

HOPEFUL AND PATIENT

Socorro Diokno of the Philippines Anti-Bases Coalition talks to Stephanie Mills

Filipinos by nature are very hopeful and patient – we took 300 years to get rid of the Spanish, and 20 years to get rid of Marcos, 14 of them under martial law. But people right now are being forced to choose between ‘democracy’ – which means armed vigilantes, illegal arrest, ambushes and killings – or the communists. There is increasing polarisation here.’

Socorro Diokno has been involved for 13 years with the Free Legal Assistance Group (which her father, former Senator Jose Diokno, founded), and is also secretary-general of the Philippines Anti-Bases Coalition. She sees a clear link between the internal problems of the country and the presence of American interests there.

‘The issues of American economic interests and their desire to maintain the military bases cannot be divorced. They can’t allow a country like ours to develop at its own rate – they need to keep it poor, they want to keep the status quo so that they can dump goods on us and use our cheap labour. And the bases support American military conflicts such as the Gulf War – 66 per cent of supplies for that war come from Clark Air Base, so we are being dragged into it.’ The political culture is also heavily influenced by the US, she says.

‘Everything here is American, and seen from the American point of view. The polarisation here has been increased by a growing climate of anti-communism which is fostered by the Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) policy of the Americans. During Marcos, anti-communist hysteria was laughed at because people didn’t like Marcos and thought he was absurd. But the Filipinos are not communist by nature – 90 per cent of them are Catholic – and now anti-communist sentiment is being played on. Everyone and everything is communist: if you have a mole on your face then you’re a sparrow,’ she says, referring to incidents when hooded men have ‘identified’ supposed members of NPA urban hit squads, or ‘sparrows’. ‘They have started to believe their own propaganda.’

GETTING RID OF THE BASES

The Anti-Bases Coalition is a grouping of anti-nuclear and nationalist organisations working for the removal of US bases, troops, nuclear weapons and installations. Their 1983 Declaration of Principles states: ‘The bases impair our national sovereignty and independence, deprive our people of the full use and control of our national patrimony, support US intervention in our internal affairs, serve as staging grounds and jumping-off places for gunboat diplomacy and intervention in the internal affairs of other states, and support the prevailing imper-

ialist control of the international economic order. The bases support the inequitable status quo, strengthen authoritarian rule typified by the Marcos regime, promote the militarisation of our country, intensify the violation of our basic human rights as individuals and as a people . . .’ (Declaration of Principles of the Anti-Bases Coalition, 1983).

Diokno feels Filipino nationalism can be galvanised in support of the anti-bases movement. More than 90 per cent of the population used to favour keeping the bases; in 1986 the figure dropped to 66 per cent in favour, 20 per cent undecided and 14 per cent against.

‘We’ve still got a long way to go in our education campaign, but little by little it is changing. The situation is still very bad and it is going to take a long, long time. I might be dead by then, but I’m still working and looking forward to the day the bases go – we owe it at least to future generations.’

At present, the coalition is supporting two bills in the Senate, one creating a Philippines nuclear-free zone, and the other a nuclear monitoring and control commission to implement the present nuclear-free constitution.

Diokno is hopeful about the future of the two bills, as more than half the Senate support them at the moment. But she is less optimistic about the long-term prospects for democracy in the Philippines.

‘Life here is very depressing, and the future looks even more so. It’s the perfect “low-intensity conflict” situation. We do not discount the possibility of another Grenada happening here, with direct US military intervention – there are rapid deployment forces based at Clark, and the situation is in many ways parallel to that of Vietnam or Central America. There is a saying here: you cannot stay in government without the support of the United States. The Aquino government for example, has received a tremendous amount of military aid – more than Marcos.’

CHANGING SOCIAL STRUCTURES

When Marcos went, the structures remained the same, she says.

‘We can’t advance unless we change those structures.’ The basic changes, she believes, must include a reduction in the armed forces and better pay for those who remain; an alternative defence system not geared towards internal problems and establishing the principle of civil supremacy over the military; genuine land reform; an increase in wage levels and trade union protection for the workers and farmers; a proper housing, education and social welfare systems;

and an economic policy based on the needs of Filipinos and controlled by them.

She feels a change of government is possible now, with the re-introduction of martial law and a military regime.

‘But I still believe a peaceful resolution to the problems is possible. I’m a cynical person by nature, but I think that in many cases violence is not the answer. If you can still achieve your goals through peaceful means, you must do that. After all, who would have thought that we would get Marcos out without violence? However, if you have used each and every recourse, then people do have the collective right to revolution – the concept of revolution is one of self-defence.’

‘But I don’t know what the next step is, the point at which you give up on democracy. At the moment we are trying to work with the Government, and we can’t give up that opportunity of the legislative process. But the point is, we criticise the government to help the government, not simply to have them fail.’

She also blames the failure of the educated Filipino middle-class as well as American dominance for the problems.

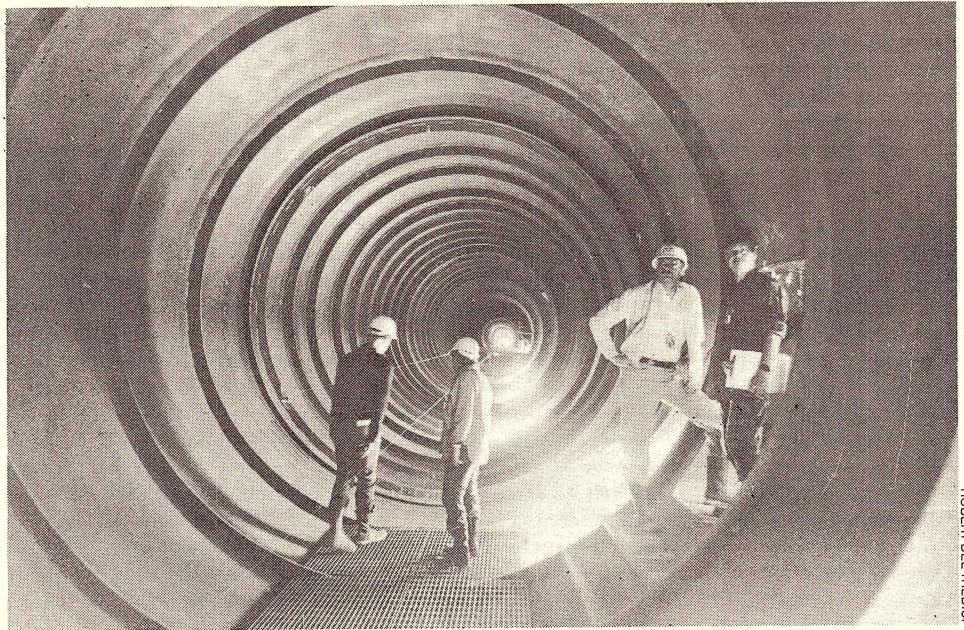
‘It is we ourselves who have failed too – we didn’t open our people’s minds to explain the problems. We thought we were successful when we got rid of Marcos, but people still don’t understand, for example, about human rights: many of them are still in favour of vigilantes and zoning. We have to do more education yet.’

DEALING WITH FEAR

Diokno is in a vulnerable position now, even though she is a member of a prominent family in Philippines political life. Is she afraid of the intimidation and killings that have targeted other left-wing activists reaching her?

‘Well, I travel a lot and speak throughout Central Luzon on the bases issue, and every time I speak, the electricity gets cut off and there is no lights or mike. People keep saying I shouldn’t go round on my own, but I spent twelve years working on these issues with my father. Fear is very normal, but it is more important that you conquer it. You are afraid, but there are certain things you have to do, regardless of the consequences. You just don’t let the fear control you.’ ■





ROBERT DEL TREDICI

Nuclear Tunnel. This 875 foot steel pipe in Nevada, USA, tests the impact of nuclear warheads on military communications and other nuclear warheads. At the far end the warhead is detonated behind blast doors so that only radiation hits test equipment, not the blast. 29.10.84



ROBERT DEL TREDICI

Radioactive Reindeer. This freezer in a Swedish slaughterhouse is full of radioactive Reindeer with a contamination level of 16,000 becquerels per kilo. The limit is 300 becquerels per kilo. They were bought by the government and used as feed on mink farms. 2.12.86

UNVEILING THE MYSTERY OF THE BOMB

Stephanie Mills talks to **Robert Del Tredici**, author of *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb* (Harrap, £9.95), a photographic account of the making of nuclear weapons

The Bomb is like a religion, says Robert Del Tredici. 'It has mystery and horror, it is transcendent, it is very far removed from us . . . It sits up in the middle of our imaginations like a god - all-powerful, not very good at communicating, completely beyond our daily experience, and beyond politics, too, in a sense. What conceivable issue would be worth using the Bomb over? Certainly the people closest to it, the designers and scientists have a belief, a faith in it.'

In his recent book *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*, Del Tredici sets out to map those people who are caught in the orbit of the

nuclear arms industry, and to capture the Bomb 'on its home ground'. In the process, he is aware that he himself has been seduced by the Bomb's 'mystery' and has felt the need to 'stalk my way around it'.

'Obviously I have become hooked on it, although I am completely opposed to it. But I'm really grateful I wasn't born during the Manhattan Project, because it would have been very hard for me to resist the pull from doing that [inventing and using the Bomb] for the first time. I don't quite understand why I'm drawn to it - it snuck up on me. But I understand how appealing it can be to people, how they love it, and believe in it beyond all reason - I take that as a given, not as a shocking fact. As a result, those people were happy to talk to me.'

The 'mystery' of the Bomb has been tied up with the cultural invisibility of the nuclear age, he says.

'I realised I'd never seen a Bomb factory, and couldn't even begin to visualise one. That bothered me, and then got my documentary interest up. It seemed silly that something so important and produced in such massive quantities was so completely shrouded in secrecy.'

THREE MILE ISLAND

Del Tredici's first encounter with nuclear issues was at Three Mile Island. He spent a year documenting the impact of the 1978 accident, because, he says, 'it became clear their story was not going to be told in the newspapers'.

'I got hooked there on the really compelling complexity of nuclear things,' he says. 'I'd never met anything like it - so serious, so deep, and yet almost invisible. People's lives there had been profoundly changed and yet their next door neighbours would be saying that nothing had gone wrong.'

Going on to the nuclear defence industry was a logical step. 'I discovered that the airspace over Bomb factories was not restricted - so I could at least make aerial shots - and that each factory had PR people to answer "legitimate media requests". That was enough to get me going.'

His first obstacle, he says, was his own fear.

'I didn't think I could do it. So the first thing I did was go to Hiroshima, which I think is the spiritual centre of the nuclear age, because I felt I could get some kind of blessing there - which I did. I met survivors of the Bomb, and when I left I was ready to "go get" the Bomb factories, rather than quaking in my shoes.'

Meeting PR officers on their own ground was another challenge.

'They generally do their job well - which is not to obstruct, but to present an "open face" on the subject, to give an impression of civilised democracy at work. There are certain things they will tell you and certain things they won't. They never volunteer information, but if you are able to ask the right questions they will answer them - although sometimes you are told "No". It's a matter of getting a sense of the psychology of the hierarchy behind them, of speaking their

language and being very persistent. I took six years to do it, and I didn't do anything crazy during those years, so they got to know me and trust me.'

Del Tredici discovered he enjoyed getting the PR people to 'do their thing'.

'I like that kind of dancing around with the dragon, because the dragon *will* talk under certain conditions. They have to do PR for something that is not very pleasant, that has a bad name - but that can also be rather glorious if you talk about it enough. So they have to tread a delicate line and not be too enthusiastic. They've been doing it very successfully for years - mainly by keeping silent - but when they have to talk, they have a whole bunch of strategies for dealing with it.'

Del Tredici became fascinated by the reality behind the 'selling', the language used.

'For example, you *never* use the word Bomb. It's like a vulgarity. But if you talk about "technology", everything is fine. If ever I had a vulgar or nasty question to ask, I would try and phrase it so as not to interrupt the flow of dialogue. For example, when I talked to a civil defence chief, rather than say Don't you think this is just a joke, I asked, what do you say when someone says, don't you think what you're doing is just a joke?'

YEARS OF NUMBNESS

The Bomb's reality has been hidden, he says, by two factors: the secrecy of the Manhattan Project and the shroud of national security, and most crucially, by the Press Code imposed on occupied Japan by the Americans.

'Personal letters, journalistic pieces, scientific reports - everything was routinely cleaned up and cut out for a space of seven years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. During that space, the only conclusion we could come to was that the Bomb ended the war and saved lives - that is, quite a positive thing. We saw no human aftermath: it was a very, very smart thing to do. People started to wake up after the nuclear testing began, but by that time it was all over - the nuclear arms race had begun and decisions to build the facilities were all in place. We still haven't recovered from the scale of that seven years of numbness.'

The response to his book has shown the tremendous hunger for information, he says. 'It's the kind of hunger when you're not sure whether you're hungry or not. Then you smell some food, and you realise you're ravenous. People are glad it is not just more horrible shots of Hiroshima, and they are very interested in the actual process of Bomb making, and how much part of the fabric of our society it is. They like finding out about it because they have a nagging worry about nuclear weapons.'

'It was the same for me - to see the factories from the air is a lot different from reading a data book about them. That is why I wanted all the US Bomb facilities in the book, even though I had a struggle over it

with the book designer. I wanted to say - now you've seen them all. It answered a certain need in me to, X marks the spot.'

HOW CAN THEY LIVE WITH THE BOMB?

One of his other aims in doing the book was to find out how people can live with working in the Bomb factories.

'The first thing I discovered was that the closer you get to the very centre of the Bomb, the harder it is to see. Many people rationalised what they were doing by saying it was "for national defence". It passes for thinking. But I felt they were really doing it because it was a job, and if they were asked to rationalise it, that was what they offered. It shows a lack of imagination in the people working on the Bombs - people just wanted to get on with their jobs and stick with it, even if it killed them.'

Another rationale for working on the Bomb was that the government assured them it was not harmful.

'They say "We wouldn't hurt you, would we?" The workers get that constantly in newsletters and talks and on safety posters at work.'

In fact, he says, radiation dangers could be improved with new health and safety rules, but the government can't afford to allow that to happen.

'That would be admitting that the radiation set-up now is not healthy, and leave them open to lawsuits that would cost millions. But it is like the asbestos problem - people now know about radiation, the latency period for cancers has elapsed, and so it is inevitable that the government will have to do something about it - they're just dragging their heels.'

CAUSES FOR HOPE

Del Tredici's main response to finding out about the nuclear chain and its destruction has been that it is 'totally human - in the sense of all *too* human'.

'Being very human is a cause for despair, but it is also a cause for hope. People can be nudged into change - it is not a bunch of evil masterminds controlling it all.'

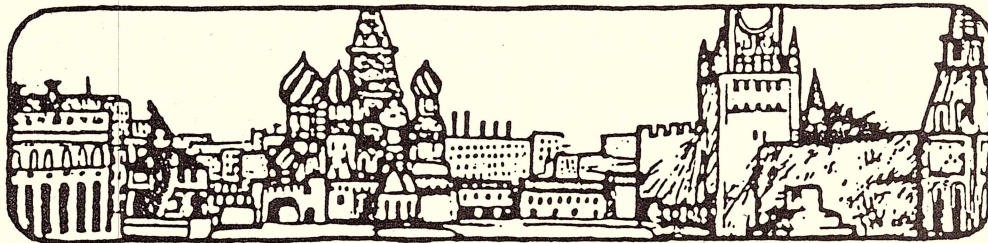
But beside the massive size of the Bomb facilities, he feels the present arms control talks look very small and remote.

'It's hard to believe that people sitting at a table will be able to reverse 30 years of that.'

Making the book has changed him too.

'I wasn't really much of a political person before I did this but I feel the book became a very political piece of work. It came from my desire to document it initially, more of an artistic impulse than a political one - it was very important for me not to preach. But now I feel I really know what is happening there, and this made me feel I needed to do the book in a very active way, that a tremendous amount was at stake. I felt I had to do whatever it took to get the pictures, from the working conditions themselves to a much larger view of how the whole arms race is completely out of control.' ■

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