

PRESS RELEASE

‘What are they hiding?’ — Knocking on a US base’s door in Zambo, a citizens’ group is shut out

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ZAMBOANGA CITY (February 18, 2008) — Members of a citizens’ fact-finding mission walked up inside Camp Navarro in Zamboanga City and confirmed the presence of a little known fortified US military base with communication facilities inside the Philippine military camp.

Asserting the right to information and transparency, the Citizens’ Peace Watch knocked on the doors of the base requesting to inspect its premises and to meet with officials of the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P).

The JSOTF-P is the unit of US Special Forces that - unknown to many Filipinos - has been headquartered in the said US military base in this city since 2002 and has been deploying to various parts of Mindanao since then.

The members of the Citizens Peace Watch were told to wait, and they waited, only to be fetched by a Filipino soldier called up by the JSOTF-P to send the group away.

The JSOTF-P later sent a fax to the group saying they don’t have the authority to grant the request for a visit. They claim to have forwarded the request instead to the Armed Forces of the Philippines which is supposedly in the position to decide on the matter.

Such an explanation, however, was contradicted by a Filipino military official whom the group interviewed inside the same camp. Capt. Vicente Enriquez of the Western Mindanao Command had earlier told the group that it was not up to the AFP to approve any requests to visit the US military facilities. Only the US military can decide, Enriquez said.

Even Filipino soldiers, Enriquez stated, are not allowed to enter the military base without the US military’s permission.

“By the Philippine military’s own admission then, what we have here is clearly a US military base that is outside the control of the Philippine military, where the US exercises sovereignty within Philippine territory, and that is off-limits to Filipino citizens,” noted Atty. Corazon Fabros, a member of the Citizens’ Peace Watch.

"The 'visitors' have not only stayed on, they have set up camp in our house and told us - their hosts - to go away," added Fabros.

The US military base stands out and is sealed from the rest of Camp Navarro by walls, concertina wire, and sandbags. The actual size of the area it occupies could not immediately be established from the outside. But communication facilities such as satellite dishes, antenna, and other instruments are visible.

US Marines provided protection for the facility; some workers were seen wore IDs identifying them with DynCorp, a controversial US military contractor.

What other facilities were inside the base is also unknown but the US embassy - responding to an earlier report exposing the granting of a P700-million peso contract to a company providing "base operations support" - had confirmed that they are constructing structures for "medical, logistical, and administrative facilities" for US troops "to eat, sleep, and work."

The Citizens' Peace Watch's requests to various members of the cabinet, military officials, and the US embassy for meetings and for an inspection of US military facilities in the country was effectively rejected, with a Philippine military official saying that such requests would be acted on in "two months or in 2013."

"What exactly are they hiding here? Why all this secrecy?," asked Amabella Carumba of the Mindanao People's Peace Movement, a member of the mission.

The following organizations are represented in the Citizens Peace Watch mission: Alyansa ng Kabataan sa Mindanao para sa Kapayapaan, Anak Mindanao Party List, Balay Rehabilitation Center, Bangsamoro Women's Foundation, Citizen's Coalition for Human Rights, Focus on the Global South, KaisaKa, Kilusan para sa Pambansang Demokrasya, Lanao Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (LAHRA), Mindanao Peoples Caucus, Mindanao Peoples Peace Movement, Mindanao Tri-People Women Forum, Moro Human Rights Center, Muslim Women's Organization, Peace Women Partners, Peacebuilders Community, Pinay Kilos (PINK), Resource Center for People's Development, STOP the War Coalition Philippines, Sumpay Mindanao, Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, Tulong Lupah Sug, Inc

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