

Philippines: The generals' pork? Duterte eyes P16.4-B fund for anti-communist task force

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If approved, the fund is seen to set the stage for a bigger war with the Left a year before the 2022 elections

President Rodrigo Duterte allocated his controversial anti-insurgency task force – the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) – a staggering P16.44 billion fund in the proposed 2021 national budget.

If Congress approves the fund, it will set the stage for an even more aggressive campaign next year against progressive groups red-tagged by an administration that's now teeming with retired generals.

What does the fund hope to achieve?

"It's going to end communist insurgency, which [these organizations] have been waging. It will be used to prevent the destruction of our youth and indigenous peoples exploited by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) front organizations," said task force spokesperson Lieutenant General Antonio Parlade Jr, commander of the military's Southern Luzon Command.

The generous funding – called the Support to the Barangay Development Program – underscores Duterte's priority as he approaches the end of his term in 2022 and intends to end a 50-year-old rebellion.

National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr, a retired Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief, is the proponent of the fund.

In presenting the program as one of Duterte's legacy projects, Esperon said in January 2020 that the government had already cleared 842 villages. A total of 2,379 villages continue to be infiltrated and 2,739 more were threatened with communist infiltration, he added, making the guerrillas the country's "primary political threat."

The money is aimed at allowing the task force to bring the campaign down to communities by releasing up to P20 million worth of livelihood programs to each infiltrated or threatened barangay.

Here's how the carrot will work: The barangays must first secure a certification that they are "cleared" of insurgency, based on criteria that the task force will set.

The role of barangay leaders is critical here – because they are the same foot soldiers who bring the votes during elections, which the Left participates in.

Thus the fund is seen to be not just as a tool to end the insurgency but also to wipe out leftist organizations in the 2022 elections.

The proposed P16.44 billion allocation is separate from agency budgets for programs that support the anti-communist campaign. For example, the Philippine National Police's proposed budget has its own allocation called End Local Communist Armed Conflict.

Centralized control

The proposed budget was also taken from existing budget items under the Local Government Support Fund (LGSF), which used to pay for barangay (village) projects such as farm-to-market roads.

The crucial difference is NTF-ELCAC will now manage the funds and the barangays that used to rely on the LGSF could no longer access it if they fail to secure a certification from the task force.

NTF-ELCAC may also use the fund for small items previously disallowed under the LGSF - medical, burial, transportation, food, cash for work, and educational assistance to indigent individuals or families.

By moving the money to the task force, the Duterte administration is saying that it just needs one big push to achieve what previous governments have failed to do: defeat the rebels, who number less than 4,000 nationwide based on military estimates; and paralyze any and all groups it finds supportive or sympathetic to the armed struggle.

"If NTF-ELCAC is able to address the major security issues we face from the CPP then that will translate to hundreds of billions of revenues arising from peaceful communities conducive to development," said Parlade.

It's pork

To critics, this is simply pork barrel for the generals.

The House of Representatives began budget deliberations on Friday, September 4. Bayan Muna Representative Carlos Zarate, a member of the progressive Makabayan bloc red-tagged by the military, said he will persuade his colleagues to take away NTF-ELCAC's budget.

Zarate likened the budget allocation to a pork barrel for retired generals because it allows them "so much discretion" in spending the money.

"Sila ang magse-certify. Sila magbibigay. Mas matindi pa ito sa pork barrel ng Kongresista. Magdi-dispense sila ng P20 million per barangay. Can you imagine that? Talagang pork ito in aid of whatever," Zarate said.

(They will issue the certification. They will release the funds. This is worse than the pork barrel of lawmakers. They will dispense P20 million to every barangay. Can you imagine that? This is really pork in aid of whatever.)

Parlade rejected the comparison. "It is not akin to pork barrel, which some legislators used for political ends.... It's not the same as Makabayan's pork barrel, which they use to destroy government and other programs to expand their organization," he said.

Zarate said the money will be put to better use if it's managed by regular departments or moved to augment the country's coronavirus response.

"The President said in his budget message that their priority is the budget for health. You will

wonder why they [NTF-ELCAC] would get P16 billion,” said Zarate in a mix of Filipino and English, noting that this is 3 times the budget of COVID-19 programs on personal protective equipment (PPE) and other COVID-19 interventions.

“It speaks volumes about what is really your priority in this time of crisis,” Zarate added.

Budget experts have echoed these concerns about Duterte’s priorities for next year. “Riddled with perverse priorities and misguided by a false sense of hope, the 2021 budget in its current form threatens to underfund, enfeeble, or even derail the government’s pandemic response next year,” they said.

Parlade explained that the task force may use the Support to the Barangay Development Program to fund infrastructure projects such as farm-to-market roads, school buildings, water and sanitation systems, health stations, electrification, and technical vocational projects and trainings on agriculture and livelihood.

“It will be used to promote good governance down to the barangay level so that services will reach the poorest and most isolated Filipinos,” said Parlade.

Political tool?

So how can these projects go wrong? “The problem is they are red-tagging legitimate organizations,” said Zarate.

He is worried that barangay officials will be encouraged to participate in the “harassment and vilification” of legitimate community organizations and its members. “They (barangay chairmen) may prohibit leaders and members of progressive organizations from organizing or even existing just for them to get the P20 million bounty,” Zarate said.

It’s a scenario that threatens to suppress activism in communities due to fears of reprisal. It could affect campaigns for land reform, respect for human rights, and abolition of mining concessions, among other issues.

Parlade dismissed Zarate’s concerns. “It will be used to counter their lies and protection of institutions they seek to destroy, including our learning institutions,” he said.

Corruption-prone?

Beyond this, budget experts who briefed Rappler raised concerns about the susceptibility of NTF-ELCAC’s funding to corruption due to its discretionary nature.

They noted the similarity of the funding to problematic programs - introduced by Duterte’s predecessors - that were also intended to address the root causes of conflict by bringing development to communities.

The Aquino government introduced PAYapa at MASaganang PamayaNAn or Pamana, the developmental arm of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) created to support peace talks with different armed groups by bringing development to their communities.

Pamana had been hounded by corruption allegations involving cuts or commissions required from LGU beneficiaries in order to avail of the fund. It’s a problem that persisted when the Duterte administration sustained the program, leading to the [resignation](#) of his former peace adviser, Jesus Dureza.

Dureza resigned after Duterte fired Ronald Flores, OPAPP Undersecretary for Support Services and National Program Manager of Pamana; and Yeshtern Baccay, Assistant Secretary for Support Services and Pamana Concerns.

Interior Secretary Eduardo Año, also a former AFP chief of staff, said the Support to the Barangay Development Program will be different from Pamana.

"Ibang klase naman 'yun dahil may mga unaccounted funds. But this time, all projects are specific," Año said. *"Lahat ng project doon ay naka-itemize sa mga NPA-affected barangays at puro infrastructure projects. [They're] subject to COA audit,"* he said.

(It's a different case because there were unaccounted funds [in Pamana]. But this time, all projects are specific. All the projects are itemized for NPA-affected barangays and all of them are infrastructure projects.)

Año said it will be easy to track the fund because government agencies - the Department of Public Works and Highways, Department of Agriculture, Department of Health, and the National Irrigation Authority - will implement them.

Parlade said these corruption issues are "precisely" why the task force exists. The program was "created to override graft ridden systems and processes that delay government services or deflect programs to suit parochial concerns of politicians."

"This time it's about the poor and vulnerable, and not political bases," he said.

But the military has its own recent history of corruption in its counter-insurgency projects. Pamana's predecessor, the Kalayaan sa Barangay Program (KBP) that was implemented by the AFP's former National Development Support Command (NADESCOM), was also hounded by rumors of irregularities until it was deactivated in 2012, according to an analyst familiar with the fund.

Crackdown on critics

There's also fear that the NTF-ELCAC's real agenda is to crack down on government critics.

The task force's propaganda machine have recently also targeted media groups and individuals such as media giant ABS-CBN, GMA News reporter Atom Araullo, Rappler CEO Maria Ressa, and Rappler managing editor Glenda Gloria.

During his confirmation hearing last week, Parlade was unapologetic about targeting the media. "We would like to shift to the more important aspect of this political war, which is propaganda. If they happen to be a part of that machinery, then we will destroy it," he said.

Where would this hate campaign lead? "It's hard to speculate on possible scenarios but when money is dangled as an incentive for barangays to have themselves cleared, it could lead to shortcuts. We've seen that with the drug lists," said Nonoy Espina, president of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), which has been at the forefront of defending journalists red-tagged by the NTF-ELCAC.

Evolution of anti-insurgency campaign

Indeed, the country is seeing the evolution of the counter-insurgency campaign two decades since progressives joined the party-list elections to push for reforms in mainstream politics.

The military watched with consternation as they grew in popularity, dominating party-list elections that would give them up to 3 seats each in the House of Representatives.

Retired generals eventually ran for party-list elections, including retired Major General Jovito Palparan, most hated by activists but loved by the troops. In the House, Palparan would not back down to lengthy verbal tussles with the progressive groups to argue with the likes of former Bayan Muna representative Satur Ocampo.

Palparan and Ocampo ran for the Senate in 2010 but lost. [Palparan was sentenced](#) in 2018 to 40 years in prison for kidnapping and serious illegal detention over the disappearances of University of the Philippines students. He is appealing his conviction. Ocampo was briefly detained, too, in November 2018 for alleged human trafficking and kidnapping in relation to a humanitarian mission in Davao Del Norte.

The military also watched its tagged enemies get appointed to key government agencies, especially when Duterte appointed known Leftists to the Cabinet. The generals especially resented the appointment in 2016 of a respected professor, Judy Taguiwalo, as head of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). They considered her a communist sympathizer who suddenly had control over community development projects.

Today, retired generals occupy key government posts usually held by civilians, like the DSWD, which is now headed by former Philippine Army chief Rolando Joselito Bautista. The [task force against the coronavirus pandemic](#) is packed with soldiers while the President recently signed into law a pet bill of the military, the anti-terror law.

In the case of the 2021 budget, will Congress give the generals more power than what they already have?

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