

Sustaining gains in internal security

By Alexander Yano

We have seen positive developments in Central Mindanao. The AFP remains supportive of the ongoing peace negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). We are confident that with the anticipated resumption of the peace talks, a negotiated political settlement will soon be reached.

For the AFP, the ceasefire is a window of opportunity to pursue non-combat initiatives and bring development into MILF-influenced barangays and in turn, bring the people closer to government. We have seen an increase of MILF surrenderees, most of whom were beneficiaries of comprehensive programs to demobilize, disarm and reintegrate into society former MILF members. Nearly all of the 460 firearms recovered from the MILF in 2007 came from surrenderees.

We believe that violence is not the best way to attain lasting peace. Violence begets violence.

However, we find it very unfortunate that we experienced a spike in MILF-initiated incidents in recent months. They are responsible for a total of forty (40) incidents from May 01 to June 30 alone, including ambushes, raids, harassments and eight (8) sabotage operations against Transco towers and power-generating facilities.

Thus, while I reiterate the primacy of the peace process even in the light of increasing attacks by the MILF, we shall maintain an active defense posture consistent with our non-negotiable mandate to preserve peace. It is our primary role to ensure the security of our people and communities. Therefore, should there be any individual or group who would disrupt peace and threaten to harm the Filipino people, the AFP will not hesitate to use force in order to subdue them, restore peace and secure the Filipino people. Consistent with our Commander-in-Chief's directive, I direct the AFP to be vigilant and take appropriate actions, while upholding the primacy of the peace process, to protect the people against those who disrupt the peace.

The AFP units in Central Mindanao are capable of performing their three-fold task of containing the 11,765 fighters of the MILF in their areas of temporary stay, bring developmental projects into our communities in Mindanao, and support other government agencies. In the upcoming ARMM elections, some AFP units have been deputized by the COMELEC to help ensure peaceful elections. Furthermore, should there be conflict in Mindanao, the AFP stands ready to respond and ensure that hostilities are contained and swiftly resolved.

Dealing with finality

As regards the terrorist threat posed by the Abu Sayyaf Group, this has continually diminished as shown in the absence of high-profile attacks in urban areas. Combat operations, specifically those conducted under Oplan Ultimatum, have degraded the ASG's armed capabilities. We have also cut off its links from foreign terrorist groups, denying it financial, training, and logistics support. Until now, the group has yet to recover from its leadership vacuum since the death of its leader Khadaffy Janjalani, degenerating into a mere bandit group bereft of any ideological foundation and motivated solely by money.

The AFP believes that our local communities are now rejecting the Abu Sayyaf. Their havens are now limited to remote, isolated areas of Jolo and Basilan where close kin reside. Waning popular support for the groups can be traced to AFP developmental initiatives through Oplan Kaunlaran, which involves the construction of basic infrastructure and the provisions of social services.

Your AFP is also an active participant in the Health, Education, Livelihood for Progress (HELP) Humanitarian Caravan of the Office of the Presidential Adviser in the Peace Process. HELP aims to usher the convergent delivery of social and economic services to communities affected by conflict in Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. These projects have addressed quality-of-life issues. This has denied the ASG issues with which to entice new members.

Initially, the recent kidnapping incident in Sulu has thrust the ASG into the headlines. However, the incident failed to translate to a resurgence of the group. In fact, it

proved to be counter-productive since it was a grave manifestation of the group's weaknesses. Unlike in previous kidnappings perpetrated by the group, which were orchestrated by a clear leadership, the recent kidnapping was undertaken by young members, without central coordination. This explains why the situation was resolved in a relatively short period of time. The fact that main efforts in resolving the situation came from the PNP, with the AFP only playing a support role, is indicative of the fact that this was merely a local peace and order problem.

Nonetheless, the AFP has continued to keep the pressure on the group. The ASG's freedom of movement has been constrained by initiatives such as the Coast Watch South. Increase in naval forces in the Sulu Sea have rendered them incapable of operating in a maritime environment. I have also ordered intelligence-driven small unit operations against the group to ensure it is dealt with finality. These operations are conducted by small, highly trained units that act decisively and swiftly to ensure that the operations do not disrupt communities.

Moving closer to 2010

Your AFP has been posting similar positive gains in its efforts against the armed local communist movement. You are aware that the communist insurgents are in a continuous decline – both in strength and influence. Their number of members is at an all time historical low of 5,379-- only around 21.3% of their peak membership of 25,200 in 1987.

Similarly, their influence is waning, with their presence seen in only 1,615 barangays or 3.8% of the country's 41,995 barangays. The number of their guerilla fronts, which peaked in 2005 at 107 fronts has also been scaled down to only 67 fronts.

Allow me to recount how we have achieved our gains. Foremost is our sustained military operations and focus on further diminishing the armed capability of the communist insurgents. To illustrate, our recent operations resulted in the capture of the headquarters of the insurgents' North Central Mindanao Regional Committee (NCMRC) in Bukidnon. We were also able to recover landmines, high powered firearms, and sacks of bomb-making materials. We have also been actively seeking

out the arms cache of the rebels, recovering high-powered firearms and other war materiel. In fact, we have already reduced the insurgency's arms by 176 firearms for the 1st semester of this year. These combined operations are resulting in leadership vacuums in several guerilla fronts, mass base loss, financial difficulties, and ultimately, lower armed capabilities.

We could not have achieved as much if we relied on the traditional "military solution" alone, that is, fighting arms with arms. Thus, we have sought to redefine "military solution" and fuse this into the overall whole-of-government response to insurgency. When I say redefining the military solution, I am talking about adding to the equation the AFP's developmental offensives.

You have heard of our National Development Support Command, which is primarily tasked to "undertake basic infrastructure works, livelihood activities and other development projects... in conflict, underdeveloped and depressed areas". You are aware of our Kalayaan Barangays Program, which aims to transform conflict-affected barangays into model communities of development.

We have already completed 357 short-gestation, high-impact projects such as the construction of school buildings, access roads, and water systems. We launch these "offensives" because we know that there is a symbiotic relationship between security and development. Bringing development into our communities encourages our people to reject armed groups. Our people know that they are stakeholders to peace and development and they shun groups that threaten their community. People are turning against the communist insurgency, creating unfavorable environments for the rebels.

Another important factor to our success is that a military solution gives precedence to a peaceful solution. Localized peace processes are given importance by our commanders on the ground. This has resulted in an increase in the number of rebel surrenderees over the past months. The decline in their numbers is not only an effect of sustained military operations. It is also a manifestation of the number of rebels turning away from the local communist movement.

The author is chief of staff of the AFP. These are excerpts from a speech he delivered before the Manila Overseas Press Club on July 8, 2008. Source: ABS CBN News Online.