On My Mind
   4/12/02

It does not sound as though the administration is very sympathetic to the pitch being made by the Saipan Garment Manufacturers Association (SGMA) that if only the CNMI would offer the right incentives, the garment industry would be glad to stay beyond December 31, 2004 - the date by which the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) will be in full effect and by which all of the CNMI's factories would, presumably, have otherwise left for better deals elsewhere.

It is, therefore, perhaps none too soon to begin considering what to do with the facilities those factories now occupy.   The first inclination, when a site is evacuated, is to tear everything down and start over.   But that only creates a lot of trash for the dump, and major indebtedness in having to purchase new materials.   It should be possible to re-use, to re-cycle, any number of the buildings associated with the 31 garment factories, that, according to the SGMA, are still in operation.

Among the first considerations should be a concern for their preservation, so that as the companies and their employees move out, they do not trash the buildings, the windows, the walls, the wiring, the plumbing, etc.   There may be clearing procedures for factories located on public land, but there probably are not for those on private land.   Perhaps it is not too late to amend contracts to build in such protection even now.

Unless leases for the garment factories have been paid in full in advance, another early consideration should be a concern for how to adjust - and obtain - the remainder due on the lease agreements.   The street talk is that 'garment factories will disappear in the middle of the night' - and to prevent that happening, steps need to be taken now to make sure that financial obligations are satisfied.

A third step that should be taken now is to draw up an inventory of the buildings at or affiliated with each garment factory - not only the factory buildings themselves, but also the barracks, the company living quarters, the company offices, the warehouses, etc., etc.   The inventory should list, in some detail, the number and nature of the buildings, and their condition.   Not all buildings will be worth saving and re-cycling, but at least with an inventory, there will be information as to what useful facilities are out there.

Unless other manufacturing industries with similar needs for space and utilities are found, it will take some imagination to re-cycle the garment factory buildings themselves.   If the floors are all concrete, maybe one can be converted to a roller-skating rink, another to a tennis or basketball court, others to exhibit areas, performance halls, shopping malls.

Finding uses for the existing barracks - and company living quarters - will, of course, depend a great deal on the condition of the barracks themselves.   Should a minimum wage law pass that entails eliminating the housing benefit, the garment manufacturing barracks would offer a convenient alternative.   For example, the barracks could be operated on a dormitory model, where individual rooms are rented out, and meals provided in a community dining hall.   With

some modification, the barracks could be converted to rooms with cooking facilities, or even apartments.

Corporate housing facilities, and perhaps even the better quality barracks (if that's not an oxymoron) could be converted into condominiums - perhaps as alternatives to homesteads.

Another idea: could the garment factory compounds - at least those on public lands - be considered ready-made tax-free zones?

In any case, it would seem appropriate, in light of the discussions on CIP and 702, on the application of minimum wage to foreign workers, on the fate of the garment factories, that some steps be taken now in anticipation of the decline, if not demise, of the garment industry in the CNMI.

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What a relief to know that the issue of housing a mahareshi and all his trappings on Rota is now dead!   One can only wonder at what it was that made the fairly tale so appealing, and at the length of time it took to realize that it was only a fairy tale.   Maybe the attributes of Rota's local medicine deserve closer study?

While the people of Rota were not willing to give up their whole island to a proposed country of global peace, the same may not be true of other Pacific countries with more islands to spare. The Republic of the Philippines has hundreds of islands, as does Indonesia, and the Maldives, for example.   Such places may be far more ready to believe and accept promises of the elaborate and extensive kind of development offered by the mahareshi than did either Rota or the CNMI.

Presumably, the group came to Rota because Rota was part of the U.S. - with a stable currency, and government.   But that doesn't mean that the group will not approach other countries.   In the interests of furthering regional cooperation, the CNMI might wish to inform its neighbors - through whatever formal and informal   channels of communication in the region are available - about the mahareshi and his global peace country, to share with them its own experience, and to forward to them the information that has been gathered here as to the prior history of the group, its attempts at development elsewhere, and whatever other information may have been gathered in the process.

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Far more threatening, though, is what's happening in the Middle East with Israel's campaign, as asserted by its Prime Minister, to destroy the infrastructure of Palestine's terrorists.   What Sharon views this infrastructure as being has not been defined, and so far, according to reports in the media, it has allowed him to wage   unrestricted battle even against defenseless women and children as he destroys their homes and villages.   No end date, no end target, no limit has been defined as to what Sharon's intent is, how far he means to go.   He is not targeting just roads, or communication centers, or airports, or power plants - the normal interpretation of "infrastructure" - but appears to be wantonly killing civilians, and destroying "civilian" facilities - homes,

churches, schools, hospitals, as well.

It is worrisome to think the U.S. appears to be taking the same approach, in its apparent intent to invade Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Somalia - and who knows where else - in the guise of destroying so-called "terrorist infrastructure."

What is truly baffling is that the rest of the world - the U.S., the Arab,   the U.N. - does not seem willing to take any real steps to stop this slaughter.   Will history show that here was another of those tragic turning points that - if only world leaders had taken a stronger stance - would not have led to another world conflagration?

And we might well be facing another world conflagration.   For it does not bode well - what with the combatants' conflicting economic interests, the semantic battles over what constitutes an act of terror, and the tangled relationships and loyalties within the Middle East.

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Speaking of semantics, a Gannett columnist makes the point that there is a difference between fighting terrorism, and fighting terrorists.   Deborah Mathis, in a column in the 4/10/12 <I>Pacific Daily News</I>, notes that "There is no racial, ethnic, religious or regional predisposition, no DNA test to detect a proclivity for terrorism.   Rather, it is an evolved condition, born of circumstance that first creates fear and sorrow, then despair, then desperation, then rage, and then, perhaps....whatever it takes."

"Winning the war on terrorism," she writes, "requires smart policy and good law and fair play .... Winning that war takes a certain understanding of and appreciation for basic human nature that, in all honesty, much of our current foreign policy - and Israel's - seem bent on ignoring."   Her conclusion: "The war on terrorism is a bigger job than the war on terrorists."

In other words, the war on terrorism will not be won by either meaningless slaughter or toppling governments.

<c>A new column will next appear on May 3, 2002.