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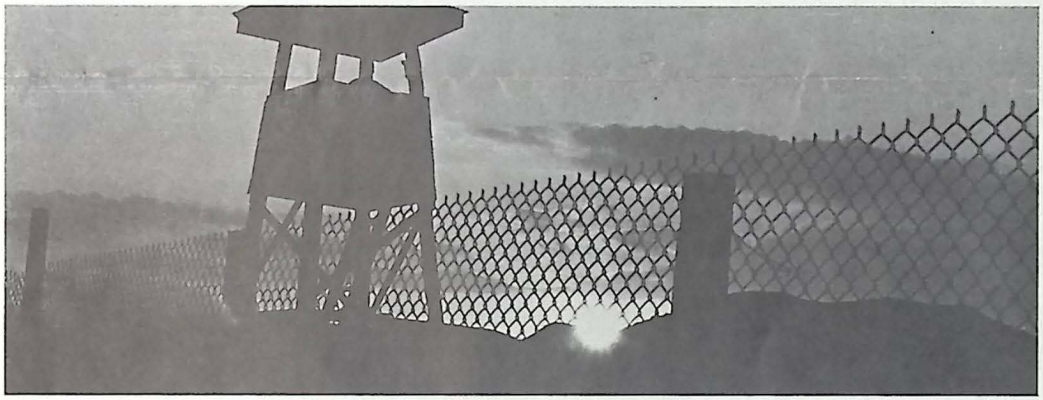
The U.S. Military Bases in the Philippines



What Are We Trying to Secure?

All of us want to be secure—secure in our homes, on the streets, as a nation, in the world. Where does our security as Christians lie? Psalms of security and protection give us a few clues.

> *God set me safely on a rock and made me secure. God taught me to sing a new song. . . . Happy are those who trust the Lord, who do not turn to idols or join those who worship false gods. . . . Happy are those who are concerned for the poor. The Lord will help them when they are in trouble. God will protect them and preserve their lives.*
>
> (Sections of Psalms 40 and 41)

The Christian understanding of how to be secure can be in direct contradiction to the mainstream social understanding of how to be secure. The story of the U.S. military bases in the Philippines provides an example of such a contradiction. By applying a biblical understanding of security to a real situation where human lives are at stake, we can deepen our faith commitment and give integrity to our worship of God. One of the greatest dangers for North American Christians is to "join those who worship false gods" (Ps. 44:20).

The Contradiction between American Words and Action

World attention was riveted on the Philippines in August, 1983, when former Senator Benigno Aquino was murdered moments after he stepped off the plane at Manila International Airport. Aquino was returning to his country after three years of self-imposed exile. He came unarmed and advocating social change through the electoral process. He planned to challenge President Marcos in the 1984 elections.

People around the world were shocked and outraged at the audacious way in which the Marcos government disposed of a political opponent. Both Americans and Filipinos have appealed to the U.S. government to cease its support of the Philippine government. This seems a reasonable request to make of a government which claims to protect human rights and freedom around the world—of a country whose proclaimed ideal is to nurture the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

However, the response of President Reagan, the State Department, the Pentagon, leading national newspaper editorials, and even liberal congressional representatives, are variations on the theme of U.S. security: "We don't like the human rights abuses in the Philippines. We don't condone the killing of Aquino or the killing of thousands of unknown Filipinos who have struggled for justice and human rights. BUT OUR MILITARY BASES, CLARK AIR BASE AND SUBIC BAY NAVAL BASE, ARE ABSOLUTELY VITAL TO OUR SECURITY IN THE PACIFIC. So, it's a trade-off. No matter who gets killed or imprisoned or tortured in the Philippines, we have to keep our relationship and aid to a government which will look out for our interests there."

This is the crux of the conflict: our words call for democracy and freedom, yet our actions support dictatorship and repression.

In the light of our biblical faith, we must carefully examine the history of the U.S. bases in the Philippines, the present situation, and the Filipino point of view. By doing so, we need not be locked into the idea that Filipinos have to be tortured or killed to maintain U.S. security.

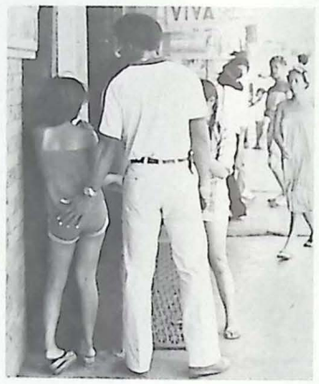
History

American textbooks tell us that after 350 years of Spanish rule, the Philippines were liberated by the United States government in 1898. What most Americans don't know is that over a half a million Filipinos died resisting that liberation.

Soon after the United States took over as the colonial power in the Philippines, it established two military bases. These bases were used as springboards of intervention in Korea in 1950-53, the Quemoy-Matsu area of China in 1958, and Indochina from 1965-75. These U.S. bases have also served several times as staging areas for U.S. displays of force in many parts of Asia and East Africa.

After the second World War, when the Philippines was devastated from American bombing attacks, the country received its nominal political independence. Soon after, the United States and the Philippines signed an agreement to continue the bases' presence until 1991.

In 1979, that agreement was amended, arranging for the United States to give the Philippine government $500 million in economic and military aid over a five-year period. In 1982, during a state visit to Washington, President Marcos assured Reagan of "unhampered U.S. military operation of the bases." The two governments reached speedy agreement without the benefit of public debate on the next five-year accord. Reagan and Marcos signed the agreement on June 1, 1983. Pending congressional approval, the Philippine government will receive $900 million in economic and military aid over the next five years.



Description of the Bases

Headquarters of the Thirteenth Air Force, Clark Air Force Base is the logistical hub of U.S. military air traffic in the Western Pacific. Subic Naval Base is home to a carrier task force and serves as the main ship repair facility of the Seventh Fleet.

About seven other installations perform important military communications and surveillance functions. The bases are garrisoned by 15,400 military and Defense Department personnel, supplemented by 9,000 Seventh Fleet sailors in port at any time. They cover over 192,000 acres, with the United States directly controlling almost 25,000 acres and having the right to use the rest.

Social Conditions

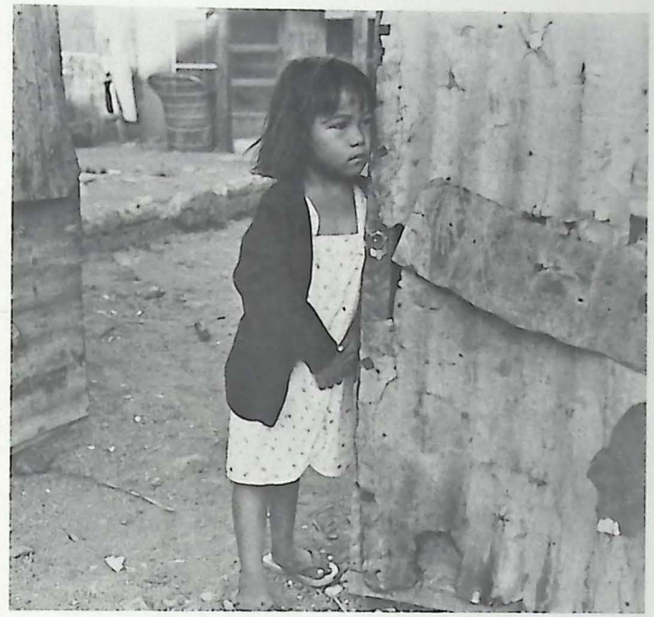
Christians are part of a transnational body, the Church, whose concerns go beyond national government interest. Therefore, we need to understand what these bases mean to ordinary Filipinos.

A visit to the two towns surrounding the bases, Angeles City and Olongapo, is embarrassing and heartrending for Americans who come face to face with decadence and sin of our own culture. The main street of Olongapo is mostly bars, massage parlors, and discotheques. Olongapo has no industry except the base and the 15,000 "hospitality girls" who work in bars and nightclubs.

The girls come from the rural areas with the hope of getting a respectable job. But usually they are forced, through economic circumstances, to succumb to extracurricular ways of making money. Most send money home to their families.

Seven hundred families on the outskirts of Olongapo make their living scavenging on the base dumping area. They literally live off the garbage of the Americans. Other Olongapo residents fish in the waters near the base, but if they get too close they are shot at by base personnel. On July 1, 1983, the Philippine military began demolishing the hovels of the forty fishing families because their homes were an "eyesore" to the U.S. military at the naval base.

In Angeles City, outside Clark Air Base, a thriving black market based on items from Clark goes on unhampered. Many Filipinos suspect it has the sanction, and even participation, of higher levels of government, both Philippine and American. They point to the fact that a few years ago a base commander who genuinely tried to stop the black market was removed from the base and sent home.



Filipino Opposition to the Bases

Former Philippine Senator Jose W. Diokno, a prominent nationalist, says the bases introduce expensive tastes, alien culture, and consumerism that eat up precious foreign exchange and increase the growing gap between the rich and the poor. He regards the issue of the bases as the single most pressing issue in Philippine cultural and political life. Until the bases are removed, the country cannot move to a more rational economic development which gives local needs first priority. The bases assure an open door and many special privileges to foreign multinational corporations, Diokno argues.

At this point, the Philippine government is being more responsive to the needs of Western investment than to the needs of its own people. The present Philippine external debt is $20 billion and expanding steadily. In order to get more loans to continue the export-oriented development of the country, Marcos must follow the dictates of lenders: commercial banks, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

While wages in the country have barely increased, the cost of living has soared. Two-thirds of all children under six suffer from malnutrition. The poor farmers, workers in the city, and even the middle class are all experiencing severe economic hardships. Yet they see the elite families living in affluence. These unjust conditions produce conflict between rich and poor. To help quell the opposition, the Marcos government has increased the size of its army from 60,000 in 1972 (when martial law was declared) to 260,000 at the present time.

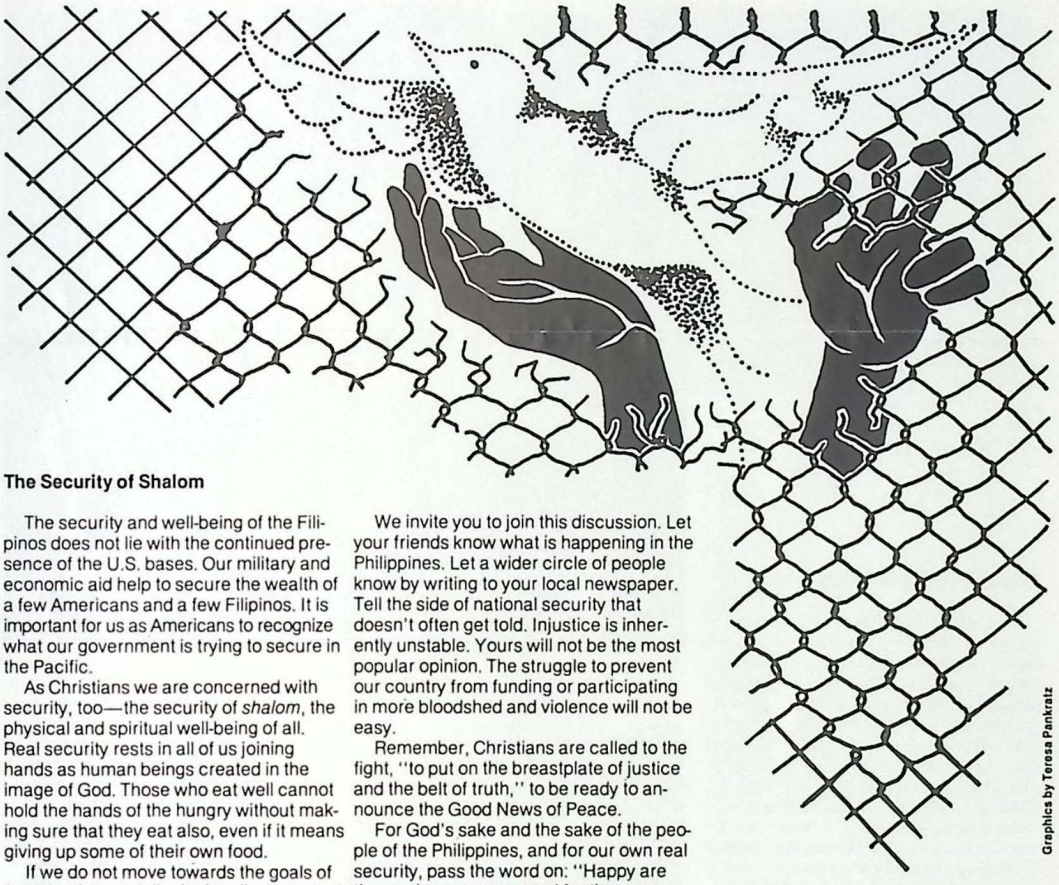
The Catholic archbishop of Manila, Jaime Cardinal Sin, declared recently that the "U.S. weapons are used to slaughter Filipinos" and called on the United States to stop its military aid to the Marcos government.

But the continued support of the present U.S. Administration for a government abusive of its citizens seems inevitable. Why? Because profiteering at the expense of Filipino lives has been practiced by American banks, corporations, and investors. Marcos himself openly admits this. In a speech in 1981, he declared, "One of the reasons I am in power today, I think, is because I have maintained and insisted that free enterprise be the principal agent of change." To make sure that U.S. economic interests remain intact, the U.S. government must continue to intervene either through military and economic aid, or directly with American troops.

An organized and militant peoples' movement is growing in the Philippines. The people are struggling for genuine democracy and economic justice. They are also on record as opposing the military bases. In early 1983, a broad-based group of Filipino leaders from church, academic, legal and professional backgrounds came together to express their opposition to the bases and formed the Anti-Bases Coalition in Manila.

In their Declaration of Principles they wrote, "We Filipinos want to survive as Filipinos. We yearn for peace, freedom, and independence. Yet the presence of the U.S. military bases on our land has impaired our sovereignty and independence and made the threat to our survival as a people starkly real and immediate."

The Filipinos think the bases are a threat to their national security. The storage of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons at Subic Naval Base make the Philippines a ready target for attack from another country hostile to the United States. The bases are not there as a protection from external enemies of the Philippines. Rather, they act as a magnet for nuclear attack.



Graphics by Teresa Pankratz

The Security of Shalom

The security and well-being of the Filipinos does not lie with the continued presence of the U.S. bases. Our military and economic aid help to secure the wealth of a few Americans and a few Filipinos. It is important for us as Americans to recognize what our government is trying to secure in the Pacific.

As Christians we are concerned with security, too—the security of *shalom*, the physical and spiritual well-being of all. Real security rests in all of us joining hands as human beings created in the image of God. Those who eat well cannot hold the hands of the hungry without making sure that they eat also, even if it means giving up some of their own food.

If we do not move towards the goals of food, justice, and dignity for all, no amount of weapons and bases in the Pacific will provide security for us. Only when there is genuine justice can all of us be secure. Injustice brings an inherent instability. What the biblical imperative for justice supplies us with is long-term realism, as opposed to shortcuts which lead to disaster.

As Christians, we have another reference point beyond shortcut solutions which puts us in a position to question the ideology of national security. We can lead the way in questioning the continued presence of the U.S. bases in the Philippines because we have a different grid from which to measure security and effectiveness. We don't have to be locked into old definitions of security. We can take our cues from the poor and struggling in the Philippines, because we know that's where God's ear is, too.

We invite you to join this discussion. Let your friends know what is happening in the Philippines. Let a wider circle of people know by writing to your local newspaper. Tell the side of national security that doesn't often get told. Injustice is inherently unstable. Yours will not be the most popular opinion. The struggle to prevent our country from funding or participating in more bloodshed and violence will not be easy.

Remember, Christians are called to the fight, "to put on the breastplate of justice and the belt of truth," to be ready to announce the Good News of Peace.

For God's sake and the sake of the people of the Philippines, and for our own real security, pass the word on: "Happy are those who are concerned for the poor. The Lord will protect them, and preserve their lives" (Ps. 41:1-2).

Dorothy Friesen
September, 1983

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Jubilee Crafts is a nonprofit organization marketing third-world crafts, with a focus on educating Americans about the injustices which surround the craftmakers' lives. Jubilee Crafts markets many Philippine crafts, such as pendants, T-shirts and cards made by former political prisoners; woodcrafts made by missionaries serving the needs of the rural poor; and *bunots* (floor polishers made from coconut shells) produced by women living in a heavily militarized area. To order our catalog, send $1.00 to Jubilee Crafts, Dept. A., 300 W. Apsley St., Philadelphia, PA 19144.