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Stark message of the mutiny

Is the Philippine government bombing its own people for dollars?

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[The Guardian](#)

What does it take to become a major news story in the summer of Arnie and Kobe, Ben and Jen? A lot, as a group of young Philippine soldiers discovered recently. On July 27, 300 soldiers rigged a giant Manila shopping mall with C-4 explosives, accused one of Washington's closest allies of blowing up its own buildings to attract US military dollars - and still barely managed to make the international news.

That's our loss, because in the wake of the Marriott bombing in Jakarta and newly leaked intelligence reports claiming that the September 11 attacks were hatched in Manila, it looks like south-east Asia is about to become the next major front in Washington's war on terror.

The Philippines and Indonesia may have missed the cut for the axis of evil, but the two countries do offer Washington something Iran and North Korea do not: US-friendly governments willing to help the Pentagon secure an easy win. Both the Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and the Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri have embraced Bush's crusade as the perfect cover for their brutal cleansing of separatist movements from resource-rich regions - Mindanao in the Philippines, Aceh in Indonesia.

The Philippine government has already reaped a bonanza from its status as Washington's favoured terror-fighting ally in Asia. US military aid increased from \$2m (£1.25m) in 2001 to \$80m a year, while US soldiers and special forces flooded into Mindanao to launch offensives against Abu Sayyaf, a group the White House claims has links to al-Qaida.

This went on until mid-February, when the US-Philippine alliance suffered a major setback. On the eve of a new joint military operation involving more than 3,000 US soldiers, a Pentagon spokesperson told reporters that US troops in the Philippines would "actively participate" in combat - a deviation from the Arroyo administration's line that the soldiers were only conducting training.

The difference is significant. A clause in the Philippine constitution bans combat by foreign soldiers on its soil, a

safeguard against a return of the sprawling US military bases that were banished from the Philippines in 1992. The public outcry against the February announcement was so strong that the entire operation had to be called off and future joint operations suspended.

In the six months since, while all eyes have been on Iraq, there has been a leap in terrorist bombings in Mindanao. Now, post-mutiny, the question is: who was responsible for these? The government blames the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The mutinous soldiers point the finger back at the military and the government, saying that by inflating the terrorist threat, they are rebuilding the justification for more US aid and intervention.

The soldiers claim that:

- Senior military officials, in collusion with the Arroyo regime, carried out last March's bombing of the airport in the southern city of Davao, as well as several other attacks. Thirty-eight people were killed in the bombings. The leader of the mutiny, Lieutenant Antonio Trillanes, claims to have "hundreds" of witnesses who can testify to the plot.

- The army has fuelled terrorism in Mindanao by selling weapons and ammunition to the very rebel forces the young soldiers were sent to fight.

- Members of the military and police helped prisoners convicted of terrorist crimes escape from jail. The "final validation", according to Trillanes, was Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi's July 14 escape from a heavily guarded Manila prison. Al-Ghozi is a notorious bomb-maker with Jemaah Islamiah, which was linked to both the Bali and Marriott attacks.

- The government was on the verge of staging a new string of bombings to justify declaring martial law.

Arroyo denies the allegations and accuses the soldiers of being pawns of her unscrupulous political opponents. The mutineers insist they were not trying to seize power but only wanted to expose a top-level conspiracy. When Arroyo promised to launch a full investigation into the allegations, the mutiny ended without violence.

Though the soldiers' tactics were widely condemned in the Philippines, there was widespread recognition in the press, and even inside the military, that their claims were "valid and legitimate", as retired navy captain Danilo Vizmanos put it to me.

Local newspaper reports described the army's selling of weapons to rebels as "an open secret" and "common knowledge". General Narciso Abaya, the chief of staff of the Philippine armed forces, conceded that there is "graft and

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corruption at all levels". And the police have admitted that al-Ghozi couldn't have escaped from his cell without help from someone on the inside. Most significant, Victor Corpus, the chief of army intelligence, resigned, though he denies any role in the Davao bombings.

Besides, the soldiers were not the first to accuse the Philippine government of bombing its own people. Days before the mutiny, a coalition of church groups, lawyers and NGOs launched a "fact-finding mission" to investigate persistent rumours that the state was involved in the Davao explosions. It is also investigating the possible involvement of US intelligence agencies.

These suspicions stem from a bizarre incident on May 16 2002, in Davao. Michael Meiring, a US citizen, allegedly detonated explosives in his hotel room, injuring himself badly. While recovering in hospital, Meiring was whisked away by two men - who witnesses say identified themselves as FBI agents - and flown to the US. Local officials have demanded that Meiring return to face charges, to little effect. BusinessWorld, a leading Philippine newspaper, has published articles openly accusing Meiring of being a CIA agent involved in covert operations "to justify the stationing of American troops and bases in Mindanao".

Yet the Meiring affair has never been reported in the US press. And the mutinous soldiers' incredible allegations were no more than a one-day story. Maybe it just seemed too outlandish: an out-of-control government fanning the flames of terrorism to pump up its military budget, hold on to power and violate civil liberties. Why would Americans be interested in something like that?

- A version of this article appears in the Nation. Naomi Klein's most recent book is Fences and Windows

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