

Annual military exercise: US, Philippines open 'scaled down' Balikatan

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MANILA, Philippines — Philippine and American troops on Monday formally opened their annual military exercise which many observers say is a “downgrade” of its past iterations.

Present during the ceremony at Camp Aguinaldo Monday morning were Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, US Ambassador to Manila Sung Kim, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief Eduardo Año and Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Ariel Abanilla, who delivered a speech on behalf of Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo who is arriving from the United States today.

Lt. Gen. Lawrence Nicholson, the commanding officer of the Marine Expeditionary Force based in Japan, is the American exercise director, while Lt. Gen. Oscar Lactao of the Central Command is his Philippine counterpart.

This year's Balikatan exercise focuses on humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, counterterrorism (HADR/CT) and subject matter expert exchanges, according to Philippine and American security and defense officials—a stark deviation from previous bilateral military engagements that involved live fire exercises and scenarios of invasion on the western seaboard of the archipelago.

HADR/CT training focuses on improving responses, effectiveness and speed during natural disasters and other emergency situations, according to officials.

American and Filipino troops will hold community engagement activities and embark on civic assistance projects in Panay, Leyte and Samar and HADR/CT training in Luzon and surrounding areas.

Events scheduled for this year's 33rd Balikatan exercise include HADR/CT staff exercise in Camp Aguinaldo; disaster preparedness training in Fort Magsaysay; civil military activities from the sea in Casiguran, Aurora; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in Upi, Isabela and humanitarian civic action and engineering civic assistance project dedications in Surok, Guiuan, Samar.

This edition of the annual exercise involves 2,800 Filipino soldiers and 2,600 American troops. Around 80 military personnel from Australia and 20 from Japan will also participate in some major training events.

Balikatan this year will also have several observer military contingents from some countries in Southeast Asia.

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P.S.

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