

# Philippines: Why Duterte couldn't beat the communists

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## **Philippine military says it will eliminate New People's Army by end of Duterte's term but the leftist rebellion is alive and well**

MANILA – Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's government has claimed to have neutralized a top New People's Army (NPA) leader during the latest operations in its all-out war against the communist rebels.

Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced on Monday that top communist rebel Jorge Madlos, known by the nom de guerre Ka Oris, was killed during recent clashes with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) near the southern city of Bukidnon.

Officials were quick to claim that the event represented a major, fatal blow to the NPA, which has spearheaded the longest-running conflict in the country dating back to 1969. The government hopes to eliminate the rebellion before the end of Duterte's term next year.

There is, however, little indication that the rebels will be snuffed out anytime soon given the depth of social injustice and inequality across the country's peripheries, including in Duterte's home island of Mindanao. The NPA, which operates mostly in the Philippine countryside, has recently claimed to have a presence in 73 of the nation's 81 provinces.

The Filipino president has largely left his generals in charge of a doomed and bloody war against the group after overseeing ill-fated peace negotiations early in his term.

The upshot has been widespread violence in the poorest regions of the nation as well as a generalized climate of impunity amid a systematic crackdown on perceived as leftist opposition and civil society groups and human rights activists across the country.

Before launching a ground assault, which claimed the life of the rebel commander and a number of his followers, the Philippine military reportedly deployed fighter jets to the area after being tipped off by sympathetic locals on the location of about 30 rebels holding a secretive meeting in a remote village near Impasug-ong town in Mindanao.

AFP spokesperson Colonel Ramon Zagala claimed that the operation represents a major blow against the communist rebels, since "[h]is (Madlos) death will deter the activities and plans by the NPA for he can no longer direct the communist terrorists' violent action against our people."

The government has accused Madlos of preying on small and big businesses in the region as well as masterminding repeated assaults on major mining and agricultural companies to extract what communist rebels call "revolutionary taxes" from capitalists.

In 2011, he reportedly [oversaw a large-scale attack](#) by as many as 200 rebel fighters on the

country's biggest nickel producer, partly owned by Japan's Sumitomo Corp, which was forced to temporarily shut down due to security concerns.

"Justice has been served for those innocent civilians and their communities he terrorized for several decades," regional military commander Major General Romeo Brawner declared triumphantly following the operation.

The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the political overlord of the NPA, [was quick to dismiss](#) government charges by claiming that the ailing and aged rebel leader was "ambushed" by security forces, similar to the spate of extrajudicial killings of suspected Filipino drug dealers in recent years.

"Ka Oris and Dela Peña were both unarmed when ambushed... They were not in a position to give battle or fight back and were murdered in cold blood," the CCP said in a statement, vowing to continue its struggle against the Philippine government.

Under Duterte, the Philippine military established the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) to eliminate the communist movement by the middle of next year.

But leading experts remain skeptical, arguing that the communist rebellion is a symptom of systematic injustice rather than a lack of law and order.

Moreover, legislators and human rights groups have raised alarm bells over [the phenomenon of "red-tagging"](#) by security forces, who have often indiscriminately targeted activists, progressive civil society groups and even [leading state universities](#) for their supposed association with communist rebels.

If anything, Duterte, who once claimed to [be a "socialist"](#) and was a [student of CPP founder](#) Jose Maria Sison, is largely responsible for the uptick in the seemingly never-ending clashes between the military and rebel groups.

Early in his term, the Filipino president, who ran on a populist campaign against illegal drugs and economic inequality, became the first national leader to appoint former communist rebels to several cabinet positions.

Major politicians associated with the CPP-NPA backed Duterte's presidential campaign in 2016 as part of [an unholy alliance](#) between the far-right leader and avowed communists.

Just months into office, Duterte kickstarted seemingly promising peace negotiations by releasing top communist rebels held in government custody as well as holding phone conversations with Sison, who has been in exile in Europe for the past few decades.

At one point, [Duterte publicly called](#) on his former professor to return to the country for direct, face-to-face negotiations. It didn't take long, however, before Duterte's diplomatic outreach to communist rebels disintegrated amid opposition by hardliners in both camps.

[In early 2017](#), several regional NPA commanders, who nominally represent the armed wing of the CPP, unilaterally launched an attack on a luxury resort in the northern island of Luzon and, weeks later, ambushed Filipino soldiers in the southern island of Mindanao.

The incidents immediately raised concerns over the ability of top communist leaders to control their own commanders on the ground, especially after CPP leaders openly disavowed the NPA operations.

In response, top former generals in Duterte's cabinet, including Defense Secretary Lorenzana and National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon, who resented concessions to communist rebels, [advocated for a tough and uncompromising stance](#).

Fearful of a potential backlash from the staunchly anti-communist armed forces, Duterte seemingly relented by calling off peace negotiations. During one of his public events in February 2017, the Filipino president [confessed his fears](#) of reprisals by the military.

"[Don't force me please] because the military might not like it. And then the military would oust me, would kill me, you have nobody talking to you," declared Duterte, indirectly addressing interlocutors and communist rebel leaders amid stalled peace negotiations. "If the military gets mad, not that they are against me, but they would always support you if they think you are right," Duterte added, in a mixture of English and Tagalog.

Months later, when so-called Islamic State (ISIS) affiliated fighters besieged the southern city of Marawi, Duterte declared martial law across Mindanao, which also happens to be a major site of operations for NPA rebels.

The Philippine military quickly seized the opportunity to declare all-out war against not only Islamic extremist ISIS-affiliated groups, but also communist rebels in the area.

Constantly distracted by his scorched-earth drug war, and fearful of alienating the military over his China-friendly foreign policy, the Filipino president has steadily empowered the most extreme anti-communist elements within the military.

Chief among them is former General Antonio Parlade Jr, who has repeatedly warned of fantastical plots, [including a "Red October" coup](#) attempt, against the Duterte administration by allegedly communist leaders in tandem with the liberal opposition.

The general would later go on to oversee the controversial National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), which has been accused of unleashing "red-tagging" mass hysteria and indiscriminately targeting activists and progressive groups in recent years.

Earlier this year, Parlade provoked a mass outcry by accusing organizers of a community pantry of engaging in terrorist activities.

"Same with Satan. Satan gave Eve an apple. That's where it all started," the former general said, referring to the organizer of the food pantries that popped up amid generalized poverty and misery caused by the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns.

"I'm referring to the big organization that may be at the back of all these. That's what we were saying, that's what I was saying," [Parlade explained](#), implying that the communist movement was behind such spontaneous community solidarity activities.

But far from censuring him, Duterte recently [appointed the newly retired general](#) as a deputy director-general at the National Security Council, underscoring the fear and hysteria that continues to drive Duterte's anti-communist campaign during his last months in office.

Last week, the newly-installed AFP Chief of Staff General Jose C. Faustino Jr [confidently claimed](#) that the military is on track to accomplish its goal of totally eliminating [the half-a-century-old communist rebellion](#) by mid-2022, when Duterte's term will expire.

"Right now, we are on target," Faustino said, referring to the military's self-imposed goal. "Our

enemies are getting weaker,” he added, with little evidence apparent to back the bold claim.

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