

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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View From Zamboanga

- I. Southcom
- II. The Third Air Division
- III. The Sixth Naval District

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Dear Peter,

For my last newsletter this year from the Philippines, I travelled south to "the city of flowers"--Zamboanga City. I was searching for an incisive report on the military written by a colonel in Zamboanga that I hoped to include as a coda to this newsletter. I found neither the colonel nor his report, he had recently been sent abroad to study. But I did find a charming city, known for its beauty, strong muslim culture, and rough gun-play in the streets.

Zamboanga City is located at the far end of the pennisula bearing its name where a spiny chain of mountains plunges into the Sulu Sea. My visit to Zamboanga City (pop. 400,000) was sandwiched between two holidays that further slowed Zamboanga's leisurely pace: All Saints' Day, when Catholics visit the graves of their departed, and Mauluduan Nabi, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammed. Muslims make up 36% of the population in the Zamboanga pennisula and are connected in Manila's popular imagination with fierce separatist guerrillas and smuggling.

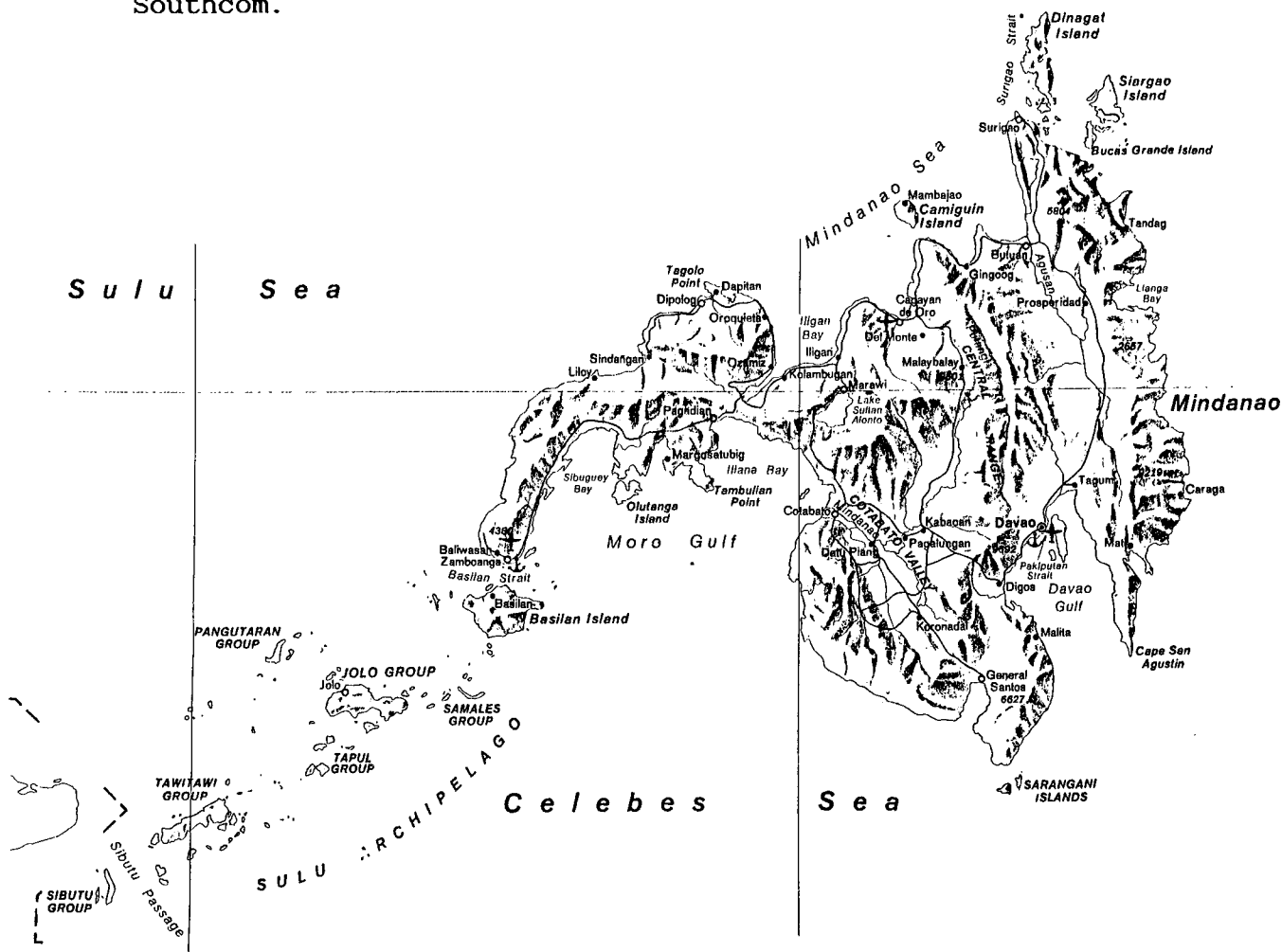
The economy thrives on smuggling and its legal equivalent, the so-called "barter trade." Throughout my stay, whether watching ships unload cargo or talking with local officials, the refrain from the Kipling poem about turning a blind eye to contraband kept running through my head: "Them's that asks no questions is never told a lie. So watch the wall my darling as the gentlemen go by." Surprisingly, in the past, no one gentleman or gentlewoman controlled smuggling here, although it would have been an ideal source for building a political dynasty. One of Zamboanga's wealthiest citizens, Congresswoman Maria Lobregat, built her fortune primarily from the coconut

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monopoly granted to her by former President Marcos. Today, however, the free-wheeling system of the old days is being challenged by "outsiders" from Manila who have moved in to control both the legal and illegal trade. Perhaps the most prominent, and resented, of these "outsiders" is Margarita "Ting Ting" Cojaunco, the sister-in-law of President Aquino.

Zamboanga City also hosts the headquarters of the Philippine military for all of Mindanao called Southern Command or Southcom.



I. Southcom

Southcom coordinates 38 Philippine Army combat battalions and two Marine brigades, for a total of 44 battalions. With 40% of the total armed forces spread over an area larger than the state of Maine (almost 95,000 square kilometers), Southcom is the Philippines' largest single command. It is headed by Maj. Gen. Cesar Tapia, a highly regarded commander who, unfortunately for me, stayed in Manila for the week after All Saints' Day.

The following description of Southcom was gathered from a conversation with the Deputy Commander, Brig. Gen. Arturo Asuncion, and his staff on my first evening in Zamboanga. Like his boss who almost became Army commander, Gen. Asuncion could be called a "Marcos general." Soon after joining the Marines in 1962, Gen. Asuncion served as President Marcos' close-in security officer for three years and was later promoted to star rank just before February 1986. Under the new administration he was relieved of his command but eventually wound up back at Southcom.

Southcom's control over operations has been strengthened by two developments. The consolidation of Mindanao's four separate regional commands under Southcom has eliminated rivalry between regional commanders and removed an extra layer from the military bureaucracy. Parallel to this, Southcom also has more authority vis a vis headquarters in Manila. In other areas, a familiar complaint is that GHQ, and specifically Chief of Staff Gen. Fidel Ramos, micro-manages operations in the field. But according to Gen. Asuncion, "GHQ doesn't poke into our affairs."

Southcom's affairs are complicated by the two insurgencies here: the factionalized Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the communist-led New People's Army (NPA). The two are mirror images of each other. The MNLF is heavily-armed, but has a weak political base; the NPA is under-armed with a highly developed political base. The two groups live in relatively peaceful coexistence with each generally keeping to its own area.

The three factions of the MNLF can field 18,000 armed fighters, yet they are weakened by personal, regional, and political divisions with some factions pushing for autonomy and others for a separate state. The strongest and most militant faction is under Nur Misurai with some 10,000 armed regulars in the Zamboanga peninsula. There are scattered encounters between the MNLF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) despite the present cease-fire. But the MNLF factions simply do not have the fighting spirit they once had in the early 1970's when united, they took on the AFP in costly, conventional battles.

Perhaps more important than the present capabilities of the MNLF are the lessons that the sudden MNLF upsurge in 1972 taught the AFP. Wary of being caught off-guard again, the AFP has assigned its best units to MNLF areas: two of the Philippines' three Marine brigades, and six army battalions. During the 1970's, company and battalion commanders unleashed intense firepower and air strikes to beat back large frontal assaults of 1,000 or more fighters. It has taken a while to unlearn these lessons. Today, these officers now hold senior positions and still tend to judge their peers by how well they did against the MNLF, not by their current performance against the NPA. The confidence gained by defeating an opponent who fought pitched battles also led the AFP to underestimate the

NPA's growth and capabilities. According to Gen. Asuncion, previous Southcom commanders were "preoccupied" with the MNLF long after its defeat in 1978 while the Philippine Constabulary continued to send reports that "all was normal and peaceful" in Mindanao up to 1981.

Less than two years ago, NPA units of 100 to 200 men struck at will. Now, due to recent setbacks, the NPA has reverted back to smaller units, and as Gen. Asuncion claimed, "We have the upper hand." Although the conflict in Mindanao is presently quieter than in northern Luzon or the Visayas, the picture is far from clear.

Every day there are about 3 to 5 encounters of varying size between the military and the NPA. The majority are initiated by the NPA. The phenomenal growth of the NPA during the latter part of the Marcos era has slacked off, but it continues steadily. For example, in the Zamboanga peninsula, where the NPA is weakest in Mindanao, the NPA grew by 15% last year. And despite newspaper headlines and government pronouncements saying that hundreds of armed NPA guerrillas and their supporters have defected, local military officials say that "only a few" NPA fighters have surrendered.

As for the numbers game, different officers estimate that there are from 8,000 to 12,000 armed NPA regulars in Mindanao. This means there are about three soldiers for every guerrilla--a far cry from the 10 to 1 ratio deemed necessary by classic counter-insurgency doctrine to turn back an insurgency.

Gen. Asuncion attributed the growth of the NPA to the lack of government presence in rural areas. He recalled that in 1983 his Marine brigade walked about 700 kilometers from Davao City in the southeast to Surigao on the northernmost tip of the island to re-establish contact in the barrios. "You go about 5 kilometers from the national road and people haven't gone to high school; 10 kilometers and people haven't seen anyone from the government."

These patrols combined with the emergence of armed citizen's groups, the so-called vigilantes, and mistakes by the NPA led to the current swing in the government's favor. Vigilantes are now touted as the panacea for insurgency. The military is establishing vigilante groups throughout the Philippines, including Manila, to fill the role abandoned by the police and local officials. Vigilante groups often include some former NPA supporters and like the NPA, may suffer from the same strengths and weaknesses. Just as the too-rapid expansion of the NPA in Mindanao drew in toughs and petty criminals, triggering a backlash, so too common criminals turned peace-keepers may alienate citizens.

Regarding equipment, officers at Southcom said that they are lacking in basic land transport with only 50% of all vehicles operational. Gen. Asuncion considered it "lucky" if a combat battalion of 500 to 600 men has 3 two-and-half ton trucks. AFP plans call for 8 to 10 such trucks per battalion in order to move two rifle companies.

In all of Mindanao the Army has perhaps a total of 40 armored vehicles. Although the U.S. has delivered a considerable amount of equipment to the Aquino government, Southcom officers said that since 1986 the Army has not received much new equipment. What they get merely replaces worn-out vehicles. In contrast, the Marines are better equipped with armored personnel carriers and have received new vehicles.

Mobility is further constrained by land mines and ambushes. The NPA has "perfected the use of land mines," said Gen. Asuncion. "They can knock down any vehicle in our inventory today." According to an officer in Manila, it usually takes a day for ground forces to arrive at the scene of an ambush. One response to land mines, said Gen. Asuncion, is to increase foot patrols alongside roads.

But Southcom officers and those at headquarters in Manila see the primary solution as more helicopters to ferry troops quickly. In the last 6 months the number of UH-1H helicopters in Mindanao has been beefed up from 9 to 16, of which 12 are now operational. However, Gen. Asuncion and others said they are still short of the 40 helicopters that they need. Currently, each region has a pair of UH-1Hs that together can carry 18 men, too few to reinforce a 20 to 30 man reconnaissance patrol if it runs into a large NPA unit of 120 to 140 men. (Smaller patrols are generally not conducted in Mindanao.)

The lack of radio communication also limits patrols. Troops cannot call in for resupply by air because the standard radios have a range of only 5 kilometers in Mindanao's dense foliage. Limited by the amount of food they can carry, soldiers patrol for only one week, covering 20 to 30 kilometers.

Gen. Asuncion wants about 20 more helicopters for Mindanao. "What we need are some hard-hitting, helicopter-borne troops, that would be coupled with a serious reconnaissance unit that will operate for 20 days...Give me my helicopters and we will bleed the NPA dry." As mentioned in a previous newsletter, the U.S. and Philippine military bureaucracies handling equipment are favorable toward his request: the Air Force officer who is the AFP chief for plans and policy has been pushing for more helicopters as has the head of JUSMAG, Maj. Gen. Charles Teeter, an Army aviator.

A major issue is whether the AFP is being "held back" in dealing with the NPA. Some field commanders, and many politicians, complain that the presence of human rights groups has restricted the Army's ability to aggressively pursue the NPA.

Gen. Asuncion was emphatic that this is not the case in Mindanao. He pointed out that under the Marcos administration,

battalion commanders needed permission from Manila for artillery fire and air strikes. Now, according to Gen. Asuncion and Air Force officers, a battalion commander can on his own call in an air strike or artillery support. Said Gen. Asuncion, "The President has directed us to conduct all-out war against the NPA."

Another important issue is to what extent local government officials cooperate with the military in the counter-insurgency effort. In Manila, many officers say that the people are now "on our side" due to the popularity of the Aquino government. Yet, Gen. Asuncion believes that local officials were "more cooperative" during the Marcos era. Not surprisingly, he found that local officials elected under Marcos get along better with the military than former oppositionists appointed by Aquino. As for national politics, he insisted that the August 28th coup attempt did not affect the morale of the troops. But he did note that as a result of the coup attempt, two Marine battalions were sent to Manila, and more armored cars intended for Mindanao were kept in the capitol.

My first meeting the next morning reinforced Gen. Asuncion's words that "you cannot divorce the military from politics." It also gave me an indication of the amount of control Gen. Ramos has over Mindanao.

Officially, my interview with Brig. Gen. Lorenzo Rapanan, who heads the Philippine Constabulary in the Zamboanga region, should not have taken place. For on October 12, Gen. Ramos had ordered that Gen. Rapanan be transferred to a minor post in Manila. The order was part of a larger shake-up that shifted two other generals who supported the coup and brought in as Rapanan's replacement a colonel who helped squash the coup. In Manila, it was read as a major step by Ramos to consolidate control over the armed forces. But three weeks later, here I was facing Gen. Rapanan across his desk, which was bare except for the morning's papers. He informed me that the order had been rescinded. Yet, there hadn't been news of it in Manila.

Locals believe, however, that the reason behind the transfer was not questionable political loyalty, but embarrassment. Crime and bombings are on the rise in Zamboanga City, but worst of all there was an incident in September when the NPA poisoned Constabulary recruits who were exercising, killing 19. Rapanan's removal was blocked by Southcom head, Gen. Tapia, who insisted that his classmate from the Philippine Military Academy (class 1957) be allowed to hold his post until their retirement on April 1 next year.

## II. The Third Air Division

After meeting with Gen. Rapanan and his staff I proceeded to the Third Air Division, which handles all aircraft in Mindanao. Here again, the commander was extending his stay in Manila, so I met with his deputy, Col. Jose Comendador.

Col. Comendador is new at his position, but not to Zamboanga. Two months ago, he was a wing commander in Manila. But when he became the spokesman for a group of Air Force officers that complained about promotions he was sent to his present post. During the conflict with the MNLF, he flew air strikes, and later as a civil-military relations officer interviewed MNLF surrenderees, which convinced him of the efficacy of air support.

This has been a relatively quiet year for the Third Air Division with operations at a moderate level. Most of the sorties by fixed-wing aircraft are for patrols, reconnaissance, and limited troop movement. The 12 T-28 propeller-driven aircraft here are rarely used for bombing and strafing.

In contrast, helicopters are used more frequently for a variety of missions. From January to October of this year, the UH-1Hs have gone on almost 3,000 sorties, mostly for ferrying troops, medical evacuations, and inspections by commanders. Armed only with a single .50 caliber machine gun, they are generally not used as gunships.

Mindanao's three S-76 helicopters, however, are armed with rockets and heavier guns for use as gunships. Deployed in tandem, or with a single UH-1H as backup, they have helped to break up large NPA formations. As of January, the S-76s have flown over 500 sorties, sometimes providing air support. So far, the Air Force can fly with impunity: the NPA has .50 caliber machine guns but without mounts to hold them, cannot fire at aircraft.

Col. Comendador believes that Mindanao needs more gunships, but more importantly, an aircraft to fill the gap between helicopters and T-28s. In his view, each craft has its limitations: helicopters can deliver only so much firepower; T-28s are less accurate and alert rebels when to take cover since they have to dive to strafe or deliver their bombs. He is looking for a slow-moving plane that can circle an area for long periods of time, firing its 4 side-mounted machine guns from any point of the compass. His concept has sparked some interest and his boss is currently scrounging around for ageing C-47s or similar aircraft.

If the NPA should again advance toward larger formations in Mindanao, this type of aircraft will certainly come into use. It is likely to change the face of the war. When I asked Col. Comendador whether civilians might be caught in the plane's fire, he said that the rules of engagement are strictly followed. But, he added, there are also "clear areas" where pilots have much greater latitude.

### III. The Sixth Naval District

On my last day in Zamboanga, I stopped by the Sixth Naval District, which is adjacent to a large muslim slum. Like the Air Force, the Navy is also under the control of Southcom and is responsible for a vast area. Almost one third of the Philippine Navy patrols all of Mindanao's rugged coast except for the northern portion. Deputy Commander, Capt. Eduardo Domingo described the Navy's duties as primarily to stop smugglers and gun-runners.

The Navy patrols these waters by sending out a mother ship, one of the three Patrol Craft Escorts based here, along with several smaller Fast Patrol Craft. The mother ship will steam to an area and anchor for a week while the Fast Patrol Craft fan out, returning to the mother ship for supplies. Due to chronic fuel shortages, the Patrol Craft Escorts are allocated only enough fuel to steam for seven hours a week, Fast Patrol Craft have fuel for six hours a day. Of the 15 Fast Patrol Craft here, only two can move at full speed, 15 knots. The rest of the patrol craft have only two of their three engines working so they limp along at eight to ten knots. Smuggler's boats, with three powerful engines, make about 20 knots; only two have been caught in the last six months.

To compensate for this disparity in speed, all civilian vessels are prohibited from going over 15 knots. Any ship found with more than one engine is considered a smuggler. If caught, the ship is impounded, the two 'extra' engines are removed, the owner is fined, and his ship returned. This happened four times in the past year and according to Capt. Domingo, it is "one of the sources of engines for [our] water craft."

Gun-running is more serious than smuggling, but Capt. Domingo adds that it's impossible to tell whether the arms are for the NPA or the MNLF. To boost Navy patrols, two indigenous craft have been built here with two more under construction. Yet, their impact will not be significant. Even if the entire Philippine Navy was here, Capt. Domingo believes that it wouldn't curb smuggling. As he said, his greatest challenge is just to try and make sure all of his old ships operate. Meanwhile, smuggling flourishes and the citizens of Zamboanga wink as the gentlemen go by.

Sincerely,



Erik Guyot