

U.S. Military Bases and The Derogation of Women's Rights in the Philippines

Do People in the Philippines Appreciate What the U.S. Does for (to) Them?

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Women's Organizing for Peace in the Philippines

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Greetings of peace to all especially to the courageous and joyous women who are gathered here today calling for Peace and Reunification of Korea! Let me also convey to you the warm wishes of solidarity from GABRIELA Philippines and the International Women's Alliance (IWA), a global alliance of grassroots women's organizations.

I am honored to speak before you today to share the experiences of Filipino women in organizing for peace in my country. I have been with the parliament of the state as representative of the Gabriela Women's Party to the Philippine Congress for nine years and in the parliament of the streets as a feminist activist of the GABRIELA Women's Coalition for half my lifetime. I will talk about the work of peace building of my organization, GABRIELA.

Having been colonized by Spain for 300 years, by the US for more than 40 years and occupied by Japan during WWII, the Filipino people have a long history of struggle for peace that is inextricably linked to the struggle for national sovereignty, social justice and genuine freedom. The Filipino women were at the forefront of these struggles and played important and leading roles.

Despite formal independence in 1946, our country remains a neo-colony of the US. The US still dominates our economic, political, and socio-cultural life. One of the most telling manifestations of such control was the US occupation for almost a century of our prime lands to maintain its military facilities including two of its largest military bases outside its territory – the Subic Bay Naval base and the Clark Air base. These bases served as springboard for US interventionist war in Korea, Vietnam and the Middle East.

The sites of these US bases became haven for the 'rest and recreation' industry where women and children's bodies were sold in prostitution for a price of a hamburger; where women were viewed as mere sex objects and the culture of violence against women pervaded; and where thousands of Amer-Asian children were left impoverished and abandoned by their American fathers.

In addition to these social costs, the US has not owned up responsibility for cleaning up the toxic wastes left after the bases were removed in 1991 and for the health hazards these

wastes continue to pose to the people in the community. And like in the camp towns in South Korea, innumerable cases of crimes including murder, rape and sexual abuse were committed with impunity by US troops with many of these cases not even reaching the courts.

These compelling realities are the very reasons why we oppose the presence of US military bases and troops in the Philippines and beyond. We believe that there can never be long and lasting peace as long as we are under the control of the US or any other foreign power. And we cannot have a free and sovereign state with the presence of foreign troops on our land.

The women brought into the anti-bases argument the discourse on the social costs of the bases and why the removal of the US bases and troops is important for women. GABRIELA, the biggest progressive alliance of women's organizations in the Philippines which was organized in 1984 at the height of the anti-Marcos dictatorship movement brought the issue of prostitution of women around the base areas and the puppetry of the dictator to US interests. Marcos was deposed in a people power that became a model to the world. The Philippines subsequently passed the 1987 Constitution with clear provisions against the presence of foreign troops, bases and nuclear weapons on our soil.

The historic Senate rejection of a new treaty that would extend the Military Bases Agreement with the United States beyond 1991 was another victory for women. Leading up to the Senate vote, women conducted massive information campaigns, held pickets, demonstrations, caravans, die-ins, lobby work and networking both locally and internationally to pressure the government to reject the treaty. The efforts of the women and the broad anti-bases movement finally led to the termination of the bases agreement.

But our struggle continues. In flagrant violation of our Constitution, the US in collusion with the Philippine government was able to reassert its military presence through the Visiting Forces Agreement of 1998 and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement of 2014, agreements that are more dangerous than the previous agreement they replaced. These agreements allow the US military free and unhampered use of virtually the entire Philippines for its basing needs and for rapid forward deployment of its forces as part of the US pivot to Asia policy. This heightening US military presence is also happening here in South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Australia among others.

Filipino women at the grassroots – the rural and indigenous women, workers, youth and students, housewives, professionals, religious and other sectors continue to organize. The women are aware that massive poverty and hunger and the marginalization, discrimination and violence against women are intensified by the policies of imperialist globalization which is carried out, propped up and sustained by militarization and war.

Furthermore, the policy of militarization and war diverts the much needed funds and resources that could have been used to create jobs for the 10 million unemployed and underemployed; to build homes for the 22 million homeless; to build school buildings, day care centers for children and crisis centers for women, and hospitals and health clinics in remote villages; to provide free education, health and reproductive care and other social services for the poor; and to develop our agriculture and industry.

We build long and lasting peace that is based on social justice and where women participate

in the process and not the peace based on silencing the poor and powerless that militarist and war mongers do.

In conclusion, let me take this opportunity to convey the Filipino women's solidarity with the women of Korea. Our fathers and brothers were also sent to fight the Korean War and our grandmothers and mothers were also victims and survivors as comfort women during the Japanese occupation. We share this memory of war and women's exploitation, oppression and abuse. But today we also affirm our collective memory of struggle against all these as we persist and continue to work for peace in both our countries, in our Asian region and the world.

Liza Maza is a former Congresswoman representing Gabriela Women's Party to the Philippine House of Representatives, and Chairperson of the International Women's Alliance (IWA). She has been a key part of GABRIELA's Purple Rose Campaign, a global campaign to end sex trafficking in Filipino women and children.

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