



AMIHAN

National Federation of Peasant Women

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Women Demand the Pull Out of US Troops in Soccksargen¹ and in the whole of Mindanao!

They said, they come only to train Philippine troops through joint military exercises mostly in Mindanao. And so for a few years, they consistently came and left. But in recent years, they came and all indications point to a fact, that they no longer intend to LEAVE. And now they are commonly seen in plush restaurants and resorts – in full battle gear, in different towns and cities.

A team of US troops even mauled a radio reporter in one restaurant in General Santos City. A team was also seen training Filipino soldiers in a shooting range in T'boli town, 20 meters away from a populated community of T'bolis, an indigenous tribe, even as a guideline exists, that to conduct shooting exercises, no civilian community should be within 100 meter radius of the shooting range site.

On February, 2008 US troops in full battle gear were also seen roaming the streets of Koronadal, South Cotabato.

Despite repeated denials that the US troops are doing their rest and recreation activities in different areas in Mindanao, actual testimonies of the people show otherwise.

An interview with a tricycle driver who drove girls to Tropicana Hotel, in General Santos City, a known hotel frequented by US troops, claimed he knew that the troops were hiring girls. Some were young women, students, but most were mature women who plied the clubs and bars of the city. He said he knew their cellphone numbers, and said that they were not interested in what they actually did. Sometimes two girls to one man. As long as they paid him rights it was fine and it was just his livelihood. Sometimes he got 200 pesos for one trip, and days like this was good. The American soldiers wanted girls.

And they were highly guarded. Like they didn't want to be seen at all. Just like now, they were to transfer to East Asia Hotel because there were Korean tourists scheduled to check in at the Tropicana Hotel (excerpts from an interview with the tricycle driver who drove the girls to Tropicana Hotel, General Santos City, November 11, 2007)

To conceal and soften the impact of these military exercises and with no definite time frame, the US military conducts "extensive high profile humanitarian missions (these activities has no definite time frame) such as distribution of relief services, fishing boats, school buildings and medical missions. In the words of Vice Admiral Eric Olson, USN Deputy Commander, US Special Operations Command on 24 April, 2007 before the Senate Armed Services Committee: " Our operations have a Philippine face.... We are assisting the Filipinos with medical programs, and dental programs and veterinary programs and school building programs and those things. So for us, it is a form of counterterrorism and irregular warfare. The people see it largely as a humanitarian assistance mission."

US officials are careful not to name these military exercises and continuing deployment of US troops as "military basing." But the facts speak for themselves. A US base construction unit, the Naval Facilities Engineering Command, has given a P650-million, six month contract to US firms offering "base operations" services. And on September 11, 2007, the Pentagon released a modified order to Global Contingency Services for a \$6.25 million contract to support the operational needs of the US

¹ Refers to the provinces of South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani and the City of General Santos all located in the far south portion of the Mindanao island.

Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines (JSOTF). The contract is scheduled for completion in April, 2008.

Why Socksarsgen?

The US is very much interested in Sarangani Bay which reportedly provides highly suitable ports for naval fleets and underwater vessels. Using Mindanao as a new launching pad, the US can gain a strong foothold over the South China Sea – a location reportedly rich in oil reserves. The Crestone Energy Corporation and Exxon Mobil are two of the 5 oil companies salivating for oil reserves in the South China Sea.

The US has positioned itself in the Philippines through military exercises to protect the sea lanes where 50% of all trade pass through. Another strategic sea trade route between Asia, US and other parts of the globe in Southeast Asia is the Malacca Strait. Unfortunately, this is bordered by Malaysia and Indonesia – two Muslim countries that are critical of the US policies.

The presence of the US troops through military exercise and other access agreements with the Philippines are also designed to protect the economic interests of the US and other foreign corporations in Mindanao.

Dolefil and US transnational companies in agribusiness

The Cotabato plains which used to be the “food basket” of Mindanao, producing rice and corn has now been converted into one big plantation owned and controlled mainly by US and Japanese transnational corporations. The biggest and the most exploitative is Dole Philippines of the Murdock Conglomerate which now controls at least 32,000 hectares of prime agricultural lands planted to export crops: 18,000 hectares pineapple in the towns of Polomolok and Tupi; more than a thousand hectares of fast expanding banana plantation in the towns of North Cotabato and about 3,000 hectares asparagus in South Cotabato. In cohorts with big land owning families like Danding Cojuangco, Alcantara-Dominguez, Lorenzo, Gutianon, Chiongbian, Lucio Tan and the likes, the US and other transnational companies have now arrogated for themselves the rich agricultural plains of south central Mindanao for their export crop production. Following the opening of new markets and with the onslaught of globalization, more and more peasants and lumad lands have fallen into the hands of these rapacious landlords and their foreign partners. They have even used the government’s Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA) and the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP) as instruments to facilitate their so-called “legal land grabbing.”

Second Biggest gold-copper deposit in Asia

The current biggest threat to the people’s patrimony is large scale mining in the triboundary of Sultan Kudarat, Davao del Sur and South Cotabato which holds the second biggest gold-ore deposits in Asia. The mining concession (formerly awarded to Western Mining Corporation is now owned and operated by the multinational Swiss company Xstrata plc in conjunction with Sagittarius mines, Inc. a local company. Xstrata which is the number 5 biggest mining company in the world has been granted a 50 year Financial and Technical Assistance Agreement (FTAA) by the Arroyo government (renewable for another 50 years) to exploit all the minerals in the 23,000 hectares in the tri-boundary of South central Mindanao.

Fishing and Fisheries Resources

The rich fishing grounds and fisheries resources is likewise a huge magnet for corporations to operate in Socksarsgen. Japan has been pushing for the ratification of the Philippine Senate of the controversial Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) which aims to further exploit our resources, particularly tuna and the fishing industry, create favorable trade agreements for itself.

We want a STOP to the rapacious plunder and exploitation of our natural resources by US TNCs and other foreign corporations!

We do not want a repeat of the experiences of Subic and Angeles where women and children were bought as commodities, for the sexual gratification of US soldiers, and worse sexually violated with impunity.

We want the US Troops OUT of Socskargen and the whole of Mindanao!

Signed:

Virginia Maraganas
Chairperson
BUGAS (Babaye sa Uma Gidaug-daug Andam sa Pagbarug)
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Lorna Mora
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Carmen Buena
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OUT NOW - Socskargen²

² OUT NOW-Socskargen is a multisectoral alliance of people's organizations in South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani and General Santos City, against the continued stay of US Troops in Mindanao.