

Australia turns a blind eye to repression in the Philippines

Edited from a contributed article

The killing of 57 innocent people in the run-up to presidential elections next May has raised serious questions about the direction Australian foreign policy has taken in the region.

The legacy of the Bush presidency in the United States and its draconian 'war on terror' continues to be a dominant mode of operation for reactionary groups and governments, including the Arroyo clique in the Philippines and Australian counterparts.

The Pentagon regards the Philippines as a strategic part of Australian defence and security planning. It requires stability to be effective. Extensive counter-insurgency operations are, therefore, directed toward legitimate opposition figures and trade unions to comply with the objectives. Political expediency has proved little other than the turning of a blind eye to gross human and trade union rights abuses.

Private armies do the dirty work

The whole Mindanao area of the Philippines has major significance for the United States with global defence and security planning. The Pentagon, in recent years, has given high priority for planning air and naval bases in Central and Far South Mindanao as a reliable vantage point for surveillance of the region. Once established, the facilities will enable the US to monitor the movement of more than half the global trade passing through the South China Seas as part of the so-called Global Transformation of Defence and Security.

Since 2001, the US has conducted at least seven military exercises in the Mindanao region and provided millions of dollars for military aid to fund local 'security forces, including the Ampatuan family oligarchy, accused of organising the massacre. The provision of 'inter-operability' with US troops remains a prime consideration for the Pentagon and their liaison with private armies in a privatisation and out-sourcing of state terror. The mode of operation has provided the US with the ability to absolve itself of any seemingly official involvement in atrocities and other irregular behaviour.

The Ampatuans were known to possess their own 500 strong army, which included 200 special armed civilian auxiliary forces, together with police units. While billed as an essential feature of the war against Abu Sayyaf, the paramilitary force was a means of strengthening a localised oligarchy



against political opposition figures and trade union activists.

Australia – the junior partner

It comes, therefore, as no great surprise, to find extensive Australian involvement in the Philippines generally and Mindanao specifically. The country is the second biggest recipient of Australian aid after Papua New Guinea; the finance has reduced the Philippines to a cess-pit of intrigue and conspiracies where political power has taken priority over public sensibility, tolerance and decency.

In 2006, the Howard government announced plans to provide up to 30 small vessels for the Philippine National Army for hostilities with Jemaah Islamiyah rebels in Mindanao. During the period, Australia established strong bi-lateral counter-terrorism cooperation amounting to more than \$10 million

a year. The cooperation included extensive intelligence support and training of 'special forces'. The same 'special forces' are used to conduct repression and human rights abuses against workers, peasants and people standing up for democratic and trade union rights.

Bloody rule of Arroyo

Since Arroyo took office in 2001 nearly a thousand extra-judicial killings, including those of 96 trade union activists, have taken place; the business classes have been kept happy as workers have been subject to repressive means to prevent wages rising above subsistence levels.

To retain tight control of whole regions of the Philippines, President Arroyo allowed localised groups to establish and arm militias funded by public finance and overseas aid. The

Ampatuan ruling elite were able to operate as a para-military force and auxiliary unit of the PNP and national army within the US-planned Oplan Bantay Laya military provision.

The response of the Arroyo administration in the aftermath of the atrocities of 23 November was noted as particularly slow and highlighted by a general lack of enthusiasm on the part of law enforcement agencies. In spite of eye-witness statements, Andal Ampatuan was only arrested after widespread national and international protests.

The coming months may prove to be particularly turbulent in the Philippines with the ever-increasing threat of a military coup and widespread repression. Nevertheless, the Filipino people have a magnificent history of struggle and will resist and defeat the schemes of the corrupt oligarchs and their US patrons.

Filipino workers mistreated by John Holland

The following article is based on a statement issued by the Filipino Workers Rights Campaign. Readers can donate to the CFMEU-Filipino Workers Appeal by credit card - phone (02) 9749 0400, cheque - mail to 10 Railway St, Lidcombe NSW 2141, or online at <http://www.cfmeu-construction-nsw.com>.

Six Filipino workers were sacked in December without reason by the John Holland Group from a major Queensland construction project.

The six Filipinos had paid thousands of dollars to an immigration agent in Manila for jobs in Australia. They were sponsored under the Australian 457

temporary visa program for foreign workers by the John Holland Group for a four year contract. However, they have now been sacked after only two years. A number of the workers worked 10 hours a day, sometimes seven days a week without overtime rates. They were paid substantially less than market rates of pay for the work they performed. They are now destitute and homeless. The Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union (CFMEU) is helping the workers, providing them with shelter in their union complex in Lidcombe in western Sydney. The CFMEU is supporting a campaign for compensation for these sacked workers. Two of their workmates from the

Philippines, Rey Garcia Jardinel and Antonio Julio Guerrero Pili, were killed on the project. In the same accident, six other workers were injured. John Holland Group has no respect for workers' rights. They forced the Filipino workers onto unfair individual contracts.

We are also campaigning with the CFMEU to assist the widows of the two Filipino workers employed by the John Holland Group. Safety on John Holland Group sites is a disgrace. Multinational companies like John Holland should treat all workers, including temporary overseas workers, with dignity. We urge you to support our campaign for workers' rights and justice.