

Philippines President Arroyo Stands Up

by Mike Billington

Except for Great Britain and Australia, the two intimate partners of the Bush/Cheney imperial vision, no nation has been more subservient to the pre-emptive war policies in Washington than the Philippines under President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. It was therefore a great shock, and a promise of hope to that desperate nation, that President Arroyo stood up to the would-be Gods of Olympus in Washington, unilaterally withdrawing the token Philippine military force serving in Iraq, more than a month before the scheduled end of their tour of duty on Aug. 20.

The decision followed the kidnapping in Iraq of a Filipino truck driver, who was threatened with beheading if the Philippines did not immediately withdraw its 51 military and police personnel in Iraq.

To understand the impact of this kidnapping in the Philippines, it must be noted that over 7 million Filipino workers have been systematically sent abroad to work, without their families, because the International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity policies so faithfully applied over the past 20 years have not provided jobs for the population. The \$7 billion in foreign remittances from these overseas workers is the lifeblood of the starving economy.

‘Everyman’ Working Abroad

Thus, the kidnap victim in Iraq became known as the “Filipino Everyman,” as the nation prayed together, Muslim and Christian, for his safe release.

Opposition leader Sen. Aquilino Pimentel noted that if the hostage had been killed, the already super-heated political environment in the Philippines would have exploded, against President Arroyo. Pimentel supported the pullout, placing the national interest first.

As expected, the negative response from Washington, and from Australia, has been intense. American Ambassador to the Philippines Frank Ricciardoni, who is on the inside of the neo-conservative faction running the Bush Administration, denounced the decision, then left for Washington for consultations. The Charge d’ Affaires in Manila, Joseph Mussomeli, went on Manila television to say: “I think it’s important to reassess the [U.S.-Philippines] relationship, because a commitment was broken. . . . Even the ones who agree with what the Philippines did, would be worried now that they’d never know when the Philippine government may back down on its word.” Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer

blamed the Philippines and Spain (which pulled its troops out of Iraq earlier) for the continued kidnappings in Iraq, and even for subsequent terrorist threats against the Australian homeland. Prime Minister Howard fully defended this nonsense from his Defense Minister, even when Downer disparagingly accused President Arroyo of acting “like a marshmallow.”

In the face of these attacks, President Arroyo responded: “It won’t take more than three lines to summarize my case, and let me say them. One, I take responsibility. Two, I make no apologies. Three, I stuck to my oath.” She also stressed the importance of the assistance from the Islamic countries—naming Syria, the UAE, and Bahrain in particular.

Other commentators were less diplomatic. Dante Ang of the *Manila Times*, a former Arroyo advisor, noted that the Philippines had been “duped by Bush” into the Iraq war, on false pretenses. “What kind of signal does the United States want to send to the world?” Ang asked; “that it is perfectly alright to go to war based on faulty intelligence? On the contrary, the Philippines sent the right signal. By pulling out of Iraq ahead of schedule, President Arroyo signaled the world that the Philippines is capable of correcting the wrong, by humbling itself, and that it cannot be a party to a dishonorable and unjust war.”

The Economic Disaster

She will need even more courage to stand up to the emerging economic storm, and the probability of economic warfare from Washington in response to the Iraq pullout. Arroyo has just been elected to a new six-year term, but in an election so fraught with charges of fraud that the opposition has called the final declaration of victory “a fatal blow from which [the Philippines] may never recover.” (The Supreme Court on July 28 gave the Arroyo government ten days to respond to the fraud charges filed by the opposition.) Arroyo followed her declaration of victory with an announcement that the devastating national debt crisis had reached the point where even the interest could not be paid. She proposed a tax and austerity program which will please the IMF and the Washington banks, but will only drive the nation deeper into bankruptcy and despair. The Senate may well reject the new tax package and other austerity measures; but even if passed, they will not solve the financial insolvency. As the IMF and its Washington sponsors have shown repeatedly—most recently in the case of Argentina—even those nations which follow every financial and economic dictate from the IMF will be thrown overboard once they’ve been driven into bankruptcy.

Worse still, Arroyo called for the dumping of the Presidential system of government, in favor of a Parliamentary system, thus dispensing with the most positive remnant of American influence in the Philippines. The Constitutional Convention required for such a charter change will also allow the speculators to realize their dearest demand—the elimination of several Constitutional protections which limit foreign

ownership of Philippine enterprises.

The *Wall Street Journal*, the leading voice of the synarchist bankers, signaled their intention in a July 26 editorial, "Putting the World at Risk." President Arroyo, they pontificated, "seems sadly oblivious to the consequences of her folly" in pulling out of Iraq. They pronounced her responsible for all subsequent kidnappings (!), just as "night does indeed follow the day." More ominously, they held Arroyo responsible for the "inept economic policies" which have destroyed the Philippine economy, and driven Filipinos to seek work in Iraq. While she certainly shares that responsibility, it is largely due to her following dictates from the *Wall Street Journal's* backers.

But the subtext is: There is a move to dump the Philippines, Argentina style.

The United States is not likely to cut back on military ties with the Philippines, since the Cheney Administration is intent on using the country as one of its multiple military bases surrounding China. Military training programs in the conflict areas of Mindanao (themselves very controversial, since the Constitution forbids foreign military forces in combat on domestic soil), and large-scale naval exercises around Subic Bay, the former U.S. Naval Base north of Manila, are proceeding as planned. But on the economic front, the United States has postponed a \$20 million commodity loan under U.S. Public Law 480, clearly owing to Washington's anger over the Iraq pullout of Filipino troops. The beneficiaries of the PL-480 program are mainly in the troubled province of Mindanao. Earlier in July, the United States diverted a \$30 million pledge of support for the development of Mindanao, complaining that the Manila government was not moving fast enough in peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Force (MILF) in the region—even though the development fund was a major part of the government's package being offered to the MILF to achieve that peace.

The courage shown by President Arroyo in the pullout from Iraq will have to be sustained and expanded to issues of the economy, to find and implement a sovereign policy which puts the general welfare of the nation before the largely illegitimate foreign debt. Former Malaysia Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad was facing a similar attack on his country in 1997-98, although with very different predicates. Reflecting back on his own courageous decision at that time, in September 1998, to break from IMF orthodoxy by imposing currency controls to defeat the speculative attack on the Malaysian economy, Dr. Mahathir recently said: "We were strongly criticised by the Western countries, but we never bowed to them in any field, because we are responsible to our country, to our people. They are not responsible for our country. To them, if our people suffer, it is not their problem. But we are responsible; we are elected by the people, and it is our responsibility to look after the people's security and well-being." This is the mentality and method required in the Philippines today.

Army Whitewashes Abu Ghraib Torture Scandal

by Carl Osgood

The Defense Department's strategy of burying the Abu Ghraib torture scandal under a blizzard of investigations that will pin the blame for abuse and torture of Iraqi detainees on the "aberrant behavior" of a few soldiers, was put into action on July 22. That was the day the Army released an Inspector General (IG) report on detainee and interrogation operations in Iraq that concluded that the abuses "were unauthorized actions taken by a few individuals," the result of inadequate supervision.

The report was met with incredulity, by several members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, which held a hearing that day; and in the editorial pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The *Post* commented, "The Pentagon cannot be counted on to reliably or thoroughly investigate the prisoner abuse affair." The *Times* concluded that "The only way to learn why innocent Iraqis were tortured by American soldiers is a formal Congressional inquiry, with subpoena power."

The IG report contradicts those of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on conditions in prisons and detention camps run by U.S. forces in Iraq, as well as the investigation of Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba into abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison. It furthermore ignores the impact of a long trail of legal opinions issued by Bush Administration lawyers, beginning a few months after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, that the provisions of the Geneva Conventions do not apply to the so-called war on terrorism, of which the invasion of Iraq has repeatedly been declared a part. A Jan. 25, 2002 memo by White House counsel Alberto Gonzales called it "a new kind of war" which "renders obsolete" and "quaint" some of the provisions of the Geneva Convention. The attitude of the Administration was echoed by Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker, at the July 22 hearing. While not condoning unlawful activity, he told the committee, "People ought to understand how dangerous this enemy is and how dangerous the situation we are in, and folks that are underestimating the challenge we face in this century and today are making a big mistake."

In its February 2004 report, leaked to the *Wall Street Journal* last May, the Red Cross reported, among other things, that "methods of physical and psychological coercion used by the interrogators (at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere) appeared to be part of the standard operating procedures by military intelligence (MI) to obtain confessions and extract information."