

Resume peace talks, resume interim ceasefires - A call to the Government of the Republic and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines

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The call to resume the peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) is only right and just because their scrapping by President Duterte was premature, even as the NDFP Panel Chief Political Consultant and Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) guru Jose Maria Sison says he understands him. But this call should be accompanied by another call to resume the unilateral interim ceasefires that were also prematurely terminated first by the CPP and New People's Army (NPA) leadership for the NDFP (not the other way around) and then soon after followed suit by President Duterte for the GRP. This was the *casus belli*, as it were, or what triggered the downward spiral of this whole peace process. This prematurity we had already discussed last weekend in an article "Urgent Motion for Reconsideration of the Ceasefire Termination," forgive the court case terminology of a MR.

To save and bring the whole peace process back on track should entail, to use court case terms again, a return to the *status quo ante* — the situation before the breakdown in the process. That status quo ante was clearly one of peace talks accompanied by unilateral interim ceasefires up to the Rome Talks of last January 19 to 25. The "Joint Statement on the **Successful** Third Round of Formal Talks between the GRP and NDFP in Rome, Italy" is the best evidence of the prematurity that we are talking about. It is not the interim, repeat **interim only**, ceasefire that was premature but rather its termination. In the Joint Statement, it was in fact stated particularly that "The Parties note that their unilateral indefinite ceasefires **remain in place**."

If only the peace process breakdown could be subject to a court injunction (like U.S. President Trump's travel ban), the injunction would be to restore that status quo ante of unilateral interim ceasefires. This is what would avoid a deterioration of the situation now that the dogs of war on both sides have been unleashed. This is what is needed as "a measure of restraint" (Sison's words, akin to a court temporary restraining order or TRO) before it is too late — before there can no longer be any holding back of the fighting which creates its own negative dynamic for the whole process, as experience has shown.

Some peace advocates no less, ironically say that "the absence of reciprocal, unilateral ceasefires should not unhinge our efforts for building peace." But it has unhinged this process under President Duterte, if not himself also. Others say "Keep on talking even when there is fighting. But *keep on listening as well*." But that's very hard "amid the din and drone" of gunfire and explosions, whether from NPA landmines or Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) artillery shelling and aerial bombardment. These disrupt not just listening but the very business of living in the conflict-affected areas of the countryside.

Sison *et al.* cite at least 10 major agreements that have been sealed since the Ramos administration of 1992-98 despite the continued fighting. But only one of those is considered a substantive

agreement, the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL). That is only the first of four major substantive agenda items under the framework Hague Joint Declaration of 1992. Just one substantive agreement in nearly 25 years or one generation! That is already “untenable,” to use the CPP-NPA’s description of the unilateral interim ceasefires. Compare that to the two years from the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro to the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in the peace talks cum ceasefire with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) during the Aquino administration.

We have precisely “been there, done that” already with fighting while talking for the most part of several decades of the GRP-NDFP peace process since 1992, more so if we count from the first round in 1986-87. It’s about time that we try *talking and listening without fighting* where the latter is understood to be **for a reasonable interim period only** of an estimated (by the CPP leadership and the NDFP Panel) two years or so to possibly work out comprehensive agreements on socio-economic and politico-constitutional reforms. The Rome Joint Statement indicated fair, if not good, advances on this. Indeed, as an NDFP partisan said, “the aim of the talks is not just to end the fighting but also to address the roots of the armed conflict.” But in the meantime, for a reasonable period, can the fighting (just this, not other forms of struggle) not be put on hold as a “specific measure of goodwill and confidence-building to create a favorable climate for peace negotiations”? This is **not yet** for the “end of hostilities and disposition of forces.” A mere interim ceasefire in this context is **not** “tantamount to the capitulation and pacification of the revolutionary people and forces.” AND at the end of that reasonable period, IF **good faith** negotiations still fail to achieve substantive reform agreements, THEN a return to armed struggle would be understandable or even justified, depending also on the circumstances.

It is fair, not only by the GRP but also by all peace-loving Filipinos, to raise a privileged question of sincerity about talking peace while fighting a war. As we had written a number of years back, why continue to fight a war if the peace talks are “successful” so far, especially in working towards comprehensive agreements on substantive reforms to address the roots of the armed conflict? Why suffer the loss of precious lives, including of thy comrades, in the meantime if these are going to be achieved? Or does the desire to continue armed struggle indicate an expectation or worse, an intention, that the peace talks will ultimately fail?

By the CPP-NPA’s termination of its unilateral interim ceasefire (followed suit by the GRP), it has in effect (or as intended?) preempted an interim bilateral ceasefire already scheduled for another meeting of the two ceasefire committees. One relevant simple question that nobody seems to be asking is: ***are both sides willing to reinstate the prematurely terminated unilateral ceasefires as an important “compelling reason,” or “key link,” or key gesture (as far as President Duterte is concerned), to reverse the premature announcement of an “all-out war” and the premature scrapping of the peace talks?*** The simple proposition is that it is only right and that all that have been prematurely done should be undone before it can no longer be undone.

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