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At the Crossroads: Notes From A Trip to the Philippines

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Early in May I went to the "Crossroads 1991" international conference in Manila on U.S. bases in the Philippines, attended by over 200 Filipinos and some 60 foreign delegates from Belau, Japan, New Zealand and other Pacific countries, as well as South Africa, France, West Germany and the United States. The conference took a strong stand for full Philippine sovereignty and for the immediate withdrawal of the U.S. bases from the Philippines. But the dominant impression I got from my trip was of the explosive growth of anti-bases sentiment *outside* the conference, among the Filipino people at large.

I was asked to speak, for instance, in Davao, the largest city in Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippine archipelago. Some two years ago Davao had figured in the news as the center of activities of Alsa-Masa, a violently pro-bases right-wing vigilante group. As a U.S. citizen who opposes the bases because of their connection with U.S. wars of intervention in the Third World, I was not sure what reception I would receive there.

What I found in Davao was very striking, in a most positive way. The first meeting I spoke at was held in the Chamber of the Davao City Council, where only recently the Council had passed a resolution calling for the withdrawal of the U.S. bases when their lease expires in 1991. Among the participants in the lively discussion that followed my talk were those who identified themselves as speaking for women's organizations, trade unions, business people, teachers, the religious, and, of special note, a representative of 36 students who had just been arrested for picketing the United States Information Service office in Davao. All called for the removal of the bases, as did two members of the City Council.

The nearest thing to support for the bases came from a member of the City Council who insisted that he was not for the bases, only for their gradual phase-out and withdrawal. I later found this to be typical: there is hardly a single public figure in the Philippines today who will come straight out for the bases. Such is the pressure of public opinion. I had

similar experiences speaking elsewhere in the Philippines. What was new for me was to find this growing anti-bases sentiment outside Manila—in the provinces. I knew from previous visits how Manila felt.

Another outstanding impression from the trip came from my participation in an anti-bases demonstration in Manila. The conference voted to deliver to U.S. Ambassador Platt our resolution against the bases, and after its final session about 200 of us started from the conference site at the Pope Pius XII Meeting Center in a peaceful and nonviolent march toward the U.S. Embassy. About half-way there our path was blocked by a double file of the Philippine military stretched across the city street and armed with helmets, shields and truncheons.

When the officer in charge refused the Filipino leaders of the march permission to proceed further, four U.S. delegates to the conference, myself included, asked if we could deliver a message to the U.S. Ambassador, taking with us four Filipino religious (three nuns and a priest who were on the march). The officer said this would have to be negotiated. Our eyes were fixed upon him as he stepped back from the line of confrontation speaking into his walkie-talkie when, suddenly, all hell broke loose in a very small space. Members of the government drug squad in plain clothes had surrounded the marchers on each side and at the rear, and they rushed us, at least two flourishing pistols, pummeling the marchers, shoving them about and arresting thirteen.

In the two weeks I was in the Philippines there were reports of public demonstrations, vigils, and marches against the bases, almost all of which were similarly "dispersed." Someone in authority had given the word, and Filipino rights to protest, demonstrate and petition authority went by the board. In the Philippines the two organizations most obviously promoting the bases, so far as I could see, were the Philippine military and the U.S. Embassy—the latter with much slick and expensive printed material, radio and TV talks, and speeches at public meetings, lobbying efforts, etc. It is difficult to

believe there is no connection between these two, especially since the Armed Forces of the Philippines are so largely funded by the U.S. government and so closely supervised by a permanent body of U.S. military advisers.

To try to understand what I saw in the Philippines it is necessary to carry all this one step further: according to the *Far Eastern Economic Review* of January 4, 1990, the Pentagon has decided to hold on to its bases in the Philippines, Cold War or no. But with the Soviet Union drastically reducing its military in Asia and elsewhere, the Defense Department now conjures up threats arising in the Third World as the excuse to keep its bases in the Philippines. It is these bases, for example, that facilitate U.S. military intervention in the troubled Middle East.

I told my audiences in the Philippines, however, that many U.S. voters were getting tired of their government continuing to take on its shoulders the role of global policeman at such great cost to the U.S. taxpayer. I drew attention to the pressing problems we in the U.S. face at home: homelessness, deteriorating education, and an economy suffering from declining productivity—all largely aggravated as a result of neglect caused by the monstrous military budgets of the Cold War. It costs U.S. taxpayers at least one billion dollars a year to maintain U.S. troops and bases in the Philippines, for example.

I also told my Philippine audiences that there were growing numbers of organizations and institutions in the United States beginning to oppose the U.S. bases in the Philippines—like the National Council of Churches, Pax Christi, *National Catholic Reporter*, Sane-Nuclear Freeze, American Friends Service Committee, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. I could sense their approval on hearing this, and it was expressed by some. As a result I believe that the removal of the bases would be the best way to promote U.S.-Philippine friendship. This friendship, as General Eisenhower once said, may be worth more to U.S. national security than any U.S. military installations on Philippine soil. ♦