

Terror and Torture in the Philippines

By Frida Berrigan | February 21, 2003

Soon after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, the Bush administration launched the “second front” of its war on terrorism, deploying troops in the Philippines for training and joint military exercises in late 2001 and early 2002. In the next few weeks, even as war in Iraq looms on the horizon, U.S. troops will begin a major new counter-terror operation that, in the words of one official, will “disrupt and destroy” Muslim rebels there. U.S. Special Forces are expected to play a combat, not just advisory, role.

Since the opening of this second front, the Bush administration has rapidly increased military and economic support for the Philippines. President Bush recently announced a grant of \$78 million in new military aid, including \$20 million to purchase U.S. weapons and services and \$21 million worth of secondhand arms. But the fact that President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is as committed to squashing domestic insurgency movements as she is to fighting terrorism, raises concerns that Washington could sideline human rights in the interest of preserving and enhancing its partnership with Manila.

In the letter to President Arroyo that accompanied the announcement of new military aid, Bush wrote “while you have made important strides in the war against terror in your country, additional terrorist attacks against civilians and the resulting loss of innocent life mean there is still much to be done.”

While he is right that there is still “much to be done” in the Philippines, it is unlikely that U.S. weapons are the right tools for making “important strides in the war against terror.” In fact, a new report from Amnesty International documents the use of torture in the Philippines, suggesting that U.S. weapons and military aid could increase incidents of terror.

Since September 11, 2001 the United States has been working to reestablish military ties with Philippines that were broken in 1992, when the Filipino Senate responded to the popular movement demanding the ouster of U.S. bases by refusing to renew the leases for U.S. bases in the archipelago. In

2001, U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for the Philippines amounted to \$2 million. After President Arroyo pledged her support in the war on terrorism, aid jumped 10 times, increasing to \$19 million for 2002. President Bush’s request for 2003 is just slightly higher at \$20 million, but is accompanied by another \$25 million in emergency support.

In addition, the U.S. has supplied the Philippines with more than \$100 million in military equipment, including C-130B transport aircraft, 8 UH-1H utility helicopters, 350 grenade launchers, 30,000 M-16 rifles, a Coast Guard patrol vessel and mortars, sniper rifles, and night-vision goggles. Washington also increased aid for training (IMET), almost doubling it from \$1.4 million in 2001 to \$2.4 million in 2002. In 2002, the U.S. began a series of major joint training exercises with the Filipino military that involved thousands of troops on both sides.

At the same time, human rights have become a major concern. The Amnesty International report *Philippines: Torture Persists*, released in January, found “the persistence of torture and ill treatment in the Philippines today... highlights the serious discrepancy between the law and its application.” Amnesty documents torture techniques, including electroshocks and the use of plastic bags to suffocate detainees, and determines that, “those most at risk include alleged members of armed opposition groups, their suspected sympathizers” along with “ordinary criminal suspects.”

Amnesty is not alone in recognizing human rights abuses in the Philippines. According to the State



Department's 2001 *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, "there were serious problems in some areas. Members of the security services were responsible for extrajudicial killings, disappearances, torture, and arbitrary arrest and detention."

In its human rights report, the State Department also acknowledged that U.S. Special Forces and military advisers helped create an environment in which human rights abuses increased, noting in their report that "there were allegations by human rights groups that these problems worsened as the Government sought to intensify its campaign against the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)."

It is likely that human rights will continue to be an issue as long as U.S. military training of Filipino soldiers takes place in insurgent strongholds. Most training missions simulate battle conditions, but in the Philippines the exercises often take place in real zones of conflict. Retired Philippine General Rodolfo Biazon notes that the training operations use "live ammo," have a "live enemy," and thus are "live missions." In October 2002, 800 U.S. troops and at least as many Filipino soldiers began joint exercises on Luzon Island, where the New People's Army (NPA), a Communist group designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department in August 2002, has its base of operations. Even as the U.S. military maintained that the NPA was not the target of the exercises, tensions were high and during that period an

attack on a nightclub resulted in the death of an American Green Beret and two Filipinos.

In 2003, Manila and Washington are planning at least 11 joint exercises, with the first now underway at Clark Air Force base, the former U.S. military base. U.S. troops will teach the Filipino military mountaineering, close quarter combat, and jungle survival.

Anticipating the possibility that U.S. military personnel deployed in the Philippines will be accused of human rights abuses, Washington has offered Manila \$30 million in additional military aid in exchange for an agreement that would exempt U.S. soldiers operating in the Philippines from the International Criminal Court.

Given the Filipino military's track record on torture and human rights abuses, Washington cannot help President Arroyo quell insurgency movements, fight the war on terrorism, and uphold human rights all at the same. Perhaps insisting on respect for human rights is a better tool for fighting terrorism than weapons and military training.

(Frida Berrigan <BerrigaF@newschool.edu> is a senior research associate with the Arms Trade Resource Center, a project of the World Policy Institute. She writes regularly for Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org).

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). ©2003. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit www.fpif.org.

Recommended citation:

Frida Berrigan, "Terror and Torture in the Philippines," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, February 21, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0302philippines.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Frida Berrigan

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC