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Critics counter that the VFA wasn't ratified by the U.S. Senate and is therefore not duly recognized as a treaty by both countries.

But even those who consider the VFA a treaty, such as its principal author, Sen. Blas Ople, have said the Balikatan exercises aren't covered by the agreement.

And the MDT? Well, it only applies when there is an external threat to either countries' territorial integrity, which the Abu Sayyaf, despite the sketchy claims of their link to the Al-Qaeda network, is not.

CORRUPTION

One can hardly expect prescribed solutions to the Abu Sayyaf problem from "protectors of terrorists." But the New Patriotic Alliance (BAYAN), a leftist umbrella of people's organizations, has insisted that the Abu Sayyaf can be wiped

out without foreign military intervention. The most obvious weakness of the Armed Forces of the Philippines is corruption, which no amount of training and weapons upgrade from the U.S. can eliminate, but which political will can.

BAYAN points to an incident in June 2001 as an example of AFP corruption and collusion with terrorists. In that incident, the Abu Sayyaf was surrounded by the AFP inside a hospital compound. By all accounts, it looked to be the end of the terrorist group and the kidnapping crisis. But, miraculously, the group escaped through a backdoor after some ransom money exchanged hands — with AFP commanders allegedly taking a cut — and soldiers guarding the door had withdrawn from their posts. A sweeping investigation has failed to turn up any evidence of corruption despite damning testimonies from a hostage witness and Sen. Sergio

Osmena whose plane was borrowed to transfer the ransom.

BAYAN and other critics of Balikatan further argue that the presence of hundreds of U.S. troops in the hot zones of Mindanao will not mean eventual peace and stability. Indeed, their biggest fear is that this is only a lit fuse heading towards a powder keg. The U.S. State Department itself has estimated the core fighters of the Abu Sayyaf to number no more than 200. The critics wonder if the U.S. isn't also eyeing much larger armed dissident groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the New People's Army as future targets for their anti-terrorism campaigns. That would mean a more intense involvement and a longer stay for U.S. troops in the country — something that would be unilaterally favourable to American geo-political and economic interests in Southeast Asia.

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Screaming my lungs out with the protesters was exhilarating. I was moved and amazed by the unity they displayed.

At around 5 p.m., another CUFSA member and I decided to join the rest of the Filipino community inside the hotel who waited for GMA's arrival. On our way in, we were stopped by police officers who saw us come from the picket line. They scrutinized our invitation cards and allowed us in without incident.

The hall was packed. Media people filled the front part of the hall, and the first five rows were filled with Philippine embassy people. I randomly asked people why they were there and was surprised to learn that all of them didn't have any deeper reason than to see the president and hear what she had to say to the community.

When the president finally arrived, I stood up with the rest of the crowd, but I didn't clap with the others. I was more intent on seeing what she looked like in person.

It took a while for her to get on stage as she shook hands with people and got photographed.

She started her speech by greeting the crowd in various Filipino dialects. Each

greeting met with a response of approval and loud clapping. Represent!

She spoke to the crowd with confidence and reassurances. She said the Philippines is in a better state, comparing the country's GDP with other Southeast Asian countries. She then praised the crowd of Filipino immigrants to Canada, saying they were the ones keeping the economy afloat. She called them the "new investors of the Philippines," neatly avoiding the word "remittances."

As she talked about how the country is dependent on the money sent by people abroad, she failed to mention how that money is earned. She neglected to describe how some endure abuses to earn those dollars, although she did acknowledge the sacrifices these people have made by separating from their families so that they can have a better life in the Philippines. To me, her speech seemed to basically encourage Filipinos to seek work abroad. I was not impressed by her speech at all because none of the more pressing issues in the Philippines was mentioned.

She asked the Filipino community for support and once more gave assurances that the Philippines is in good condition. To seal

the 20-minute speech, the crowd gave loud applause, something which I refused to join. I noticed others who weren't applauding. Call me cynical, but I don't think the Philippines is in good condition, especially when GMA just sold us out to the U.S.

After the speech, I wanted to get some sound bites from the president, so I scurried to the front of her entourage. When I came face-to-face with her, I was caught a little off-guard. I didn't think I could break through her bodyguards, one of whom was still trying to hold me back. But all she said was that CUFSA members should study hard and finish our studies. Feeling a little patronized, I asked her how she was going to address the Marinduque mining issue. With a big smile, she said it had already been addressed. And that was that.

I lost the entourage, but I managed to speak to a man who listened to the speech. He, too, felt insulted over being called a "new investor of the Philippines."

I remember thinking how it was all such a pointless gathering. I should have just stayed outside with the rest of the protesters. At least I would have had fun yelling my lungs out.