

# Philippines: Reverse the violence, choose peace

Sunday 28 March 2021, by [MICLAT Gus](#), [TAÑADA Karen](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2021).

**On the eve of New Year's Day 2016, communist guerrillas in Agusan del Sur released Army Cpl. Adriano Bingil, whom they had held captive for 102 days, to then Davao City mayor and presidential aspirant Rodrigo Duterte.**

Right there, Mr. Duterte vowed to prioritize the search for peace and work for social healing and reconciliation when voted into office, saying anger and hate do not build a nation.

That event painted Mr. Duterte as a “friend” who can dance in step with the rebels in resolving the decades-long rebellion. Indeed, the pace of peacemaking was encouragingly upbeat as Mr. Duterte began office, although ironically, blood spilled profusely in his war on drugs.

He dished out a unilateral ceasefire in his first State of the Nation Address in July 2016. Detained rebel leaders were temporarily freed to join the peace talks that had been stalled since 2013. As the Norwegian-facilitated talks resumed by August of that year, the parties committed to an indefinite ceasefire—unilateral and uncoordinated yet setting a good atmosphere for negotiations.

Succeeding meetings produced landmark consensus on the framework for social and economic reforms, the bedrock of a political settlement, and free land distribution. In a further show of goodwill, the President dined with a number of Red leaders in the Palace and asked the military to support the peace process.

But, as quick as the peace momentum's buildup was the downward spiral to war footing, as differences on the release of political prisoners and the issue of a bilateral ceasefire lingered.

By February 2017, the parties had dropped the truce. Enmity deepened as the rebels suspected that apart from quelling the Marawi siege, they, too, were targets of the martial law in Mindanao. The stage was set for the parties' full return to the battlefield.

With prodding from the survey-popular Mr. Duterte, the state's war machine was quickly mobilized. Red-tagging of peasant, lumad, and progressive groups became the norm, often leading to the extrajudicial killing of targeted personalities such as the nine Tumandok leaders who opposed a dam project in Panay.

The Makabayan bloc, which is outspoken about the country's social ills and the administration's failures to effectively respond to the pandemic, has been persistently branded a rebel front.

Fixated with defeating the rebels before 2022, the leadership's antiquated national security mindset dominates government thinking, even in imposing quarantine restrictions. The military ventured further into draconian ways by branding academic institutions like the University of the Philippines as breeding grounds of rebels.

The assault on civil liberties could worsen with the recent passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020.

Through dialogues in conflict-affected communities, peace advocates have determined that the renewed hostilities have only brought enormous suffering especially to the lumad whose ancestral territories became battlegrounds. Desperation and deprivation pushed many villagers to lean on either side, weakening the social fabric of communities. Incidents of harassment are reported from either side, some resulting in deaths. People are gripped by fear and anxiety.

As the drumbeat of war gets louder, civil society is in the forefront of creating reverberations for peace, beyond the talks between government and the rebels. There is a dire need to protect affected peoples from violence, seek justice, and rebuild relations within and among communities.

Civil society recognizes the imperative of restarting the peace talks soonest, as war will not solve the inequities that underpin 52 years of rebellion. A vigorous and broad peace constituency must accompany the parties in that arduous process to prod them to plod on until a political settlement is reached.

In the last five years, the parties have spoken volumes about building peace in the country. They are now called upon to translate rhetoric into concrete actions, to reverse the ever-rising tide of violence and tread the path of peace.

---

**Gus Miclat** is executive director of the Initiatives for International Dialogue.

**Karen Tañada** is executive director of the Gaston Z. Ortigas Peace Institute.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

---

**P.S.**

Philippine Daily Inquirer

<https://opinion.inquirer.net/138253/reverse-the-violence-choose-peace>