

Philippines - Of fallen rebels and soldiers: One too many, must this go on?

Thursday 25 July 2013, by [SANTOS Soliman, Jr](#) (Date first published: 22 July 2013).

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The four decades-old ongoing insurgency and counter-insurgency war on the Communist front once again came closer to home, though a bit quietly, in Naga City this July 2013 when a simple memorial mass was held in the Ateneo de Naga University (AdNU) chapel for two of its former college students Frankie Joe Soriano and Ted Palacio, who were among eight communist rebels killed in an early morning raid by a Philippine Army unit on 4 July 2013 in the hinterlands of barangay Upper Camalayan, Juban, Sorsogon.

What made this encounter more noteworthy than usual was that the 40-year old Frankie Joe Soriano happened to be the popularly known "Ka Greg Bañares," spokesperson of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP)-Bikol, the long-time voice, if not face, of the communist insurgency in this region, a long-time stronghold of the New People's Army (NPA). The NDFP-Bikol, in a long statement with mini-biographies of the eight rebels killed, claims Soriano to be no less than a member of the Bikol Regional Party Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). There were also other "big fish" among the eight - no less than four "Red commanders" of the Celso Minguez Command, the NPA's Sorsogon Provincial Command, with one of the four also a member of the Sorsogon Provincial Party Committee of the CPP.

Palacio ("Ka Gary"), whose body was found close to that of Soriano, was apparently a close aide of the latter, likely in NDFP-Bikol information and propaganda work. As was the 37-year old Christine Puche ("Ka Nel") whose body was found also close to the two. The three were apparently retreating away from the main group engaged in a firefight with the raiding Army unit when the three were felled by a blocking force of that unit. Puche happened to be the wife of Soriano. She was also a former college student, this time of the University of the Philippines (UP) College of Mass Communications. She hailed from Legazpi City in Albay, while Soriano hailed from Libmanan and Palacio hailed from Naga City, both in Camarines Sur. Their lives and deaths span the main or most prominent provinces of the Bikol region. They are now part of Bikol revolutionary folklore.

Blasts from the Past Brought to the Present: Something Touched Us Deep

Inside

The battle deaths of Soriano, Puche and Palacio came with a little degree of closeness to my wife and myself in Naga because we, she more than me, met all three of them on several instances. As former AdeN professor, my wife of course met or knew Soriano and Palacio from their college days in the late 1980s to the early 1990s, as a moderator of Kapatirang Plebeians and of the student paper *Pillars*, but did not know them that closely, especially Soriano who was then a “totoy” (like a little boy) of that progressive campus organization. We got to meet with Soriano and Puche, or shall we say “Ka Greg” and “Ka Nel,” up closer and personal when we did a book research interview of “Ka Greg” as NDFP-Bikol spokesperson in June 2006 in an NPA guerrilla zone somewhere in Bula, Camarines Sur. He was one of the key informants for the Chapter 2 case study on NPA-Bikol for our co-authored internationally-published 2010 book *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines*.

The funny thing is that, during the book research interview, Doods did not then recognize “Ka Greg Bañares” to be Frankie Joe Soriano, and we in fact learned of the true identities of “Ka Greg” and “Ka Nel” only from the CPP-NPA-NDFP website statements on the eight fallen rebels of the Juban Incident. Aside from the passage of 13 years since Soriano graduated A.B. Philosophy from AdNU in 1993, she simply could not connect the mature, personable, confident, well-informed and articulate “Ka Greg” with the same little quiet “totoy” Frankie in the margins of the Plebeians of those AdNU college days. He showed a thirst for learning, especially about international law (my field), and an interest in Bikol literature (Doods’ field), with a confidence to do such writing himself. And he also showed concern for our personal needs that overnight we spent in a peasant’s hilltop house with a NPA squad as security detail. He took particular attention in calming down his former Plebeians moderator Ma’am when she got palpably nervous about a relayed report during the following morning that an Army unit was patrolling some distance from the house.

During the interview, “Ka Nel” keenly followed the discussion and spoke well, giving her own take on things. Doods noted her being very caring and proud of “Ka Greg,” thus surmising they were spouses without their telling us. She talked a bit to Doods about their children as women usually do but she seemed to be more security conscious than “Ka Greg” in revealing aspects of her person. We would learn only from accounts of mutual AdNU friends after their deaths that both their two children, now aged 13 and 9, were “children with special needs.” And that Doods and Christine Puche happened to both be journalism graduates of UP MassCom, albeit nearly two decades apart.

What was clear to both of us was the strong commitment or dedication to the cause of “Ka Greg” and “Ka Nel.” For me in particular they typified perhaps “the best and the brightest” among the sons and daughters of the revolution they represented, that cadres like them were that revolution’s best assets which gave it some fighting chance to win despite the odds it faced. But they were easy to talk to, discuss and even argue with, they were certainly not of the heavy “grim and determined” mien. Though death was surely a normal danger, in fact normal occurrence, that they fully accepted was part of the path of revolutionary armed struggle that they knowingly and whole-heartedly chose, still the very violent deaths in the prime of their lives of these persons we have had the chance to meet, talk and touch base with, even if just for less than the length of a day, shocked us and something touched us deep inside the day we learned they had died.

A Chronicle of Deaths Retold, A Series of Unfortunate Homecomings

There are many feelings and thoughts about the deaths (and lives) of Frankie, Christine and Ted as well as the aftermath of this. To be sure, these things can be viewed at several levels and of course

also from different perspectives. Most starkly different, in fact conflicting, as may be expected, are the rebel and anti-rebel perspectives: one side saying "*Parangalan... Pamarisan sila!*" and the other side in effect saying "*Huwag tularan!*" or even "*Buti nga sa kanila... Durugin pa ang mga yan!*" As regards the Juban Incident itself, there are legitimate questions in particular about the kinds of bullet wounds, especially head wounds, found on the dead bodies of the eight rebels killed, as may indicate that they were finished off at close range while already incapacitated by their initial wounds but still alive and thus entitled to medical aid – in violation of the rules of war.

The memorial mass at AdNU chapel for Frankie and Ted was not also without some controversy. This time it was not about the employment of revolutionary messages, flags and other symbols during such an occasion or during a wake, as was the case for Christine in her Legazpi hometown. This time it was about the surprisingly rather conservative restrictions that the school administration imposed on the memorial mass. One local newspaper columnist who happens to be a senior AdNU alumnus commented: "Here are two former Ateneans going back to their alma mater for the last time, yet the same alma mater which taught them to be 'men for others' at whatever cost had put some restrictions on how their stories should be told... Why treat Ateneans-turned-rebels differently?"

Frankie's and Ted's broken bodies were no longer brought for the AdNU memorial mass. But in at least one previous instance, the body of an Atenista rebel even "lay in state" at the old AdNU chapel. This was former AdNU student government president 32-year old Jemino Balaquiao who was killed as a rebel in 1992, in fact also in Sorsogon, but in a different town, Irosin. An old beloved Jesuit priest, since passed away, even said then that Balaquiao was like national hero Rizal because he died for his country. My own close encounter with him was nothing political, just playing "*tatluhan*" basketball at one of the then outdoor AdNU basketball courts in the early 1980s.

And so the memorial mass at AdNU chapel for Frankie and Ted seemed like just part, the latest, of a chronicle of deaths told and retold – of Naga school boys turned rebels, getting killed as such in some far-flung countryside barrio, and finally coming home to a memorial mass in the good old school of their earlier youth. The first for me of this kind of Naga homecoming was for one who was closest to me among those honorable schoolboys in terms of generation of schooling as well as of activism – my elementary (Naga Parochial School), high school (Philippine Science High School) and early 1970s college (UP) classmate 28-year old Alexander Belone II who was killed as a rebel in 1980 in far-flung Balatan, Camarines (where I now happen to be the acting municipal judge). But the circumstance of his dead body's desecration there became an issue that the then leading Naga newspaper *Balalong* editorialized as "an outrage embarrassing to any civilized society." In the recent Juban Incident, there was some kind of reprise of this issue, albeit of what appears to be a different kind of violation of civilized conduct.

The latest Naga homecoming of the above-said sort, the one for Frankie and Ted, just struck me/us as one too many in the chronicle of deaths retold, in the series of unfortunate homecomings. Must this go on? It is not hard to imagine how many times this sort of homecoming is multiplied in other hometowns, not just Naga, and not just for fallen rebels but also for fallen soldiers, some of the latter also "the best and the brightest" of their generation from North to South of this country. Someone's son, brother, husband, other relative, friend, boyfriend, classmate, frat bro, org-mate, neighbor, townmate or other acquaintance – it could be a fallen soldier just as well as a fallen rebel.

The Rebel in Literature

Part of Naga's urban legend is the true story of the Ateneo Avenue apartment final shootout between

the cornered, recuperating, earlier wounded 26-year old NPA “Kumander Tangkad” (Romulo Jallores) and the pursuing, younger Philippine Constabulary (PC) Lt. Segundino Agahan towards the end of 1971, no less than Rizal Day, wherein both were killed. Here it was the soldier who was reportedly the Atenista, albeit an alumnus of Ateneo de San Pablo, while the rebel was an alumnus of another Catholic school, the Sta. Clara Academy in his rural hometown of Tigaon, Camarines Sur – the birthplace of the CPP and NPA in Bikol in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In literature, at least Philippine and Bikol literature, according to my literature professor wife, it is the rebel more than the soldier that is a favorite subject or character, the *bida* (hero), with the soldier often the *contrabida* (villain). This is because it is the rebel who cuts the romantic figure, aside from the lasting impact of the Philippine Revolution against Spain in the national historical consciousness. My wife likens this to the “heroic outlaw” in Irish folk literature which character has “innocent beginnings.”

And so, “Kumander Tangkad”/Romulo Jallores is featured in two books of life-and-death stories of Bikol martyrs (recall the Quince Martires of 1896, whose monument is in Naga) of the post-1970 revolutionary Left — the 1997 NGO publication *Pulang Hamtik* (“Red Ants”) and the 2008 underground publication *Pa-iraya: Sa Pagserbi sa Masa* (“Going Upstream: To Serve the Masses”). As the first NPA commander in Bikol, it is after Romulo Jallores whom the NPA Regional Command is named. There are also stories of Belone and Balaquiao in *Pulang Hamtik*.

The Fallen Soldiers, They Too Have Their Stories

But the fallen soldiers, they too have their stories. Take that of PO2 Elmark Rodney Pinated, one of (also) eight police Special Action Force (SAF) elements killed in a landmine-initiated ambush by a unit of the NPA Danilo Ben Command (DBC) last 27 May 2013 in Allacapan, Cagayan. His mother Evelyn Pinated was reported in the media to have said, “The (NPA) must stop these senseless killings. They are killing those who are serving our people.” She told reporters that Elmark had married his girlfriend Grace only last October 8. She last talked to him over the cellphone on May 20, her birthday, when he greeted her.

DBC spokesperson Crispin Apolinario’s May 29 statement written in Filipino (translated by media) said that the DBC “sends its apologies to the families who lost their loved ones in the engagement. We are saddened by the deaths, but this is part of our conflict, your relatives were instruments of the current [Aquino] administration.” This has to do with the underlying conflicting perspectives on the value of rebel and soldier deaths which we shall address as part of this discussion.

Take the 2011 Philippine Military Academy (PMA) graduate 26-year old 2nd Lt. Alfredo Lorin IV of Iriga City (not too far from Naga and also in Camarines Sur), the leader of a seven-man team on a test mission for the Marine Force Reconnaissance Battalion and who were all killed in a clash with an Abu Sayyaf faction last 25 May 2013 in Patikul, Sulu (two days before the Allacapan Ambush). According to media reports, his elder sister Rosalyn Lorin said that “He’s more like a father to us... He was a very responsible son and brother. He was also a super gentleman. He’s my defender every time I faced difficulties in life. He would call or send us messages whenever possible. He always sent us ‘good morning’ messages and biblical passages.” His salary went to their mother and he made sure that their parents were all right while he was away. “We are very poor. His dream was to have a good job and build a decent home for my parents.”

Most significantly, Rosalyn said of her brother Alfredo, “Limboy” to his family and friends, “He died with bravery so we will [accept his death] with bravery. He’s our inspiration and we will always remember his courage... Maybe that’s the only task given to him by God – the task to touch

everyone's hearts and to remind us that life is precious and we need to strive harder."

Not much different in terms of "dreams, promises and plans gone" were stories, as reported in the media, of the 19 Army Special Forces soldiers killed by a Base Command unit of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) on 18 October 2011 in Al-Barka, Basilan. There was the 27-year old 2nd Lt. Jose Delfin Khe, as remembered by his aunt Kleng Estenor, his younger brother 2nd Lt. Erren Khe, and his fiancée Jane Frances Madarang; the 33-year old Cpl. Roderick Cabucana, as remembered by his wife Ginalyn Cabucana; and the 24-year old Pfc. Mark Ted Quiban, as remembered by his cousin Marichie Quiban. 2nd Lt. Jose Delfin Khe and Pfc. Roberto Reafranka were in particular lauded as heroes by their comrades-in-arms who survived the carnage because they offered their lives so that others would live by deciding to face the rebels to allowing others to safely withdraw. (But you know what, this is the kind of story of comradely heroism that is often told and retold on the rebel side, the NPA even more than the MILF.)

A Question of Heroes

It seems heroism is relative or, perhaps more precisely, partisan. And those who consider either fallen rebels or fallen soldiers as heroes will always find ways of honoring them. The fallen soldiers are usually, if not always, are given military honors and burial rites, often at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* ("Cemetery of Heroes"). But one does not see in the Philippines the general respect and honor for living troops as defenders/protectors that one sees in the U.S. (honored especially during featured baseball games). In the Philippine case, our troops have yet to fully recover from the taint of being martial enforcers/oppressors, so as to earn that level of general respect and honor. But perhaps, the times they are a-changin'.

Take the eight policemen of the Catarman Municipal Police Station killed in a NPA landmine-initiated ambush on 21 August 2010 in the capital town of Catarman, Northern Samar. Among them was no less than the station's deputy chief of police, Senior Insp. Nicasio Lavapie San Antonio of Buhi, Camarines Sur. As reported in the media, Catarman mourned its slain lawmen. The Mayor said "They are our heroes. They were killed while they were carrying out their duties as law enforcers." And the seven locals among them were buried there as heroes. San Antonio's body was of course brought for a "homecoming" to his hometown Buhi. Over a thousand persons, including government officials, soldiers, policemen, students and relatives turned out for the funeral of the seven locals. The mourner's joined a two-kilometer funeral march which served as an indignation rally to protest the policemen's killing. It passed through the town's major streets and took two hours to reach the Catarman public cemetery.

In the more recent Allacapan Ambush, aside from referring to the killed police SAF elements as "serving our people" (though the NPA referred to them as "instruments of the current [Aquino] administration"), Evelyn Pinated, mother of the slain SAF vehicle driver PO2 Elmark Rodney Pinated, referred to the NPA ambushers as the "devils" who took her son away, and she wants them crushed. We had already noted elsewhere that, during the dark years of the Marcos martial law dictatorship, the NPA and/or its supporters used the vernacular term "*demonyo*" (devil), among others, to refer to their worst enemies, whether these were bad elements in the barrio, brutal soldiers-torturers, or deep penetration agents. How ironic (or karmic?) that this same term of non-endearment is now being turned around/thrown back at the NPA. Also ironic is how the old NPA Maoist motto "Serve the People" is instead being applied to their adversaries in the uniformed services.

It was in Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong's 1944 article "Serve the People," that he

said: "All men must die, but death can vary in its significance. The ancient Chinese writer Szuma Chien said, 'Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather.' To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather." Later-day Bikol revolutionaries have replaced Mount Tai with Mayon Volcano, Bulusan Volcano or Mount Isarog. Unfortunately, to view the death of soldiers as "lighter than a feather" is to devalue their lives. And of course for both sides to see the other as the "demonyo" is to deny him any saving grace, including his right to life.

An "Eye-for-an Eye" Cycle of Killings, Not Just Quantitative But Also Qualitative

Evelyn Pinated's desire for revenge (she wants them crushed) is a natural emotional feeling for the kind of painful loss of a loved one she had just suffered. Same with Rosaleo Balag, father of the 30-year old "happy-go-lucky" bachelor PO2 Rodel Martires Balag, one of the above-said eight killed policemen of Catarman killed in a NPA landmine-initiated ambush. One of PO2 Balag's leg was dismembered due to the landmine blast and his father Rosaleo tried to look for his missing leg at the ambush scene but could not find it. His head, like those of his comrades-in-arms was shot several times, at close range and apparently to finish them off (a scenario reprised in the Juban Incident but this time by the soldiers against the rebels?). So, it was not just their deaths that their loved ones had to come to terms with but also the brutal manner in which they were killed, not to mention that death came too soon for these young men still full of promise (much the same thing too for the other side). Rosaleo understandably could only wish ill for those responsible for the death of his son and his police colleagues.

On the other side of the armed conflict, and going back to the recent Juban Incident main starting point of this article, among the immediate responses of the CPP to it was a statement on 6 July 2013 stating that: "The CPP and all revolutionary forces vow to exact justice and punish the perpetrators of this massacre. It calls on all units of the NPA to carry out more tactical offensives to defend the people, particularly the peasant masses in Sorsogon and the Bikol region, who are being subjected to more severe violations of human rights as the AFP intensifies its Oplan Bayanihan war of suppression." Coincidence or (likely) not, that same day, eight (note also eight) soldiers of the 31st Infantry Battalion (the same Army unit involved in the Juban Incident) were killed by the Celso Miguez Command (CMC) of the NPA-Sorsogon during its "active defense maneuvers" in Irosin town, according to statements of the CMC and CPP. Whether true or not (it was denied by an Army spokesperson), must this — which amounts to an "eye-for-an-eye" spiral or cycle of killings — go on?

As it is, as of March 2012, according to Ploughshares Research and Action for Peace, as many as 40,000 combat-related deaths in the Philippine armed conflict on the Communist front have been reported since 1969, when the NPA was founded and launched its revolutionary armed struggle under CPP leadership. This is apart from the usually cited figure of 120,000 (civilians and combatants) deaths in the Philippine armed conflict on the Moro front — but where there is at least an honest-to-goodness peace process moving forward towards a new and improved comprehensive agreement with the MILF as the emergent representative of the Bangsamoro people's struggle for self-determination. The dynamics of armed conflict often partakes of the nature of scoring body counts and propaganda points against each other. In the process, the number of combat-related deaths just piles up year after year of an armed conflict nearing 45 protracted years.

Those are the cold statistics. And we have given you here just a few of the names and human interest stories behind those morbid statistics. The analysis of these must really not just be quantitative but also qualitative. In the first place, as we already said, the number of persons killed should be

multiplied by the number of their relatives, friends and acquaintances (perhaps further multiplied by the multiplier effect of facebook, the internet and social as well as mainstream media), as an initial measure of the impact of these killings at the personal level.

And when one side sees the other as the “*demonyo*” and whose best wishes for them are only death wishes, when one side has “blood debts” to the other side, when one side’s heroes are the other side’s oppressors, when one side’s deaths are “weightier than Mayon Volcano” and the other side’s deaths are “lighter than a feather,” then part of the “State of the Nation” is a broken social fabric that does not bode well for the necessary national unity and even economic revival. Those who envision and speak of a “civil war” (like the American Civil War of the 1860s) in terms of the politico-military balance and status of belligerent forces in armed conflict may not realize it but there is already a veritable civil war of hearts and minds among the people, between brother and brother. Must this, as well as the blood-letting, go on in order to achieve well-meaning and valid socio-economic and political objectives and programs?

Ends and Costs, Ends and Means

If good, talented people are our best resource – as human resources should be, for any endeavor, whether it is revolution or governance – then it is a pity that so many of “the best and the brightest” of them are nipped in the bud or prime of their young lives. The laudable ends, including of ultimately ending the exploitation of persons by other persons, can no longer justify the human cost. That now includes the precious lives of Frankie, Christine and Ted, among many others. Most ways one looks at it, what a loss, if not waste, of youth and talent, although those three would be the first to object to the characterization of their deaths as a waste. But for us, while their lives certainly may not have been a waste, their deaths were. There was still much that they could do for the country.

Some revolutionaries would say that if Frankie and Christine had not taken the less travelled revolutionary road that they did, then they would be just an ordinary married couple struggling to make ends meet and to raise children as a middle-class family with the usual career and material aspirations. Perhaps, perhaps not, this would ultimately depend on their idealism, patriotism and sense of social responsibility. In whatever station or stage in life, one can make his or her contribution in the service of the people, for the betterment of the country, and even for needed radical changes.

For this, there has to be another, less costly way than armed struggle as the main form of struggle. It behooves the revolutionary leadership to seriously consider this, if only because of the mounting human and other costs – but also because of questions of feasibility or effectiveness of the chosen strategy of protracted people’s war under current objective and subjective conditions, both national and international. And we are not speaking of surrender, capitulation or cooptation of the national-democratic cause or program. Of course, the state or ruling system must also do its part of the politico-military equation. An honest-to-goodness peace process is one forum to sort this out, including arrangements for the revolutionary Left’s viable politico-electoral participation. This entails sincere and serious engagement in peace negotiations as a strategy and not just a tactic – on the part of both the CPP-NPA-NDFP and the government.

Sometime back, in the aftermath of Typhoon “Sendong” in December 2011 in Northern Mindanao, Frankie as NDFP-Bikol spokesperson “Ka Greg Bañares” was quoted in the media as saying that “While the peace negotiation has no clear direction, it is better to go on with the armed struggle.” And so it did go on, with Frankie and many others on both sides eventually laying down their lives in this struggle. It behooves the leaders of both sides to give peace negotiations clear direction in

terms of its really going somewhere. Enough with the tactical posturing and maneuvering. The leaders of both sides owe it to their fallen rebels and fallen soldiers to be as sincere and as serious in peace negotiations as their fallen rebels and fallen soldiers were in the performance of their tasks and duties. Frankie, Christine and Ted, fallen rebels – as well as the fallen soldiers – may you rest in peace. And may there instead be more of happy homecomings for “the best and the brightest” sons and daughters of the people.

Soliman M. Santos, Jr., Naga City, 22 July 2013

P.S.

* SOLIMAN M. SANTOS, JR. has been a long-time Bikolano human rights and IHL lawyer; legislative consultant and legal scholar; peace advocate, researcher and writer, whose initial engagement with the peace process was in Bikol with the first GRP-NDFP nationwide ceasefire in 1986. He is presently Presiding Judge of the 9th Municipal Circuit Trial Court (MCTC) of Nabua-Bato, Camarines Sur and Acting Presiding Judge of the Municipal Trial Court (MTC) of Balatan, Camarines Sur.