

MAKING PHILIPPINE INSURGENCY IRRELEVANT

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As the middle level officer involved in designing responsive training for the Philippine Army, I have travelled all over my country to document our four-decade long insurgency history. In this speech, I wish to highlight my findings about our continuing struggles and fervent hopes in ending the insurgency. In the course of this, I will also touch on the out-of-the-box approaches initiated by peace stakeholders namely, the government, the military and the citizenry.

The most disastrous perspective about any insurgency is when one believes that it can be won through force alone. I was a combatant for seven years, serving with an elite infantry unit where we sent from trouble spot to another. Having been a product of West Point and trained, in the early 1990s, in the Cold War doctrines of domination through air, land and sea superiority, I fought in the frontlines. I left the battlefield after leading my men through the fiercest battles in Mindanao in the year 2000. The uneasy peace forged in the aftermath of the all out war came at such a huge cost on both sides. Much more than the lives lost, however, what has been more painful was that the violence was really a giant step backwards in the march to peace. Conquering the enemy main camps was the swifter way to assert control. Through massive operations, all the established enemy camps were reclaimed after 4 months. But rebuilding the communities, and most importantly bringing back the citizens on the path to peace, has become a longer and more continuous process.

The strategy of domination to win a war only works when a whole country is the enemy. But even in the most rebel-influenced areas in the Philippine South, not everybody is the enemy. The Cold War mentality of distrust and hate had so pervasively captured our mindset, that we, the warriors, from both sides, had been almost inured to a lifetime of violence. At some point, in my warrior days, it has become normal to kill a brother Filipino – Christian or Muslim alike – as long as he carried a gun. At those points, we were just doing it for survival.

A ray of hope, however, has shown itself in the minds of the more enlightened erstwhile enemies. While the first generation rebels and military commanders revolved around a culture of rage, we of the younger generation now seek to understand and respect our enemies first before engaging them in violence if necessary. It is in following a logical process of isolating the resilient and hardest targets who deserve precise application of force, that we have been devising novel peace-building initiatives for the stakeholders who do not deserve such force.

This mindset, has so far yielded a more sober assessment of our performance in counterinsurgency. For the insurgents not willing to consider peace, we in the Armed Forces will measure our success in terms of how many of them we neutralize and how many of their firearms we capture. For the rest, we will measure our success on a balanced scorecard. At the end, we want to know whether we, the nation's military, can indeed support other stakeholders in creating a political, social and economic environment conducive to development. Examples of these measures are economic indicators directly attributable to the reign of peace such as the number of new businesses established, the rise in literacy, the decrease in unemployment and the increase in tourist arrivals. More importantly, we now also

seek to measure counterinsurgency success to the appropriate application of military power which makes possible the increased support of the populace and the greater involvement of local political and civic leadership towards peace. So far, this more comprehensive and broader appreciation of counterinsurgency success parameters, is motivating Armed Forces officers to try out “softer” approaches to gauge their success. In some instances, these soft approaches have even worked even for the hardest targets.

The most naïve perception of the Philippine insurgency is in believing that its primary motivation is political or religious ideology. Given the present realities of the three major threat groups we face, nothing could be farther from the truth. Counting our rebels groups combined, namely the New People’s Army, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Abu Sayyaf group, these are just about 10% of our Armed Forces strength and about .1% of our total population. However, we are spending a disproportionate amount of our annual budget trying to totally wipe them out. The task really is made more difficult because though their numbers have become insignificant, they are so deeply entrenched in the rural political and informal economic system. Let me focus on the activities of the entrepreneurial insurgent.

In a poor country where jobs are most wanting, the insurgency is an alternative and lucrative source of income. Take for example the obvious choice of a poor farmer or an out-of-school youth. He can pretend to be an idealistic cadre but extort money from foreign construction companies at the same time. He can champion the environmental protection but demand that legal mining firms pay him revolutionary taxes. He can also fight for the poor but systematically drain these of food and other support. He could represent religious uprightness but earn a

living through kidnapping and drug dealing. The whole thing lies in the easy choice that a recruit or an insurgent can make – return to society and eke out a living in the farm or live comfortably as an entrepreneurial bandit. His answer is obvious.

From the perspective of our government and our Armed Forces, the answer to the decades-long insurgency may also be getting clearer – cut the insurgent support system and nurture him in the society through job creation. At the tactical level, much of the out-of-the-box approaches are in devising ways to sever the link between the city-based financier and the jungle-based rebels. The center of gravity of most successful approaches over the past few years is the insurgent support system. For a time, we were involved in not merely drying the water in which the fish or the insurgent swims. But we also went as far as breaking the aquarium that makes the dynamic coexistence of the fish and the water possible.

After all is said and done , however, what lies at the heart of the counterinsurgency in the Philippines is this: the insurgents can never win, but neither could the peace actors decisively wipe them out. That matters most is that the whole insurgency be made irrelevant. And the only way to do that is more preventive anti-insurgency strategies and more precise violence-oriented counterinsurgency measures. We have conquered an insurgency in the 1950s when the late President Ramon Magsaysay mobilized the whole Philippine nation towards decimating the Hukbalahap rebellion. We can do it again if there is an active interplay of the three main actors – the citizens, the military and the government.

The insurgent has become practical. He no longer wants equal distribution of wealth. That simply, is not possible. What he dreams of is equal distribution of opportunities through education and entrepreneurship. Let me touch on both powerful forces.

Education opens the mind to the points of view of other people. It is in this discovery that he learns to appreciate the universal values such as respect, tolerance and human rights. He recognizes differences, but he searches for the similarities before he wallows in the differences. Education, therefore, is the great equalizer. When one is educated, his tendency is not so much on the easier conflict resolution method which is killing. When he is educated, he opts for reason and logic before he arrives at the decision whether to follow the harder right than the easier wrong. Education, indeed, is a powerful anti-insurgency tool.

Entrepreneurship is also a vital culture to develop. When he learns to earn, he ceases to depend on others and most especially from the government. When he is financially independent, he gains freedom – the freedom to choose which school to send his children or what food to eat for that day. More importantly, when he is free, he does not have the time and the inclination to blame or suspect anybody for anything. The most successful stories of rebels returning to the folds of the law have one thing in common – they all took up to forming their own businesses after laying down their arms. Such is the power of entrepreneurship.

The other crucial element of any peace-building effort is the nation's military. By his natural orientation, any military is wired for combat and conflict management. It is when he shifts this orientation to cooperation management that he becomes creative in making insurgency irrelevant. There had been a dramatic transformation in Army attitude since we started

encouraging our soldiers to become consensus-building nation-builders and not merely as violence managers. When a soldier realizes that his sacrifices are all geared towards nation-building, he begins to see himself not as a conqueror or invader but as a community facilitator. When he sees himself as a vital component in the march to progress he sees citizens as allies and not as potential adversaries. He sees the possibilities in things and not on the impossibilities of efforts. He tends to be positive in his approaches and not as divisive and pessimistic as before. He relishes win-win relationships and not zero-sum games. Most importantly, a military geared towards nation-building learns to listen and care. And this makes all the differences in the way he views his job, his stakeholders' expectations and his commitment to meeting these.

The third major factor in insurgency resolution is the government. In my studies of our sustainable campaigns so far, the most dramatic had been those championed and personally led by the local chief executives. The ideal situation is when a mayor or governor musters his formal and informal leaders and calls on them for a united stand. Productive results always follow because all the forces in a community work together for peace and development. In this environment, the insurgent cannot hope to thrive.

To sum it up, much has been done about the insurgency in the Philippines. More international understanding, greater cooperation among peace stakeholders, more support for education and entrepreneurship – and we will see its end. To quote the most famous President today, “Yes, we can!”

---by Major Dennis Eclarin

