

US troops in Sulu: has the Wood Brigade returned?

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Rising just 700 meters high from the interior but visible from most parts of the island, the mountain called Bud Dahu looms like a distant memory over the island of Sulu in the southern Philippines. Once an active volcano, Bud Dahu's peak is now so over-crowded with soaring trees of jackfruit, mangosteen and other tropical fruits you could hardly see the sky; bamboos, ferns, and shrubs have invaded every inch of its extremely fertile soil; the vegetation is so lush and so thick that it is almost impossible to walk through from rim to rim. It is as though nature has been trying its best to hide the past beneath the foliage.

It is unlikely that the American soldiers will pay a visit to Bud Dahu's peak. This month, about 250 more of them will join an undetermined number of GIs who have been in the island as early as February last year. The new batch is part of the more than 5,500 US soldiers who are coming to the Philippines in the latest and largest batch of the continuing and uninterrupted deployment of US troops to the country since the global "war against terror" was launched after September 11, 2001.

It is not clear what they have come to Sulu for. President George Bush has said that the Philippines, along with Iraq and Afghanistan, is a front in the "war against terror" and other US officials have repeatedly called the country "a kind of Afghanistan east." Indeed, the mountains of Sulu is said to be where the remnants of the Abu Sayyaf group, tagged by Washington as a "terrorist" organization with supposed ties to al-Qaeda, have fled. Seen more by locals less as a branch of a "global Islamic terrorist network" and more as the fringe of a local secessionist movement, the Abu Sayyaf - though isolated and decimated - remains, in the words of National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales, "by far the most dangerous group in the Philippines."

But the way Filipino government and military officials explain it, it's as though it were just a coincidence that the US troops are coming to where the Abu Sayyaf is. According to official pronouncements, US troops are coming only to help: to train Filipino soldiers, conduct medical missions, build schools, and even give veterinary services to pets. Despite being sent to actual conflict areas with real, living enemies they are authorized to shoot in case they're fired at, the US troops have not come to do what soldiers do: to fight.

And yet, in Sulu, people we spoke with claim that the Americans are doing just that - and not against the Abu Sayyaf, but against the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the still popular and widely supported separatist movement that settled for autonomy under the central government in 1996.

The alleged involvement of US troops in combat happened in November last year when the Philippine military launched offensives against enemies they branded as Abu Sayyaf members. Those who were being bombarded with 1,000-pound bombs, however, claimed they were actually members of the MNLF and had nothing to do with the Abu Sayyaf.

In the middle of all the action, witnesses claim that US troops were in the vicinity of the fighting, riding with Filipino soldiers in their trucks, helping them launch bombs, clear landmines, and operate spy planes. Four US soldiers were allegedly killed, although this cannot be verified independently unless the US comes out with a complete and uncensored list of all its casualties.

US and Philippine military officials do not deny that they were present in Sulu at the time of the fighting but they do deny that they were doing anything related to actual combat. Some officials even corroborate some of the witnesses' claims. General Nehemias Pajarito, the highest ranking military official in the island who led the November operations, confirms that the US soldiers were indeed where they were seen - at the vicinity of the fighting - but only to repair damaged water pipes - while war was raging. Another Filipino colonel who refused to be named admitted that they indeed asked Americans for "technical assistance" in removing landmines. A spy plane, which locals say has been hovering over the island for months now and which was also seen at the time of the operations - was recently recovered by a farmer after it crashed.

The allegations are explosive enough. Simply put, people in Sulu are saying that the US and Philippine governments are not telling the truth when they say the American soldiers are here to take care of pets. Still, the charges have not caught fire; for the government, it's too preposterous to suggest that troops who are sent to combat zones will actually engage in combat.

And yet, back when US troops were first supposed to come to Sulu in February 2003, they made no secret of their mission. Pentagon was supposedly worried about the possibility of US troops suffering casualties - something they wouldn't be able to explain to the public if they were just playing "war games." In case that happened, Filipino counterparts reportedly asked US officials to lie to the public, according to the Los Angeles Times. "We could always cover it up," Filipino officials reportedly told them.

In the end, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld chose to say: "Whatever it is we do, we describe in language that is consistent

with how we do things. And we do not tend to train people in combat. "Another US defense official was even more descriptive: "This is not an exercise, this will be a no-holds-barred effort."

Though it was eventually called off following a public outcry in Manila, the US government never took back its characterization of the planned deployment as an actual combat operation. Since then, certain sections in Washington, including the highest-ranking US military officers such as then chair of the joint chiefs of staff Richard Myers and Pacific Command commander Admiral Thomas Fargo, have been agitating for a "longer and more intense mission" in the country.

General Myers has since included the Philippines in the list of "emerging targets for preemptive war" of a new US military unit authorized to conduct clandestine operations abroad. Seymour Hersh, the prominent investigative journalist, has written about a presidential order that allows the Pentagon "to operate unilaterally in a number of countries where there is a perception of a clear and evident terrorist threat" - even if their governments have been cooperating in the "war against terror."

It is not clear whether the US troops were aware that the forces their Filipino counterparts were battling with - while they were repairing water pumps - were members of the MNLF. It is also not yet clear what they intend to gain by joining the fight against them. But one thing is unmistakable in Sulu: US deployment is surely not helping push the island away from the edge of full-scale war. With the recent military offensives against the MNLF, with successive unexplained killings of civilians gripping the towns, and with all the spy planes, helicopters, and naval ships coming and going, residents of Sulu say that it feels like the full-scale war of the 1970s all over again - only this time, with GIs around.

And as American soldiers roam around Sulu, one mountain seems to be on most people's minds and lips: Bud Dahu. Exactly a century ago this March, entire families in the island packed all their belongings and climbed to the crater of the mountain to escape from and resist the rule of the American colonizers in the towns. A United States military brigade, since remembered as the Wood Brigade after its commander General Leonard Wood, charged up the mountain's slopes and surrounded the rim. Supported by "Filipino" troops from the north, they volleyed cannons down into the crater for four continuous days.

When the dust settled on the mountain peak, between 600 to 900 Moros lay dead. No one was spared - "not even a baby alive to cry for its dead mother," wrote the American novelist Mark Twain. According to locals, hundreds of the dead were left and buried on the crater. The Americans would go on to kill about 4,000 more in similar circumstances in two other mountains.

When they first came here, the Americans also said that they had only come to help.

P.S.

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