

Philippines: On the peace zones review - “Off-limits to armed conflict or hostilities”

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National Security Adviser Hermogenes C. Esperon, Jr. was reported to have said that peace zones like those in Sagada, Mountain Province and in Mindanao would be reviewed basically in so far as these have barred the entry and presence of police and military personnel but not rebels particularly of the New People’s Army (NPA) who have taken advantage of some peace zones for sanctuary, recruitment and training ground. He told this reporters on the sidelines of a summit of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) in Baguio City last July 25. (“Esperon, peace zones up for review,” PDI, 7/26/19, p. A16)

Despite their misgivings about rebel infiltration of peace zones, it is notable that security officials like Esperon and the Army’s 5th Infantry Division Commander Maj. Gen. Pablo Lorenzo still speak of “honoring” and “continuing to recognize” these peace zones. Both Esperon and Lorenzo, however, speak of setting new rules or mechanisms in place for the efficient and effective delivery of government services to improve the lives of people in these peace zones, including for the military’s engineering brigades to build roads or bridges near or within peace zones.

The most immediate or urgent concern, however, in this time of escalated armed conflict and insurgency-related killings like currently in Negros island, is for civilian protection from continuing armed hostilities. Among other measures of civilian protection, including better respect for human rights and international humanitarian law (the rules of war), local communities like those in Sagada and elsewhere should be allowed and respected in their autonomous decisions to declare or maintain their localities as **peace zones which are, at the minimum, off-limits to armed conflict or hostilities**, and not necessarily off-limits to soldiers and rebels, armed or unarmed.

At this juncture, it might be good to go back to a definition and other policy formulations in the once 13th Congress House Bill No. 1867 of then Anak Mindanao Party-List Rep. Mujiv S. Hataman for “The Peace Zones Policy Act of 2004.” Here a **peace zone is defined** as “a people-initiated, community-based arrangement in a local geographic area which residents themselves declare to be off-limits to armed conflict primarily to protect the civilians, livelihood and property there and to contribute to the more comprehensive peace process.” The **proposed basic policy** on peace zones “shall be one of openness, respect, recognition, consultation, appropriate support, **and ensuring their integrity and autonomy.**” **Five specific policies** on peace zones are proposed, and it would be educative to all concerned, including for the above-mentioned peace zones review, to present these now:

1. Peace zone proponents will undertake direct negotiations separately with each armed party. Any agreement reached with a combatant group constitutes a bilateral pact, autonomous of any agreement that may be reached with other armed parties.
2. Peace zone shall, as much as possible, be demilitarized of both government and dissident armed forces, including paramilitary forces and private armies. This does not preclude the community from agreeing to the deployment of peace-keeping or law enforcement units for protection from criminal elements as the situation warrants.

3. Peace zones shall be oriented to the peace process, and **not be used for counter-insurgency or for rebel base-building**.

4. Special development assistance to a peace zone shall be subject to community-based decision-making and implementation. Development programs and projects should be identified, requested or agreed on by the community.

5. Peace zones shall not be subjected to any blockade of food, vital services and development projects approved of by the local community.

The above-said proposed Peace Zones Policy Act also contains sections on Characteristics of Peace Zones, on Official and Formal Agreement with Government, and on Sanctions but there is no space here to present these. But **what is important for one**, given the “whole-of-nation approach” institutionalized by Executive Order No. 70 of 4 December 2018 as “a government policy for the attainment of inclusive and sustainable peace” and being implemented by the above-said NTF-ELCAC, **is for the government not to coopt the peace zones into that “whole-of-nation approach,”** such as for counter-insurgency. That will only defeat the purpose and even integrity of peace zones as autonomous local community initiatives to protect themselves from continuing armed hostilities of which they want no part in. **Let them be, leave them be.** As we said, it is notable that security officials like Esperon and Lorenzo speak of “honoring” and “continuing to recognize” these peace zones.

Unfortunately, on the other side of the armed conflict, the NPA through the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), has long adopted a hardline negative policy against peace zones especially “in areas where the NDFP is already governing or present” and which they view as characterized by “one-sidedness in favor of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) authority.” CPP founder Jose Ma. Sison has characterized peace zones as “seek(ing) to mobilize the local respectables (especially reactionary politicians, businessmen, landlords and conservative clergy) and create public opinion against the revolutionary movement and ‘restore trust and confidence’ in the GRP, including the perpetuation of violence of oppression and exploitation...” **This should dispel any security establishment thought that peace zones are one-sided in favor of the NPA.** On the contrary, it is a bigger challenge for the peace zone communities to get the CPP-NPA-NDFP to honor, recognize and respect peace zones declarations than it is to get the GRP side, both local and national, to do so. **Recognition and respect are important but still more important is local community assertion for its autonomous self-protection.**

In ending for now, aside from keeping peace zones off-limits to armed hostilities, allow us what may appear to be a naïve proposal: **let peace zones be also safe spaces for peaceful competition between the GRP and the NDFP in the delivery of basic services there, in the best interests of the local communities,** certainly a win-win solution for them.

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P.S.

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