

UNDER THE

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, LIEUT. COLONEL Dennis Villanueva was a soldier who fully earned the chestful of medals he received in 19 years of fighting for the Philippine Army. The 42-year-old father of three would bravely lead men into battle, then party with them afterward. ("He drank anything," recalls one of his junior officers fondly, "as long as it wasn't poison.") In February, Villanueva planned a break from duty on the strife-torn southern island of Mindanao for a family reunion. On Feb. 10, he sent a text message to his wife, Evangeline: "I can't come. We're under attack here." The week before, conflict had broken out with Muslim rebels on the nearby island of Jolo, fighting that is still ongoing.



VILLANUEVA
How did he die?

COURTESY OF EVANGELINE VILLANUEVA

Shortly after he sent the message, Villanueva and his 53rd Infantry battalion were pounded by rebel mortar fire near the hamlet of Bitan-ag. Two bombs fell harmlessly but a third killed a private and wounded Villanueva and seven other soldiers.

They were evacuated by helicopter to a civilian hospital, where Villanueva exhorted his men to hold on: "*Kaya ninyo yan* [you can make it]," he said. Around noon, Evangeline received a second text message but it was blank. A couple of hours later, Villanueva died of loss of blood—the highest-ranking Philippine soldier to be killed in battle in years.

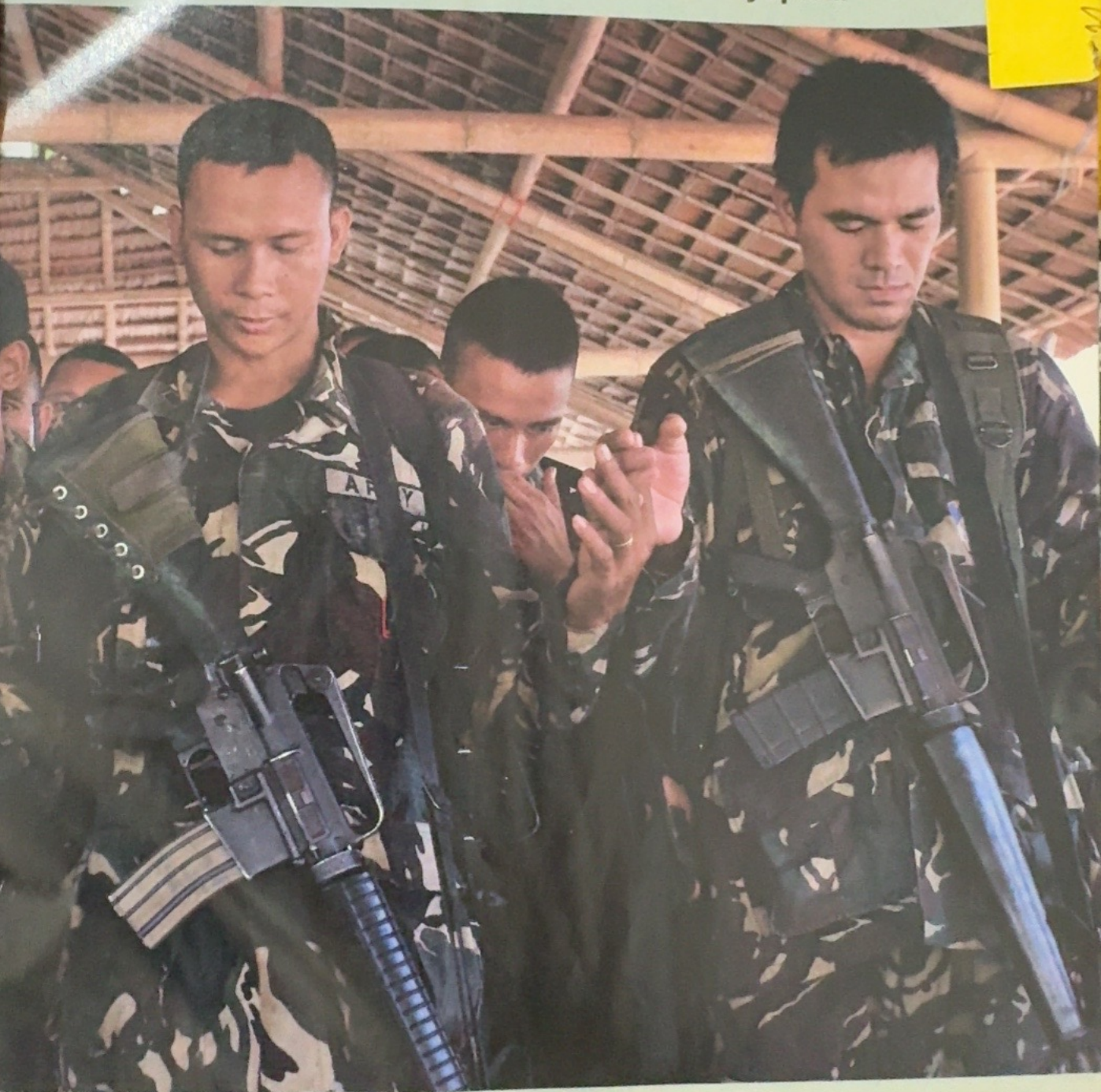
To his family, men and fellow officers, there is tragedy in the death of Dennis Villanueva. But there's a puzzle too. Did that third mortar inflict mortal wounds—or did Villanueva die because he failed to receive timely medical treatment? Army brass insist on the former. "There's no way he would have survived," contends General Efren Abu, Armed Forces of the Philippines' Chief of Staff.



PRAYING FOR HELP
Soldiers attend Mass at a field camp on the embattled southern island of Jolo

GUN

The Philippine military is fighting low morale, poor equipment and stubborn militants. That's a problem not just for the nation but for the entire region **By Anthony Spaeth**



But Evangeline, a trained pharmacist, is convinced that her husband perished because his battalion didn't have proper medical supplies in the field and he was airlifted to a hospital that didn't stock his type of blood for transfusions. "My husband shouldn't have died," she tells TIME.

The mystery is worth pursuing, because the Philippine military is badly in need of intensive care. No nation in Asia has so many serious, festering internal security problems. A major reason the Philippines has never become an Asian Tiger is the seemingly ceaseless havoc caused by bombings in its capital, firefights in the jungles, and tourists held for ransom. If the country can't control its Communist insurgents, Muslim separatists, kidnap gangs, and terrorists who sneak in from neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia, it will continue to repel investors and hemorrhage development opportunities.

Asia as a whole is affected, too. Last month, the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Manila landed in diplomatic hot water for telling an Australian reporter that Mindanao was becoming a "Mecca" for terrorism and could develop into "an Afghanistan situation." Washington is taking the sorry state of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (A.F.P.) seriously: since the war on terror began, it has stepped up training programs and boosted military aid, which currently runs at about \$86 million a year. "In the post-9/11 world," says Marvin Ott, a professor at the National War College in Washington, D.C., "the one thing the U.S.—and the region—has to worry about is the Philippines' becoming a haven for terrorists, or parts of it becoming a large ungoverned space like Somalia. There are groups out there looking for just such havens."

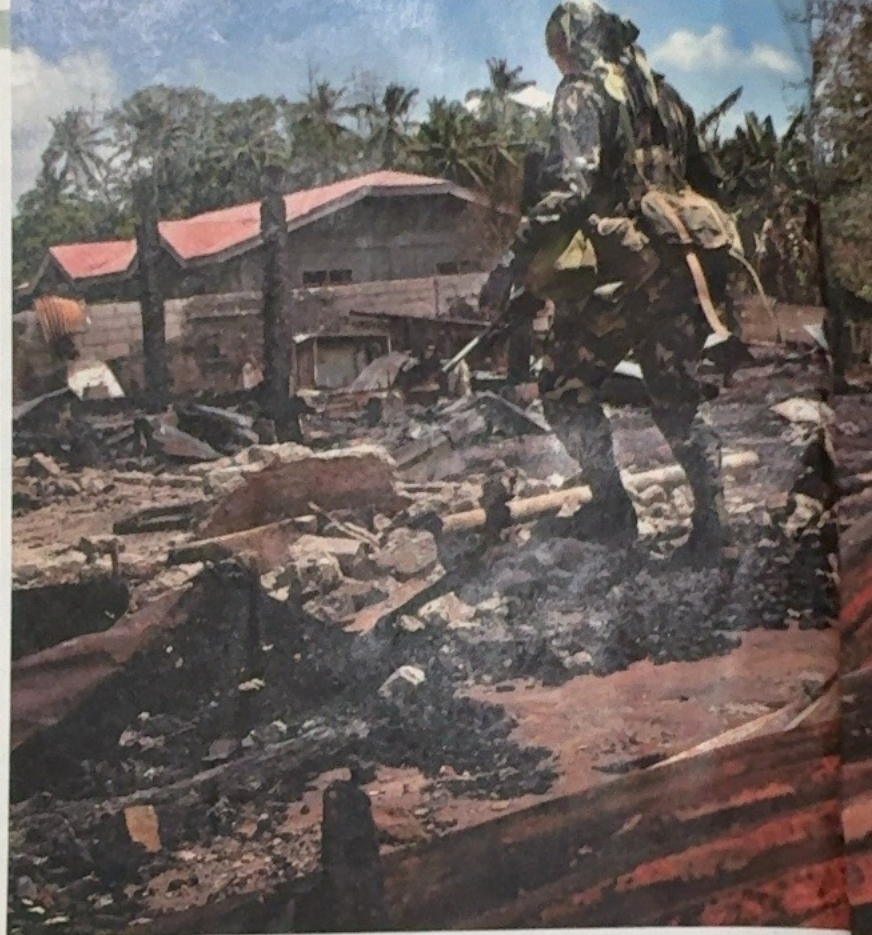
Keeping the country terrorist-free is the job of the personnel of the A.F.P., and they're in battle almost every day of the year, fighting the same wars some of their fathers and grandfathers fought—often with the same rusty guns. Underfunded and distractedly run—President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is on her sixth Chief of Staff in four years—the A.F.P. are working at less than 50% of their capacity, according to Defense Secretary Avelino Cruz. Arroyo has begun a 10-year, \$365 million modernization of the military, but even that plan will barely touch the deterioration of the past decade.

In short, it's a debilitating time to be one of the Philippines' 125,000 soldiers—and that raises a threat of a different order. In March, former National Security Adviser Jose T. Almonte warned that the

disgruntled military could seize power to rectify a "mismanaged society." A few days later, former Defense Secretary Fortunato Abat disclosed that he had drafted his own vision for a new governmental structure for the Philippines—a military junta—and sent copies to the A.F.P.'s top commanders as "food for thought." The Philippines has endured more than 10 coup attempts of varying gravity in the last 19 years. In the most serious (in 1989), coup leaders inspired their followers by saying the civilian government had not only failed the nation but was using its troops as cannon fodder in unwinnable wars.

Such messages still circulate, and they are more true now than in the past. Who can blame soldiers for being unhappy, or even rebellious, when they're sent into battle on helicopters that keep breaking down, with machine-gun parts fashioned from discarded sardine or corned-beef cans, and without protective armor or other vital needs—such as basic supplies and manpower to prevent a battalion commander from unnecessarily bleeding to death?

If that's how Dennis Villanueva died.



TURN BACK THE CLOCK A decade, and the A.F.P. were in the midst of their most hopeful period. They were no longer as bloated and distrusted as during Ferdinand Marcos' years in power. Coup plotting ceased under the presidency of Fidel Ramos, a former four-star general. And the internal security of the Philippines had reached what appeared to be a genuine turning point. The overthrow of Marcos in 1986, the restoration of democracy and the collapse of the Soviet Union dealt seemingly fatal blows to the Communist insurgency, which stretched back to the 1950s. A peace deal with the separatist Moro National Liberation Front (M.N.L.F.) promised an end to decades of conflict in vast, rough-tumble Mindanao. With peace brooding all over, the government decided A.F.P. weren't needed for domestic security and a law was passed saying they henceforth be used for external operations such as U.N. peacekeeping missions patrolling the waters around the Spratly Islands. The nasty, deadly



WAR ZONE After a firefight, a soldier patrols a town on Jolo, where the army is flushing out militants

On the Cheap

The Philippine military has a lot to do—on a small budget

MILITARY SPENDING

As percentage of GDP

Japan	1%
Indonesia	1.3%
Philippines	1.5%
South Korea	2.7%
United States	3.3%
China	3.5–5.0%
Singapore	4.9%



**ONLY 1 DOCTOR
FOR EVERY 294
SOLDIERS**



**116 WORKING
AIRCRAFT FOR
1,018 PILOTS**

Sources: CIA World Factbook; 2003 Feliciano report

How to Turn the Tide

MODERNIZE

The government has begun a 10-year, \$365 million modernization plan to fundamentally change the way the armed forces are run, including in personnel management, acquisitions and use of the budget

HELP FROM UNCLE SAM

After the Philippines closed American bases in 1992, \$200 million in yearly military aid from the U.S. was sharply reduced. Since 9/11, it has rebounded: this year, Washington will give \$86 million, up 21% from 2004



▲ COUP WATCH

If the deterioration and corruption in the military aren't halted, soldiers might be inspired to rebel against the government again, as they did in Manila in 2003, above

clashes that continued were fobbed off to the national police.

The rose-tinted glasses fell off pretty fast. The Communists bounced back. In Mindanao, M.N.L.F. founder Nur Misuari surrendered his group's arms in exchange for political control of most of the island; a splinter group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (M.I.L.F.), kept fighting. (The M.I.L.F. is currently in peace talks with the government, but Misuari restarted his antigovernment rebellion nearly four years ago when he realized that he would lose re-election as governor of his megaprovince.)

Then the Philippines woke up to the fact that the regional network of Islamic extremists known as Jemaah Islamiyah had operatives training at M.I.L.F. camps in the south and helping to set off bombs in Manila. And another M.N.L.F. offshoot, Abu Sayyaf, has scared off tourists by kidnapping foreigners (and locals) for ransom. It's Abu Sayyaf, teaming up with some 300 Misuari loyalists, that is fighting the government on the southern island of Jolo, battles that have so far killed 100 people, including 40 soldiers.

In sum, the A.F.P. never got out of the bush-fight business and are also operating on one of the lowest budgets in Asia. The Philippines spends 1.5% of GDP on its military, compared with nearly 5% by Singapore, a country with minimal security threats. The Philippines has one of the region's lowest ratios of troops to the general population. The U.S. used to contribute \$200 million a year to the Philippine armed forces, which served as life support. But that spigot was wrenched shut in 1992 when the Americans were thrown out of their two huge bases in Luzon. "We are facing so many threats," says Chief of Staff Abu. "But the budget given to us is not enough. We don't have enough money." As a 2003 report on the state of the military by a commission headed by former Supreme Court Justice Florentino P. Feliciano puts it: "The A.F.P. can easily qualify as one of the cheapest armies in the world."

Arroyo recently started her 10-year modernization plan, but, according to the forthright Abu, "The word modernization is a misnomer. When you talk about modern weapons, we can't afford them."

Abu's preferred term is refurbishing, and he admits it's long overdue. In the 1980s, the military had 80 functioning helicopters. That number shrank to 10 last year, before the Philippines started getting more choppers from Singapore and the U.S. (One of the U.S. helicopters crashed last week, killing all nine aboard.) The Philippine Air Force has three C-130 cargo planes for ferrying vehicles, supplies, troops—and carrying coffins from battle zones. Only one C-130 is flown at the moment; the other two are used for spare parts. The army's M-16s date back to 1972, and need to have the barrels replaced; many are no longer capable of shooting straight. Communication equipment is so ancient—oversize Vietnam War-era radio sets with tree-grazing antennas—that soldiers are told to use their own cell phones in battle. (Officers give them prepaid phone cards.) In the 1990s, troops were forced to buy their own combat boots, a shortage later eased by shipments from China, although many still have to purchase their own fatigues. "Go out to the battlefield and you'll see people with



CLOSE COMBAT
Helicopters, in short supply,
are needed to bring wounded
soldiers, below, to safety

different uniforms," sighs Abu. "The only thing we can give is the heart to fight. That's all we have."

And that's the condition of the squadron Dennis Villanueva took into battle on Feb. 10.

JOLO IS WHERE NUR MISUARI STARTED the Muslim separatist war in 1972, and there are two versions of how the recent fighting began. The military says rebels ambushed and killed eight soldiers on Feb. 7. Through their spokespeople, the rebels claim that the soldiers started the conflict by killing a local religious leader, his wife and son. Either way, President Arroyo has decided to crack down hard on Jolo. Says Lieut. General Alberto Braganza, commander of the A.F.P.'s Southern Command (Southcom): "We will finish what they started."

Some of the guerrillas are members of Abu Sayyaf, but most are Misuari loyalists from the old days. The operation is a lot like those in the Vietnam War: the army pinpoints a village dominated by the rebels and moves in to "cleanse" it. Residents flee; up to 50,000 were in temporary refugee shelters across the island at the height of the fighting in March.

The morning Villanueva died, two infantry battalions and two marine battalions were sent to capture a camp led by an M.N.L.F. rebel named Habier Malik. A pair of OV-10 attack aircraft softened up the target with 50-lb. bombs. Villanueva's battalion was marching south toward Bitan-ag when it was bombarded by three mortars

around 10:30. The third landed about five meters from Villanueva and Captain Joel Jugarap, 33. "I saw him grab his right leg and shout, 'I am hit, please help me,'" Jugarap says. "I told the radio operator to ask for immediate air evacuation. I realized I couldn't shout very loudly because I had been hit by shrapnel in the left lung."

Villanueva and two other injured men were put in an armored personnel carrier; the other five wounded were moved by civilian vehicles. It took 10 minutes to get to the operation landing zone, where a helicopter was unloading supplies. "To my surprise," recalls Jugarap, "the chopper left without any wounded men. I tried my best to wave with my wounded right hand. Maybe they were blind." It was a 20- to 30-minute wait for the next helicopter, which evacuated the eight injured men to Jolo town, a 15-minute flight. Villanueva seemed fine, Jugarap says. Then came a

nive- to 10-minute drive by humvee to the Provincial Hospital. men a sole surgeon went to work on both Jugarap and Villanueva. "His through was right next to minor fu recalls Jugarap. "He gives instructions to succo men. 'Text my wife. carri her I'm O.K.'"

After surgery on wrist, chest and the Jugarap was put on a aircraft to Mindanao. "When I woke up on plane, I asked who Colonel Villanueva. They said he was dead. I cried a bit. I didn't have the slightest idea he was going to die. I thought he was the most serious ca

Chief of Staff Abu tells TIME Villanueva suffered fatal internal injuries. (Other generals interviewed by TIME they were told the same thing.) Jugarap disputes this: he says he saw wounded Villanueva's hand and right leg, but evidence of internal injuries. "He only minor wounds," he says. "He was not complaining when we were in the hospital." Jugarap's conclusion: "It could have been different. He could have been saved."

On Feb. 28, the military seized another rebel camp near Silangkan, a seaside town on Jolo where Misuari resurrected his rebellion in November 2001. (Misuari fled to Malaysia shortly afterward and was extradited to Manila. He's now in jail awaiting trial for rebellion.) Six days after the capture, TIME accompanied Southern Command Braganza on a visit to "cleansed" town. Braganza has one of the bigger jobs in the A.F.P.: with the re



fighting on Jolo, about half the military's men and equipment are in Mindanao. He strides through a deserted Silangan. The population has fled and sea breezes waft through an empty schoolhouse. The area is not fully secure: rebels are able to lob mortars from the jungle; eight days later, they succeeded in hitting an armored personnel carrier, wounding two soldiers inside.

In an open-sided, thatched-roofed community hall, Braganza hosts troops to a "boodle fight," a tradition apparently adapted from West Point. A long table is covered with banana leaves and then layered with rice, grilled tuna and canned sardines. All the men gather around, officers and grunts elbow-to-elbow. An officer commands: "Ready on the left? Ready on the right? Fire!" Then everyone digs in with bare hands, Philippine-style. A midday Mass follows, and a pep talk from Braganza. "Don't lose your morale," he urges the weary-looking soldiers. "The A.F.P. is doing refurbishing: the higher-ups are taking care of that. We in the field do the fighting. We in the field are gaining victories!" A jeep from the Scout Rangers, the Philippines' Green Berets, is parked outside the eating hut. On one bumper reads the Rangers slogan: WE STRIKE! On the other: GOD WILL PROVIDE.

In the assault on the rebel base near Silangan, 60 soldiers fought more than 80 armed guerrillas for three hours; 15 rebels were killed, 20 captured, and the rest vanished into the jungle. Two soldiers sustained only slight wounds, but put that down to luck. For 60 men, the assault team had only 33 helmets and eight bulletproof vests. Asked about the lack of equipment, Braganza is embarrassed. "They're used to it," he snaps. "They like to run light." Then he resorts to jocular. "In the Philippines, the commanders are courageous, the soldiers are brave!"

The Philippines' fighting men are indeed used to their shortage of gear. The irony is that with the A.F.P. stuck in low-level conflicts with jungle insurgents, their requirements are basic. "For internal security, you don't need much," says Senator Juan Ponce Enrile, longtime Defense Minister under Marcos. "All you need is to give them assault rifles, ammo, transport, plus counterinsurgency air cover. You don't need fighter planes, just helicopter gunships and good communications." Blaming the budget infuriates government critics like Enrile, who says mismanagement and corruption are the bigger problems for the A.F.P.

The 2003 Feliciano report on the state of the armed forces backs that assertion. In

fact, it reads like a textbook on how to bleed a military dry. The report describes a phenomenon known as "conversion," which, according to the authors—two Supreme Court justices, two retired military officers, a political-science professor, and the dean of a law school—ends up diverting 30% of the procurement budget into private pockets. (One typical example from the report: the marines once ordered 500 American-made Kevlar helmets, paid more than \$70,000 to some suppliers, and ended up with 299 helmets manufactured in Taiwan.) It also tells the sad story of the Retirement and Separation Benefits System, or RSBS, a pension fund set up in 1973. Every month, each Philippine soldier contributes 5% of his salary to the RSBS, which at some point was supposed to take over the job of paying

pensions from the national treasury. It never did, and the whole fund collapsed in the 1997 Asian economic crisis, after which 240 RSBS officials and employees were indicted for fraud or graft.

Then there's the "startling and appalling" (in the words of the report) saga of Fort Bonifacio, a military base on prime real estate in Manila. After the U.S. stopped aid in the early 1990s, the Philippine government decided to make up the shortfall by selling some of its bases. A developer paid \$630 million for Bonifacio's 214 hectares. But then a group of serving and retired officers housed on the base registered themselves as the land's owners and managed to get the case into the Philippines' famously logjammed court system. The government was forced to

Rebel Nation

The Philippines is home to more active militant groups than any other Asian country

NEW PEOPLE'S ARMY (N.P.A.)

The military wing of the Communist Party has 10,000 fighters—double the number in the early 1990s. The map shows where the military says they are concentrated

MORO NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT (M.N.L.F.)

At onetime the country's largest Muslim separatist force, the M.N.L.F. has joined the political system. But followers of its former leader are fighting on Jolo

MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT (M.I.L.F.)

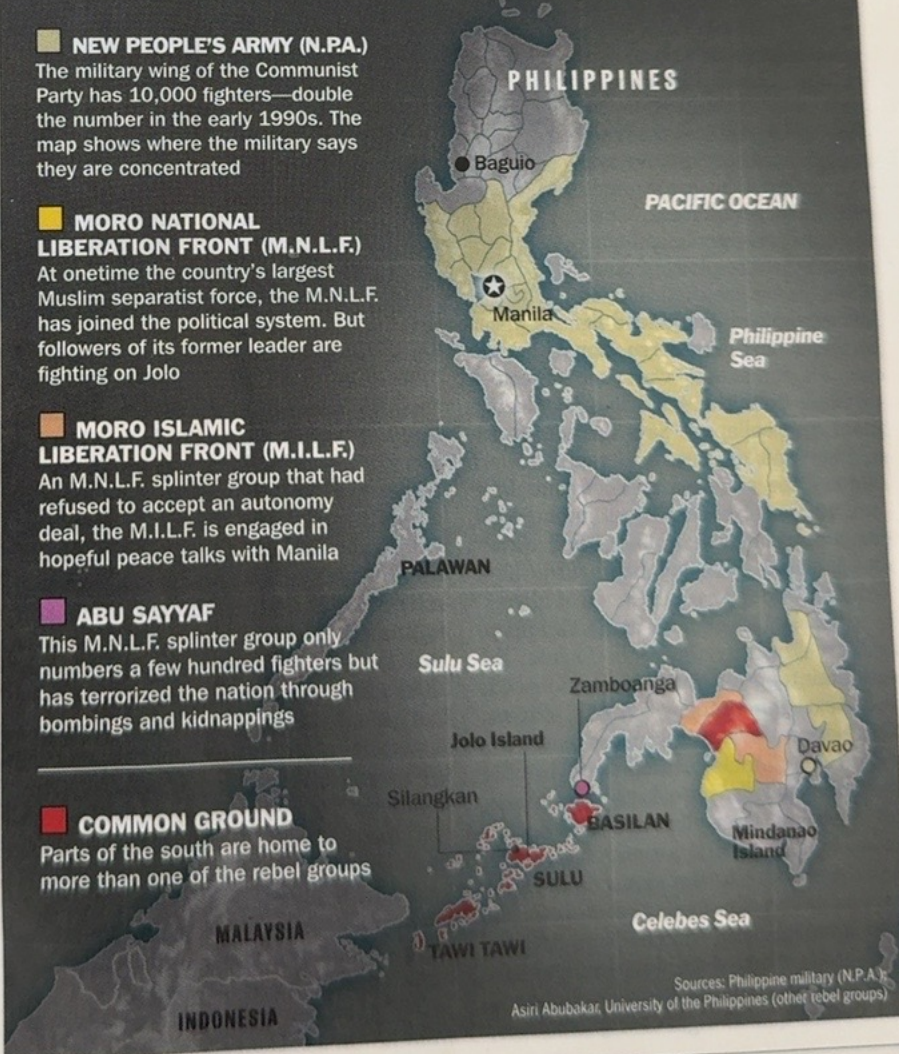
An M.N.L.F. splinter group that had refused to accept an autonomy deal, the M.I.L.F. is engaged in hopeful peace talks with Manila

ABU SAYYAF

This M.N.L.F. splinter group only numbers a few hundred fighters but has terrorized the nation through bombings and kidnappings

COMMON GROUND

Parts of the south are home to more than one of the rebel groups



Sources: Philippine military (N.P.A.); Asiri Abubakar, University of the Philippines (other rebel groups)

refund the purchase price for 87 hectares. The report calls that episode "a most serious breakdown of discipline... at the most senior levels of the A.F.P. officer corps."

"Corruption is the No. 1 complaint by my soldiers," says an officer in Mindanao. "We are the ones who suffer because of poor procurement." And on occasion the soldiers do more than merely gripe about it. In July 2003, 323 officers and soldiers from such elite units as the Scout Rangers took over one of the high-rise towers of the Oakwood Premier Apartments in the heart of Makati, Manila's business center. They were persuaded to abandon their coup attempt after 23 hours, although Arroyo came very close to ordering the military to blow up the tower. When the mutineers finally surrendered, they said their motive was to highlight the wretched state of the A.F.P. and they complained specifically about corruption, bad housing, woe-ful medical care—and said they wanted refunds of their years of contributions to the failed RSBS fund.

The Feliciano Commission's task was to investigate the Oakwood rebellion. It argued that the soldiers' motive was to overthrow the government, not make a statement about the A.F.P. Nonetheless, it concluded that the plotters' complaints were justified and, if left unresolved, could lead to further coups. And corruption, the commission concluded, was such a serious problem that "the A.F.P. itself could implode and collapse." Says Enrile: "If the military and defense leadership doesn't address the situation soon, demoralization will set in. And you know what happens then. The soldiers will either throw away their guns—or turn them around 180 degrees."

It's a cool, clear dawn at the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) in Baguio, the mountaintop institution that molds the next generation of A.F.P. officers. Graduation is a week away and the male and female seniors are ironing their uniforms, baking cakes and preparing for a week of farewell parties and boodle fights—and their first assignments in the field. According to the newspapers, 86% have asked to be stationed in steamy, far-off Mindanao, inspired by the action on Jolo.

The 69-year-old academy—its first curriculum was adapted from West Point's by none other than Dwight D. Eisenhower—

was once one of the proudest institutions in the land. The shine is off these days. The class of '71 has become infamous for producing many of the coup plotters of the '80s and '90s. Another member of that class, Major General Carlos Garcia, is currently on trial for having unexplained wealth of more than \$1 million after serving three years as the A.F.P.'s logistics comptroller. The class of 2004's valedictorian, Rolly Joaquin, is being tried for unbecoming conduct after being caught shoplifting while training in the U.S.

Compared with the helmetless grunts in the field, the PMA's cadets represent the military at its most pampered. The campus north of Manila is idyllic, the dorm rooms wouldn't look out of place at a U.S. college, and cadets receive



IN TRAINING Cadet officers say they're eager to get battlefield postings in Mindanao

monthly stipends of \$300—considerably more than what a parent who works on a farm or in a schoolhouse earns. Even so, the quality of the recruits is declining, an administrator tells *TIME*. Competition with banks and call centers is one factor. Another, bigger one is young people's reluctance to join a military that's still fighting the same old wars, only less ably than before. "Hey, when I was here in the '70s," says the official, "my instructors had fought the N.P.A. [New People's Army]. Our generation fought the N.P.A. We're still fighting the N.P.A. That has an effect."

How can the Philippine armed forces—worn down and riddled with graft—get back into fighting shape? Chief of Staff Abu takes the question seriously. "Definitely we have neglected the administration and logistics that our forces need," he says, pausing momentarily. "It's just like you want to win a basketball game. To do that,

you've got to organize. Get a new coach. Get good players. Practice more. Maybe you'll lose—but what we need is consistency." The "new coach" line is deliberate. June, Abu will retire after a mere 18 months in the job to give way to Arroyo's seventh Chief of Staff.

WAS DENNIS VILLANUEVA a casualty of his employment's shoddiness? *TIME* obtained his death report, not from the armed forces but from Parouk Hussin, governor of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, which runs the hospital in which he died. (The military has its own hospital in a nearby police camp, but it's badly equipped that only minor wounds are treated there.) The report disproves Abu's assertion that Villanueva had internal injuries: it lists vascular injury to the left leg, right thigh, right hand, and a puncture wound on the left shoulder. Villanueva's widow is also correct in asserting that the hospital didn't have her husband's blood type. A unit of fresh whole blood was administered before he was operated on to stop his bleeding.

And Captain Jugarin's memories of Villanueva's dabbling in the hospital appear to be wrong. According to

report, Villanueva's blood pressure on admission to the hospital was 0/0 and he bled "paper white" from loss of blood. "He bled heavily before he reached the hospital," says Dr. Basil Jajurie, Villanueva's surgeon-on-call. "He had to be saved."

But Jajurie says a lot could have been done to sustain Villanueva en route to hospital: bleeding can be stanchied with pressure dressings, and transfusions of intravenous fluids or plasma expanders would have helped enormously. "During military operations," he tells *TIME*, "there should be a military surgeon on call." But the A.F.P. is as short of medical kits as it is of helmets, fatigues, proper housing for soldiers, and controls over officers who handle the budget.

The likely explanation of the haste with which Villanueva's life bled away in the helicopter and vehicles that brought him to Sulu Provincial Hospital. He served his country and his military well—better than they served him. —With reporting by Sally Donnelly/Washington and Nelly Sindayon/Manila