

OPINION & FEATURES

Dilemma

THE Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) between the Philippines and the United States is currently a subject of contention among lawmakers in the Philippines.

Sen. Miriam Defensor-Santiago has been a staunch advocate for its abrogation, especially since US soldiers were killed in an explosion in Jolo just this week. She said that "the soldiers weren't supposed to be there, as their presence in the alleged landmine made the area a war zone."

Cebu Rep. Antonio Cuenco begged to disagree. Cuenco asserted that the Americans play a vital role in countering terrorism. Zamboanga del Sur Rep. Antonion Cerilles argued that the Americans were victims because they were on their way to do humanitarian works and were not in combat.

"There is much more to it than you can see on the surface. You know, we are not alone in this world. There are possible dangers ahead. We cannot anticipate all the contingencies. We have to accept the fact that we are a weak country, we do not have the means to defend ourselves. We need friends," Enrile added.

It is unavoidable for Filipinos to have mixed feelings about having US troops on Philippine soil. After all, the ratification of the said agreement by the Senate in 1999 carries with it special rights and privileges for American soldiers and civil employees of the US Department of Defense.

The VFA is a form of Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), but SOFA is for countries who have US bases in their soil. When the US still had military bases in the Philippines, the SOFA was included in the RP-US Military Bases Agreement.

EDITORIAL

The VFA was signed at a time when there were no longer US military bases of facilities in the country. Essentially, it clarifies the terms under which the US military is allowed to operate. It is mainly concerned with the legal issues associated with military individuals and property, as well as crimes committed.

Many Filipinos believe that the VFA is against the provision of the Philippine constitution for "equal protection before the law." The special rights and privileges afforded to uniformed and civil members of the US Defense Department is not something that is freely given to ordinary Filipino citizens.

One of the most controversial situations that tested the VFA was the Subic rape case filed by a Filipina against American soldiers in 2005. Many felt that the VFA hindered the trial proceedings and disregarded the power of our judicial system.

The long-standing alliance between the US and the Philippines has been tested time and time again. The abrogation of the VFA may sour the relationship at a time when the country is in a state of calamity and is in dire need of international aid and assistance for rescue and relief operations. As sublime as our lawmakers' intentions maybe for our country's best interest, now may not be the best time to burn bridges with those who are capable of getting us out of this chaotic situation. (AJPRESS)



In conjunction with the American Red Cross, US Ambassador to the Philippines Kristie Kenney (right) delivers relief aid to a fire victim inside a local elementary school in Manila on Wednesday, Sept. 30. AP Photo by Mike Alquinto

Villar won't file raps against Arroyo

DURING disasters there will always be people who will take advantage of the situation. Profiteers are the first to take advantage of the misfortunes of their fellow men. Even with price controls that freeze the prices of basic commodities, some profiteers still raise their prices. As the supply dwindles, prices will continue to rise. Fish and vegetables will be the first to go for obvious reasons: fishermen were unable to go out to sea during the storm and the vegetable farms had been ravaged by the floods. Construction materials will come next. Auto shops will make a killing: imagine all the vehicles that were submerged in the floods that have to be repaired. Upholsterers also will be busy. Even the car wash shops will be overwhelmed, what with all those muddy vehicles being towed from areas buried in mud.

Government and private relief efforts are also overwhelmed. Although the floods have begun to ebb, the number of flood victims lining up for relief goods keeps increasing. Most of them, of course, come from areas still under water, some of whom were marooned on their rooftops since Saturday. Others, however, are not flood victims at all. Although their homes were not swamped by the floods and they do not need any help, they take advantage of the relief efforts by going to the evacuation centers and lining up for relief goods, thus taking them away from those who



AS I SEE IT

Neal H. Cruz

really need them.

I know a squatter colony in Quezon City were members are away the whole day lining up for relief goods in different evacuation centers, although they were untouched by the floods. They bring even their small children with them, each one lining up for relief, and some line up again after receiving their packages. Then they go to another evacuation center and line up again. They repeat this many times the whole day. In the evening, they come home loaded with relief packages, enough to start a small sari-sari store.

Of course, the relief workers cannot distinguish between the genuine flood victims and the opportunists, and much of the relief goods that should go to the really needy go only to these opportunists. That is why there is scramble in the distribution centers as people scramble and fight for relief goods. Relief workers try to cope, but there may not be enough to go around indefinitely even with the private sector generously pitching in to help the unfortunate.

The relief workers plead to the opportunists: Don't take advantage of the tragedy. Don't steal the food away from the flood victims who really need them.

If and when Sen. Manny Villar becomes president, he will not, he said, file charges against

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. But he would not prevent others from doing so. He would allow the wheels of justice to punish those who need punishing. But he will not interfere to save anybody.

That was what he said, in answer to questions, during the Kapihan sa Manila forum last Monday at the Manila Hotel. I am not an avenger, he said in effect, but I will not coddle the corrupt either.

Asked what would be his priorities in case he becomes president, Villar answered that it would be the economy and jobs. An improved economy and more jobs are important to raise the standard of living in any country, he said. With a higher standard of living, graft and corruption would lessen. People would not steal anymore because they are living well already.

Villar also asked his colleagues in the Senate to end their investigation of the so-called C-5 insertion issue. Villar has been accused by Senators Panfilo Lacson and Jamby Madrigal of inserting another P250-million appropriation in the budget for the construction of the C-5 extension through his property. It has been a year since the investigation began, Villar said, and until now these allegations remain allegations.

Lacson and Madrigal have presented what they claimed were pieces of evidence, but none of them could pin down Villar. Otherwise, the committee, which is composed mostly of Villar's rivals in the presidential election next year, would have already issued a guilty verdict.

This inquiry has been overstretched already, he said, as part of a bigger effort to disgrace him and ruin his chances in the presidential race.

The C-5 extension project is a real project that is now benefiting thousands of commuters and cargo vehicles every day, 24 hours a day, he said.

Because of the Senate inquiry, Malacañang, in order to distance itself from the controversy, has impounded the budget intended to complete the project.

But this project was envisioned as part of the seamless road connection scheme linking Metro Manila to nearby provinces under then President Ferdinand Marcos. The project had been constructed on a piecemeal basis since then, Villar said.

"To date, we have yet to get anything out of this investigation," he said. "It only serves as a vehicle for mud-slinging and unproven accusations. There is a limit to everything. Somehow there must be closure, one way or the other."

One year is too long for an investigation, Villar emphasized. If the evidence is strong, there should already be a committee resolution finding him guilty. But a year-long search for proof is way too long and already unhealthy.

"This project is a much-needed road network, and it is unfair to have it mired in politics," Villar said. "It is grossly unfair and insensitive for Jamby and Ping to milk this issue at the expense of the affected residents, commuters and communities." (Inquirer.net)

People Power 3

FACEBOOK was the place to be last weekend for those connected to the Web but unable to leave their homes (such as me, since I was still recovering from my operation).

Here are excerpts from my Facebook wall (for those not familiar with Web 2.0 language, a wall is like a homeroom or a public diary where other people can write comments):

Last Sunday, at 4:30 a.m., I posted this: "Only Teodoro and Villar were visibly helping during the flood. Where were the other presidentiables? It makes no difference if the two were thinking of politics. They helped. The others missed their chance to show that they can handle crises."

My Facebook friends ("friends" are people on a mailing list) responded immediately. Among the many responses I got, these are representative (I translated those written in Fili-



MINI CRITIQUE

Isagani Cruz

pino): "Dick Gordon was around, doing Red Cross stuff. Noynoy and Mar were mentioned in relation to relief goods to be delivered. But other than that I have no recall of anyone else."

"The question is, where is Noynoy?"

"I read somewhere that they were in Bukidnon or some other province in Mindanao."

"Gordon is remarkable! His Red Cross group is now rescuing people in Provident Village."

"The others are/were out campaigning, I guess."

"Teodoro was expected to be doing his job as NDCC chair, with its massive machinery and resources, as well as Gordon as Red Cross Chair."

"Sometimes some would rather not advertise their helping out."

"One should not be lauded for something he is supposed (in fact,

paid) to do, or for doing something which is in his power to do. And for Teodoro, I think the unpreparedness of a disaster preparedness contingent to respond effectively is a reflection of what he failed to do as DND chief."

I added: "What I feel bad about is that the other presidentiables (not just Noynoy but particularly him) showed no leadership yesterday. At the very least they should have rallied their troops to do something. If they didn't know what that something was, then they should not be our president!"

That brought more responses. "I like how you say it. I agree!"

"You are absolutely right. A good leader is someone that is able to think and act fast in time of adversity and devastation."

On Monday, at 6 a.m., I posted this: "There's a People Power Revolution going on (call it People Power 3): everyone helping the victims of the flooding, with or without the help of the government or those that want to

be in the next government! I love the Filipino people, not just those in the country but those abroad!"

Immediately, 26 Facebook friends indicated that they agreed with me. Some posted comments such as these:

"The great flood that devastated most of Metro Manila yesterday is another proof that we have no politician nor government official who is ready and can instantly provide the needed leadership in a crisis situation. This latest natural disaster was another national disaster for aspiring politicians and leaders of this disaster-prone country. In times of need, they are nowhere to be found!"

"This is like a ray of sunshine amid the gloom. Let's continue helping in our own way."

"We share the same thought. Another good reason to feel good about being a Filipino and to encourage hope for the nation. Indeed a ray of sunshine."

"Bayanihan. Everyone helps the victims of Ondoy in whatever way they can."

"No country in the world could have coped. I thought the front page yesterday [of a newspaper, not the STAR, that featured a huge photo of a presidentiable rather than the flood - IRCJ was in extreme bad taste."

"I agree. Why put a huge photo of Noynoy and Mar smiling when that wasn't the biggest story? Maybe the editors were stranded."

I changed the topic (called a "thread"): "Nice work, DZMM! When I texted them about a family still on a rooftop, they called me back immediately to ask for details."

I got this quick response: "Saludo, DZMM!"

I also got this response: "May I have the text number so I can pass on details of my friend's dad who is also trapped on a roof in Cainta?"

I immediately posted the text number, which I had taken from the DZMM website. (Philstar.com)

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