CHAPTER 1

The Communist Front: Protracted People’s War and Counter-insurgency in the Philippines (Overview)

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Introduction

The armed conflict on the Communist front is the longest-running Maoist insurgency in the world (Corpus, 1989, pp. 27–28). Led by the New People’s Army (NPA)—the armed force of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which was re-established as a Maoist party on 26 December 1968—it was launched on 29 March 1969 in Central Luzon. Its primary task is ‘to wage a protracted people’s war’ (PPW) to overthrow the government and replace it with a ‘national democratic’ system with a socialist perspective. It is a ‘people’s war’ because, together with the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP)—formed in 1973 as an umbrella for its mass organizations—the rebels aim to win over the majority of the population in overthrowing the status quo. It is ‘protracted’ because they recognize that it will take time to build bases in the countryside before they can eventually take the cities and seize power. There are three major stages in this PPW: the strategic defensive, the strategic stalemate, and the strategic offensive. The PPW has been in the strategic defensive stage since the late 1960s.

Though it wages a ‘people’s war’, the NPA is essentially a political rather than a military force. Aside from armed struggle, its primary tasks are mass base building and land reform. Its strategy is to set up barangay (village) organizing committees and barangay revolutionary committees, primarily in rural areas (see Chapter 2), and to build support infrastructure in urban areas through sectoral and other mass organizations. With enough rebel-influenced villages in the countryside, the NPA’s ultimate goal is to encircle the cities
where the support forces await them to form a coalition transitional council that will eventually become an alternative ‘national democratic’ government (Marks, 1996, pp. 98–106).

This chapter presents a brief survey of the root causes of this internal armed conflict and provides an overview of its evolution, showing how political changes at various junctures have influenced the war. One political mechanism of particular interest is the peace negotiations of 1986–7, which have continued intermittently since 1992. Prospects for a comprehensive agreement between the government and the NPA are bleak since the government remains firmly opposed to what it views as demands for power sharing, while the CPP is committed to its deeply ideological vision.

The chapter also looks at the longevity of the armed group, which has persisted despite changes in the national and international contexts, and a deep split within the party in the early 1990s. As a result of the split, sections of the Communist Left have explored alternative paths to progressive social and political change, including participation in elections. These other paths necessarily have some bearing on the evolution of the conflict on the Communist front.

Since 11 September 2001, the US-led ‘global war on terror’ has impinged upon peace negotiations and, of course, on the armed conflict itself. The chapter concludes with some insights on the human security and development panorama, asking whether and how the armed conflict can be resolved peacefully. It also highlights the role of the gun in the insurgency. Following this chapter is a case study of the NPA in Bicol (Chapter 2), a region where the NPA is particularly strong. The study looks at how the group operates in practice, providing details of its organizing and fund-raising techniques.

The key findings of this chapter include:

- The quality and number of cadres has decreased since its heyday in the mid-1980s, but the NPA is still attracting members, mainly poor people from rural areas, for many of whom the NPA represents one of the few available livelihood opportunities. Idealistic college students continue to join, though in much smaller numbers than in the 1970s.
- Though suspended at present, peace talks could be resumed, but the potential for compromise on either side is slim. The NPA’s aim is still to overthrow
the government, a demand that leaves little room for negotiation. The Arroyo government has invested in defeating the group militarily.

- The United States, as part of its war on terror, has injected new fuel into the government’s anti-insurgency drive, both by listing NPA as a terrorist group and by offering logistical support to the military.
- The direction of conflict is dependent on the quality of democracy. If an inclusive, participatory democracy can be established, then the NPA’s struggle will seem anachronistic to its potential supporters and members. Neither the government nor the NPA is likely to win a military victory.

Causes of armed conflict

The power of the CPP-NPA-NDFP framework is that it helps to simplify and make sense of society’s problems. Through the years, and despite changes of government, its analysis of the nation’s ills continues to appeal to people who may not have access to more complex and sophisticated study (Caouette, 2004, p. 696). The CPP-NPA-NDFP has identified the three basic problems of the Filipino people as the land problem of the peasantry, US foreign intervention, and ‘bureaucrat capitalism’. The latter is defined by CPP founder Jose Maria Sison (‘Amado Guerrero’) as government officials who serve the interests of the exploitative landlords, capitalists, and imperialists (Guerrero, 1979, pp. 112–15).

The Philippine government and military analyses of the root causes of the nation’s problems are broadly consonant with the CPP’s. The National Unification Commission Report to President Fidel V. Ramos in 1993 identified poverty and inequity, poor governance, injustice, and exploitation and marginalization of indigenous cultural communities as root problems. Perceived foreign intervention in domestic affairs, degeneration of moral values, and ideological differences in achieving social changes are other factors (National Unification Commission, 1993, p. 27).

The debt-ridden—and in some cases allegedly corrupt—governments of President Ferdinand Marcos (1965–86) and his successors have failed to address these root problems of poverty, poor governance, and injustice. The Philippines was 84th among 177 countries on the United Nations Development
Programme Human Development Index in 2005 (PHDR, 2005, p. 97) with 25.7 per cent of its 81 million people living under the national poverty line in 2003 (PHDR, 2005, p. 108). Patronage politics persists (Castañeda, 2006), especially in rural areas.

The government’s failure to provide democracy and justice to the people has given the CPP-NPA-NDFP some grounds for its PPW to establish what it claims will be a liberating nationalist and democratic government. The CPP rationalizes the existence of the NPA by claiming that it protects the people from the ‘mercenaries of a fascist elitist’ government and the plundering of traditional local politicians. In Sison’s words, ‘[w]e should be able to see the high cost of the violence of daily exploitation to recognize the necessity and lower cost of armed revolution’ (Rosca, 2004, p. 201).

Of course, without the CPP-NPA’s agitation, the armed conflict would not exist. The government tends to point to the Communists as the root cause of the problem, because they exploit conditions of poverty, block government efforts at development (Cruz, Avelino Jr. 2006), and foist their ideology on the people (Abinales, 1996). The picture is more complex than this analysis of ‘outside agitators’ exploiting root problems would suggest, however. Guerillas cannot exist without the willing and active support of a majority, or at least a strong minority, of people in the countryside. As the accompanying case study (Chapter 2) shows for the island provinces of Catanduanes and Masbate in the Bicol region, poor areas that are bereft of government presence and services provide fertile terrain for guerilla warfare.

Reaffirming the PPW

Major political changes in the Philippines mark ebbs and flows in the Communist insurgency, but there have also been clear trends: a gradual rise during the Marcos government (1965–86), a period of relative decline during the Aquino (1986–92) and Ramos (1992–98) governments, and a slow but consistent recovery since 1995.

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of student activism across the globe, and the Philippines was no exception. Students of Marx and Mao in the University of the Philippines and other private colleges and universities were drawn
particularly to the perceived logic, purity, and success of the Maoist revolution in China in an era of romanticized national liberation movements. They joined peasants, workers, and sectors of the middle class in a protest movement for reform and democracy (Wurfel, 1988).

In 1970, shortly after the foundation of the CPP and NPA, the ‘First Quarter Storm’ student demonstrations erupted. Marcos’s hard-line response—in particular the suspension of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus and, in 1972, the declaration of martial law—inadvertently served the NPA’s recruitment drive. Even after CPP founder Sison and NPA commander Bernabe Buscayno were captured in 1976–77, the national democratic movement expanded through massive organization, intensification of guerilla warfare in the countryside, international solidarity work, and alliance-building with groups and individuals who opposed the dictatorship. Following 13 years of martial law, in 1985 the CPP proclaimed that it was in the ‘advance substage of the strategic defensive’. In other words, the CPP thought it was close to winning its PPW (CPP, 1993, pp. 35–36, 44; PHDR, 2005, p. 85).

The panorama shifted for the group in 1986, when Corazon Aquino rose to power by virtue of an aborted military coup and the EDSA ‘People Power’ uprising. Political prisoners were released—among them Sison—peace talks were in the offing, and a ceasefire was declared. But the Communist rebels were unimpressed with the quality of the restored democracy on the grounds that it was as elitist as it had been pre-Marcos, and were unhappy at calls for the group to surrender. Talks collapsed after the military brutally dispersed and killed peasants rallying for land reform in Manila in 1987, and the NPA returned to arms. Aquino, acting under the advice of the United States, launched a ‘total war’ against the NPA, then at its peak of strength (May and Collier, 2004, p. 406). The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) established Oplan Lambat Bitag (literally ‘net trap’) of ‘gradual constriction’ in 1988, which succeeded in reducing the Communist force from 25,200 in 1987 to 14,800 in 1991 (Barabicho, 2003; Hernandez, 2006) through a combination of military offensives and efforts to address the political, economic, and social causes of the conflict.

But it was not only external factors that weakened the NPA in this period. The group was undermined by internal ideological disagreements about tac-
tics, starting with the decision not to participate in the successful EDSA protests and the CPP’s boycott of the January 1986 snap presidential election. Also damaging to the NPA were the brutal purges of the 1980s when combatants in Mindanao and southern Luzon—most of them innocent—were tortured and killed on suspicion of being military ‘deep penetration agents’ (DPA). This ‘anti-DPA’ campaign demoralized and ultimately divided the ranks, and the memory of its horrors continues to haunt the CPP. A split in the group became inevitable after Sison initiated a ‘Second Great Rectification Movement’. The main group ‘reaffirmed’ (RA) Sison’s PPW and redeployed the NPA to recover its mass base in the countryside. Membership of its mass base had been reduced by almost 60 per cent and the number of barangays covered by guerilla fronts by 15 per cent, while NPA strength and tactical offensives continued on a steady decline from 1992, bottoming out in 1995.

The ‘rejectionists’ (RJs) who were expelled or who resigned from the party decried the Sison faction’s ‘Stalinism’ and rejected its analysis of Philippine society as being semi-colonial and semi-feudal. They saw a greater role for legal parliamentary struggle and insurrectionism in the Philippine revolutionary project, since by this time the looser post-martial law structure had provided some democratic space for peaceful protest, and newly elected President Ramos had initiated a comprehensive peace process (Caouette, 2004, p. 594). Some rejectionist splinter groups formed their own parties, continued with armed struggle in their own territories, or invested in peace negotiations, parliamentary struggle, trade unionism, NGOs, people’s organizations, cooperatives, and other legal means of struggle for reforms.

Further splintered since 1992, RJ groups now have relatively small mass followings and are prone to demobilization and co-option by the government. Some of these groups are involved in peace talks with the government while others are still at war with both the AFP and the CPP-NPA. Attempts have been made to bridge the rift among the splinter groups—most significantly a ‘Democratic Left’ (DemLeft) dialogue in early 2006—but unity between RA and RJ forces is highly unlikely, given RA hostility. [See Part Two profiles of the following rejectionist groups: Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa ng Pilipinas (Revolutionary Workers Party of the Philippines) and its Revolutionary Proletarian Army-Alex Boncayao Brigade (RPM-P/RPA-ABB); Rebolusyonar-
yong Partido ng Manggagawa ng Muindanao (Revolutionary Workers Party of Mindanao) and its Revolutionary People’s Army (RPM-M/RPA); Partido Marxista-Leninista ng Pilipinas (Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines) and its Partisano (Partisans) Group (PMLP-Partisano); Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines and its Rebolusyonaryong Hukbong Bayan (Revolutionary People’s Army) (MLPP-RHB); Partido ng Manggagawang Pilipino (Filipino Workers Party) and its Armadong Partisano ng Paggawa (Armed Partisans of Labor) (PMP-APP).

Starting in 1995, the military noted a resurgence of the NPA (Barabicho, 2003). In 1997, the CPP stated that it had recovered its 1983 mass base level. The CPP attributed its resurgence to Sison’s ‘reaffirmation’ of the PPW and to the NPA’s focus on ‘mass work’. The AFP put the rise down to the repealing of the Anti-Subversion Act (Republic Act 1700), which legalized the CPP, and to a shift from intelligence work aimed at defeating the NPA military to economic development to win over supporters of the insurgents. It also accused newly elected congressmen and women with alleged ties to the Communists of using congressional budgets and salaries to fund activities such as street demon-
strations organized by the CPP-NPA-NDFP, and the purchase of small arms (Barabicho, 2003, p. 49; Pante, 2003, pp. 10–11).

In 2001, the AFP estimated that the NPA had recovered almost half of its peak strength. Both Estrada and—after he was ousted in 2001 by a public uprising—his successor Gloria Macapagal Arroyo returned to Aquino’s approach by declaring all-out war on the Communists, launching a major military campaign against the rebels in 2002.

The Arroyo regime received a boost in 2004, when the United States, the European Union, Britain, Canada, and Australia blacklisted the CPP, the NPA, and Sison for terrorist activities. The NDFP suspended peace talks because it perceived the government as having pushed for the blacklisting of its member organizations (Rosca, 2004, pp. 221–26). Believing that the Arroyo government would soon fall, the CPP decided in August 2005 to reserve peace talks for her successor, and called on the NPA to intensify tactical offensives against her administration. Because the CPP realized that military withdrawal of support was needed to topple Arroyo, it forged a tactical alliance with anti-Arroyo elements in the AFP (see Box 1.1).
Two approaches and a third option

The Philippine government has had basically two responses to the PPW. The first is a military response, through martial law and all-out war. The second is low-intensity conflict involving ‘political, economic, and psychological warfare’ (Miles and Martin, n.d., p. 2; Carr and McKay, 1989) rather than military action.

As noted above, 14 years of Marcos’s martial law and the all-out war approach of succeeding governments not only failed to end the armed conflict but led to its escalation. There are several reasons for this. First, the AFP counter-insurgency strategy has tended to mimic the US strategy of conventional warfare in Vietnam and Iraq, which is unsuited to the guerilla warfare of a persistent, determined, highly mobile, and committed NPA. Second, the AFP has been beset with internal problems such as a lack of coordination on
a nationwide scale and a top-heavy bureaucracy (Corpus, 1989, pp. 107–35; Pobre, 2000). Troop vulnerability, inadequate combat intelligence, campaigns of short duration, and failure to engage in a ‘battle of hearts and minds’ with the NPA support bases were other factors.

Since 11 September 2001, the framing of the counter-insurgency effort as a counter-terrorist war has fuelled the conflict. The historical record of the CPP-NPA’s conduct of armed struggle shows that the group has neither as a policy nor as a general practice engaged in terrorism by deliberately targeting civilians. Yet the government continues to categorize the group as ‘Communist terrorists’ instead of an armed revolutionary movement with a mass base and the ‘defining elements of a social movement’ (Caouette, 2004, p. 696). This weakens chances for a negotiated political solution. The CPP’s response to the blacklisting of the CPP, NPA, and Sison was predictable: a call for ‘all-out resistance’ against the ‘US-directed Macapagal-Arroyo regime’ (Sison, 2002).

The second low-intensity approach pioneered by Aquino and consolidated by Ramos was clearly the more effective. Ramos’s ‘soft approach’ combined with the internal purges, the CPP split, the shift of activists to NGOs and the electoral arena, and the collapse of Communism globally left the NPA floundering.

As to a third option of peace negotiations, both the Philippine government and the CPP-NPA-NDFP have been instrumentalist in their approach. The government has tended to use peace talks to pacify and demobilize the NPA to eventually win a military victory over the group, rather than as a long-term tool to effect reforms (Oquist, 2002; 2003). Its peace proposals have involved the use of amnesties, economic support to demobilized combatants, investments in zones of influence, and the offer of political posts to ‘buy’ insurgents. The CPP in turn has tended to use the peace negotiations for tactical objectives such as recognition of belligerency status and legitimacy against a terrorist listing (Sison, 2004), but always in the service of the PPW strategy (Quimpo, 2006). Peace talks have been scuttled on numerous occasions for various reasons, including acts of aggression by one or other of the parties.

NDFP negotiations came to a productive head in March 1998 at The Hague with a Comprehensive Agreement to Respect Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL). In early 2005, the NDFP rejected a government demand for an interim ceasefire for a limited period to conduct
intensive talks. The CPP-NPA-NDFP has lost all hope of a peace process with the Arroyo government. Figure 1.2 shows the rise in the number of incidents initiated by the CPP-NPA in recent years, which contrasts with a decrease in the number of incidents initiated since 2000 by the two main Muslim armed groups, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) (though MILF-initiated incidents increased in 2008). Box 1.2 describes an ongoing peace process with one of the Communist break-away groups, the RPM-M.

Box 1.2 GRP–RPM-M: building peace from the grass roots

The Peace Process between the GRP [Government of the Republic of the Philippines] and the Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa ng Mindanao (RPM-M)—formerly the Central Mindanao ‘component’ of CPP-NPA-NDFP—is one of six ongoing parallel peace processes in the Philippines today. What makes it different from the others is its emphasis on the participation of the various barangays (villages) and tribes in Mindanao through participatory local consultations aimed at determining and responding to development needs of the communities.

The process started on 19 July 2003, when President Gloria Arroyo created the GRP Panel for Negotiations with the RPM-M. Rather than a process of complex, high-level political negotiations, it aims for a local peace and development agenda that will have an immediate impact on the ground and will be formulated by the communities and tribes of Mindanao. As part of this peace process, a series of barangay and community-based consultations in areas with RPM-M presence are being conducted to identify community problems and their solutions—including the controversial issue of land ownership.

The GRP and RPM-M signed the Formal Agreement for the General Cessation of Hostilities on 28 October 2005, thereby institutionalizing the participation of the communities and tribes affected by the conflict. Since then 97 barangays (including more than half of the barangays within ancestral domain claims) in ten municipalities in five provinces in three regions of Mindanao have been involved in local consultations.

The GRP-RPM-M Peace Process is proving to be a viable model for peace building, especially in these times of political upheaval in the Philippines. Since its life and momentum are not purely dependent on top-level talks, community-level activities can continue in the absence of a permanent Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process. Participants have found that the process has been empowering for the communities involved since it has allowed them to win small victories. The two sides (especially the principals) continue to meet and talk informally and a number of the priority community-based projects identified during the local consultations as integral to the peace process are being implemented with the support of international development agencies. The final resolution to the conflict through a formal peace agreement between GRP and RPM-M is important and has yet to be reached, but peace building is happening along the way.

Author: Kaloy Manlupig, President of Balay Mindanaw, Head of the Independent Secretariat, GRP–RPM-M Peace Process
The war goes on

Although the NPA is unlikely to win a military victory, neither is it about to go away. It may well expand in the countryside given the persistence of many of the same conditions that gave birth to it—poverty, injustice, and the lack of government presence and services in remote areas. If the rebels are to gain ground, however, they must convince a good number of Filipinos that waging war for their national democratic alternative is more effective and less costly than traditional political avenues for alleviating poverty, spreading wealth, and seeking justice. If NPA rebels harass people, seek to impose their will, fail to curb tendencies towards centralism and dogmatism, or are perceived to have become new oppressors, they will lose their members and mass base. Filipinos, already distrustful of repressive regimes after martial law, are unlikely to welcome any more rigid regimes, whether elitist or Communist (Mangahas, 1993).  

The armed conflict between the CPP-NPA-NDFP and the Philippine government has recently escalated with Arroyo’s reiteration of a military solution. Dogged by questions of legitimacy and threatened by military restlessness, the Arroyo government proclaimed a state of national emergency on 24 February

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**Figure 1.2**

**Incidents initiated by the CPP-NPA, MILF, and ASG, 1997–2007**

Notes: Incidents include ambushes, raids, harassment, disarming, use of landmines, killing, kidnapping, robberies and hold-ups, bombing, sabotage, and arson.

Source of data: Figures from J2-AFP, Digest 4th Quarter 2006; graph by South-South Network.
2006—lifted two weeks later—to quell a conspiracy she attributed to a tactical alliance between the CPP-NPA and ‘military adventurists’ (see Box 1.1). She also bore down on mass protests.

In June 2006, Arroyo called on the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to crush the insurgency in two years, pledging at least PHP 1 billion (USD 19 million) to the effort (Avendaño, 2006). Her government also allotted funds for poverty alleviation and anti-corruption in government (Cruz, Avelino, 2006) and deployed the Philippine National Police (PNP) in counter-insurgency efforts directed against Communist rebels. The AFP has a new three-year internal security strategy called Oplan Bantay Laya II which employs a ‘holistic approach’, encompassing economic, political, and social as well as military strategies. Meanwhile, death squads continue to assassinate with impunity legal activists and non-combatants identified with the Left, even those who have long left the movement. They have been acting with the complicity or involvement of some sectors of the military, according to a number of organizations, including the government’s Melo Commission tasked to investigate the killings, Amnesty International, and UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston.

Arroyo’s all-out war proclamation has been criticized as a ploy to quell military restlessness, since a battle against the Communists will keep the army busy and provide a rationale for distributing awards and largesse to the officers. Yet critics—even among anti-Communists—predict that a purely military solution to the insurgency is not viable (Abaya, 2006; David, 2006). With this move, they say, Arroyo will have achieved the singular distinction of ‘reviving Southeast Asia’s last communist insurgency’ (Tan, 2006).

Caouette concludes that, while the CPP-NPA-NDFP is likely to persevere and even grow in the near future, it will remain a ‘marginal actor in Philippine politics because the possibilities to become a central and significant actor over time in any large social coalition are at the moment quite narrow’ (Caouette, 2004, p. 699). Nonetheless, current events might create the right mix to result in the ‘newer people’s army’ that Kerkvliet foresaw (Kerkvliet, 1996, p. 26). Although the killings have a chilling effect on legal activists, they also anger human rights advocates, church leaders, and ordinary civic-minded citizens in the Philippines and abroad. The threat to legal venues for activism is driving leftists underground and giving the NPA some grounds to retaliate against
an authoritarian government. In urban areas, especially in progressive colleges and universities, intellectuals and idealists continue to find in the CPP’s ideology a clear, coherent, and realizable alternative to oligarchic politics and the abuses they see around them.

Meanwhile, the CPP-NPA-NDFP has responded to Arroyo’s ‘all-out war’ in kind, with new combat plans in a tit-for-tat struggle with little immediate prospect of a cessation of hostilities. These plans include the deployment of hit squads to target the ‘masterminds and operatives’ of political killings, and the shooting down of military planes (Sison, 2006; CPP Military Commission, 2006).

The rebels have learned from past mistakes, albeit slowly and at great social cost to their mass base and their own ranks. The CPP was marginalized in EDSA 1, but was a strong force in the popular uprising against President Estrada in 2001. It eschewed parliamentary politics in the 1980s and NGOs in the 1990s, condemning these as illusory and reformist, but is no longer so reluctant to use these venues to support its revolution. Used to working in temporary alliances with other actors, it is now forging ties with anti-Arroyo forces, even among Arroyo’s own military.

Peace advocates and civil society groups continue to search for mutually acceptable terms of reference such as human rights, international humanitarian law, and democracy—issues that both sides pay at least lip service to.
They have called on the protagonists to respect the CARHRIHL, as well as local communities’ desire for peace zones and environmental zones (Mallari, 2006b). Such independent groups, though visible, remain small and prone to the divisions that beset most social and political organizations in the Philippines, however. They have yet to develop the capacity to mediate in the conflict between the Philippines government and Communist rebel forces and to work for substantive reforms.

**Box 1.3 The role of the gun**

‘Garand or M-14, AK 47 or M-16/ our carbines will surely hit their mark/ with correct principles as our guide.’ This line from a rebel cultural publication summarizes the role of the gun in the hands of the rebels. The CPP-NPA is engaged in armed struggle to achieve political goals.

The NPA’s firearms are mainly seized from AFP and PNP forces engaged in counter-insurgency and their civilian auxiliaries within the Citizens Armed Forces Geographical Unit (see Chapter 8). They are seized primarily through ‘annihilative actions’, sometimes using command-detonated anti-vehicle landmines which NPA rebels manufacture themselves. One frequent guerilla tactic is the use of command-detonated Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to first disable a military vehicle, before targeting any surviving soldiers with rifle fire, usually taking care to conserve as much ammunition as possible. Rebels gather as many weapons as they can from the dead or injured after such attacks. They also engage in ‘attritive actions’ to inflict damage and put their enemy on the defensive through ‘sniping, attack-and-retreat units, sapper units, RPGs, mortars and land mines’ (CPP Military Commission, 2006).

It is also alleged that two other sources of NPA weapons are military officials or rank-and-file soldiers who sell their guns at low prices in the market. Another source is local politicians who hand over weapons as a form of ‘donation’ or ‘taxation’.

**Table 1.1**

**Cost of armed conflict with the NPA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Incidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armed incidents from 2000 to 2006</td>
<td>1,130*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed and injured in armed encounters from 1986 to 2004</td>
<td>3,552 combatants**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed by the NPA from 2000 to 2006</td>
<td>1,227*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displaced from 1986 to 1992</td>
<td>1,272,100 individuals or 238,880 families**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income lost from 1986 to 2004</td>
<td>PHP 2,127.13 million (USD 40.3 million)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: * Esperon (2006), US dollar rate at 1 June 2006; ** PHDR (2005, p. 10)
Epilogue (December 2008)

A statement issued on 26 December 2008 to mark the 40th anniversary of the ‘reestablishment’ of the CPP signals an intensification of the conflict. This most important of the annual policy statements of the CPP is likely to have been written by CPP founder and ideologue Jose Maria Sison, who turned 70 in February 2009.

The statement speaks of a plan for a ‘qualitative leap’ of the armed revolution, which involves the NPA advancing ‘from the stage of strategic defensive and finally to that of the strategic stalemate’ in its PPW (CPP, 2008). But before we examine some of the ramifications of this plan, it is interesting to note certain assessments and revelations made by the CPP in the statement. The CPP says that ‘all attempts to destroy the armed revolution have failed’ and the PPW ‘has endured’—quite an achievement, it says, in ‘a major base of US imperialist hegemony’.

Yet it reveals that the NPA ‘never reached the level of 25,000 riflemen in the 1980s’, as was commonly believed based on military intelligence estimates and other public sources. Rather, it says, ‘its peak strength in that decade was only 6,100’. At the end of 2008, the CPP says its membership ‘runs into several tens of thousands’ while the NPA has ‘thousands of fighters’—the military intelligence estimate was 4,941 NPA fighters in late 2008. The CPP says ‘close to 100 per cent of the weapons in the hands of the NPA have come from its enemy through tactical offensives.’ It claims to have a countryside mass base of ‘millions of organised peasants’ in ‘120 to 130 guerrilla fronts in 70 provinces, more than 800 municipalities and more than 10,000 barangays’—military intelligence estimates that there are 63 NPA guerrilla fronts and 1,442 NPA-affected barangays.

For the planned ‘great leap forward’ the CPP says it needs ‘tens of thousands of Party cadres and hundreds of thousands and then millions of Party members’ (CPP, 2008). Cadres are the leading members of the CPP, its quality backbone force which leads its day-to-day revolutionary work on various fronts, mainly but not only in the NPA guerrilla fronts (Rutten, 2008). While there has been a shift from the early decades when the CPP recruited mainly from the student sector to recruitment from the rural peasantry, in recent years underground recruitment in schools and universities has increased (Uy, 2008).
It remains to be seen whether the CPP can achieve the required critical mass of cadres and other forces for its planned ‘qualitative leap’ to the strategic stalemate stage of the PPW. The ‘overriding objective’ of this new push includes ‘approach[ing] the goal of destroying the ruling system and replacing it with the people’s democratic state.’ The plan includes a call to ‘[d]evelop the guerrilla fronts toward becoming relatively stable base areas.’ Quantitatively, the NPA guerrilla fronts ‘must be increased to the level of 168’, or one per congressional district in all provinces, including Moro provinces. Qualitatively, it seeks:

*the emergence of relatively stable base areas from the increase, merger, integration or expansion of existing guerrilla fronts under a base area command, capable of launching company-size tactical offensives on the scale of a province or several provinces, if based on an inter-provincial border area.*

*In order to build up these base areas, the CPP must lead the NPA in suppressing and driving away the oppressors and exploiters and dismantling the reactionary organs of political power over extensive areas.*

Note that the latter directive is not just to shadow or compete with but to ‘dismantle’ political bodies so they can be effectively replaced by revolutionary political organs. The local ruling classes such as the big landlords are to be ‘suppressed’ and ‘driven away’ by the NPA to make space for the ‘maximum level’ of revolutionary land reform whereby peasants organized by the CPP-NPA take over the land. All told, one sees an intensified and accelerated CPP-NPA-NDFP drive to assert what it perceives as its ‘status of belligerency’. As has been noted elsewhere, this is a source of considerable violence and coercion being committed in its name.

An escalation of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence can be expected in the immediate or near future, as preparations for the 2010 elections get under way. The four-year impasse in the formal peace talks between the GRP and NDFP—for which, true to form, it blames the Arroyo regime—is likely to continue. The CARHRIHL, now more than ten years old, has been prejudiced at a time when it is most needed. A weak civil society peace constituency has had little impact on the combative behaviour of either side in the conflict.
A substantially improved human security effort is needed by all concerned if there is to be a chance even of reducing violence levels, since ending the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence is not yet in sight. Humanizing the war is as crucial at this stage as finding solutions to the root causes of the rebellions. Unfortunately the opposite is happening: the root causes are not being addressed since the peace negotiations are dormant, and there are continued reports of serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. Since these violations—which include oppression, injustice, and indignity—are among the root causes, it is difficult to see how the vicious cycle of conflict, insecurity, and further conflict can be broken without paradigm shifts on both sides.

Endnotes

1 Foreign debt was PHP 1.81 trillion (USD 35 billion) in April 2006 (Pedroso, 2006). Transparency International puts the Philippines in 117th place out of 159 countries in the world in terms of corruption in 2005; the UN Development Programme estimates that 13 per cent of the government’s annual budget is lost to corruption; and a Hong Kong consultancy firm declared the Philippines under Arroyo to be the most corrupt in Asia (Mydans, 2006; Castañeda, 2006; Cabacungan, 2006).

2 This uprising is named after EDSA, a main highway in Manila where more than a million people confronted tanks and troops loyal to Marcos.

3 The barangay is the smallest government unit in the Philippines; each municipality or city is subdivided into barangays.

4 Though the CPP is now legal, illegal possession of weapons and rebellion remain punishable by law. Rebellion is considered a ‘continuing crime’ and is subject to the death penalty in the Philippines.

5 Mahahalagang punto ng mga kaisahan at unawaan sa pagitan ng Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas at Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan (no publication data). The title of this document captured by government forces can be translated as ‘Important points of unity and understanding between the Communist Party of the Philippines and the Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan.’ Also captured was a ‘Minutes re Final Talk’ between representatives of the two groups dated 20 February 2006.

6 This point is based on a comment by Fred Lubang of Nonviolence International Southeast Asia.

7 Around 33,000 military troops with around as many Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units (CAFGUs, civilian auxiliaries to the AFP) battled guerillas in the 1990s. Though superior in number and logistics, the AFP has not been able to defeat the mobile NPA rebels.

8 For example the AFP terminated the successful Lambat Bitag in 1995 and deactivated some of its CAFGUs, which were used as ‘holding units’ after clearing the area of guerillas (Barabicho,
2003, pp. 5–7). For more details on how the CAFGU are mobilized in counter-insurgency, see Chapter 8.

9 Impressions of Kristian Herbolzheimer of the School for a Peace Culture after a visit to the Philippines in May 2006.

10 The CPP claims belligerency status on the grounds that it leads another state.


12 According to the MILF Coordinating Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH), the number of clashes between the GRP and the MILF increased from fewer than 15 per year during 2004–07 to 146 in the first nine months of 2008. There were 72 clashes in August 2008 alone.

13 Surveys of the Social Weather Stations from 1993 to 2005 and results of the Bicol Kaiba Yahoo! Groups poll on ‘Who do you think killed Sotero Llamas’, 31 May 2006, show that people are polarized; the situation differs from town to town in the region with regions where the local NPA is able to proselytize and organize tending to be more favourable towards the group. The e-poll is limited to those who chose to answer the poll among those who belong to the e-group.

14 US dollar rate at 1 June 2006.

15 Executive Order No. 546.

16 Kerkvliet has studied the pre-Second World War Communist armed group Hukbalahap extensively and says the Left may ‘come back with more vigor and vitality’ and even become a ‘newer’ people’s army (1996, p. 26).

17 Among these groups are church organizations, the Philippine Coalition to Stop the Use of Children as Soldiers (2006), which decried the impact of the war on children, and Sulong CARHRIHL, a network of groups and individuals monitoring the observance of the CARHRIHL (<http://www.sulongnetwork.ph>). The CPP-NPA-NDF has been suspicious of the concept of peace zones and civil society.


19 This tactic—documented in numerous media reports on the use of IEDs—is also demonstrated in the cultural presentations of the NPA, such as the ambush scene in the skit ‘Pakat’ (Punla, 2004, p. 67).

20 Based on Abaya (2006a) and separate interviews with former Bicol Regional Party Committee head Sotero Llamas, Tabaco, Albay, 5 March 2006 and Gregorio Bañares, NDF Bicol spokesman, Camarines Sur, 3–4 June 2006.

21 This insight is attributed to Protestant Bishop Constante Claro of the United Churches of Christ in the Philippines.

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