

## **Marcos and Arroyo: Hounded by Rights Abuses**

**An increase in U.S. military assistance results in a corresponding increase in the number of human rights violations. During the Marcos dictatorship, the unprecedented amount of military assistance given to the government went to the persecution of people and mounting human rights violations. This is what is happening also under Arroyo.**

**BY DR. RAINER WERNING**

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Dr. Rainer Werning, a lecturer at the Internationale Weiterbildung und Entwicklung (InWent) in Bad Honnef, Germany, interviewed Prof. Bobby Tuazon, a Filipino journalist and a political analyst of the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG). Tuazon, who teaches at the University of the Philippines in Manila, used to chair its political science program and has been an editor of major dailies and a number of independent news services and online news magazines.

Dr. Werning recently held a series of lectures about the European legacy in the Philippines at the Ateneo de Manila University, German Club, Notre Dame University (Cotabato) and University of San Carlos (Cebu) upon the invitation of Goethe-Institut, Manila. He interviewed Tuazon on March 22 this year at The Hague, The Netherlands on the side of the Permanent People's Tribunal (PPT) second session on the Philippines.

The interview is also being published as the Philippines marked the 24th anniversary of the assassination of Marcos critic, Benigno Aquino, Jr. on Aug. 21, 1983. His assassination and the litany of rights abuses during the Marcos dictatorship (1972-1986) have been likened to the current crisis of human rights under President Gloria M. Arroyo.

Excerpts of that interview follow:

**Rainer Werning (RW):** *It's been 21 years since the ouster of the Marcos dictatorship. One may get the impression that things are turning full circle. What, in your interpretation, sets the Marcos dictatorship apart or how would you describe the differences between that regime and the current administration of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo?*

**Bobby Tuazon (BT):** To many Filipinos, especially the human rights groups, the fall of the Marcos dictatorship signified only a transfer of political power from Marcos to the members of the anti-Marcos ruling elite. To say that the fall of the Marcos dictatorship opened the dawn of democracy and the ground fertile for social and economic reform is a fallacy. In fact, the situation has worsened especially now under the government of President Gloria M. Arroyo in terms, for instance, of the

number of human rights violations and also in terms of the culture of impunity that characterizes the gross and systematic violations of human rights.

**RW:** *Among your colleagues in the Philippine press, would you know the current number of journalists who have been killed under the GMA administration since January 2001?*

**BT:** Since January 2001 when Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, then the vice president, ascended to the presidency after the second People Power uprising, the number of journalists killed has risen to more than 50 journalists. This is unprecedented, considering that the Marcos dictatorship that lasted for 14 years had about 30 journalists killed compared to 50 killed under Arroyo's six years. The toll is even comparable to the number of media killings during the previous three presidencies before Arroyo. Under Arroyo's presidency, the Philippines gained the notoriety as a country most dangerous to journalists second only to Iraq.

**RW:** *How do you explain this spate of killings now going on in the Philippines for some years now?*

**BT:** Aside from journalists many more people on a bigger scale have become victims of extra-judicial killings: Today, the number has reached 837 victims. This excludes victims of enforced disappearances, victims of torture, and also tens and thousands of other Filipino civilians who have suffered the brunt of counter-insurgency operations especially in the rural countryside. Alarming of course is the culture of impunity in these killings and this can be traced to the general amnesty decreed by Corazon Aquino after Marcos' ouster giving perpetrators of human rights abuses immunity from prosecution. Coupled with the collapse of the justice system and the executive policy of promoting violators of human rights, the amnesty has practically given today's summary executioners, abductors, and their commanders the licence to commit human rights violations at will. Under Mrs. Arroyo, the spate of killings has been taking place in the context of the counter-insurgency program which is an adjunct to the so-called war against terrorism. Records show that an increase in U.S. military assistance produces a corresponding increase in the number of human rights violations. During the Marcos dictatorship, the unprecedented amount of military assistance given to the government went to the persecution of people and mounting human rights violations. This is what is happening also under Arroyo.

**RW:** *In other words, do you see a direct link between the 9/11 events in the U.S. and the ongoing counter-insurgency in the Philippines?*

**BT:** Well, yes, just moments after 9/11, Mrs. Arroyo immediately supported George Bush's declaration of total war against Afghanistan and later against the so-called axis of evil. She offered the use of Philippine territory for the U.S. borderless war including the entry of American forces in the guise of anti-terrorism training operations, intelligence, logistical support, and other objectives. For this support, the U.S. president pledged an increase in military assistance as well as financial and political support to Mrs. Arroyo.

**RW:** *What is the significance of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement, and similar other agreements in relation to the ongoing counter-insurgency operations in the Philippines?*

**BT:** The war against terrorism launched by Mr. George W. Bush, Jr. and the support extended by Arroyo in opening the Philippines as the second front of the war activated the VFA, an agreement that was signed secretly in 1998 as a bilateral executive agreement and then ratified by the Philippine Senate as a treaty in May 1999. The VFA provides for the entry of U.S. security forces under the guise of war exercises, opens the Philippine territory to logistical and other war-related equipment thus making such operations a clear example of a “temporary and permanent basing facility” in support of the U.S. centers of military projection in East Asia and beyond. One of its worst implications is that under the VFA the Philippines surrenders its sovereign right to subject erring foreign forces under the country’s criminal jurisdiction. Aside from allowing the entry of American forces into the country where they can exercise extra-territorial rights, the VFA violates the constitutional principle which renounces war as an instrument of foreign policy.

The MLSA (Mutual Logistics Support Agreement) allows the entry of forces and also facilities and other logistic support at any point in the Philippines. In the guise of fighting terrorism and under the cover provided by the VFA, one cannot deter the U.S. from even deploying nuclear missiles and other kinds of weapons of mass destruction.

**RW:** *Why do you think the U.S., a former colonial master, wants to stay in the Philippines more than 50 years after its independence from American colonial subjugation?*

**BT:** The U.S. has been in the Philippines for over a century. It colonized the Philippines in 1899 and launched a brutal pacification campaign against the Philippine revolutionaries who had just ended three-century-long Spanish colonial rule through a revolution. That pacification campaign, by the way, led to the genocide of a minimum of 500,000 Filipinos to a maximum of 1.5 million. Since then, the Philippines has been not only a colonial or a neo-colonial outpost of the U.S. but also primarily a military outpost in the present world. In the light of the war against terrorism, the Philippines has become again a vital military outpost for the U.S. with its forces operating in the southern islands and elsewhere. Their operations serve to bolster U.S. military presence in East Asia and Oceania. Coincidentally, U.S. security policy makes the Philippines as an important military outpost in the so-called containment strategy of the U.S. to encircle China. U.S. forces in the Philippines are also trained for future deployment in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other war-torn countries. This makes the Philippines virtually at war with many countries at the risk of inviting retaliatory actions by forces who have become targets of U.S. aggression and pre-emptive operations.

**RW:** *What are the objectives of the so-called Balikatan war maneuvers?*

**BT:** The Balikatan (shoulder-to-shoulder) war exercises involving U.S. and Filipino troops have been full-scale and been serialized since Arroyo became President in 2001. The war exercises, which are held in southern Philippines and other

provinces, coincide with the holding of special operations forces (SOFs) training that involve the elite forces of the U.S. under the Pacific Command and the special forces of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The SOF program provides training in unconventional warfare which is the thrust of counter-insurgency. This training is being conducted purportedly for operations against the Abu Sayyaf and other “terrorist” groups but also against the communist New People’s Army (NPA).

**RW:** *You mean to say the war exercises and special operations trainings are not limited to the southern Philippines, but are held in other parts of the archipelago as well?*

**BT:** The war-exercises have been going on not only in southern Philippines, in Basilan, and other parts of Sulu but also in other areas including Luzon and the Visayas. War maneuvers have been held quite regularly in Central Luzon particularly at the former Clark Airbase and Subic and also in Nueva Ecija. It is likely that the trainings, especially unconventional warfare, have been used to conduct covert operations leading to the assassination and abduction of political activists and other critics of the Arroyo administration.

**RW:** *What is the number of American forces currently stationed in the Philippines?*

**BT:** At any time, whenever a war exercise is held, the number of American forces may range from 500 to even 5,000, reports show. For 2007, war exercises are projected to total 16. What is concealed, however, is the fact that at any time at least 500 U.S. forces stay in the Philippines even in periods where there are no war exercises. The VFA itself is vague how long U.S. troops can stay in the country. An indefinite stay virtually gives the Americans a permanent presence in the country.

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