



16 August 2010

## **FILIPINO SOLDIERS AS HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES?**

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As a developing nation confronted by several internal armed threats from local communist insurgency, Muslim secessionist movement and organized crimes, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is deeply engaged in myriad of military missions that are largely internal in nature. Its huge involvement in internal security operations (ISO) to fight these armed groups has pejoratively created an image of the military as oppressor rather than protector of its own people because of alleged human rights violations committed by some men in uniform. Its alleged role in extra-judicial killings of activists has also tainted the reputation of the AFP as a soldier of the Filipino people.

To change this unwarranted image of the Philippine military, Lieutenant General Ricardo A. David, Jr., the current AFP Chief of Staff, launched the Soldiers' Handbook on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law on 12 August 2010 at Camp Aguinaldo during the observance of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Day. The Handbook was made through the combined assistance of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the European Union (EU) Justice Support Program.

The Handbook intends to make the Filipino soldiers as human rights advocates.

With the launching of this Handbook, General David gave a marching order to all military personnel to internalize the meaning of human rights and put into practice the mandate of IHL in all military operations. General David instructed the AFP to distribute an initial 10,000 copies to all commands from divisions, brigades and battalions levels and ordered the creation of a human rights office in all command and support units of the AFP to monitor human rights violations on the ground.

More importantly, General David directed the AFP to teach human rights and international humanitarian law as mandatory subjects to all education and training requirements of military officers and enlisted personnel. He even

declared, “Under my watch, respect for Human Rights and observance of Rule of Law will be on top of the AFP’s list of priorities” and stressed that “we are going to invest extensively in Human Rights education and values formation for our personnel. Each soldier will emerge from this kind of training as an advocate of Human Rights and an adherent of command responsibility. Each will not only know the content of the Soldier’s Manual but will develop the moral conviction to practice it. Each will understand that respect for human rights is not incidental or secondary to mission accomplishment it is a prerequisite to mission accomplishment.”

While there is no doubt that the AFP Human Rights Handbook is a landmark document that can guide fighters in ISO, the Handbook will just become a collection of pieces of papers if not translated into military strategy that is human rights sensitive. The launching of the AFP Human Rights Handbook shall lead to the amendments of existing military operations plan that has made the AFP as a killing machine. The Handbook shall also facilitate the transformation of the defective “military mind” that has promoted the gunpowder mentality of misguided Filipino soldiers on the ground.

If Filipino soldiers are to become truly human rights advocates, the Handbook shall have concomitant policy reforms in the AFP that mandates the soldiers to be more humane and their actions more humanizing. This requires the revision of existing AFP promotion system that is more sensitive to seniority rather than meritocracy and more bias on the number of body bags rather than the number of body saves. As admitted by General David himself, “This is the first and most urgent war that the AFP must win. The victor is not the one with the largest body count against the enemy. It is the one who has the most number of people whose hearts and minds were won. It is the one who has earned, through their deeds, the trust and support of the people.”

Given all these marching orders, General David is indeed making an enormous difference in the AFP as a serious human rights advocate in an organization wrongly blemished by human rights violations. He has become a true military leader who is secure of his manhood and who is valiant to challenge the “Rambo culture” that romanticizes the use of hard power.

General David’s soft- power/human-rights approach to the resolution of our country’s internal armed conflicts is humanizing the war against insurgency, which General Emilio Ponce of El Salvador once said is 90% political, social, economic and ideological and only 10% military. As such, General David has also become the reincarnation of French military commander David Galula who preached the human rights gospel of counterinsurgency warfare, which proclaims that “military action is secondary to the political one, its primary purpose being to afford the political power enough freedom to work safely with the population.”

If General David's strong human rights advocacy is vigorously sustained by his successors and seriously owned by the men in uniform, the AFP will become the source of our country's national pride. Otherwise, his effort will just become a flitting moment that can fall into the deep abyss of AFP's short-term memory.

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**This Policy Commentary is the official publication of the  
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