

## US Wages "War on Terror" in the Philippines

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*The global population is not only aware of the feeble facade that disguises the imperial US agenda of world domination, it is sick and tired of the excuse, the declaration of an endless war on a noun, 'terror,' which enables the US to wage war on any person, State or group, it chooses.*

*If the USA were truly serious about eliminating terrorism it would wage war on the two largest perpetrators of chaos, destabilisation and civilian killing in the world today, NATO and itself - so let's get real and refuse the bullshit sandwiches which Washington and Brussels imagine the global population would readily devour.*



*In a classic Orwellian inversion, which very few outside the US accept, America and NATO, in order to veil their own innumerable crimes, accuse their victims of exactly the crimes they commit. In every instance of intervention NATO and the US have left ruin in their wake and countless citizens displaced and [slaughtered](#). Take a long look at their 'success' stories, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, Somalia etc, etc. REALITY easily displaces the bullshit, tired propaganda and thin excuses. Millions have died and many more millions have been displaced over the past 15 years of NATO's and America's 'humanitarian' interventions, however, today the feeble excuses that issue out of Washington and Brussels just don't 'cut it' anymore.*

Report from Truthout follows:

Although Islamic State regularly captures global headlines, the so-called fight against "terrorism" is not just confined to the Middle East. The United States quietly maintains other fronts in the War on Terror - including the Philippines.

Last January, Filipino police from the elite Special Action Force (SAF) - a Philippine SWAT-style police unit that's modeled off the British Army Special Air Service (SAS) - entered Tukanalipao, a small enclave in the Mamasapano municipality, in the southwestern part of the Philippines' Mindanao island. Their goal was to arrest two suspected terrorists who were on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorist List with hefty US bounties on their heads - Zulkifli bin Hir (also known as Marwan), a Malaysian national, bomb maker and leader of the Southeast Asian Islamic militant group Jemaah Islamiya; and Abdul Basit Usman, a Filipino rebel and bomb-making expert aligned with Abu

Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah. Neither of these men were members of al-Qaeda, and there is little evidence suggesting their involvement in terrorist plots against the US. Marwan was killed in the operation, and his finger severed and sent to the FBI to confirm his identity.

However, the operation also resulted in a violent firefight between Philippine police commandos and Islamic separatists - Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). Mindanao is the southernmost of the Philippines' three island groups (Mindanao, Visayas, Luzon). The southwestern part of Mindanao is home to the Muslim, or Moro, population, which is comprised of many ethnic groups. It has also been the location of decades-long fighting between the Philippine government and Muslim separatists. The operation - officially named Operation Exodus but called "Mamasapano massacre" by many - resulted in 67 deaths, 44 of which were police, along with some separatists and many civilians.

What's also been highlighted and condemned is the US role in the operation. According to an investigation by the Philippine Daily Inquirer, a US drone flying overhead provided real-time intelligence to Filipino commandos and pinpointed Marwan's location. It added that the United States "fully funded and provided the training for the Mamasapano operation." Two government inquiries - one from the Philippine Senate, the other from the Philippine National police - both concluded the United States did play a role in the Mamasapano operation. At least six US military personnel were at a Philippine command post and fed Philippine commandos intelligence collected by US aircraft. One of the Americans even ordered a Filipino army general to call in artillery fire, although he refused.

The operation has been widely condemned by Filipinos in the US and in the Philippines. Rhonda Ramiro, vice chair of BAYAN-USA, a progressive Filipino alliance, told Truthout, "The interesting thing that we see happening is that people from right to left, from the conservative end of the spectrum all the way to the progressive and radical end - people are really upset about what happened." Ramiro said people feel that the operation "never should have happened" because "it was really a US-planned operation. An operation to get two people that were on a US FBI Terrorist List. It wasn't something that was Philippine-made or Philippine-created or anything that really served the interests of Filipinos." She added, "It was a mission that we feel like the US used Filipino pawns to undertake, and where's the fairness in that?"

Activists in both countries have been calling for accountability from Philippine President Benigno Aquino III - as well as President Obama - for the US' role in the botched operation.

This operation is one example of the recent impacts of the United States' ongoing military presence in the Philippines. The United States operated military bases in the Philippines since the archipelago nation became independent in 1946. That ended in 1991, when the Philippine Senate voted to kick the American bases out of their country. However, the Visiting Forces Agreement between the United States and Philippines - signed in 1998 and put into effect in 1999 - allows for joint military exercises between the US and Philippine militaries. Now the United States is expanding its military presence in the Asia-Pacific. In light of territorial disputes between the Philippines and China - along with the Obama administration's strategic and military shift to Asia, also known as the Asia "pivot," to counter China's power - the Philippine and US

governments have expanded their military cooperation efforts. Last year, the US and Philippine governments signed a 10-year pact called the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which provides US troops greater access to select Philippine military bases.

The War on Terror provided the US an opportunity to expand its military footprint in the Philippines. Of the little American press coverage of US foreign policy in the Philippines, much of it focuses on the counterterrorism aspect, accepting the framework that the Philippines is just another country partly inhabited with groups of militant, anti-Western Muslims. But there is a deeper background behind the situation - one that does not fit into such a narrow frame of reference.

### Muslim Insurgency in the Philippines

Islam was introduced to the Philippines in the late-13th century by Muslim missionaries, such as Tuan Masha'ika. In 1280, Masha'ika arrived in the Sulu archipelago, where he established the Philippines' first Muslim community. After Masha'ika came another Muslim missionary, Karim-ul-Makhdum, in the mid-14th century. When Rajah Baginda arrived in the early 15th century, his son-in-law, Abu Bakar, created the Sulu Sultanate. Islam soon spread throughout the rest of Mindanao.

Dr. Jamial A. Kamlian, author of *Bangsamoro Society and Culture*, writes, "Eventually, it is the Islamic faith that would distinguish the Moros from the other natives of the Philippine archipelago. Under the sultanates, the Moros were unified under one leadership, one command and one God. Islam served not only as a unifying thread for their political organization but also as the ideological foundation to effectively resist foreign intrusions." Kamlian holds that the non-Islamic natives were more scattered and presented a less united front (making them potentially more vulnerable to foreign colonialism).

The arrival of Spanish colonialism set the stage for the current conflict in the southern Philippines. In 1521, Spanish colonizers colonized and, in 1565, incorporated the Philippines into the Spanish Empire. The Spanish converted most of the native Filipino population, particularly in the northern islands, to Christianity, through violent means. After expelling Muslims from Spain in the late 15th century, the Spanish colonizers were hell-bent on eliminating any trace of Islam from the Philippines. In 1578, the Spanish governor "ordered that 'there be not among them anymore preachers of the doctrines of Mahoma since it is evil and false' and called for all mosques to be destroyed," according to an in-depth Al-Jazeera English op-ed by Ambassador Akbar Ahmed, a former Pakistani high commissioner to the UK, and Frankie Martin, an Ibn Khaldun Chair Research Fellow at American University's School of International Service. Ahmed and Martin add that the "governor's instructions set the tone for centuries of continuous warfare." For over 300 years, the Moro people fought the Spanish colonizers.

Once the declining Spanish Empire lost control of the Philippines after the 1898 Spanish-American War, the United States replaced Spain and established its own form of colonial rule in the country. Kamlian writes, "The US colonial government systematized and regulated the whole process of land ownership, land registration, cadastral survey, homesteading and agricultural investments. Through class legislation and discriminatory processes, the ancestral lands and economic resources of the Moros and Lumad would gradually drift into the hands of Christian Filipino settlers and large US corporations."

Additionally, the Moro people lost their "right to govern themselves according to their own systems" since their lands were absorbed into the Philippine colonial bureaucracy.

Philippine independence in 1946 did little to change the situation of the Moro people. Christian Filipino elites had the most economic power and were committed to protecting foreign economic interests. Multinational corporations controlled the Moro people's economy, particularly in pineapple, banana and rubber exports. This laid the groundwork for future conflict.

"The current conflict," explain Ahmed and Martin, "began in 1968 with what became known as the Jabidah Massacre, when around 60, mainly Tausug, recruits in the Philippine Army were summarily executed after they refused a mission to attack the Malaysian region of Sabah, where a population of Tausug also resides." The Tausug people are among the 13 Moro ethnic groups. Angered by the Jabidah Massacre, in 1971, a group of Moro formed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) to fight for Moro independence. Splinter groups eventually grew out of MNLF, particularly Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf. MILF and Abu Sayyaf are both Islamic guerrilla groups but Abu Sayyaf is more brutal and extreme. It commits terrorist attacks on civilians - such as kidnappings, bombings and assassinations - and engages in criminal activity. Abu Sayyaf has made headlines for both its terrorist attacks and loose ties to al-Qaeda. Because of this, the MNLF and MILF tend to distance themselves from Abu Sayyaf, but the Philippine military accuses both groups of providing support to Abu Sayyaf.

Poverty and inequality are endemic throughout the Philippines. As of 2012, the GINI coefficient - a measurement of inequality going from 0 the lowest to 1 the highest - for the Philippines is 43.0. The poverty rate is 25.8 percent, according to government statistics. Poverty is most pronounced in Mindanao, which holds 10 of the country's poorest 16 provinces. Lanao del Norte is the poorest, with a 67.3 percent poverty rate.

While the Philippines has a constitutional republican form of government, corruption and oligarchy run deep. In a population of 100 million people, there are 178 dynasties that rule 73 - over 90 percent - of the Philippines' 80 provinces. According to Al-Jazeera English, "Half come from the old landed elites, while the rest turned up after the 1986 popular revolt that ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos." Current President Benigno Aquino III also comes from a political dynasty. His father, Benigno Jr., was a senator, while his mother was the late-President Corazon Aquino. Aquino's predecessor, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, is a daughter of former president Diosdado Macapagal.

It is within this context of poverty, inequality, oligarchic nepotism and lack of political self-determination that Muslim separatists, along with many left-wing guerrilla fighters, labor organizers and political activists, are challenging the Philippine establishment, through both armed and nonviolent resistance.

### US-Philippine War on Terror

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Philippines became an ally in the US War on Terror. The Philippine government used this amorphous war as an opportunity to continue its generations-long war against Muslim separatists in the southern Philippines. The United States provided the Philippine government ample assistance in this fight.

In 2002, the United States established a counterterrorism task force called Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P), a team of US special operation forces that aid Philippine security forces fighting Islamic militants. The US' main target is Abu Sayyaf. At its height, the task force had between 500 to 600 US commandos assisting the Philippine military with intelligence, training and transport. Its forces hail from US Army Special Operations Forces, Navy SEALs, Air Force special operators and other military services. While US forces are generally not involved in combat, some US military personnel have been killed in the Philippines. In fact, in early 2012, a US drone strike targeting the Islamic militant groups Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah killed 15 people on the southern Philippine island of Jolo.

While not publicly confirmed, it is possible that the CIA is on the ground in the Philippines, as well. In a mid-March story, the Washington Post mentioned that "It is common for the elite troops" from the US antiterrorism task force in the Philippines "to work with intelligence operatives from the CIA and other agencies." The CIA didn't answer the Washington Post's questions about its involvement in the country.

In late February, the United States announced that it would disband its counterterrorism task force in the Philippines. According to a US Special Operations Command, Pacific spokesperson's statement to USNI News, JSOTF-P will complete the transition on May 1. Some "personnel will return to their units," while others "will remain as part of foreign liaison elements and continue to advise and assist Philippine counterterrorism efforts . . . This represents a shift in focus for US Special Operations Forces from advising and assisting at the small unit level to providing operational advice and assistance at higher levels of command within the Philippine Security Forces for continued counterterrorism progress, humanitarian assistance and civil military cooperations."

Thus, while JSOTF-P will be disbanded, US special operations forces will still maintain a significant presence in the Philippines, assisting the upper echelons of the Philippine security apparatus. Moreover, the overall US counterterrorism mission in the Philippines - dubbed Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines - will still continue for the foreseeable future.

### Philippine Dirty War on Dissidents

After the September 11th terrorist attacks, the Philippines joined the US in the global War on Terror. The effort became a subterfuge for the Philippine government to wage its own Argentina-style dirty war against political opponents. In 2002, then-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo launched a counterinsurgency campaign called Oplan Bantay Laya, or Operation Freedom Watch, to, ostensibly, fight communist guerrilla fighters. However, the policy's holistic approach does not distinguish between armed combatants and noncombatant activists. For over a decade, Philippine security forces have assassinated, abducted and tortured hundreds of left-wing activists, organizers, lawyers, journalists and religious leaders suspected of being communists. To vilify dissidents and justify their repression, the Philippine government will often accuse dissidents of being terrorist sympathizers.

Getting accurate numbers of people killed or abducted is difficult, and numbers vary between studies. But most show that hundreds of people have been killed or abducted since 2001, and most have been activists and other dissidents.

A legal report on the Philippine government's extrajudicial killings from 2001 to 2010 - during the Macapagal-Arroyo administration - found that the vast majority of victims are activists, government officials and other noncombatant members of the opposition. Of the 390 people killed within that time frame, 32 percent were officers or members of activist groups, 15 percent were elected government officials, 15 percent were journalists, 10 percent were farmers and the rest were others such as lawyers and religious leaders. Only 8 percent of those victims were armed rebel fighters.

Of all perpetrators, most are unidentified armed men (57 percent of 837 suspects), while the rest - the perpetrators who are identified - are typically state actors like the military (19 percent) or police (9 percent). Only 12 percent of the suspects were rebels. The Philippine military has consistently denied involvement in extrajudicial killings and, in some instances, blame left-wing guerrillas for the killings.

However, the Philippine military has been uncooperative with efforts to investigate these killings and hold perpetrators accountable. A Human Rights Watch report states, "At the lowest ranks, the military has created an environment in which foot soldiers have readily participated in killings of leftist activists. A military insider told Human Rights Watch that even if the local commander did not give the order to kill, 'he knows of everything' and will protect his soldiers. Soldiers have also been paid as hired killers, acting on behalf of private interests or other government agencies." So it is possible that many of the unidentified armed men responsible for extrajudicial killings are paid mercenaries. It is unclear to what extent military officers higher up the chain of command are responsible for these extrajudicial killings.

This dirty war has continued under the Aquino government. According to Karapatan, a human rights group in the Philippines, from July 2010 to June 2014, there were 204 extrajudicial killings, 21 enforced disappearances, 99 instances of torture, 3 instances of rape and 664 people illegally arrested and detained by the Aquino government.

Even US citizens who are active in Filipino left-wing politics are targets of government vilification and repression. One such case is that of Melissa Roxas, a graduate of the University of California, San Diego, longtime activist and member of BAYAN-USA. On May 19, 2009, during a medical mission to the Philippines, Roxas was abducted at gunpoint and tortured by the Philippine military for six days. Ramiro told Truthout that members of BAYAN-USA in the San Francisco Bay Area have been surveilled and interrogated by the FBI, as well.

This is why the framework of "terrorism" is unhelpful for understanding the situation in the Philippines. The people deemed "terrorists" by the Philippine government are often activists, organizers, political dissidents or separatists fighting for national liberation.

### Natural Resources in the Philippines

The Philippines, particularly the southern region, is also rich in natural resources, due to its proximity to the "Pacific Rim of Fire." It is home to iron, gold, copper, nickel, chromite and other minerals. Much of its mineral potential is untapped, which provides opportunities for investment, exploration and exploitation by foreign multinational corporations. In 2006, the US embassy in Manila estimated, in a diplomatic cable released by Wikileaks, that "the Philippines may have untapped mineral wealth worth between \$840 billion and \$1 trillion." Mindanao, in particular, is seen as "a treasure

trove" of minerals. The embassy stated:

According to data from the GRP Mines and Geosciences Bureau, up to 70 percent of the Philippines' mineral resources may be in Mindanao. Interest has grown significantly since a December 2004 decision by the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Mining Act. Companies that are up to 100 percent foreign-owned may now pursue investments in large-scale exploration and development of minerals, oil and gas. As of early 2006, there were 23 mining projects nationwide. Multinational firms are already eyeing areas in Mindanao for possible projects.

Moreover, there are, according to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), approximately 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the South China Sea that have yet to be tapped. Seven countries bordering the sea - China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia - all lay competing claims to that oil and natural gas.

The Wikileaks cable points to a key reason for expansion of US military power in the Asia-Pacific region. Beyond the rhetoric of fighting "terrorism," a key reason for US militarism in the Philippines is to protect American economic interests.

Peace or Endless War?

Last year, the Philippine government reached a peace deal with MILF. In exchange for laying down its arms, the government granted MILF a concession: Muslims would self-govern parts of the southern Philippines. As of today, the MILF has decommissioned its armed rebel forces. However, the Mamasapano operation jeopardized prospects for some semblance of peace laid down by this deal. Some right-wing elements argue that the botched operation's police deaths show that the Moro people are not "ready" for peace and cannot be trusted; they lay the blame on Muslims for what happened.

One month after the Mamasapano massacre, the armed forces of Philippines Chief General Gregorio Pio Catapang Jr. ordered an all-out offensive against the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. Recently, Gen. Catapang announced that the offensive ended as the military had achieved its objectives. The offensive killed 139 BIFF men, wounded 53 and captured 12, according to Catapang. However, tens of thousands of civilians were also displaced due to the fighting.

However, Ramiro points out, there is widespread unity among Filipinos in holding the government accountable for the failed operation and for letting the United States violate Philippine sovereignty. Some are even calling for Aquino to resign. At the same time, according to Ramiro, "There are definitely those forces in Philippine society that don't want that kind of unity, that would rather have the status quo. So they're calling for all-out war."

But war, she said, is not the recipe for peace. "If we want to achieve peace, it's not going to be through these kinds of operations. It's going to be through addressing poverty and inequality," said Ramiro.

The US role in the Mamasapano massacre underscores how far the War on Terror has spread over the past 13 years. Even though the original Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) gave the president the power to use military force against those

responsible for 9/11 attacks, it has been stretched to include not just al-Qaeda, but also "associated forces." This loose term - coupled with an expansive interpretation - gives the US legal cover to use force against any Islamic militant group that may or may not pose a direct threat to the United States.

Since most of al-Qaeda's base is gone, the US is waging borderless, perpetual war against a slew of loose, transnational terrorist networks who hardly pose an existential threat to the United States. Much of this war is waged in the shadows with paramilitary and elite special operations forces, mercenaries and allied proxies around the world. One underreported front in this borderless, perpetual war is the Philippines. The botched Mamasapano operation is one of many examples of how the War on Terror generates more instability, exacerbates human suffering and undermines true peace and justice.

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Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-1548.html>