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War Drive

Philippines: fighting military globalisation

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Harry Tubongbanwa of the Revolutionary Workers' Party of Mindanao looks at the background to the current US military intervention in his country.

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THE Philippines is back on the map now because it is the place where the biggest counter-terrorist group of US troops outside of Afghanistan exists so far. We have 660 US Special troops in the southern part of the country right now - and others who are training the Philippine army in the north, several companies of them in different areas.

The biggest concentration is in Mindanao where they are training the Philippines army how to capture or destroy the terrorists - the Abu Sayyaf. There are actually less than 100 of these people, but now the Philippine army has around 8,000 troops on the small island of Basilan to carry this out. Even with the help of the US they seem to be having trouble dealing with these 80 people - this so-called network of Al-Qaida in the country.

The President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, is the most reliable ally of US imperialism in fighting the Al-Qaida network in the South East Asia region. She was the first one who supported Bush right after September 11 - even when the other leaders in the area did not.

The Philippines is also very important for President Bush today because it is a living manifestation of the failure of neo-liberal globalisation.

Today the transition period of the new government installed in January 2001 after what we call the second phase of people's power is over. After the national and local elections last May, the ruling party was able to consolidate its hold at both national and local level. Having the majority in the Lower House and a small majority in the Senate, the President is no longer dependent on allies who were responsible for her coming to power.

Now she can press ahead with the trial of former President Estrada, who she replaced. She wants to attack him because at the end of last year Estrada and his supporters tried to regain control of the government through a third phase of peoples' power. It was the poorest section of the population that was mobilised in December 2001.

When Arroyo came to power, there was a big broad coalition that put her there including the left. The Communist Party of the Philippines participated in the elections and gained seats in the Lower House. Because of this help, at first Arroyo tried to accommodate the demands of the left but now she is very uncompromising with them.

We see the direct US military intervention as the armed wing of globalisation and also as a concrete expression of the post-cold war policy of the US strategy of "just in time". In a matter of hours the US can deploy large concentrations of troops to any country or island in the world - without the expense of maintaining bases. They sent troops from Okinawa in Japan to the Philippines for example. The US is also prepared to "act unilaterally if it must, but multilaterally if it can".

Why Mindanao? Geographically speaking it is at the centre of the growth area of South East Asia - Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Basilan is key to this - but of course it's also where the Abu Sayyaf are.

It was the Philippine government that originally created Abu Sayyaf - we identified 5 agents inside including the main

strategist who was killed 2 years ago. In 1994 they started this when the Moro Revolutionary groups were negotiating with the government. The time was ripe for the entry of fundamentalist groups to offer an alternative to revolutionary ideas.

Abu Sayyaf mainly grew after the 1996 peace agreement between the Moro groups and the government and of course it attracted followers when this agreement broke down.

We see a connection between the government's support for the US and the presence of the troops. Just like Bush, President Arroyo's father was also a President and during her time as a senator she was very supportive of US bases in the Philippines. She is a very ardent follower of the younger Bush - she adopts his slogans like "Bullets for Bread" and "Security for Liberty". She claims to be implementing an all-out war against the Al-Qaida network in the Philippines - while what she is really concerned about is neutralising possible opponents in the 2004 Presidential elections.

There was a strong rumour at the end of last year that there would be a coup d'etat and this forced her to say she would replace the Head of the National Police. But now the US troops are there she changed her mind. Not only has this man kept his job, his term has even been extended. The US troops have given her confidence both to continue ruling and prepare for the 2004 elections.

This situation gives an opportunity for the different groups of the revolutionary left in the Philippines to act together. Those who were active in getting rid of the US bases in 1991 are now back in the mainstream. Different blocks from the left, excluding the CP, are trying to rally behind this and form a coalition for peace. We are trying to connect the fight against globalisation with the presence of the US troops.

The Revolutionary Workers Party of Mindanao is active in this campaign, particularly in Mindanao. We are the only block that has a presence in Mindanao where the troops are. And through this work we are developing stronger co-operation with other left groups - particularly the Socialist Party of the Philippines - which has relations with the DSP in Australia - and the Workers' Party of the Philippines and also the Proletarian Party of the Philippines.

Today the government has broken off peace talks with all the different armed groups which means that the US troops can intervene militarily against them. The New People's Army, the military wing of the CP, was listed as a terrorist group by Bush.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front, with whom we have good relations, is very worried about the presence of US troops especially in Basilan because they have almost 2,000 armed men on the island. They think there is a danger that they will be identified as Abu Sayyaf.

There is a real possibility that people who are not members of Abu Sayyaf will be killed. Right before the US troops came the marines killed 3 people who they mistook as Abu Sayyaf - and the media where there and proved that they were not - not least because they were cooking pork which Muslim fundamentalists certainly would not.

The government have argued that there are only 2 options - either you are for Abu Sayyaf or you are for US troops. They have been showing videos on the TV of Abu Sayyaf carrying out executions by beheading from 1995 to whip this up. For us it's an important job to educate people that it is not as simple as this. We have to condemn both.