

Some notes on the CPP 40th Anniversary Statement: retrospect, prospects, & respect for human rights

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26 December 2008 marked the 40th anniversary of the “reestablishment” of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) on 26 December 1968, not coincidentally itself the 75th birth anniversary of Mao Zedong. “Reestablishment” in order to indicate ideological, political and organisational discontinuity from the old, already defeated but still existing Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) of the same name in the Filipino language and which was founded in 1930. [1] Nearly four decades had passed since then, from 1930 to 1968. And now, another four decades have just passed, from 1968 to 2008.

From the perspective of eight decades, the Communist-led struggle in the Philippines turns out to be even more protracted than the so far four-decade protracted people’s war (PPW) counted from the founding of the CPP’s New People’s Army (NPA) on 29 March 1969, not coincidentally the 27th founding anniversary of the PKP’s Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon (Hukbalahap, Anti-Japanese People’s Army) on 29 March 1942. The highest annual policy statements of the CPP pertaining mainly to itself and to its NPA are issued publicly on their respective said anniversary days, and for the most part are written by CPP founder and ideologue Jose Maria Sison – who himself turned 70 on 8 February 2009. There is therefore now occasion to start speaking of a “septuagenarian” leadership of the CPP.

It is perhaps, therefore, most significant that the latest, the 40th anniversary statement of the CPP speaks of a plan for a “qualitative leap” of the armed revolution, that involves the NPA advancing “from the stage of strategic defensive to that of strategic stalemate” in its PPW. [2] But before going into some key ramifications of this plan, it is interesting to note certain assessments and even revelations made by the CPP in this statement. The CPP says that “all attempts to destroy the armed revolution have failed,” the PPW “has endured,” quite an achievement, it says, in a major country base of the United States. It takes pride in the NPA as the “largest revolutionary army ever built” in the Philippines, “far larger” than the Hukbalahap and the PKP’s post-anti-Japanese army, the Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB, People’s Liberation Army). In this, it does not seem to consider the far larger Moro liberation armed forces as revolutionary armies, which they consider(ed) themselves to be.

The CPP reveals that the NPA “never reached the level of 25,000 riflemen in the 1980s” (as was commonly believed, based on military intelligence estimates or figures made public), and that “its peak strength in that decade was only 6,100.” At the end of 2008, the CPP says that it has a membership which “runs into several tens of thousands” while it leads “the thousands of fighters” of the NPA (the military intelligence estimates are 4,941 NPA fighters in late 2008). [3] The CPP says it also has a countryside mass base of “millions of organised peasants” [4] in “120 to 130 guerrilla fronts” (the military intelligence estimates are 63 NPA guerrilla fronts) in “70 provinces, more than 800 municipalities and more than 10,000 barangays” (the military intelligence estimates are 1,442 NPA-affected barangays). But for the planned “great leap forward,” the CPP says it needs “tens of

thousands of Party cadres and hundreds of thousands and then millions of Party members.”

Cadres are the leading members of the CPP, its quality backbone force which leads its day-to-day revolutionary work on various fronts, mainly but not only in the NPA guerrilla fronts. [5] Most of the CPP cadres during its earlier decades came from the student sector, aided by their education and related skills, while later decades have seen more CPP cadres coming from the peasant class due to the emphasis on building the revolutionary mass movement in the countryside. But recent years have also seen increasing CPP underground recruitment from the student sector in schools and universities, such that the military says the CPP’s armed struggle still relies on these campuses as a fertile source of “quality cadres.” They “become political officers of the armed movement” and “have a big impact among farmers and youth in the countryside.” But an increasing number of them, still in the flower of their youth, have been killed or captured in armed encounters with the military. [6]

It remains very much to be seen whether the CPP can achieve the required critical mass of cadres and other force factors for its planned “qualitative leap” to the strategic stalemate stage of the PPW. It is notable that there is no more mention, like in past CPP/NPA anniversary statements, of certain sub-stages – whether early, middle, or advanced – of the strategic defensive stage. The impression one gets is of literally forcing the issue or the pace. The announced “overriding objective” of this new push includes “approach(ing) the goal of destroying the ruling system and replacing it with the people’s democratic state.” The plan, among others, includes a key call to “Develop the guerrilla fronts toward becoming relatively stable base areas.” Quantitatively, the NPA guerrilla fronts “must be increased to the level of 168” which “means having a guerrilla front in every congressional district in all the provinces” (note no exception even made for Moro provinces). Qualitatively, it goes “for the emergence of relatively stable base areas from the increase, merger, integration or expansion of existing guerrilla fronts under a base area command, capable of launching company-size tactical offensives on the scale of a province or several provinces, if based on an inter-provincial border area.”

Now, “to build the relatively stable base area,” the CPP “must lead the NPA in suppressing and driving away the oppressors and exploiters and dismantling the reactionary organs of political power over extensive areas.” Note that the latter directive is not just to “shadow” and compete with but no less than “dismantle” – so that they can be effectively replaced by revolutionary organs of political power. The local ruling classes like the big landlords are to be “suppressed” and “driven away” by the NPA. This is also supposed to allow raising revolutionary land reform “towards the maximum level” whereby the CPP/NPA-organized peasants can “take over the land.”

The latest CPP call to “intensify the revolutionary armed struggle” includes a specific directive to the NPA to “dismantle the landgrabbing operations of foreign and local agri-corporations, mining companies, logging companies for export, real estate companies and similar enterprises that reduce the land for agriculture and land reform and that result in the destruction of the environment.” The CPP also notably directs the NPA to “deal with the impunity of high bureaucrats and military officials in perpetrating treason, plunder and human rights violations. Those who commit these grave crimes are subject to summons for investigation and arrest, and if armed and dangerous or protected by armed personnel are subject to battle by the NPA arresting unit. Retirement from reactionary government service does not free the suspects from criminal liabilities, arrest or battle. Close relatives and friends who benefit from the criminal offenses or fruits thereof must be treated as accomplices in crime.”

These CPP directives to the NPA raise not only questions of possible violations of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) but also questions about the NPA’s combined or confused military and police functions, as well as about the “revolutionary” code of crimes, criminal procedure and justice system being implemented by the CPP through its main coercive instrument, the NPA.

All told, one sees an “intensified,” “heightened” and “accelerated” CPP-NPA-National Democratic Front (NDF) drive to assert what it perceives as its “status of belligerency,” with consequent use of force and counter-force, violence and counter-violence, in a different kind of “two-state” dynamic. [7] As has been noted elsewhere, this is a source of a lot of violence or coercion being committed in its name. The government itself already predicts or expects an “escalation of violence” by or from the NPA. [8] But the dynamic is indeed two-sided. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is still going by President Arroyo’s deadline to reduce the NPA to an “inconsequential” or “insignificant” level of a “common police problem,” no longer a “national security problem,” by 2010, or just next year. [9] This also remains very much to be seen, given four decades of the NPA’s persistence, resilience or simply staying alive. At any rate, shortly after New Year 2009, the talk on this front was about the RP-US Balikatan military exercises going in April to Bicol, which happens to be the second strongest region (after Southern Mindanao) of the NPA. And so, the CPP has specifically instructed NPA units in Bicol to attack RP-US Balikatan forces in Bicol. The AFP has in turn said that it is ready to repel the NPA during the Balikatan.

An escalation of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence can thus be expected in the immediate or near future, certainly in 2009, including in preparation for the election period for crucial national elections in the first half of 2010, with its own kind of politics and violence. The two main protagonists seem to want it this way. With the likely continuing impasse of more than four years in the formal peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the NDF (which expectedly blames the Arroyo regime for this as a matter of course), even the more effective implementation of their more than ten-year old Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL) has been prejudiced at a time when it is most needed.

A weak civil society peace constituency has been trying to do what it can on this front, [10] unfortunately without much impact felt in terms of changes in the belligerent behaviour of the protagonists toward each other. This will need a substantially better human security effort by all concerned if there is to be a chance of even just reducing the level of violence, since ending the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence is not yet in sight.

As has been rightly pointed out elsewhere, *humanizing the war is as crucial at this stage as finding the solution to the root causes of the rebellions*. [11] Unfortunately, not only are these root causes of the armed conflict not being addressed because of dormant peace negotiations but the war is also being dehumanized by continuing serious violations of human rights and IHL. But these violations, which partake of oppression, injustice and indignity, are actually also part of the root causes. And so, the vicious cycle of conflict-insecurity-further conflict goes on – protractedly – unless certain paradigms or mindsets change for the better on both sides.

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Quezon City, 22 January 2009 (22nd Anniversary of the Mendiola Massacre)

Footnotes

[1] A good, if sympathetic, recent historical book on the PKP from 1930 to the mid-1950s is Ken Fuller, *Forcing the Pace: The Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas: From Foundation to Armed Struggle* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2007). As for the CPP, one good, if

critical, still recent historical book is Kathleen Weekly, *The Communist Party of the Philippines 1968-1993: A Story of its Theory and Practice* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001). Expected to be published soon by the Ateneo de Manila University Press as the most comprehensive independent book on CPP history is Dominique Caouette, *Perservering Revolutionaries: Armed Struggle in the 21st Century, Exploring the Revolution of the Communist Party of the Philippines* (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2004).

[2] Central Committee, Communist Party of the Philippines, "Strengthen the Party and intensify the people's struggle in celebrating the 40th founding anniversary," 26 December 2008 (released 24 December 2008 in the CPP-NPA-NDF website www.philippinerevolution.net).

[3] Compare this to the usual five-figure estimates, ranging from 10 to 15,000, of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) strength in recent years but which is concentrated in Central Mindanao, while the NPA is spread nationwide.

[4] Compare this to the registered mobilization of 3,934,065 people in the MILF people's consultation in May 2005.

[5] On the role of cadres, see Rosanne Rutten (ed.), *Brokering a Revolution: Cadres in a Philippine Insurgency* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008).

[6] Jocelyn R. Uy, "Red Revolution at 40 - Campuses fertile source of CPP 'quality cadres' (Second of two parts)" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 27 December 2008, p. A1 & A6.

[7] The reference or allusion here is to the Israeli-Palestinian "two-state solution."

[8] TJ Burgonio, "Gov't predicts 'escalation of violence' by NPA rebs," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 10 January 2009, p. A2.

[9] According to Lt. Gen. Cardozo Luna, AFP Vice Chief of Staff, as cited by Jocelyn R. Uy, "Red Revolution at 40 - Sison now croons to keep cause alive (First of two parts)" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 26 December 2008, p. A1 & A6.

[10] The only sustained current civil society effort of promoting the GRP-NDF peace process through respect for human rights and IHL is the independent citizen network called "Sulong CARHRIHL" (Advance CARHRIHL), with website at www.sulongnetwork.ph.

[11] This insight is attributed to Protestant Bishop Constante Claro of the United Churches of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), as mentioned by Carlos Isagani T. Zarate, "Mirage," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 12 January 2009, p. A15