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COMMENTARY

A Just and Sustainable Peace in the Philippines

On July 16, 2024, the Council of Leaders for Peace Initiatives, a group consisting of prominent peace advocates from the church and academe, as well as youth leaders and former civil servants, was formally launched in a gathering held at the Santo Domingo Church in Quezon City. Scholars for Peace convenor Sol Iglesias, Ph.D, was at the launch to deliver a talk about the current state of affairs in relation to the formal negotiations between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). The commentary below presents the main points of Dr. Iglesias's talk.

The ongoing peace process between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) is of great urgency, given the decades-long conflict that has persisted in the country. The Philippines has been grappling with one of the world's longest-running communist insurgencies. Despite various attempts at resolution, the cycle of violence and insurgency remains unbroken, driven by systemic issues and the government's counter-insurgency strategies.

This discussion explores the broader context of the conflict, particularly the state's reliance on dirty war tactics, and outlines the essential elements for achieving a just and sustainable peace process. From addressing human rights violations to ensuring the safety of peace negotiators, several critical

steps are necessary to break free from this cycle of violence. A closer look at these issues provides a pathway towards a more peaceful and just society.

Dirty War: Counter-insurgency in the Philippines

The concept of a *dirty war* has its origins in Latin America, but unfortunately, we've witnessed similar tactics in the Philippines. Counter-insurgency efforts here can be characterized as a dirty war: marked by systematic violence against civilians, restrictions on political freedoms and civil liberties, as well as violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. Usually, a dirty war is a type of counter-insurgency that governments pursue when they are unencumbered by democratic constraints. These tactics have persisted even in the post-dictatorship period however, spanning administrations from Cory Aquino onwards.

Despite different leaderships, the government's approach to the communist insurgency has consistently involved such methods. This is the frame we must consider when discussing peace. A peace process is essential, but it must be a *just peace*. Yet, no administration has adequately addressed the human rights violations of its predecessors nor successfully avoided it themselves. Accountability for state crimes is a crucial element for any sustainable peace process moving forward.

Requirements for a Just and Sustainable Peace Process

The peace process, particularly in the context of ongoing conflict, involves numerous complex steps and considerations. Addressing these challenges requires a carefully considered approach, balancing immediate needs with long-term solutions. Among the elements in achieving and sustaining peace include the cessation of hostilities, respect for international humanitarian law, protection of negotiators, confidence building, sequencing of disarmament and demobilization, and addressing "spoilers" in the process.

Ceasefire

The difficulty of "talking while fighting" must be addressed. Ceasefires are often the first step in peace negotiations, even though achieving them is challenging. The 2023 Oslo announcement was promising, but skirmishes and other attacks persist.

Respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

Dirty war tactics continue, including forced disappearances and faked surrenders, as highlighted in recent testimonies, such as those of Jhed Tamayo and Jonila Castro. Aerial bombardments, food blockades, and other IHL violations—methods reminiscent of those now seen in Gaza—also occur in the Philippines. Respect for IHL and human rights is non-negotiable.

Protection of Negotiators

Peace negotiators must be protected. We have seen cases of negotiators jailed, attacked, or even killed. Their families have been targeted too. Such actions undermine the peace process immeasurably.

Confidence Building

Confidence building is crucial. The government bears the onus here, despite some possibly believing in a purely military solution. However, even if the armed insurgency were dismantled by force, the root causes of the conflict would remain unaddressed. A peace process is indispensable to resolving these underlying issues.

Disarmament and Demobilization

Given international experience in many other conflicts, a demand for disarmament and demobilization of the armed insurgents is not usually the first step. Some government pronouncements suggest that it should be among the first steps with the CPP-NPA. Experiences from even domestic peace processes such as with the MNLF and MILF, among others, show that demobilization and disarmament usually come later. The government needs to shift its rhetoric.

Spoilers

Almost every peace process faces spoilers—actors who undermine peace-building efforts. In the Philippines, the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) is one such spoiler. Calls to abolish it are growing, given its role in red-tagging and other harmful practices. Defunding and abolishing NTF-ELCAC would be a meaningful goodwill gesture from the government. The ongoing communist insurgency is the world's longest. Without a just and sustainable peace process, it will not be the last insurgency the Philippines faces.

The Role of Council of Leaders for Peace Initiatives (CLPI)

As a group of eminent persons, CLPI can engage in quiet diplomacy, influencing leaders and decision-makers. This complements public-facing activities, raising stakes and convincing stakeholders of the necessity of the peace process. The CLPI can help prod the formation of a peace panel with diverse composition and credible members, particularly from civil society, to infuse legitimacy into the beleaguered process. These individuals must have proven track records for peace and justice across administrations. The panel also needs to avoid spoilers—for example, those involved in red-tagging. Among the needed initial steps are the release of National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDF) consultants, reaffirming Comprehensive Agreement for the Respect of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CAHRIHIL), advancing Comprehensive Agreement on Social and Economic Reforms (CASER), and abolishing NTF-ELCAC. Parties to the peace talks must share a vision aligned with the people's aspirations. Only then can we hope to achieve a just and lasting peace. The CLPI could play a critical role in supporting such a vision.