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Publisher *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Peace Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713441298>

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Online publication date: 18 May 2010

To cite this Article Simbulan, Roland G.(2010) 'The Pentagon's Secret War and Facilities in the Philippines', *Peace Review*, 22: 2, 150 – 157

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10402651003751404

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10402651003751404>

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The Pentagon's Secret War and Facilities in the Philippines

ROLAND G. SIMBULAN

The number one rule to remember: Governments lie.
—I.F. Stone

Seventeen years after the historic dismantling of U.S. military bases in the Philippines, when the country's Senate rejected a newly proposed treaty, a controversial document has allowed the restoration of U.S. military presence in the Philippines. This is the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which, for the past ten years, has made the Philippine countryside a free-fire zone for so-called joint military exercises using live ammunition and artillery that have killed, injured, or maimed Filipinos, even children. U.S. troops enter Philippine territory without passports or visas, without clearances from local customs or immigration authorities, without quarantine clearances from host country health authorities, with neither licenses nor registration for driving their vehicles in the country. They have gotten away with murder, attempted murder, rape, harassment of women, maltreatment of Filipinos, and destruction of the Philippine environment. More than 40,000 U.S. troops have entered Philippine territory since the VFA was put in place in 1999. They have entered Philippine soil, territorial waters, and airspace in nuclear armed aircraft carriers, cruise ships, submarines, and military aircraft, in clear violation of the Philippine constitutional prohibition on the entry of nuclear weapons in any part of Philippine territory.

Lesser known to the U.S. and Philippine publics is that from 2002 to the present, the United States has been waging a silent, secret war in the hinterlands of southern Philippines. The mission and objective: war on terror. The legal cover: the Philippines–U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement and the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA). The camouflage for implementation: joint Philippine–U.S. military exercises called *Balikatan* (literally meaning “shoulder-to-shoulder”) and other small-unit exercises. Official denials of the existence of U.S. facilities or bases, as well as involvement of U.S. military forces in direct combat operations by both the U.S. and Philippine

governments, have only been belied by events, inconsistencies, and insider testimonies. Because of these official denials, we could say that what the Pentagon has installed in the Philippines are, in fact, secret bases and facilities, and that their deployed forces consisting mostly of U.S. Special Operations Forces are engaged in a secret war in support of counterinsurgency warfare.

Recent calls from the Philippine Senate come in the wake of revelations provided by resigned Philippine Navy Lt. Senior Grade Nancy Gadian. She not only exposed anomalies in the use of *Balikatan* funds, but also the direct involvement of U.S. soldiers in combat in the country. Gadian has been praised by the mainstream Philippine media and other sectors of Philippine society “for her patriotism of the highest order.” She stood up to her corrupted military superiors whom she had originally exposed for financial corruption of *Balikatan* funds, and has now revealed the existence of officially unacknowledged U.S. “forward operating sites” used by U.S. military forces in the Philippines. Her affidavit and sworn testimony regarding the combat role of U.S. military forces in the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao, is the most telling insider’s account from a whistleblower of what U.S. military forces and U.S. intelligence operatives are actually doing in the Philippines. For many Filipinos, she exemplifies the courage, integrity, and loyalty to the Filipino people’s interests that every Filipino soldier is sworn to uphold.

These revelations have led to the filing of a Senate Resolution on September 1, 2009, which sought the renegotiation of the RP-US Visiting Forces Agreement and its possible abrogation. The Senate Resolution was sponsored by the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago, who also co-chairs the Legislative Oversight Committee on the VFA. The Senate Resolution stated, “It is the sense of the Senate that the Department of Foreign Affairs should seek to renegotiate the VFA with the United States, and in case of denial, should give notice of termination of the VFA.”

It has been ten years since the Philippine–U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement was signed, and eight years since the Philippine–U.S. Mutual Logistics Support Agreement was sealed. During this period, the VFA has been tainted with controversies that have only exposed its loopholes as a one-sided agreement. The Subic Rape Case was the most controversial human rights issue, but, despite the conviction of Lance Corporal Daniel Smith after a full-blown trial, Philippine authorities were denied custody, and the rape victim was eventually forced (or bribed?) into a retraction. In 2002, Sgt. Reggie Lane of the U.S. Army shot a local resident, Buyong-buyong Isnijal, while the latter was sleeping in his house in Basilan. Isnijal was suspected to be an Abu Sayya member, but this has never been proven.

In an interview by the U.S. media on August 21, 2009, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that the “elite 600-troop counterinsurgency operation

deployed in the Philippines,” which is part of the Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines, will remain in the Philippines. The JSOTF-P is “an advanced unit” that serves as “the first line of defense” in the U.S. war on terror in Southeast Asia, and, according to the *New York Times* journalist Thom Shanker quoting Pentagon sources, “conducts civic actions in a simultaneous counterinsurgency effort, with partners in the CIA.” Even if U.S. and Philippine officials have been telling us a different story, what is happening on the ground gives us an idea of the real score: since 2002, thirteen U.S. soldiers have died in the Philippines—ten by accident, and three by bombs and mines in the most conflict-ridden areas of the Philippines.

In 2004, the former JSOTF-P commander, Col. David Maxwell, admitted in *Military Review* that “the JSOTF-P conducts operations under the guise of an exercise.” In his article, Maxwell wrote that the mission of the JSOTF-P in the Philippines “is to conduct unconventional warfare in the Philippines through, by, and with the Armed Forces of the Philippines, to help the Philippine government separate the population and destroy terrorist organizations.” The latest U.S. Field Manual on Unconventional Warfare (FM 3-05.130) issued by the U.S. Army in September 2008 defines “unconventional warfare” as including “guerilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities and assisted recovery.” Maxwell’s article, in fact, implied that the *Balikatan* joint military exercises under the VFA were just a disguise for actual counterterrorist operations. We must also note the important detail that the Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines (and predecessor of the JSOTF-P), which Col. Maxwell commanded then in the Philippines, was the Philippine counterpart of the Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan, which was definitely a combat unit assigned to Afghanistan right after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. By no means were they just a contingent for training or logistics support.

Another former JSOTF-P Commander for the Philippines, Col. Bill Coultrup, revealed “that 20 percent of his work in the Philippines is combat related, while 80 percent is civil military operations.” For the combat missions, these are, “capture and kill missions” of the Special Operations Forces under the JSOTF-P. Maxwell’s and Coultrup’s admissions are corroborated by Philippine Navy Lt. SG Gadian, who, in August 2009, exposed the U.S. participation in combat missions in Mindanao. Lt. Senior Grade Gadian served as the Civil Military Operations Officer and one of the Philippine military planners for the *Balikatan* Exercises. Gadian had served as Officer in Charge of the Civil Military Task Group of *Balikatan 2007* responsible for the administrative, operational, and financial requirements of the joint military exercises, and in this role, had served as liaison officer of the AFP with the JSOTF-P. Gadian, likewise, is the former deputy chief for Civil Military Operations of the Western Mindanao Command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The Western Mindanao Command is a unified AFP command composed of Army,

Air Force, and Philippine Navy units, with operations covering Zamboanga, Sulu, Basilan, Tawi Tawi, and parts of Lanao provinces. This is why Gadian's testimony is all the more significant; it sheds light on a lot of things that have been hidden from the Filipino and American people. It only opens this issue to the fact that there are many activities that have been, and are being, kept hidden by the U.S. and Philippine governments about what U.S. Special Operations Forces are really doing in Mindanao and the Philippines, under the cover of the Visiting Forces Agreement, the *Balikatan* training exercises, and the so-called "humanitarian missions" by U.S. Army Rangers, SEAL teams, and U.S. Special Operations Forces.

In her sworn affidavit and testimony before the Philippine Senate's Legislative Oversight Committee on the Visiting Forces Agreement in August 2009, Gadian exposed the existence of secret U.S. facilities inside Philippine Army bases in Mindanao. Foremost among them is Camp Navarro, the headquarters of the Western Mindanao Command in Zamboanga City. Here the U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force is based, with two permanent structures that are guarded by U.S. Marines, and into which Filipino officers cannot simply enter or have access. This is considered a principal "forward operating base" of U.S. forces in the Philippines, although the U.S. government does not officially acknowledge its existence to the public.

Gadian exposed Camp Malagutay in Barangay Malagutay, Zamboanga City, which includes a training unit of the U.S. JSOTF-P with structures, communications, and administrative facilities. Other bases she has revealed are Camp Andrews Air Base in Sta. Maria, Zamboanga City, where U.S. military forces actively use the airstrip and have based C-12, C-130 aircraft, and Chinook helicopters; Camp General Bautista in Busbus, Jolo, Sulu Province, where U.S. JSOTF have clandestine facilities; and Philippine Navy Station in Batu-Bato, Panglima, Sugala, Tawi Tawi Islands, where U.S. SEAL teams have set up facilities and have stationed a unit. U.S. military forces also have access to practically all camps of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Philippine authorities do not have control over the movements or activities of U.S. military forces, like U.S. Navy SEAL teams for example, nor are they monitored by Philippine officials.

Based on the VFA provisions, "As used in this agreement, 'U.S. personnel' means U.S. military and civilian personnel temporarily in the Philippines in connection with activities approved by the Philippine Government." Many presume that the "U.S. civilian personnel" referred to in the VFA are those from intelligence units of the U.S. government, such as those from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). Other agencies include the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Peace Corps, which specialize in winning "hearts and minds," using

so-called humanitarian or non-lethal aid. Covert action includes unconventional warfare, intelligence operations, and psychological operations (psy-ops) in target areas such as remote communities suspected of being “controlled or influenced by insurgents.” U.S. Army manuals on counterinsurgency, such as the 1975 Guide for the Planning of Counterinsurgency, state that “non-lethal tools” like humanitarian or civic action missions, in the form of medical/dental (MEDCAP) teams purportedly to meet human needs, are meant to penetrate local political infrastructures and achieve the objectives of psychological operations. Their activities provide the fundamental elements in supporting local counterinsurgency operations. It is understood that, as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in the Philippines, “the CIA has sent its elite paramilitary officers from their Special Activities Division to hunt down and kill or capture key terrorist leaders” in the country.

The “activities” of U.S. forces covered by the VFA are neither defined nor specified. Neither does the VFA specify the duration of these activities, nor the number of U.S. military forces allowed at any given time. The activities and U.S. presence are supposed to be “temporary,” but Lt. Gadian states otherwise: “U.S. troops stationed inside Camp Navarro in Zamboanga and other parts of Mindanao total about 500 at each particular time, on a rotating basis of three months each. These troops are stationed in Mindanao even without any Balikatan exercises going on.” Article XVIII Section 25 of the Philippine Constitution prohibits foreign military bases, facilities, or foreign troops “except under a treaty duly concurred in by the Senate.” But the VFA has vaguely allowed temporary visits and activities of U.S. forces that the Philippine Supreme Court has stated should be strictly for joint military exercises or training. No combat role and no installation of military bases or facilities. Nevertheless, without any basing treaty, U.S. military forces are not specifically allowed to install bases or military facilities. They are also not allowed to engage in combat operations in the country. John Gresham, in an article for *Defense Standard*, mentions the involvement of U.S. military forces in the Philippines as a critical part of “low intensity counterinsurgency strategy.” Evidently, low intensity counterinsurgency is the specialty or forte of U.S. Special Operations Forces.

If there is an official claim by the Pentagon that they are in the Philippines merely to provide advisory, intelligence, equipment training, and logistics to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), then that may also be the reason why U.S. Special Operations Forces are “embedded” in combat units of the AFP during their tactical missions. The AFP now largely depends on the intelligence gathering, covert, and psy-war operations provided by the U.S. forces in conflict zones. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) for intelligence are now allowed in many parts of the country without being monitored and without any form of control by local Philippine civilian or military officials.

U.S. intelligence operatives and counterinsurgency specialists in civilian clothes, under the coverage of the VFA, are now seen freely roaming the General Headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in Camp Aguinaldo and other AFP camps. They provide critical battlefield intelligence and communications/logistical support for large- and small-unit local counterinsurgency operations. It is clear that the type of U.S. support given to the AFP is not only at the level of strategic planning, but at the battlefield level, through operational and tactical units involved in combat. That is why the JSOTF-P are in Basilan, Sulu, Zamboanga, even Tawi Tawi, among other provinces where they have been deployed. In Bicol, and other hotspots, U.S. Special Assessment Teams have been sent for surveillance in support of counterinsurgency.

U.S. military forces are integrated as part of local combat units that, at any given time, actually engage in combat operations with the Abu Sayyaf, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), or the New People's Army (NPA). At times, they even operate on their own for so-called "surgical operations," which are covert in nature and will never be acknowledged officially. This is what the Gadian testimony has so clearly exposed. If the U.S. forces under the *Balikatan*/VFA terms are simply conducting training of AFP tactical troops, then they should do so in Nueva Ecija, in Tanay, or where there are AFP training camps—but far from the conflict war zones. Deploying and utilizing the JSOTF in known conflict areas exposes them to actual combat missions. In combat parlance, what the U.S. military forces in Mindanao conflict zones are doing is called C4I (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence).

As for the U.S. involvement in intelligence and counterintelligence operations in support of the AFP, this is done in the field. It can be considered as direct combat intelligence and counterintelligence. Information Operations (IO), a tactical combat concept of the U.S. Army Land Information Warfare Activity, is classified as combat support and a combat activity. It includes intelligence, electronic warfare, operations security, and psychological warfare operations. U.S. combat doctrine classifies information operations as integrated with combat planning and execution of combat operations in unconventional warfare or in an insurgency situation. Surveillance and target acquisition, command, control, and communications for combat missions are all integrated as part of the whole tactical mission, which is to neutralize or kill the enemy target. U.S. manuals now refer to all of these as battlefield operating systems (BOS). They are all part of the conduct of a military operation, using U.S. Army doctrine, which has been adopted by the AFP as its doctrine.

As for the installation of bases and facilities that are prohibited by the Philippine Constitution (as the VFA does not include their construction), Lt. Gadian stated that, among Filipino officers and soldiers, these installations

are referred to as “American camps” in Malagutay, Zamboanga, in Sulu, in Basilan, and as far as Tawi Tawi. The U.S. troops are there 365 days; they have set up their own facilities and camps, and are embedded in Philippine units for combat operations. These facilities are guarded by U.S. Marines, and when a Filipino officer visits them for official purposes, they do not have full access to these U.S. camps and they must surrender their cell phones or cameras to the U.S. sentries. This is the case even if these U.S. facilities are located inside Philippine Army camps, such as those at Camp Navarro and at Malagutay, in Zamboanga City.

The continuous U.S. military presence and deployment—365 days in the Philippines—is not being monitored by Philippine authorities, according to Gadian’s testimony. The Philippine authorities, both civilian and military, have been so lax with the U.S. presence that they have even allowed prostituted women (including teenagers) into the U.S. military facilities, such as in Camp Navarro. “Women come in and out of the U.S. camps especially at night,” Gadian testified.

In its document, “Strengthening U.S. Global Defense Posture” (September 2004), the U.S. Department of Defense now categorizes its overseas basing structures according to the following nomenclature. Main Operating Bases (MOBs) are very large installations and facilities located in the territory of their most reliable allies, with vast infrastructures and even family support facilities. They serve as the hub of military operations with comprehensive facilities. During their heyday as U.S. bases, Subic, Clark, and other U.S. military facilities in the Philippines were of this category, before the 1991 rejection of the U.S. bases treaty by the Philippine Senate. Today, Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan and Camp Humphreys in South Korea are prime examples of MOBs.

Forward Operating Sites (FOS) are smaller bases and facilities, but they store pre-positioned equipment and logistics, and normally host only a small number of troops on a rotational, as opposed to permanent, basis. They support a range of operations such as the forward deployment forces of the U.S. Special Operations Forces. To a certain degree, the U.S. military presence in the Philippines has the qualities of FOS.

Cooperative Security Locations (CSLs) are facilities owned by host governments that would only be used by the United States “for access” in case of actual operations. Although they would be run and maintained by the host nation or even private contractors, they may be used to pre-position logistics support, for special operations, and so on. When expanded, they are easily converted to FOS.

Referred to as “lily pads” by U.S. military literature, both FOS and CSLs support the MOBs without requiring a lot of resources to maintain large

U.S. bases and to disguise themselves against political agitation from the people of the host country. For this reason, they are hidden, constructed on the host country's own army camps to minimize their visibility. Thus, the FOS and CSLs are normally integrated in host country military or civilian facilities. Based on Lt. SG Gadian's sworn testimony, U.S. military presence in the Philippines can easily fall under FOS and CSLs.

Evidently, many high-ranking officers of the Armed Forces of the Philippines are already awed, if not made "high," by hitching rides on modern U.S. military aircraft or helicopters that are being used to ferry U.S. SEALs, Rangers, or Special Operations Forces. For these merry rides, they allow themselves not to be saluted by lower ranking officers of the U.S. Armed Forces in the Philippines. They forget the patriotic spirit that the Philippine Constitution reminds all its men and women in uniform to internalize. But Lt. Gadian has not forgotten her self-respect, both as an officer and as a Filipino who refuses to be degraded or insulted by foreign troops. She modestly states that she has only told the truth about how Philippine sovereignty and self-respect is being trampled like a doormat by foreign troops.

The people of Mindanao, especially in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, are waging a continuous campaign to stop U.S. military intervention—in its covert and overt forms—in the internal conflict, which has only complicated the situation in the second largest island of the Philippines. Lately, the people of the Bicol region in Luzon have scored a tactical victory in the struggle against the restoration of U.S. military forces by forcing the rollback of 6,000 U.S. troops in March 2009, and forcing them to send instead a so-called 100-member U.S. military "humanitarian mission" in the *Balikatan* (BK '09) exercises. BAN *Balikatan* (Bikol Against *Balikatan*) and the SUMABA KA (Speak Out!) or Sorsogon United Movement for Peace Against *Balikatan* have successfully forced the retreat of BK '09 into a defensive position. A people's caravan that traveled in all of Bicolandia's provinces highlighted a strong people's resistance to the VFA, which is being used as a camouflage to U.S. involvement in counterinsurgency and the restoration of *de facto* basing rights in the country.

For most Filipinos, the Visiting Forces Agreement has only highlighted the inequalities in the two agreements: the surrender of Philippine sovereignty to U.S. secret operations and activities as part of combat operations, and the blatant circumvention of the Philippine constitutional policy against foreign military bases, facilities, and foreign troops.

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