

## As the U.S. Moves into Southeast Asia, A Report on the Philippines

By Gary King

Policy makers have announced plans to “rebalance” military presence by concentrating 60% of U.S. forces in the Pacific, offering vague rationales about defense. But U.S. military involvement in the Philippines enables exploitation by multi-national corporations and oppression of the Filipino people.



More than 4,000 American troops joined Filipino troops in a series of military exercises this spring. Boris Volkhonsky, senior research fellow at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, called the Asia-Pacific region “the New Middle East.” The military exercise in this photo shows a mock retaking of an oil rig seized by terrorists.

Photo: Reuters/Romeo Ranoco

The U.S. and Philippine military have held some joint exercises for decades. Why? There is no likely external threat to that country. Yet, the U.S. is getting along better than ever with the Philippine military. It is sending as much as \$30 million worth of military hardware to the Philippines for “security,” and it trickles down to the private armies. Seeking to “surround China,” the U.S. has spent \$507 million lately to improve Philippine military bases, according to Ambassador Henry Thomas Jr. last November (without accounting to our Congress).

Since 2012, the U.S. has maintained 600 troops in the island of Mindanao, long, long after the one pro-Al Qaida group, Abu Sayaf, mostly a haphazard kidnapping gang, was decimated. The reason for the troops to stay is not publicly disclosed. The U.S. administration has uttered vague phrases to the effect that the Philippines should prevail in its claims to many of the Spratly Islands, scattered in the South China Sea, rumored to potentially be near offshore oil fields. So, the U.S. imagines it can help oppose Chinese encroachment in this area.

But, the more likely solid reason for those troops and our military support involves strongly suspected oil and natural gas fields further south in Mindanao. There are salt marshes, not far from the U.S. troops, which might some day be very valuable. However, those lands are nominally controlled by two Moro groups, indigenous people seeking semi-autonomy. Each of these groups (with the acronyms MNLF and MILF) is highly armed and determined to not let more lands go to fruit plantations, foreign development, and resource depredation including strip mining and logging, as well as invading farmers from the north. More than 325,000 refugees have been created by conflicts between the Philippine military and these local armies.

Now the U.S. wants its troops able to work freely out of many Philippine military bases, which is against the Philippine constitution. [Update from Gary King: As of June 2012, the U.S. wants unlimited access to former U.S. bases in the Philippines: Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Base. And, adding insult to injury, it wants the U.S. in Cam Ranh Bay, in Vietnam!] Recently a pair of 500-pound bombs were dropped on some houses in Basilan, a small Muslim-dominated island near Indonesia, targeted by U.S. drone intelligence. This was followed by the usual U.S./Philippine government bragging about killing three much-sought terrorists for the bombing in Bali. (This could not be confirmed, because Philippine soldiers, as usual, were unable to go there in daylight, due to small arms fire.)

So after 10 years of being a partner in the "Coalition of the Willing" in the U.S. worldwide war on the tactic of terror, and after almost two years of governance by a new president, Benigno Aquino Jr., what is the status of human rights today in the Philippines?



A U.S. soldier carries a Filipino soldier playing a “communist insurgent” and feigning death during a joint Philippine-U.S. military exercise in April.

Photo: Reuters/Romeo Ranoco

My wife Glen, who was born in the Philippines, and I just finished a month-long trip there—my 26th since 1975 [February 2012]. I have been working on human rights in the Philippines since a chapter of Amnesty International started in the Twin Cities in 1976. We’ve helped mourn and publicize those activists murdered by extrajudicial execution, and worked to get more than 40 Prisoners of Conscience released from prisons. This trip, I had five days in Manila to work on pressing human rights issues, and a few weeks in the central island of Cebu to see relatives and to work on local human rights issues there. I am helped by very, very brave persons in the people’s rights alliance, Karapatan, which helps find prisoners, stop torture, and promote fair and just trials. I have met four persons later murdered by the Philippine military, which had been stalking, harassing and threatening them.

Most of my work is to visit prisoners and bear witness to gross human rights violations. In Manila, we interviewed and filmed two women whose loved ones were victims of Enforced Disappearances back in 2006, under then-President Gloria Arroyo. These are heart-rending stories. We interviewed and filmed one woman who spent six years imprisoned, after her initial torture and sexual molestation.

We interviewed another woman whose husband, artist, poet and songwriter Ericson Acosta (details at [www.freeacosta.blogspot.com](http://www.freeacosta.blogspot.com)), was arrested in the province of

Samar while gathering data on human rights and environmental abuses in the countryside. He had been grabbed, without an arrest warrant, because a military patrol found a laptop in his knapsack. I participated in a press conference in Manila on January 23, with five others, to protest his treatment. Our chapter of Amnesty International is protesting his initial 44 hours of torture, which included death threats, as well as his one year in jail, without proper court progress and no sign of a trial.

This is routine: Prisoners are held extra-legally by the military—e.g., in the case of 43 health care workers—in spite of pleas by President Aquino and rulings by the Philippine Supreme Court. The military today also threatens nuns in Davao City, a large metropolis south of Manila, for holding a banner about the murder of Italian priest Fr. Faustino Tentorio.

The trial of 193 suspects for the political abductions and massacre of 58 persons in one infamous incident two years ago drags on at a rate that will take 200 years! It happened in Maguindanao, a province in the western part of the large southern island of Mindanao. The victims were traveling in a car convoy to register a candidate for an election of provincial governor. The convoy consisted of the candidate's female family members, because there were many death threats to the male candidate and it was believed that the women and girls, who were accompanied by lawyers and journalists, would not be attacked. However, police stopped the convoy, and turned the people over to the son of the provincial governor, Andal Ampatuan Sr., the head of a political dynasty that controlled the area and was a favorite of then-President Arroyo. (The province had supported her with 100% of the vote in the prior election.) Ampatuan's private army then murdered the people in brutal, sadistic ways. A world record was set in this massacre—33 journalists were killed. One witness in the trial has since been murdered, and several are missing.

Despite numerous appeals from Amnesty International and other groups, current President Aquino cannot bring himself to outlaw private armies, which have no formal training or oversight. Even the murder of Aquino's own father in 1983, during the Marcos dictatorship, remains to be solved. And yet now he wants private armies to provide security for foreign mining operations, too!



Painting by current Filipino political prisoner, Ed Sarmiento

Other than occasional harsh sentences for sex traffickers and lowly drug dealers, justice continues to be quite elusive. Foreigners spend money on sex and drugs but never go to jail. Over 900 street criminals, including children, have so far been killed by motorcycling hit squads in Cebu City and Davao City, the two large cities south of Manila, and there hasn't been single prosecution of perpetrators. The mayors of these cities brag about the death squad work over the past ten years, and still get reelected.

One small gem of possible justice is that the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Renato Corona, is facing impeachment. He has single-handedly reversed court rulings, e.g., one in favor of the largest carrier, Philippine Air Lines, which now wants to outsource all of their workers to destroy their unions. Easier to prove, he is in bigger trouble for amassing a fortune of about \$20+ million in land and investments. Perhaps his biggest sin is that he was appointed by prior President Gloria Arroyo, and likely would intervene to prevent her pending prosecution for incredible corruption and election fraud dating back to 2004.





Ramon Patriarcha was held incommunicado and tortured. He is suing the Philippine military.

Photo: Gary King

Another small gem of possible justice is that there is an arrest order for retired General Jovito Palparan. In his commands in provinces of Mindoro, Samar, and central Luzon, he was called “The Berdugo” (The Butcher). There were high levels of killings, abductions and torture everywhere he went. He was given steady promotions and praise by Gloria Arroyo when she was president. He even led the 2,000 troops sent to fight in Iraq. Now, he may face justice for one incident where two University of Philippines co-eds, a 22-year old sociology student doing research about the plight of farmers in the Bulacan province and a 29-year old human kinetics student and community organizer for a farmers’ group, were taken, held for more than a year, raped and molested repeatedly, and now are Disappeared. Palparan is hiding, probably in Bulacan where he was setting up military intelligence groups to profit by protecting foreign-owned mines. Although the Philippine Justice Department is working on this, President Aquino has yet to directly order the military to give him up. [Update: Chief Justice Corona was convicted, but General Palparan has remained untouched.]

However, in general, the military and police conduct illegal arrests, detentions, and torture as always, dating back to dark days of the Marcos Martial Law. \*

In Cebu, I visit political prisoners in local jails, to report to Amnesty International in London. Like my visits in 2007 and 2009, I tried to again visit Ramon Patriarcha, accused of being an officer of the New People's Army (NPA), a locally grown communist-like rebellion of the poor—mostly farmers—that has been simmering since WWII. He was arrested three years ago, and was seen being taken to a military camp. Fearing he would be tortured, the Filipino human rights group, Karapatan, persuaded a judge to issue a writ of amparo (a special court-ordered protection and

habeas corpus) to personally go on a Sunday to the military camp to see him. She was refused access for eight hours. She said, "I am a judge. This is a writ of amparo. You must let me see him!" Nevertheless, military officers blocked the entrance with a fire truck, and refused to bring him to the entrance, giving the rationale that he might escape or that the NPA might kill him. Later, on his first day in court, Ramon lifted his shirt and showed the severe contusions on his chest. (He now has filed a 1.4 million peso lawsuit against the military for his torture.)

My daughter and I went to a jail to visit him, but we were denied entrance despite my showing my Amnesty International Leadership card. The governor of the province had told newspapers that her jails are "rebel free," so Ramon was now to be held incommunicado. Considering he has not yet been convicted of anything, this violates his rights. The warden and assistant warden drove right past us to get away, not wishing to hear from AI or to disobey the governor! A few days later, he was transferred to the very same military camp where he had been tortured three years earlier. Luckily, this time I was allowed to enter that facility after showing my AI card, and we talked for an hour in front of two dour-faced, fully-armed soldiers. Ramon was supposed to be released last August, according to ongoing negotiations taking place in Norway between the National Democratic Front (the political arm of the New People's Army) and the Philippine government but all negotiations are on hold since the military grabbed 17 consultants for the National Democratic Front just before the renewed start of talks.

So it goes for our "Coalition of the Willing."

\*Filipino activists and supporters criticized a Philippine government report, accusing it of "drowning their dismal compliance to international human rights instruments with their so-called achievements." Philippine UPRWatch, a coalition of civil, legal, indigenous and religious groups in the Philippines, submitted its own report to the United Nations Rights Council's 2nd cycle of Universal Periodic Review on the Philippines. May-June 2012 <http://philippineuprwatch.wordpress.com/>

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