
United States Secretary of Defense Gates Visits Philippines to Reaffirm United States Commitment

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[The following article is provided courtesy of the Pacific Command web site: http://www.pacom.mil/web/Site_Pages/Media/News.shtml].

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates made a brief stop [in the Philippines] June 1, 2009 to reaffirm U.S. commitment to the country's fight against terrorism. Gates met with his counterpart, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro, to discuss the way ahead for military cooperation between the two countries.

We are partners, Gates said at a news conference following his meeting with Teodoro. We will continue to strongly support their efforts to defeat terrorists and extremists threatening their country and the region. Together, we will not relent until this threat is eliminated.

This is Gates' first trip to the country as Defense Secretary. A U.S. Defense Secretary has not visited the country for nearly a decade and it also is the first Cabinet-level visit under the new U.S. Administration, signaling a renewed emphasis on relations in the region. Gates said the two countries' relationship should evolve into a broader, more strategic one as the Philippines is taking on a larger security role on the world stage in combating international terrorism.

The Philippines can play an important role in regional peace and security, the Secretary said. There is a lot we can do together, and I think we will be looking for those kinds of opportunities to continue ...to broaden and deepen the relationship.

During the visit, Gates met with both U.S. and Philippine troops, praising their efforts there. Gates and Teodoro talked about how to move forward to build capacity of the Philippine armed forces, which Gates said is a fundamental tenet of American foreign policy in the new Administration. The Secretary said he has shifted hundreds of millions of dollars into the fiscal 2010 budget for such partner-nation capacity building.

The stronger the foundation we can build under these partner relationships, the longer they're likely to last; and the more effective they'll be, he said.

No specifics were detailed as to how the U.S. plans to aid in building the capacity of the Philippine armed forces. But a senior defense official speaking on background said the department will continue to support Philippine forces fighting terrorist groups in the southern part of the country. And, he said, the United States would like to look at ways to go beyond that help.

About 600 U.S. forces are in the country now, advising and assisting Philippine forces in their fight against terrorist groups that have established training grounds and safe havens there. U.S. troops began operating there shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Terrorist groups were using Philippine safe havens to launch attacks across the globe. U.S. troops help to train and equip the forces but do not fight with the Filipinos in combat. They also provide intelligence support and conduct civil-military operations.

Since 2001, the Philippine forces have grown stronger, partly due to a reform program put in place by their government the same year, the official said.

The threat from the international terrorist group in the region has gone down, he said. There are fewer hostage takings, and there are fewer terrorists and fewer terrorist attacks.

Gates' trip [to the Philippines] was delayed by a day because of mechanical problems with his aircraft after he attended an Asia security summit in Singapore. The Secretary laid a wreath at the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial. More than 17,200 American military troops are buried there, most of whom died in the defense of the Philippines and East Indies in 1941 and 1942. The names of more than 36,000 missing U.S. service members are inscribed in the memorial.