



# VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

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THE  
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FOUNDATION

Founded in 1985, the Karibu Foundation is an independent foundation that supports voices from the Global South who provide alternatives to the dominant paradigms of power, distribution, and development.

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The IBON Foundation is a non-profit research, education and information-development institution with programs in research, education and advocacy based in the Philippines.



The Ecumenical Bishops Forum is a fellowship of Bishops who support struggles for justice, human rights, and sustainable peace.

## US-Philippines Relations: Resurgent Neocolonialism

A presentation from the Ecumenical Bishops Forum's international conference on US intervention in the affairs of sovereign nations

*In January 2014, participants from around the world met in Davao City, the Philippines for an international conference on "US Intervention in the Affairs of Sovereign Nations: Ecumenical-Theological Perspectives." The conference was coordinated by the Ecumenical Bishops Forum (EBF), a fellowship of Filipino bishops who have a common goal of supporting the struggle of the people for genuine freedom, justice, human rights, and sustainable peace. The aim of the conference was to call attention to the serious harm that is being caused to people and environment in the Philippines by the activities of the US military and US-linked trans-national corporations.*

*In this month's "Voices from the South," Sonny Africa, Executive Director of the IBON Foundation in the Philippines, discusses the new proposed agreements between the US and the Philippines for greater US military presence in the country and the adverse impacts it will have on the sovereignty and dignity of the Filipino people. After nearly fifty years of U.S. colonial presence in the Philippines (1898 to 1946), such a shift in military presence represents a resurgent neocolonialism presence in the country.*

*The article is based on a presentation given by the author at the EBF Conference in Davao City.*

**By: Sonny Africa**

*Executive Director, IBON Foundation*



The Philippine government is on the brink of reaching a new agreement with the United States (US) on an even greater US military presence in the country. If sealed, the pact will only be the latest

step in the country's steady regression into greater neocolonialism over the past 12 years.

Negotiations on a framework agreement on "increased rotational presence/enhanced defence cooperation" started in August 2013 and are expected to conclude before or around the Philippine visit of US Pres. Barack Obama in April 2014. The larger US military presence is fully supported by the Philippine government but legitimizing this is made difficult by a Constitutional ban on foreign military

Photo: "US TROOPS - OUT NOW!"

Protesters outside of the American Embassy in Manila, Feb 25th 2014

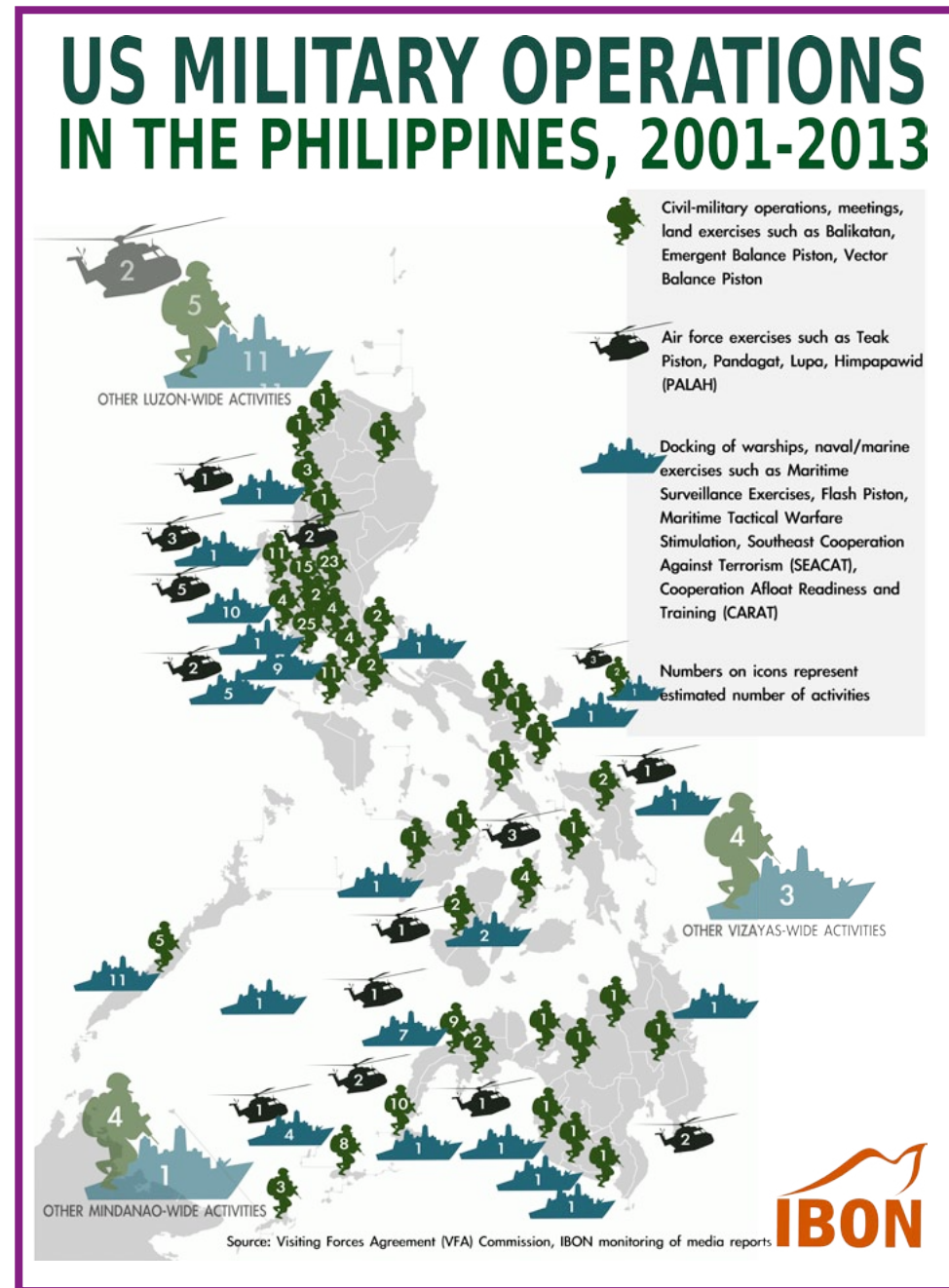
Credit: Associated-Press

bases and nuclear weapons in the country and contentious issues of sovereignty. There is also a degree of public opposition stemming from a record of abuses by US soldiers during and after the era of formal US bases in the country.

The agreement is in line with the military aspect of the US's declared 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to the Asia-Pacific due to the region's growing strategic economic and geopolitical significance. The region has seven of the world's 10 largest standing militaries, five of the world's eight nuclear powers, and the four countries with the world's largest and most advanced navies. The US is particularly concerned about an increasingly assertive China which counts among all these.

The region is of great economic consequence. It contains the world's three largest economies and the three largest countries by population. One-third of the world's bulk cargo and two-thirds of its oil shipments transits through the region which has nine of the world's 10 largest ports; this is more trade than passes through the Atlantic. The Asia-Pacific is projected to account for up to 40-50 percent of global growth until 2030. The US has a significant stake and is the region's biggest foreign investor with US\$622 billion in 2012.

These are objective conditions for heightened US attention. The Pentagon has declared that 60 percent of overseas US military naval and air assets will be shifted to the region by 2020. This includes carrier strike groups, submarines, aircraft



and bombers including forces for projecting power across and beyond the Indo-Pacific. The Philippines is militarily strategic – a US military response from the country to any-

where in East Asia takes less than a fifth of the time as that from the US mainland.

As it is the Philippines already has the second largest US military pres-



ence in East Asia and the Pacific, Some 500-1,000 special forces personnel have been continuously present solely in the southern island of Mindanao since January 2002. There are also up to 6,500 more troops who come annually for various military exercises across the country.

The Philippine government has already started playing its role in US manoeuvring to contain China and justified the pact as bolstering its defence against the territorial threat of China in disputed areas of the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea.

The Philippines is arguably the focal point of the US “rebalance” to the region. It is the most militarily strategic country in Southeast Asia. Its government and military is also historically, as a former colony, and currently very friendly to the US. It is one of the largest recipients of US aid in Southeast Asia – at US\$1.5 billion just over the last decade 2005-2014, of which US\$521 million is overtly military and security aid. This is despite the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and its paramilitary arms being involved in thousands of human rights violations over that period. Aid flows have been increasing since the Philippines was declared a front-line state of the US in its self-declared “war on terrorism” in 2001 and a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2003.

US intervention in domestic affairs goes far beyond the military aspect. In the 2000s the US government directly crafted domestic economic policy through a US-AID project which developed “satellite offices” in 11 key government and quasi-government agencies. The project produced at least ten major economic laws.

This was followed by the Partnership for Growth (PFG) initiative in 2011, where the governments of US and Philippine analysed supposed constraints to economic

growth, drew up economic policy solutions, and jointly implemented these. It is probable that among the results of this process is the current push to amend the Philippine Constitution, which the US government has long scored for what it sees as restrictive provisions on foreign investment, and to join the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) multilateral trade deal.

Many of the US government-led activities in the country are presented as extensive bilateral “democracy assistance” in electoral processes, good governance practices, anti-corruption reforms, building the legal system, assisting law enforcement agencies, promoting a free press, local governance and decentralization. The military presence is being packaged as enabling quicker disaster response and humanitarian work (for situations like Hypertyphoon Yolanda), but this only sugar coats the underlying military and business objectives.

The US colonial period lasted from 1898 to 1946. For a brief moment after the closure of the US bases in the Philippines in 1992 it seemed possible that the country was freeing itself from its neocolonial yoke. Recent years including under the current Aquino administration however indicates a resurgent neocolonialism and the persistent subordination and underdevelopment for the Filipino people that inevitably accompanies this. ■

### ***More information:***

To read the joint statement of the the EBF Conference on US Intervention in the Affairs of Sovereign Nations, “Stand Firm on the Principles of Sovereignty,” visit:

<http://karibu.no/viewstories.asp?id=231>

