

Philippines: Room for the human element in the GRP-NDFP peace framework?

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As we enter the New Year, it has been noted by Satur C. Ocampo that “By all indications, the coming year will see the continuation and even intensification of devastating wars in the world... Even here in the Philippines, deadly hostilities are taking place.” Some of these recent hostilities here have seen a highlighted human element of fratricidal war in the local communist armed conflict.

Last Christmas Day, of all days, there was a Philippine Army operation, with aerial bombardment and artillery shelling, against the New People’s Army (NPA) in the hinterlands of Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, that reportedly resulted in the killing of 10 NPAs. Among them were a family of three — Beverly Sinunta (said to be secretary of the Sub-Regional Command in Bukidnon), her husband Alfredo Banawan (said to be the deputy secretary) and their daughter Chen-Chen Banawan – who all hail from Quezon town, Bukidnon.

Three days after, or last December 28, ironically Niños Inocentes day, in another Army-NPA clash, this time in Sergio Osmeña town, Zamboanga del Norte, three NPAs were reported killed. One of them was Maria Luz Ranan, said to be secretary of the Guerrilla Front Sendong operating in Misamis Occidental. Her remains were claimed by her brother, a soldier of the Army’s 10th Infantry Battalion, the same unit that was pursuing that Guerrilla Front. Brig. Gen. Elmer Suderio, commander of the 102nd Infantry Brigade, said: “It was only lately that we discovered this fact. It was a sad ending for her as we were told that her brother did everything to convince her to return to the fold of the law, to no avail.”

Ranan of course must have had her strong reasons for staying with the NPA, as did the Sinunta-Banawan family of three, and they themselves may even say “no regrets” in this life-and-death struggle choice of theirs. The NPA would undoubtedly hail them as new revolutionary heroes and martyrs. Still, there has to be an element of sadness about such fratricidal turns of events. And of course it is not only about NPA deaths but also those of government soldiers, police officers and related personnel as well as of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire.

Also in the news last December 29 about old prisoners awaiting release was the story of ailing 84-year old Gerardo dela Peña of Camarines Norte. He was charged in a Daet court for murdering his nephew Melchor in 2001 but was arrested only in 2013 and eventually convicted in 2014. It was alleged that he and his brother Armenio were NPA members who suspected Melchor of being an intelligence asset of the military. Again, do we need this kind of fratricidal armed conflict even if waged for “resolving the roots of the armed conflict”? Does the line “from war, peace will be born” still ring?

The above-said news stories come as cautionary tales so soon after the hopeful development that was the new Oslo Joint Statement of last November 23. Here the Government of the Republic of the

Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) “agreed to a principled and peaceful resolution of the armed conflict” and “agreed to come up with a framework that sets the priorities for the peace negotiation with the aim of achieving the relevant socioeconomic and political reforms towards a just and lasting peace.”

Aside from “the serious socioeconomic and environmental issues, and the foreign security threats facing the country,” is there room in that framework for the human element and repair of the tattered social fabric? After all, the Joint Statement speaks of “the need to unite as a nation in order to address these challenges and resolve the reasons for the armed conflict” and of “a country where a united people can live in peace and prosperity.” This spirit of the Joint Statement is just as important as its letter.

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P.S.

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