

THE NPA ON MINDANAO

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According to an informed source, the strength of the New People's Army now is approximately 25,000 guerillas, majority of which is on Mindanao. The NPA is present in all but two provinces of the Mindanao mainland.

The growth of the NPA on Mindanao, which started 19 years ago, from a ragtag army of ill-equipped, inexperienced young cadres to a force that has the capability to overrun town halls and the military is the focus of this paper. The historical account is divided into three major periods: (1) the initial guerilla zones (1972-1976); (2) expansion and consolidation of guerilla front zones (1977-82); and (3) the intensification of the "people's war" (1982-85).

The treatment, I may hasten to add, is not exhaustive for I deliberately omitted the theoretical formulations on the concept of a protracted people's war and the "why" of it. More incisive discussions can be found in voluminous materials in above- and underground publications. Neither does this treatment attempt to a conclusive analysis of the armed revolutionary movement on Mindanao in general. This limitation is due partly to constraints imposed by time and the lack of access to vital sources (for obvious reasons).

The Initial Guerilla Zones (1972-1976)

The declaration of martial rule by Marcos in 1972 "has more than ever made the situation excellent for armed

struggle."¹ The spontaneous response of the national democratic forces (activists, and cadres alike) was to go underground or to take to the hills, i.e., to wage guerilla warfare.

Those who laid the groundwork for the birth of the New People's Army on Mindanao were the Kabataang Makabayan (KM), Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan (SDK) and Khi Rho Youth/student activists, and the Communist party of the Philippines (CCP) members who found immediate sanctuaries in the fastnesses of Davao del Sur, Davao City, Davao Oriental, South Cotabato, Bukidnon and Zamboanga. Here they engaged in expansion and organizing work. Peasant organizing in some areas was already under way even before the advent of martial law.

The different national democratic organizations and groups independently had established guerilla zones and units and decided to subsume these under the common banner of the New People's Army.

The NPA on Mindanao was born under the most difficult circumstances. It did not even have a mass base to fall back on or experience to compensate for lack of arms. Martial law dealt destruction to urban-based organizations. Also, the cadres had yet to establish cultural and social ties with the people. Practically, it did not have anything to start with except the commitment and revolutionary zeal of the cadres.

In addition, the military was concentrated in the region because of the Moro resistance waged by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

Early on, organizing in the countryside, Davao in particular, proved to be difficult. There was initial hostility of the peasants and of several tribal Filipino groups to be organized as part of the mass base of the NPA.²

The peasants, long abused by greedy landgrabbers and neglected by the government, have never organized yet managed

to survive. To them, the young cadres have no business telling them that there was hope.

The initial resistance of several of the tribal Filipino groups was attributed to their "very low level of political awareness" and "their near total alienation from the mainstream" which were, in turn, "traceable to the age-old neglect and discrimination they have suffered under successive Philippine administrations." To this day, the problem of winning over the Lumads to side with the revolutionary forces remains.

The government's immediate reaction to the existence of the NPA in the region was to unleash its military might to annihilate the guerillas. The massive "nip-in-the-bud" military campaigns had taken their toll on the armed revolutionary movement. The NPA guerillas and their mass organizations in Davao del Sur, Bukidnon and South Cotabato were crushed in quick successions within a year after the declaration of martial law.

In November 1972, the Initial Guerilla Unit (IGU) based in Davao del Sur was nearly decimated. The guerilla unit lost 60 home-made arms and high powered rifles (HPRs). Countless cadres, guerillas, commanders and mass activists were either killed or captured by the military during these annihilative operations. Others left active service and returned to civilian life.

Despite the initial losses, the New People's Army concentrated its efforts in guerilla zone building in three areas from the later part of 1973 up to 1976. The areas were Eastern Mindanao (Davao Oriental, Davao del Norte and Davao City), Zamboanga Peninsula and North Central Mindanao (Agusan del Norte, Misamis Oriental and Bukidnon).

But the military, being superior in all aspects, had succeeded in smashing or crippling most of the NPA units and zones. The military set up blocking forces to check NPA expansion, cornered the guerillas within their established bases

and strike forces delivered the final blow. By 1975, for instance, the NPA had only four squad-size units. Additionally, the military operations dislocated NPA units and pushed them away from one another.

Despite the heavy losses in personnel and the diminution of its territories during its early years, the NPA was able to preserve itself. Suffice to say that it had succeeded in laying down the foundation for guerilla warfare (armed units and guerilla zones) in Mindanao.

On the other hand, hard lessons were learned. Self-presentation in the face of the government's anti-dissident campaigns was its most crucial problem. But, in order to survive, it must have to be a strong "people's army."

In November 1976, a resolution (later reaffirmed in a Mindanao conference in 1977) urgently called for the building of more guerilla units and establishment of more guerilla fronts to permit greater maneuverability for both defensive and offensive actions by the guerilla forces.

Expansion and Consolidation of Guerilla Fronts and Zones (1977-1982)

Front and army building showed a marked increase during the period from 1977 to 1982. By 1977, the NPA in Mindanao had grown into 12 squads.

Four guerilla fronts were already established by 1977: Front 1 (F₁) which comprised the Zamboanga Peninsula and Misamis Occidental; F₂, Davao Oriental; F₃, Davao del Norte; and F₄ North Central Mindanao (Misamis Oriental and Agusan del Norte).

A guerilla zone was also opened by F₄ at the foot of the Diwata mountain range which borders the two Agusans and two Surigaos.

In the same year, F₅ (Davao City), abandoned earlier as a consequence of military operations in the area which had nearly wiped out the guerilla forces there, was reopened and in a matter of six months, it had already formed two squad-sized guerilla units. Arms were acquired through arms confiscation operations conducted by the regional partisans, sparrow teams and semi-legal teams (SLTS).

But in September of the same year, two tragic incidents befell the NPA. Two of its squad-sized guerilla units in Diwata and F₅, both expansion areas, were wiped out, with only one survivor each. The Diwata unit, which was raided by government troops, was temporarily abandoned.

The massacre in F₅, on the other hand, was set up. Manubos in the area had months earlier welcomed the unit cordially as friends and liberators. When they returned to the village, they attended a mass meeting the tribe ostensibly had set up to welcome them. At a signal, "the tribe's men attacked the unsuspecting guerillas, using *bolos* and guns. . . It was later revealed that the Manubos were ordered by the government military forces to wipe out the NPA units under pain of annihilation should they fail to do so."³

By 1978, the NPA had already twenty-four (24) guerilla units, majority of which in platoon formation, operating in the Zamboanga Peninsula, Misamis Occidental, Agusan del Sur, Agusan del Norte, Davao del Sur, Davao del Norte and Davao City.

Bukidnon F₆ was opened in December 1978 by cadres, organizers, commanders and a nine-man squad from F₄. But before the group could reach its destination, it was waylaid by tribal fanatics which resulted in the death of five guerillas.

In Davao City F₅ did expansion work in North Cotabato in 1979. In the following year, it helped open F₇ (Davao del Sur).

The first quarter of 1981 was spent on the recovery of the zones in Misamis Oriental (abandoned earlier due to military operations) and Diwata mountains. F₃ and F₄ were tasked to do the work. The zones in the Diwata mountains soon comprised F₈.

Additional fronts were opened in the Zamboanga Peninsula and Misamis Occidental, the result of the expansion work of F₁; F₉ (Misamis Occidental-Zamboanga boundary); F₁₀ (in the center of the Zamboanga Peninsula); and F₁₃ in lower Zamboanga.

In the last quarter of 1981, F₇ led the expansion work to South Cotabato, thus paving the way for the birth of F₁₁. On the other hand, cadres from F₄ and F₃ opened up F₁₂ (Western Misamis Oriental) and F₁₄ (Agusan del Sur-Surigao del Sur), respectively.

From all indications, the NPA was already positioned in all strategic areas of Mindanao except in the Moro areas under the control of the Moro national Liberation Front - Bangsa Moro Army (MNLFBMA). It was both a quantitative and qualitative leap from its early years.

The NPA in Mindanao, at this point in time, could muster company-size formations and mount accelerated tactical offensives. The strides made by the "people's army" in the region during the period considered certainly contributed greatly to the overall armed revolutionary movement whose growing strength began to be felt around 1978-1979.⁴ Year 1981 was a landmark year for the revolutionary movement for it was the year that the armed revolutionary had entered the so-called advanced substage of the strategic defensive.⁵

The AFP, on the other hand, had formed Regional Unified Commands (RUCs) and had undertaken massive conscription and training of paramilitary forces, to include

armed fanatic/cult groups to contain the rising tide of insurgency. In the late 1970s, 80% of the AFP's ground forces were in Mindanao.⁶ In 1981, 60% of the Philippine Army troops, 1/2 of the Philippine Marines' total force, 1/3 of the Philippine Coast Guard's total force and 200 Philippine Air Force (PAF) pilots were stationed in Mindanao. These figures did not include the Philippine Constabulary (PC) Commands, Composite Military Police, Integrated National Police or INP, (11,947), Civilian Home Defense Force or CHDF (64,000) and special paramilitary forces (35,000).⁷

The military also launched "Oplan Katatagan," a counter-insurgency scheme patterned after operation Phoenix in Vietnam. Under the scheme, the military had initiated a Vietnam-style strategic hamlet program which involves the forced evacuation of people from their farms to designated live-in centers, usually in the towns.⁸ The rationale of the program is best summed up by a military official who compared the village/barrio to a lake where there are some bad fish (NPAs) so it is necessary "to drain all the water from the lake in order to catch these bad fishes."⁹

Oplan Katatagan, launched in early part of 1983, was a campaign "to win the hearts and minds," i.e., to wean the masses from the NPA influence, so to speak. "Despite repeated injunctions from the military leadership," one observer notes, "there is often precious little effort to win the hearts and minds of those in the barrios. All too often, troops in the fields act like an occupying army, stealing food and money. . . Indeed, when AFP units move into an area, regard for the military often falls off quickly."¹⁰ Militarization, therefore, aggravated the communist insurgency.

Intensification of the People's War (1982-1985)

Despite the gains made during the preceding period, the NPA is quick to admit that, militarily, it is still weaker and logistically inferior. Guerillas wear captured government

(military uniforms, well worn T-shirts, occasional pair of Adidas track shoes or leather boots but usually rubber sandals, thus earning the monicker "*walay sapatos*" (or "barefoot"). Equipment was basic: 2-way radios, M203 grenade launchers, M16 rifles. They ate usually two times a day, mostly roots like camote (sweet potatoes) and cassava. But they were "clearly disciplined."¹¹

Admission of military weakness and logistical inferiority notwithstanding, the NPA had attained the military and political prerequisites for carrying out intensified guerilla operations.

At the start of 1982, the NPA had 18 regular/oversized platoons and 25 independent squads/small platoons on full-time guerilla duty exclusive of the SLTs, the SYPs and the local military which were not counted as full-time guerillas.

In some advanced regions, newer and bigger formations like the company-sized Main Regional Guerilla Units (MRGUs), the oversized platoon, Secondary Regional Guerilla Unit (SRGU) or Front Guerilla Unit (FGU) started to become a regular feature of the 14 fronts. Other support unit, like medical, instruction, intelligence, liaison, ordinance, explosives, commando and publication, were also developed to strengthen the movement.

From 1982 onwards, the NPA had fielded bigger guerilla formations and its much improved firepower into action aimed at bigger targets, not only in remote areas but in the vicinity of and even within economic and political centers. During these offensives the guerillas were able to secure some 400 high powered rifles (HPRs).

In 1983, NPA offensives averaged 4-5 times a week, a mark increase from previous year's 2-3 offensives a week. More high powered firearms (600) were siezed and dealt the AFP serious blows during the year. Among the losses incurred by the military included 4 colonels, 5 captains and 15 lieutenants.

The most serious officially acknowledged incident in 1983 was the ambush in Misamis Occidental. Lt. Col. Jaime

Somera, commander of the 9th Infantry Battalion (IB), his operations officer Capt. Guillermo Kong, two sergeants and three corporals were killed. A town mayor and a police corporal, who were with Col. Somera, were wounded.¹²

It was also in 1983, when the NPA staged its first successful assault on a government troop headquarters - the HQ of the 421st PC Company in Aras-Asan, Cagwait, Surigao del Sur on January 21. Days earlier it also raided the Mabini, Davao del Norte town Hall and carted away 27 HPRs.

A notable trend in 1983 was the intensification of armed partisan activities in urban and town centers, particularly in Davao City. The armed city partisans or ACPs, called "Sparrows" by the media, staged daring broad daylight operations in Davao City. One of their prominent victims was NISA Col. Berenguer.

The ACP, as a phenomenon, was not new. The concept was born shortly before martial law. Efforts were made "to build up armed units in the cities, especially within mass organizations. . . to provide tactical support for the development of mass organizations by providing them defense."¹³ But they were withdrawn later "mainly because the priority in the early years of martial law was for the NPA to survive, and countryside units needed all armaments possible."

As Julian Banaag (a nom de guerre) of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist party of the Philippines puts it:

Urban guerilla warfare is part of and serves mainly unarmed and legal progressive mass movements in the cities. As such its operations, compared to guerilla operations in the countryside, have an even pronounced political character. At the same time, it is also a part and serves the overall guerilla warfare

being waged mainly in the countryside. . . . It is however secondary to the armed struggle in the countryside where the main forces of the people's army are deployed and being continuously developed.¹⁴

The Aquino assassination in 1983, allegedly the handiwork of the Marcos administration, further heightened the people's unarmed and armed struggles.

In 1984, the rate of NPA offensives went up to 8-9 times a week. Also, these offensives hauled more arms (M30, M60 machine guns) for the NPA arsenal.

Sabotage and commando operations also increased in the same year. Infrastructure projects and agribusiness enterprises were the prime targets of such operations. Properties amounting to several hundreds of millions of pesos were destroyed.

A newly opened front in Lanao del Norte, F₁₇, launched forth a disarming operation along the borders of Kapatagan and Karomatan towns on June 26-27 of the same year.

At the start of 1985, The NPA set about raiding town halls, detachments, company headquarters. Tactical offensives during this year had become more daring than ever. Take these three samples:

1. The ambush of PC Gen. Pedrito de Guzman by partisans on January 21 which took place merely 200 meters away from the gate of the PC regional camp in Cagayan de Oro City;

2. In March, the NPA raided the town hall of Jose Dalman, Zamboanga del Norte and held it for five hours, and

3. To celebrate the NPA 16th anniversary, guerillas attacked the Consunji Construction Corp. headquarters in Prosperidad, Agusan del Sur, disarmed the company guards, without firing a single shot. The company headquarters was 600 meters away from the headquarters of the First Army Brigade.

During the later half of 1985, "the NPA General Command formulated a program for various fighting fronts to carry out intensified military operations in which "the expectation was that the armed struggle would be intensified towards the overthrow of the US-backed Marcos dictatorship."¹⁵ But it was overtaken by the February 1986 events.

The year 1985 was also marked the discovery of the scourge of the revolutionary movement in Mindanao - a massive and intensive network of deep penetration agents (DPAs) or "Zombies" as they were called in Mindanao. The discovery led to the purges and/or cleansing of the ranks of the revolutionary forces and a backlash.

Concluding Remarks

The assumption to power by the Aquino government has necessarily affected the number and intensity of tactical offensives conducted by the NPA throughout the country but this was attributed by the armed revolutionary movement more to adjustments made "in terms of targets in operations in the early months after the February uprising and during the peace negotiations between the revolutionary movement and the regime."¹⁶

After the collapse of the peace talks, Aquino declared an all-out war against the revolutionary forces. The "total war" policy of the Aquino government, which seeks to destroy the infrastructure or support bases of the NPA (through the so-called "gradual constriction"), is definitely a setback for the armed revolutionary movement.

But there is no sign that the "insurgency was broken."¹⁷ It is because the "standard factors used to explain why insurgencies thrive," writes Alex Magno, "are still very much present."¹⁸ No less than former Defense Secretary Fidel Ramos recognizes that the roots of insurgency are "poverty, illiteracy, injustice, graft and corruption and fear."¹⁹

The war in Mindanao, therefore, is intimately linked with the struggle of the entire Filipino people to eliminate the very roots of their poverty and establish an alternative social order.

NOTES

1. Fourth Anniversary statement of the New People's Army, *Ang Bayan*, March 29, 1973, p. 1 Quoted in David Rosenberg (ed.), *Marcos and Martial law in the Philippines*. London: Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 18-19.

2. *Moving Heaven and Earth*, 1982, p. 170.

3. *ibid.*, p. 1713.

4. *The Filipino People Will Triumph*. Central Publishing House, 1988, p. 12.

5. Della Miranda, "1981: A Landmark Year," *Liberation* (Vol. X Bo. 2, February 1982), p. 5. Cited in A. Magno, "The Filipino Left at the Crossroads: Current Debates on Strategy and Revolution," *Marxism in the Philippines, Second Series*. Quezon City: Third World Studies Center, UP, 1988, p. 81.

6. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 March 1983, p. 18.

7. *The Expanding Strategic Hamlets of Mindanao*, 1982, p. 54.

8. Arnel de Guzman and Tito Craige. *Handbook on Militarization*. Manila: Ecumenical Movement for Justice and Peace, 1990, p.12.

9. *Strategic Hamlets . . .*, p. 2.

10. *FEER*, 10 March 1983, p. 18.

11. *Newsweek*, 22 April 1985, p. 8.

12. *FEER*, 10 March 1983, p. 22.

13. *Marxism in the Philippines Second Series*, pp. 145-146.

14. *The Filipinos Will Triumph!*, p.24.

15. *Midweek*, 23 July 1986, p. 10.

16. *The Filipinos Will . . .*, p. 3.

17. *Kasarinlan* (Vol.4 No. 1, 3rd Quarter 1988).

18. *Manila Chronicle*, 6-12 April 1991.

19. *Handbook on Militarization*, p. 10.