks US for gains achieved from Balikatan,” *Manila Bulletin*, August 8, 2002.

⁴⁷ Jennie Ilustre, “Balikatan effective, says Colin Powell,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 28, 2002.

⁴⁸ “It’s not good bye, Joe” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 31, 2002.

⁴⁹ US House Resolution 171, July 23, 2002; HR 364, July 22, 2002; HR 219, July 23, 2002; HR 240, July 23, 2002.

⁵⁰ Julie Chao, “Second Front: Waiting for the War to Begin,” *Manila Bulletin*, March 10, 2002.

⁵¹ “Yakans Dominated Basilan,” *Results from the 2000 Census of Population and Housing*, NSO, no. 2002-41, April 18, 2002.

⁵² Victoria Brittain, “Report from Basilan,” *Guardian*, April 1, 2002.

124 *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*

Southeast Asia

The explicit mission of the exercise was to eliminate the Abu Sayyaf and bring social stability to the region. According to the Philippine Defense Secretary, Balikatan 02-01 was a three-stage exercise that included live-fire operations against the Abu Sayyaf, referred to as “live test” or “field test.” These live fire operations were for the purposes of achieving the ultimate goal of the exercises: to recover kidnap victims Mr. and Mrs. Burnham and Ediborah Yap.⁵³ With live fire, actual targets, and an end goal, Balikatan 02-01 served as more than just a “training exercise.” These exercises took on the form of an all out civil struggle with the United States training Philippine forces in search-and-rescue missions in addition to anti-insurgency techniques. Unfortunately, civilians were the hapless victims: five seventy affidavits were signed by detainees arrested without warrant and a litany of unconfirmed reports of assassinations, rape, and murder at the hands of troops continue to be released. Two international solidarity missions had been sent to the region to research the effects of militarization. As a sign of the highly precarious situation, both of these missions received death threats in the process.⁵⁴

According to the film documentary “Basilan: the Next Afghanistan,” close to 5,000 people have been kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf, 47 people have been beheaded, and in total, an estimated 80,000 people have had their life threatened by the Abu Sayyaf. Nearly a quarter of the entire population has had a run-in with the Abu Sayyaf in one way or another.⁵⁵ With the introduction of military forces in the region, close to 13,400 families have been displaced by war.⁵⁶ In addition,

twelve confirmed casualties have been recorded during the course of “routine” exercises. One of the participants of the Akbayan peace mission has commented of the Basilenos: “there is a lot of disillusionment and demoralization, because they don’t know who to trust. And they will tell you: they cannot trust the government. They cannot even trust the church. They cannot go out. But for them, they accept that as a normal way of life . . . This thing has not only destroyed the economic capacity of the people . . . or the natural environment . . . it’s really the people being destroyed.”⁵⁷

In attempts to reconcile the problems of war, as well as establish rapport with the residents of Basilan, the US military engaged in a series of civil military projects to help improve dilapidated infrastructure while also upgrading the transportation capacity of the island. According to Assistant Secretary Ruel G. Lucentales from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), the Philippines through Project Kalahi had been addressing the poor infrastructure in the region since the mid-1990s. As part of the Balikatan 02-01, the US agreed to cooperate with the DSWD to help fund the repair and construction of infrastructure that Project Kalahi had already identified as needing “immediate rehabilitation.” After the DSWD presented the US with a list of projects, the US became involved in constructing a circumferential road, water wells in strategic areas, an airstrip, a port, and bridges. In addition to the US’ participation in the construction of this infrastructure, US troops also engaged in volunteer activities such as painting walls, building canteens, and renovating school houses.⁵⁸

⁵³ “Text of High Court Pleading re: VFA, Balikatan,” Bayan Public Information Department, January 27, 2002.

⁵⁴ These two international solidarity missions were conducted by Focus on the Global South and Bayan.

⁵⁵ “Basilan: The Next Afghanistan.” Documentary produced by Focus on the Global South (Manila and Quezon City, 2002).

⁵⁶ Romel Bagares, “International Peace Mission to Report Violations,” *Kilosbayan-Bantay Katarungan*, vol. 9, no. 9 (2002), 1-3.

⁵⁷ Interview with Cora Fabros, People’s Rural Reconstruction Movement, November 11, 2002.

⁵⁸ Interview with Ruel G. Lucentales, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development, November 22, 2002.

According to DSWD Executive Secretary Alberto Romulo, the infrastructure projects funded by the US helped restore a “new sense of peace and security.”⁵⁹ By increasing access to markets, the new infrastructure also allowed for the easier movement of products from the countryside to the cities. Transportation costs for residents were decreased. The positive impact of these projects can be seen as undeniable as even the harshest of critics admitted that such infrastructure projects helped improve the livelihood of the people in the region.

Regardless of the positive benefits to the projects themselves, several questionable overriding issues can be derived from their success as well. For instance, while Project Kalahi had existed in Mindanao since the mid-1990s, Balikatan 02-01 was the first time the project had reached the island of Basilan, demonstrating a level of governmental neglect. This fact counters statements that President Arroyo continually makes concerning the interrelation between terrorism and poverty—implicating her own and preceding administrations in fostering the environment from which terrorist activities spawn. Thus, if the terrorist activities of Basilan had drawn the joint military exercises to the region, why were poverty issues not addressed on the island prior to Balikatan 02-01? Secondly, although the infrastructure built on the island can be categorized as a “godsend” to many of the residents, what is the underlying intention of

the building of these projects? By renovating the harbor and the airport to be able to receive transport planes as large as a C-130, what purpose would such a massive runway serve residents once Balikatan is over?

According to many activists, such as Jean Enriquez from the Coalition Against the Trafficking of Women, these exercises have aimed at taking over the “hearts and minds of the people.” By providing the residents with much needed resources, the US has in effect embarked on a very lucrative public relations campaign to win over the sentiments of a very skeptical public.⁶⁰ However, according to some, this is a very deceptive act. According to Cora Fabros of the People’s Rural Reconstruction Movement:

“ BY PROVIDING THE RESIDENTS [OF BASILAN] WITH MUCH NEEDED RESOURCES, THE US HAS IN EFFECT EMBARKED ON A VERY LUCRATIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN TO WIN OVER THE SENTIMENTS OF A VERY SKEPTICAL PUBLIC. ”

Support only happens where military operations are going, and people are affected . . . But it is an insult . . . people are being made to believe that they are being helped . . . but at the same time, the problem that is being created, is being created by no less the people who are giving them this

aid. What’s worse is that they are being led to believe that it is being done on their behalf . . . ⁶¹

Therefore, as actual military operations take place, infrastructure that facilitate war continues to be built, and attempts to win over the sentiment of the residents persist, the question of whether or not the Americans intend to return must come to mind. In a briefing provided by Major Jacinto Bareng, the Department of National Defense claimed

⁵⁹ “RP thanks US for gains achieved from Balikatan,” *Manila Bulletin*, August 2, 2002.
⁶⁰ Interview with Jean Enriquez, Coalition Against Women Trafficking, November 10, 2002.
⁶¹ Interview with Cora Fabros, People’s Rural Reconstruction Movement, November 11, 2002.

that the Balikatan Exercises in its present form will not return to Basilan or even the region itself. What will take place, however, is Project Bayanihan—a follow-up project with the United States to have taken place in January 2003. As a special project, Bayanihan was to implement and assess the trainings of Balikatan 02-01. In addition, training for pilots, infantrymen, and even Special Forces would continue. This project, which was originally supposed to have started in October of 2002, was postponed due to funding constraints. It is to last up to six months.⁶²

Without a doubt, the conditions surrounding Balikatan 02-01 as well as the situation of people living in Basilan paint a very poignant picture as to the end result of such heightened “anti-terrorist” policies. If not obvious already, the interconnectedness between these issues should be undeniable. For instance, the Balikatan Exercises would never have been possible if the VFA were not already in place. Moreover, through the controversial passing of the VFA, according to Schirmer, a series of very serious threats to civil liberties would follow. In this heightened “anti-terrorism” atmosphere, several propositions are being circulated in Congress that have the potential to infringe on basic rights guaranteed by the constitution. Also, through the passing of the VFA, the US would receive the legislative basis on which it could then expand its military arrangement with the Philippines. According to Schirmer, the US had been searching for an opportunity to expand the level of military coverage in the Philippines through the passing of a logistical agreement. As seen with the signing of the MLSA, this prerogative has been established. Finally, with the introduction of US military

expertise, tools, and troops to a highly militarized region of the Philippines to engage in “training,” US-Philippines political and military relations have begun to resemble that of the Marcos era (many dubbed the regime the “US-Marcos Dictatorship”). Unfortunately, it is the residents of the region that are forced to bear the burden of and the resultant heightened militarization.

Conclusion

Although the US has attempted to evade controversy by using the legally justified yearly operation of the Balikatan Exercises as an excuse to engage in real battle in the Philippines, overt militarization betrays the cause of secrecy. Furthermore, grounding itself in the legal mainframe of the VFA and the MLSA, the US has further raised questions over the issue of Philippine sovereignty. The Balikatan Exercises therefore serve as an ill-disguised attack on Philippine sovereignty that does not represent an event out of sync with history. Demonstrating the continuity of a neo-colonial relationship, one-sided policies (which in spite of perpetual protest from steadfast activists continue to be imposed) suspiciously continue to pass in the Philippine houses of Congress. This situation only helps to lay the foundation for further expansion of US interests, paving the way for any operation the US chooses to engage in. Through the war on terrorism, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and now Iraq have all been forced to endure the expansion of these interests.

This article aimed to explore the controversy associated with the Balikatan Exercises in an attempt to demonstrate the neo-colonial relationship between the two nations. This neo-colonial relationship

⁶² Interview with Major Jacinto Bareng, Department of National Defense, Republic of the Philippines, November 20, 2002.

facilitates US interests. As bombs continue to rip through the cities of Zamboanga, Cotabato, Davao, and General Santos—areas where these military exercises have taken place—it is justifiable to say that the training exercises have failed to accomplish the task of restoring peace and providing the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) with effective techniques to protect Filipino citizens. Moreover, even if the AFP had been prepared to deal with terrorist activities, this

would only be done through war as opposed to peaceful means. Therefore, it can be argued that the US is not in the Philippines for the sake of its citizens. The US is just pursuing its militaristic aims to expand its presence in the region—raising the larger question of how US militarization will affect Southeast Asia. The Philippines is therefore one of the first victims in this war on people—with the innocent residents of Basilan bearing the burden.