



CAFGUs, CVOs AND THE MAGUINDANAO MASSACRE

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INTRODUCTION

Since the aftermath of the Maguindanao Massacre on 23 November 2009, which, to date, caused the death of 57 individuals, one of the major issues that has resurfaced in the public debate is the role played by the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Unit (CAFGU) and the Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs). Human rights advocates regard these groups as convenient legal covers for private armies and vigilante organizations, which have received notoriety for their alleged human rights abuses. But the Philippine government strongly asserts that these groups are formed in order to fulfill the constitutional duty of its citizens to render personal, military or civil service to defend the state against security threats. This paper provides an overview of these groups as part of the modest attempt of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR) to add value to the body of literature on the Maguindanao Massacre.¹

CAFGU

The origin of the CAFGU is traced from the Integrated Civilian Home Defense Force (ICHDF) formed by former President Ferdinand E. Marcos in 1976. The ICHDF aimed to assist the military in counter-insurgency operations. The ousting of Marcos in 1986 also led to the dissolution of ICHDF because of reported human rights violations. But Title VIII, Section 37 of Executive Order (EO) 264 dated 25 July 1987 urges the Secretary of National Defense to “cause the organization of the Citizen Armed Force into Geographical Units” nationwide. This led to the formal creation of the CAFGU, which “shall consist of cadre of officers and men in the Standing Force and all qualified reservists residing in a particular locality.” The creation of the CAFGU implements the concept of a “citizen armed force” mandated by the 1987 Philippine Constitution.² Republic Act 7077, otherwise known as the AFP Reservist Law of 1991, also recognizes the CAFGU as an integral part of the reserve unit of the AFP, which aims to advance Philippine national security.

There are two components of the CAFGU: the CAFGU Inactive and the CAFGU Active Auxiliaries (CAAs). The Reservist Law of 1991 provides three ways to mobilize the CAFGU: full mobilization, partial mobilization and selective mobilization. Full and partial mobilizations require a joint act of the President and the Philippine Congress while selective mobilization only requires the recommendation of the Secretary of

National Defense by authority of the President. CAAs are activated through the process of selective mobilization aimed to pursue the national security policy of the government. Members of the CAFGU that are selectively mobilized in a particular geographic unit are actually members of the CAAs.

As part of the reserve force, the CAFGU is integrated in the military chain-of-command that is subject to all applicable military laws, rules and regulations (*CAFGU Primer*, 2006, p. 6). Like other members of the military reserve force, the CAFGU members receive intensive military training. They are put under the direct control and supervision of a commanding officer of the AFP assigned in a particular geographic unit. Each CAFGU member receives a reservist serial number to become officially part of the military formation. As such, a CAFGU member receives allowances and other benefits from the AFP (see Table 1). Because the CAFGU belongs to the AFP Reservist Force, the Philippine government denies the CAFGU as neither a militia nor a paramilitary unit.

Table 1. Allowances and Pay of CAFGU Active Auxiliary

| | |
|--|------------------|
| Subsistence Allowance (P60/day) | P21,900.00/annum |
| Combat Clothing and Individual Equipment | |
| - Old Recruit | P 3,980.00 |
| -New Recruit | P 6,595.00 |
| Death Benefits | |
| -Battle Casualty | P18,000.00 |
| -Non Battle | P 6,000.00 |
| -Burial Services | P 2,000.00 |
| -Special financial assistance | P10,950.00 |

Source:
Headquarters of the Philippine Army, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations, G3, 2006.

The Philippine government continues to maintain the CAAs in order to augment the capability of the AFP to confront the country's internal security threats. The AFP current threat assessments and intelligence estimates identify the following groups as major threats to Philippine national security: 1) the Communist Terrorist Movement (CTM); 2) the Southern Philippines Secessionist Groups (SPSGs) emanating from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG); and 3) the Jemaah Islamiyah. The Philippine National Internal Security Plan (NISP) regards the CAFGU as important part of the Philippine Territorial Defense System (Navarro, 2004) and a vital tool for counter-insurgency (Cabides, 2002).

According to the AFP, in order to overcome the insurgents, the ideal ratio of government force against insurgency is 10:1. The AFP laments, however, that the present ratio is only 3.2:1 (*CAFGU Primer*, 2006, p. 9). The AFP says that the mobilization of CAFGU brings the ratio to 6:1. In short, the CAFGU enhances the capability of the AFP to fight insurgency. With the AFP counter-insurgency methodology of Clear-Hold-Consolidate-Develop (CHCD), active CAFGU members are tasked “to hold and defend cleared areas in order to allow for the consolidation and development phases to take place while the regular forces continue pursuing the armed insurgents and protecting the people, defending communities and security vital assets and installations” (*CAFGU Primer*, 2006, p. 10). In addition, the Philippine government regards the mobilization of CAFGU very economical. It costs the AFP around P120,000.00 (\$US2,000.00) to annually maintain a private in the regular force. But it only costs the AFP at least P33,000.00 (\$US7,000.00) to annually maintain a CAFGU member. Because of the perceived cost effectiveness of CAFGU in counter-insurgency operations, its strength grew from 37,360 members in 1988 to 52,748 members in 2005 (See Table 2). Its highest strength of 75,468 was registered in 1992.

Table 2. Annual Strength of CAFGU Active Auxiliaries

| YEAR | STRENGTH |
|-------------|-----------------|
| 1988 | 37,360 |
| 1989 | 49,721 |
| 1990 | 69,747 |
| 1991 | 68,211 |
| 1992 | 75,461 |
| 1993 | 67,691 |
| 1994 | 55,581 |
| 1995 | 37,178 |
| 1996 | 36,326 |
| 1997 | 33,716 |
| 1998 | 32,748 |
| 1999 | 32,748 |
| 2000 | 32,748 |
| 2001 | 41,979 |
| 2002 | 51,320 |
| 2003 | 52,220 |
| 2004 | 52,748 |
| 2005 | 52,748 |

Source:
Headquarters of the Philippine Army, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations, G3, 2006.

Though the AFP regards the CAFGU as a key player in the implementation of the national counter insurgency strategy of the government (Hermoso, 2005), its creation has been challenged by human rights lawyers. It has been argued that the constitutionality of CAFGU was doubtful because the “citizen armed force” referred to in the 1987 Philippine Constitution was not the CAFGU mandated EO 264 but the “citizen armed force” provided for by the National Defense Act of 1935 (Sarmiento, 1988). The AFP rebuts this view when it claims that the passage of the AFP Reservist Law of 1991 has already strengthened the constitutionality of the CAFGU.

The Philippine government regards the CAFGU as an essential tool in implementation of the “holistic” approach against insurgency. The national security strategy of holistic approach aims to address the problem of insurgency in all areas: economic, political, social, cultural, military, etc. In other words, CAFGUs play a vital role in counter-insurgency operations of the AFP (Lucero, 2009). CAFGUs are also mobilized to perform the following functions:

- Help in maintaining peace and order
- Address local insurgency threat
- Participate in socio-economic development
- Assist in rescue and relief operations (Lucero, 2009)

Figure 1

The Role of CAFGU in Counterinsurgency

RA 7077

Citizen AFP Reservist Act

Art X: Reservist may be called upon by the President to:

- **Help in maintaining peace and order**
- **Meeting local insurgency threat**
- **Participating in socioeconomic development**
- **Assisting in rescue and relief operations**

Source: Daniel Lucero, “The CAFGU Active Auxiliary: Their Role in Counterinsurgency” (Lecture delivered at the Round Table Discussions on the Role of CAFGUs and CVOS in Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the Philippines organized by the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research held at the AFP Commissioned Officers Club on 9 October 2009).

However, there have been strong allegations of human rights abuses committed by CAFGU members. Reportedly, some CAFGU members are involved in human rights violations such as disappearances, salvaging, massacres, harassment, evacuation, divestment of property, destruction of property and others (Sarmiento, 1993). The Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PHIC) also reported cases of atrocities committed by some CAFGU members ranging from forced evacuation, to salvaging and cannibalism (PHIC, 1993). The PHIC also elaborates, “The CAFGUs are fighting not as part of a nation united against an external aggressor but in a nation divided against itself, where one part of the population is the enemy is often defined very broadly, thus lending itself to abuse” (PHIC, 1993). The Maguindanao Massacre of 23 November 2009 is the most recent example of human rights violations committed by CAFGU personalities.

The AFP admits that, indeed, some CAFGU members have committed human rights abuses. But the AFP underscores that the Philippine Commission on Human Rights (CHR), only registered 0.3% of total CAFGU membership that allegedly committed human rights abuses from 1987 to 1999. It argues, “the remaining 99.7% are commendable public servants and discipline soldiers of peace” and national security (CAFGU Primer, 2006, p. 13). The AFP has even reported that in the 12 weeks or 528 periods of CAFGU Basic Military Training, 48 periods are devoted to courses on human rights and international humanitarian law (Navarro, 2004, p. 108). To enhance the operational effectiveness of the CAFGU, the AFP has even launched the CAFGU Revitalization Program, which intends to increase the capability of CAFGU in the military and political offensives of the government against insurgency with human rights promotion as an indispensable guidepost.

The CAFGU units are presently deployed in at least 13,400 villages in the Philippines. Around 70% of CAFGU units are organized in Central Mindanao while the remaining 30% are deployed in other priority areas of the country. Having been deployed in local areas, the CAFGU has been associated with local private armies because local politicians endorse most of its members. The AFP resents this view arguing that the CAFGU is part of the military hierarchy and not a private army.


CVOs

The creation of CVOs in the Philippines is pursuant to Executive Order No. 309, s. of 1987 (as amended). CVOs aim to serve as community or local protection organizations. CVO members are commonly known as *Barangay Tanod*³ tasked to serve “as an effective community-based crime prevention monitoring and coordinating mechanism” of the Peace and Order Council (POC).

Figure 2 enumerates other legal basis for the organization of CVOs.

Figure 2

**Legal Basis Of The Organization Of
Civilian Volunteer Organization (CVO)**



- 1) **EO 546 mandates the PNP to take an active support role to the AFP in the suppression of insurgency**
- 2) **NAPOLCOM Memo Circular No. 2008-013 "Prescribing Guidelines and Procedures Governing the Deputation of Brgy Tanods as members of Police Auxiliary Units**
- 3) **LOI 02/09 (MAPAGPALAYA) defines the creation of Brgy Peacekeeping Action Teams (BPATS) as the main operators of Brgy Peacekeeping**
- 4) **LOI 40/08 "DAMAYAN" and its Supplemental Guidelines refer to the activation of POLICE AUXILIARY UNITS (PAUs) in conflict areas**
- 5) **DILG Memo Circular No 2009-145 "Directing the LGUs to support the BPATs and PAUs"**

Source: Pelagui Samson, "The Role of CVOs in Countering Terrorism and Insurgency" (Lecture delivered at the Round Table Discussions on the Role of CAFGUs and CVOS in Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the Philippines organized by the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research held at the AFP Commissioned Officers Club on 9 October 2009).

The first known CVOs were organized in 1982 in Claveria, Misamis Oriental Province. CVOs are now organized in all 79 provinces in the Philippines. The Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) estimates a total of around 800,000 CVOs nationwide.

CVOs are supposed to be unarmed peace and order organizations that aim to augment police work at the local levels. They are also mandated to act as neighborhood watch groups that support local peace, order, and security and development projects. CVOs are allowed to engage in unarmed civilian assistance which include the following:

- Intelligence or information gathering;
- Neighbourhood watch or *rondas*;
- Medical, traffic or emergency assistance;
- Assistance in the identification and implementation of community development projects;
- Gathering of relevant information and data as inputs to peace and order planning and research activities (CCPR, 2002, p. 119).

Many CVOs also perform intelligence and undercover work for the military and police units in their respective localities. Thus, CVOs are required to undergo training in basic intelligence, community work, national security, self-defense, use of firearms, civilian arrest and due process and public information (CCPR, 2002, p. 119). To provide education and training to CVOs, the *Bantay Bayan*⁴ Foundation Inc. (BBFI) was registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in 1984. Thus, CVOs are also known for most people in the communities as *Bantay Bayan*. CVOs play a vital role in the implementation of the AFP's counter-insurgency operation called *Bantay Laya*.⁵ The BBFI reported that it has formed 9,018 chapters nationwide with a total membership of 4,509,000 representing an average of 500 members per chapter.

Any group of interested and concerned law-abiding citizens of the Philippines with at least 18 years old can organize CVOs to promote community self-defense and "to protect their interest and safety against criminals and other lawless elements" (CCPR, 2002, p. 119). The Local POC is mandated to perform the following tasks:

- To receive, process and appraise applications for membership;
- To refer applicants to the Provincial Health Officer, City Health Officer or any government physician as the case may be, for medical and physical examination;
- To recommend approval of application for membership of qualified applicants to the POC chairman, who shall approve or disapprove the application, and,
- To assist in the formal organization of CVOs (CCPR, 2002, p. 119).

Like some members of the CAFGU, there were also some CVOs allegedly involved in human rights violations. There were some CVOs that purportedly became "increasingly violent as a result of their growing involvement in the illicit drug trade, increased access to small arms and persistent and often violent state repression" (Camacho, Puzon and Ortiga, 2003). Though CVOs are legally mandated not to carry firearms, there were reports that some CVOs have carried small weapons like M1 Garand, M-14 and M-16 as well as bigger weapons like RPG launchers and M-79.

Though not allowed to carry firearms, CVOs were involved in skirmishes with Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces in Shariff Aguak town in Maguindanao that began on 28 June 2006. The CVOs and the MILF gave conflicting accounts on how the skirmish started in Maguindanao. MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu narrated that the encounter started on 28 June 2006 when CVO members based in a PNP detachment in the area fired Camp Omar with a mortar. But PNP chief, Superintendent Lumala Gunting, accused the rebels of first opening fire on policemen escorted by CVOs while on their way to serve warrants of arrest on MILF commanders Jamil Ombra and Sajid Pakiladato. The skirmishes resulted in the displacement of 3,300 families in Maguindanao.

There were some allegations that CVOs were used as "private armies" of some local politicians as demonstrated by the recent massacre in Maguindanao involving the

Ampatuans (ICG, 2009). But President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo asserts that CVOs play a vital role in the pursuance of peace and development in the countryside.⁶ Referring specifically to *Barangay Tanods*, Arroyo exclaims that they are vital in “thwarting threats to community peace and security.” She stressed that village watchmen “shared with law enforcers a coordinative role in the total effort to check social and economic problems that affect their communities.” She also underscores that CVOs are indicators of vigilant communities.

CONCLUSION

The Philippine government regards CAFGUs and CVOs as important organizations of citizens aiming to advance Philippine national security. The vital role of CAFGUs and CVOs is strongly recognized in the Philippine National Internal Security Plan.

But cause-oriented organizations and church groups criticized CAFGUs and CVOs for their alleged involvement in various human rights violations. They even describe these groups as nothing but vigilante groups prone to human rights abuses.

While the Philippine government does not deny the fact that some members of CAFGUs, CVOs and even “vigilante” groups have been accused of abuses and other atrocities, it contends that those accused are exemptions to the rule. In general, the Philippine government regards CAFGUs, CVOs and so-called vigilante groups as instrumental in the promotion of peace, development and national security in the country.

END NOTES

¹This paper is based on the author’s manuscript submitted to the South-South Network (SSN) in 2006.

²Article XVIII, Section 24 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution states, “Private armies and other armed groups not recognized by duly constituted authority shall be dismantled. All paramilitary forces including Civilian Home Defense Forces not consistent with the **citizen armed force** established in this Constitution, shall be dissolved or, where appropriate, converted into the regular force.” (underscoring mine)

³Barangay Tanod means “Village Watchers”.

⁴Bantay Bayan means “Town Watcher”.

⁵Bantay Lay mans “Freedom Watch”.

⁶“GMA urges tanods to help gov’t pursue peace, development” at <http://www.medco.gov.ph/medcoweb/newsfeatl.asp?NewsMode=20&NewsDetailID=148>

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