

Philippines: Ceasefire in a time of coronavirus

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Love in a time of coronavirus, just like love in a time of cholera, has already happened and will likely continue to happen. How about a ceasefire on the war front between the Philippine government/armed forces and the communist-led rebels in this time of coronavirus? It has happened before, on a temporary and short-term basis, during some particularly destructive natural calamities, although mostly on a regional level. Well, this current natural calamity of COVID-19 is now a global pandemic. The Philippines for one is now under a public health emergency, to be clear, according to President Duterte, not martial law – although the military and police are being mobilized to backstop (employ reasonable force, if necessary) the new national emergency response under a civilian-led Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Disease (IATF-EID).

Given that new priority for the military (Armed Forces of the Philippines, AFP) and police (Philippine National Police, PNP), it should be in their interest that there be a temporary ceasefire (or at least a mutual suspension of military offensives) between them and the communist-led rebels (New People's Army, NPA) until the COVID-19 threat has been contained. On the other hand, the coronavirus emergency re-focusing and redeployment (if substantial) of the AFP-PNP is also a tempting scenario for the NPA to further intensify its tactical offensives, as it has long called for since the collapse of the peace talks in 2018. Any redeployment of big units of the AFP from the countryside to the National Capital Region of Metro-Manila (maybe the AFP version of “surrounding the cities from the countryside”) will leave some vacuum in the countryside that the NPA would normally take advantage of, such as by all the more attacking “softer” targets like the PNP and para-military units (Citizens Armed Forces Geographical Unit, CAFGU), which could no longer rely on immediate AFP reinforcements.

But perhaps the military calculus – for both sides – should not be the only or main determinant of policy decisions and courses of action in this in this military matter. Humanitarian considerations can sometimes trump (pun intended) military considerations. This looks like one of those times. There are also – to be *realpolitik* about it — political (including political correctness) and propaganda considerations. What action – continuing armed hostilities or a ceasefire – will win the hearts and minds of the people? Which army is the one helping them deal with this coronavirus threat to their health and their very lives? What is the point in saving people's lives from COVID-19 but killing perhaps just as many persons in armed hostilities?

A ceasefire in a time of coronavirus would be in accordance with the spirit, if not the letter, of international humanitarian law. For example, spirit-wise, there is Article 56 on hygiene and public health in occupied territories under the 1949 *Geneva Convention No. V on Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War* that is an international armed conflict: “To the fullest extent of the means available to it, the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring and maintaining, with the cooperation of national and local authorities, the medical and hospital establishments and services, public health and hygiene in the occupied territory, with particular reference to the adoption and application of prophylactic and preventive measures necessary to **combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics**.... In adopting measures of health and hygiene and in their implementation, the Occupying Power shall **take into consideration the moral and ethical susceptibilities of the**

population of the occupied territory.” (boldface emphasis supplied) Interestingly, both the Philippine government and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), including its ruling Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its main armed force NPA, are on record as adhering to the 1949 Geneva Conventions. And so, in this time of coronavirus, they should be combating the spread of COVID-19, rather than combating their enemy combatants.

On a higher philosophical plane or perspective of Maoist dialectics, there comes a time when the contradiction between man and nature takes precedence over the contradiction between man and man (forgive the use of this term rather than the gender-neutral humankind). The long-time principal contradictions between the people of the world and U.S. imperialism globally, and between the Filipino people and the Philippine state now under the “U.S.-Duterte fascist regime” locally, becomes secondary to the new current principal contradiction between the people of the world and coronavirus (if not yet between the people of the world and climate change). U.S. imperialism, Chinese imperialism, the Duterte administration and the CPP-NPA-NDFP can become tactical allies, even if strange bedfellows, against COVID-19. Resolve this new current principal contradiction first, then go back to the erstwhile principal contradictions, to your protracted people’s war, to your E.O. No. 70 whole-of-nation approach to end the local communist armed conflict, business as usual.

Finally, if all else rationalization fails, just have some consideration for the advanced ages (and stages) and pre-existing state of health (classified information that has been occasionally subjected to fake news) of the current acknowledged leaders of your two sides – President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, nearing 75, and his Professor Jose Maria Sison, 81. They are among the elderly most vulnerable to COVID-19. Perhaps, good old Pinoy cultural deference to and care for our elders can be reason enough for a ceasefire in a time of coronavirus. Coronabonus: this might help build some confidence for the so far *urong-sulong [one step forward-one step backward]* resumption of the peace talks.

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P.S.

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