

# Why U.S. Military Forces are in Mindanao

Balikatan and U.S. Geopolitical Interests

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## Introduction

More than a century ago, during the time that the first U.S. visiting forces came to this island to crush guerrilla resistance of our freedom fighters in Mindanao, the U.S. Army composed a song, which is still found in the records of the U.S. Army's pacification campaign in the Philippines. That U.S. Army song had the title, "The Monkeys Have no Tails in Zamboanga." It was during that era that almost tens of thousands of Moro men, women, children and elders were massacred by the U.S. Army in a bloody pacification campaign, especially at Bud Dajo, an event that U.S. army generals later referred to as "a most gallant heroic feat", in reference to the deeds of U.S. soldiers in killing what they called "savages". Moro freedom fighters were slain by U.S. visiting forces at the Battle of Bayang (Lanao) and at the historic battle of Bacolod Grande. According to Mindanao historian Samuel K. Tan, Moro resistance to American colonial rule lasted up to 1913, at the Battle of Bud Bagsak. These bloody so-called "heroic feats" of U.S. military forces in Mindanao resonate as they are again seen moving around - actively - in the second largest island of the Philippines.

## Resumption of Balikatan after the Subic Rape Case

The resumption of the large-scale Balikatan exercises comes after they were suspended during the past two years because of the Subic rape case, where a U.S. Marine was convicted of rape. However, the suspension of the Balikatan exercises was lifted, when Malacanang officials, with the connivance of the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), abducted the convicted U.S. soldier away from Philippine judicial system's custody and handed him over to the U.S. Embassy. The brazenness of this abduction may appear all too familiar now with the way whistleblower Mr. Rodolfo Lozada was abducted from the Manila International Airport by a group of government operatives upon orders of Malacanang to prevent him from testifying from the Senate hearings. The resumption of the large-scale Balikatan in 2008 is supposed to be the reward given to us by the U.S. government for the surrender of our custody and sovereignty of the convicted U.S. Marine to them. 6,000 U.S. troops are expected to participate in this year's Balikatan exercises, with the Balance Piston 08 affecting many parts of Luzon, and in Mindanao, the areas included for penetration by U.S. troops through "humanitarian work" are municipalities in Cagayan de Oro, Bukidnon and Lanao provinces. Meanwhile, all-year round, a detachment of what a high-ranking Pentagon official described as U.S. Special Operations Forces - "a little less than 1,000" have setup and constructed

military facilities in ZamboangaCity, Basilan and Sulu.

U.S. troops are back, we are told “to train, to assist and to advise Philippine counterparts in anti-terror operations” and, “to increase their interoperability, that is, working together with their Philippine counterparts” . The VFA Commission and Fil-AM officers in the U.S. Army who have been assigned to be their spokespersons, tell us that U.S. soldiers are here “not to fight, but to train, to conduct humanitarian missions.” Since 2001 after the signing of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), U.S. military forces have been sited in Batanes, Nueva Ecija, Tarlac, Aurora, Pampanga, Zambales, Cebu, Palanan, Zamboanga del Sur, Lanao del Sur, North Cotabato, South Cotabato, Basilan, Sulu, Cavite, Albay, & Camarines Sur.

While there is an outright denial by Philippine officials and “FIL-AM” spokesmen of the now established U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force that they are involved in combat operations. But that is not what American newspapers and U.S. military journals and documents are saying.

In Jan. 19, 2002, the New York Times, in an editorial, wrote, “The Pentagon has a long and ignoble history of announcing that it is dispatching American forces abroad as “advisers” when they are really meant to be combatants.”

In Feb. 21, 2003, a Pentagon official, interviewed by CNN about the deployment to U.S. forces to the Philippines, in the “second front next to Afghanistan” in “Operation Enduring Freedom - Philippines” (next to Operation Enduring Freedom - Afghanistan) categorically stated that they are coming here for actual combat. He said, “This will be a no holds- barred effort. This is not an exercise.”

And in an article in a U.S. Army journal, MILITARY REVIEW (2003) , Col. David S. Maxwell, writing about Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines, had this to say about the “Mission and Intent” of U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines: “The mission and intent of U.S. Special Operations Forces in Basilan was to conduct unconventional warfare operations in the Philippines thru, by and with the Armed Forces of the Philippines for counterterrorist and counterinsurgency operations capability with initial focus on Basilan.”

Mindanao with its vast natural resources, has not only attracted multinational companies. It has also historically up to the present attracted foreign military forces. This relationship between economic resources, business, profits and U.S. military power is best captured by a New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman when he wrote: “The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist. McDonalds cannot flourish without McDonnell-Douglas the builder of the F-15 warplane. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies is called the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps.”(The Lexus and the Olive Tree, 1999).

### **AFP Acting like Security Guards to U.S. Forces and Facilities**

The other week, there was an interesting news item about the AFP and PNP doing the work of security guards to mining companies in Zambales. But since 2001, the AFP has likewise been acting like security guards to the visiting U.S. forces in the Philippines, including the Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines (JSOTF-P) that is now based inside Camp Navarro at the Southern Command Headquarters.

The repositioning of small U.S. military facilities inside a host country’s army or military camps is a novel idea to hide these facilities from public view and to make it appear that there are no “U.S. operating bases” in the country. Herbert Docena, in two recent excellent studies titled, UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE, and AT THE DOOR OF THE EAST (The Philippines in US Military

Strategy) [1] states that U.S. government documents describe these “U.S. operating bases” here as “Cooperative Security Locations (CLS)” or military installations which have already been established in the Philippines. Docena cites the U.S. Overseas Basing Commission, an official U.S. government agency that reviews U.S. overseas military infrastructure as referring to “forward operating bases” as having been established in the country.

## **Spying and other “Activities” by U.S. Military & Civilian personnel**

U.S. Special Operations Forces in uniform and in civilian clothes have also been seen in actual war zones in Mindanao and other parts of the country. P-3C Orion surveillance planes have been sited in many parts of ARMM and in certain Mindanao provinces, as well as the use of the RQ-1 Predator, the unmanned spyplanes . On Oct. 3, 2005, workers of Puregold Duty Free Shop at Clark found a crashed unmanned spy plane on their roof. The unmanned spy plane had sticker marked, “104 Pointer Spy Plane” and was equipped with camera, recording devices and other sophisticated equipment.

U.S. SOFs or Special Operations Forces who are trained for low intensity warfare operations, are involved in what is referred to as ‘asymmetrical warfare’ in our communities they are trying to infiltrate. They combine public relations, intelligence gathering, civic action, road/infrastructure projects, psychological operations and counterinsurgency to destroy the people’s movements at the grassroots which is struggling for land, ancestral domain and social justice. These ‘activities’ by U.S. military and civilian personnel are under the “humanitarian work’ disguise but are really part of the so-called ‘war on terror’.

## **Why then, are U. S. Military Forces back in Mindanao?**

**1. They are here to engage in covert combat operations, in addition to the mission of “training, assisting, advising and supporting Philippine counterinsurgency operations.”**

Their direct involvement is through covert or clandestine operations. It is an indirect involvement, because U.S. officials are worried that if they directly engage in counter guerrilla operations, they could suffer many casualties and this could have serious political repercussions both here and in the United States. They know that it also fuels Philippine nationalism against foreign forces directly involved in local combat operations. In the March 1, 2003 issue of the Los Angeles Times, an unnamed high ranking Philippine military official in Mindanao, when asked about the political repercussions should U.S. military forces suffer casualties in the course of combat missions in Philippine war zones, said, “We could always cover it up.” Furthermore, the Philippine Constitution bans foreign troops to be involved in local combat operations and the Philippine Supreme Court ruled in 2002 that U.S. troops are not allowed to engage in actual combat, but may only be allowed here for training activities under the VFA. It is noteworthy to note though that the VFA itself only vaguely, allows U.S. visiting forces to engage in unspecified “activities” and the word training is not even mentioned.

**2. Specifically, they are here to engage in high tech and on-the-ground surveillance and spying operations.**

This was why, in a Washington Post interview three years ago, former U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Francis Ricciardone admitted that “a strategic support branch of U.S. intelligence had been formed in the Philippines with 70 U.S. spies working with the Philippine Southern Command

to bring intelligence for the AFP and law-enforcement disposal as part of our ongoing cooperation against terrorism." This is what they call "OPS-INTEL Fusion", where technical surveillance operators link up rural areas with computers, linking up data from the U.S. from outside to profile their target groups, landscape, identities, fingerprints, photos as part of technical intelligence.

The surveys profiled in these technical operations are often operated by either technical staff of Special Operations Forces or civilian personnel of the US National Security Agency, Department of Defense or even FBI. Of course, there is also human intelligence developed on the ground through MEDCAPS or Medical Civic Action Program, medical - dental missions, and other so-called humanitarian missions conducted by U.S. Special Operations Forces who are specialists in counterinsurgency and low intensity conflict warfare. These activities by these U.S. military and civilian operatives also serve not only as a camouflage for covert and clandestine operations, but also as a public relations program crudely disguised as "Project Bayanihan".

### **3. Selling U.S. military hardware with Balikatans as displays of firepower merchandise**

During joint military exercises, U.S. forces are able to display their latest firepower to their Philippine counterparts which they later offer for sale through the U.S. defense loan facility called Foreign Military Sales Credit (FMSC). This is why a close U.S. ally, Australia, was also prodded to forge a similar Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines (modelled after the US-RP VFA) so it could engage in regular joint military exercises and to accelerate the sale of its combat patrol boats which are suited for riverine and coastal warfare and operations.

### **4. Mindanao as laboratory for many COIN operations**

Mindanao has been used as a laboratory for past counter-insurgency campaigns by the AFP and their U.S. military advisers, such as those for vigilante groups in the 1980s and lately Bantay Oplay Laya I which was first tested in ARMM and then later expanded to cover the entire country as an operational plan.

### **5. Using infrastructure projects in the Philippines for U.S. basing facilities for force projection and intervention**

On the other hand, the engineering and construction projects, airfields and wharfs (daungan) structurally designed and with specifications for large vessels being poured by the USAID's Mindanao Assistance Program such as those at General Santos City at Saranggani Bay are meant to provide support for and accommodate the large U.S. naval vessels and combat aircraft for interventionary operations here and abroad. The communities are 'softened' with GEM projects of USAID to be penetrated later for the access of U.S. troops.

The Philippines is once again a springboard for intervention by U.S. military forces especially the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Expeditionary Forces based in Okinawa, Japan. The Marine Expeditionary Forces are the mainstay of U.S. interventionary forces and they are now also regularly trained here during the so-called Balikatan exercises. And of course under the VFA and MLSA, the Philippines has been made once again into a communications, surveillance, training and most important, logistical supply base for U.S. interventionary forces against our neighbors.

We have experienced the impact of U.S. military presence and bases before - the loss of self-determination, human rights and sovereignty, as well as the degradation of culture, values, health and environmental destruction as a host nation. And only a few domestic elites who are subcontracted by the U.S. military actually benefit from the much vaunted economic benefits, for they are the ones owning the base-related businesses. For the U.S., their military presence here

allows them to wage illegal wars and military interventions (locally and against other nations) to advance their corporate and strategic interests especially in Mindanao.

## **The Challenges and What is to be Done?**

In the face of the rabid attempts by the de facto Malacanang government to restore a permanent foreign military presence, let us therefore prepare for the following challenges:

1. Monitor closely U.S. troops movements, activities/secret operations, and expose public violations of the VFA and Philippine laws. We can enlist the quiet assistance of patriotic elements of the military and police as well as sympathetic government officials.
2. Forge and strengthen our solidarity with the American people who oppose war and intervention overseas.
3. Make intolerable/unbearable for U.S. military forces and their civilian spies to stay any longer in Mindanao and the rest of the country.
4. Work for the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement, the Mutual Logistics and Support Agreement, and the Mutual Defense Treaty and , and all other official and secret onerous agreements that mock and compromise the dignity of our country as a sovereign nation.

Today, GIs who are counterinsurgency specialists and American civilian operators in intelligence units such as NSA, DIA, FBI, etc. roam around Mindanao, and even many parts of Luzon. But, is it wrong to ask why U.S. Special Operations Forces especially trained in counterinsurgency and low intensity conflict warfare are involved in MEDCAPS, in so-called humanitarian missions, doing roadbuilding, construction of schoolhouses, introducing internet surfing, etc. Does this not make us wonder? Let us remember, that 100 years ago, when Bud Dajo happened, the American visiting forces had also said they had come to help.

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### **P.S.**

\* Roland G. Simbulan is professor, University of the Philippines & Senior Fellow, Center for People Empowerment in Governance.

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### **Footnotes**

[1] See also on ESSF from Docena: [“An Acceptable Presence”: The New US Basing Structure in the Philippines](#) and [Banging the drums of war](#)