

The Moros' unknown war

In 1901 U.S. troops, fresh from throwing Spain out of the Philippines, moved in to colonize the islands. On the southern islands of Mindanao, Palawan and Sulu, the Americans met with a nasty surprise: Neither their Springfield rifles nor their revolvers could stop charging Moro tribesmen.

These fierce Muslim warriors somehow withstood numerous bullets and still had enough strength to throw themselves among the horrified American troops and slash them with their deadly bolo knives. To stop the Moros, Colt produced its famous .45 pistol that is still in wide use today. Its heavy bullet would knock down anyone — even a charging Moro.

After the turn of the century's Moro Wars, these tribesmen were largely forgotten by the world until 15 years ago when they began, once again, to fight the central government in Manila. This time the loosely allied Moro tribes were opposing what they saw as attempts by the Catholic majority to suppress Islam as well as efforts by the Marcos regime to steal their lands and loot their resources.

The Moros have waged a little-known but bloody guerrilla war against the Philippine army, police and the private sector armies of local warlords. Manila responded with air strikes against villages, widespread executions and counter terror. In the process, between 50,000 and 100,000 Filipino Muslims — the majority civilians — were killed by government forces and another 200,000 made refugees from the southern war zones.

Interestingly, there has been absolutely no outcry by the West over this quite bloody religious and economic repression. Human rights groups, ever-

Punch



"Just think, Rodney. For every romance published, how many trees, how many tall, dark, silent sentinels of nature, mute keepers of who-knows-what deep secrets, gave their all?"

ERIC MARGOLIS



ready to denounce South Africa or Chile, remained mute to the fate of the Moros. Marcos' American patrons and arms suppliers also had nothing to say about their client's activities. One might suppose that to western liberals, Muslims do not really count as victims of human rights abuse.

The Moros received money and arms from neighboring Muslim Malaysia and Indonesia, from Iran and Libya. In 1976 Libya's Khadafy managed to negotiate a truce between Manila and the Moros. In exchange for Libyan economic aid, Marcos promised to grant the Moros autonomy. Three years later the accords broke down and fitful fighting erupted again across the southern islands.

Libya still supports the Moros, though now, thanks to depressed oil prices, with less hard cash than in the past. The U.S. government cites such Libyan activities as a prime example of "state-sponsored terrorism," neglecting, of course, its own role in the killing of so many Philippine civilians by U.S.-armed and equipped Marcos forces.

Sporadic aid still comes in from Iran, Malaysia and from the shadowy right-wing Muslim Brotherhood in the Mideast.

Cory Aquino's government has been holding talks with Nur Misuari's Moro National Liberation Front and two smaller Moro groups. In spite of all these negotiations, tensions in the southern Philippines are reported sharply rising as many Muslims are calling for a *jihad* (holy war) against Manila. Such a development could not come at a worse time for the central government which is confronted by the widening communist insurgency.

The Philippine Army and Constabulary have neither the men nor the equipment to fight a two-front war against such resolute foes. Manila's best hope is to make some sort of lasting settlement with the Moros and to channel their strong Muslim hatred of communism against the marxist rebels.

Compounding these problems, Manila could find itself in a nasty territorial dispute with the Moros' prime backer, Malaysia, over the thousands of islands in the Sulu Sea between the two nations. Malaysia maintains claims to many of these Philippine-controlled islands that may just sit atop important underwater oil deposits. Not much further off, Muslim Indonesia watches with mounting concern as its co-religionists are bombed and rocked by Manila's forces.

All this may sound remote. But the growing Moro problem could fracture the alliance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations — a keystone of western defence policy in Asia — in the same way that Cyprus' ethnic and religious quarrels have set NATO's southern members, Greece and Turkey, at dagger's drawn. Settling down the fierce Moros is a priority for Manila.