

Is NPA Sparrow Warfare Urban Terrorism?

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An Army Sargeant lies dead after a 'Sparrow' ambush.

Within the ranks of the Philippine Left, one issue that has become very controversial lately is the urban guerilla warfare being waged by the "sparrows" of the New People's Army (NPA).

Over the past few months, killings of police and military men in Metro Manila by NPA "sparrows" have dominated the news. The NPA's Alex Boncayao Brigade (ABB), which has operational command over the "sparrows" in the metropolis, has claimed responsibility for the slaying of at least 20 of over 40 lawmen killed within the period.

Explaining the killings, the ABB clarified in a paid newspaper advertisement that their military operations were not directed against police forces in general, but only against specific persons who had been found to have committed crimes such as politically-motivated "salvagings", kidnapping and assassination of leaders of democratic organizations; violent dispersal of demonstrations; demolition and forcible relocation of urban poor communities; formation of armed vigilante groups; assisting intelligence/spy networks; drug trafficking, white slavery, kidnapping and extortion.

The ABB stated that the main purpose of their military operations in Metro Manila at present is "to *punish* those who use their armed might and authority to coerce and violently attack the *unarmed citizenry*." (Underscoring ABB's.)

In response to the "sparrow" operations, the police and the military, together with local civil government officials, have intensified their counterinsurgency campaign in the metropolis. Aside from setting up "eagle squads" to hunt down "sparrows", the police have reactivated their mobile checkpoints, beefed up their intelligence networks and conducted "zoning" operations in the slum communities. The police have reportedly killed or captured several suspected "sparrows".

The ambush of former NPA chieftain Bernabe Buscayno ("Kumander Dante"), which resulted in the killing of two

people and the wounding of Buscayno and two others, is widely believed to be the handiwork of military or police forces, in retaliation for the killing of lawmen by NPA "sparrows".

Local civil government officials are now organizing "peace and order committees" in their respective cities and municipalities. Some of these officials are even agitating for the formation of armed vigilante groups similar to Davao's *Alsa Masa* and *Nakasaka* to counter the NPA's urban guerillas.

Reactions to "Sparrow" Killings

"Terrorists."

This is what the government (including the military) has branded the NPA "sparrows". Maj. Gen. Renato S. de Villa, PC-INP chief, has claimed that the spate of killings are a "show of force" of the NPA to terrorize civilians and destabilize the government.

President Corazon Aquino herself has called the killings of lawmen "an unequal way of fighting waged by enemies who are cowards and afraid". She has lumped "extremists of the Left" with "extremists of the Right", denounced both as "terrorists" and declared a "people's war against terrorism". Soon after, Manila Archbishop Jaime L. Cardinal Sin expressed support for Aquino's declaration of "people's war".

But what has been the reaction of the general public?

From a news feature in *Midday* (June 19, 1987), it would seem that public response to the war between NPA "sparrows" and police "eagles" has been mixed. The article stated: "The rebels appear to have heavy support from the depressed areas of the city particularly Tondo and Sampaloc where the urban poor have identified themselves with the rebels and it is known that most of the rebel safehouses are located in these depressed areas. The police, on the other hand, is generally supported by the middle class and the business sector who have expressed themselves for law and order."²

Most media, however, perceive public reaction to the killings of lawmen by "sparrows" to be negative. In an editorial, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (June 13, 1987), a relatively more liberal newspaper, observed: "Certainly, the Sparrow attacks have not won any sympathy for the (revolutionary) movement."³ Also in an editorial, *The Manila Chronicle* (June 22, 1987), another liberal newspaper, commented: "If the Sparrows are behind most of the killings, it is obvious that they are alienating the urban population."⁴

While some newspapers have been critical of military and police human rights violations and of rightwing vigilante groups, the mass media in general has been critical of the NPA's urban guerilla warfare. Even ordinary news items - supposed to be objective and impartial - refer to "sparrow" warfare as "terrorism" and "dirty war". The *Inquirer* editorial earlier cited referred to the "ill-considered assaults by (NPA)

Assassinated Police Col. Lacson.



urban) partisans on government forces" as "left-wing adventurism, an infantile disorder", paraphrasing Lenin no less. "Urban guerillas grown so fascinated with violence," the editorial said, "have completely lost sight of why the revolution was launched in the first place - and of their humanity."

Within the ranks of the Left, there are some who have been very openly critical of the NPA's "sparrow" operations in Metro Manila. Former NPA commander Buscayno himself has commented that the tactics of killing lawmen are "tactics of terrorists that won't topple governments". He likened the NPA's urban guerilla activities to the unpopular actions of the Red Brigades of Italy and the Japanese Red Army.

Buscayno claimed that military actions in the city would be difficult for people in the city to understand. Killings by the "sparrows", he said, only serve as "provocations that spawn actions you cannot hold back" and cited as "immediate reactions" the emergence of death squads which make the open Left the target. He called on his former comrades to stop their guerilla actions in the metropolis and warned them that a "bigger" problem would erupt if the killings go on.⁵

In defense of the "sparrow" actions, National Democratic Front spokesman Satur Ocampo said: "A revolutionary would not desist from undertaking a required act like eliminating bad elements among the police forces for fear of retaliation. This is a war we are fighting, you have to do what has to be done." To desist for fear of retaliation, he added, would be tantamount to "self-paralysis".⁶

Replying to the military's charge of "terrorism", the ABB stated: "We deeply believe that terror is not the way to win the massive popular support that is essential to the victory of our revolutionary struggle. The military's allegation, on the contrary, is meant to rationalize the current stepping up of militarization in the National Capital Region. . ."⁷

In view of adverse reactions to its urban liquidation actions, the NPA has conducted "intense discussions" within its ranks to study the greater impact of the killings. ABB spokesman Sergio Romero, interviewed by a *Chronicle* staffer in late June, acknowledged that the intensity of public reaction, especially middle class reaction, in areas beyond organized rebel areas, had been unexpected. He said, however, that while "sparrow" operations created some confusion, "it is our position that revolutionary justice should be meted out".⁸

"Terrorism" or "revolutionary justice"? How should the Left view the urban guerilla warfare being waged by the NPA "sparrows"?

The Debate on Armed Struggle

Within leftist circles, many of those who are opposed to urban guerilla warfare are against it because they are, from the outset, opposed to waging armed struggle against the Aquino government which they view as a "liberal democratic regime" that enjoys a considerable amount of popularity.

They believe that the NDF should shift to the unarmed form of political struggle and accept the "liberal democratic regime's" offer of integration in a pluralistic political process.⁹ To persist in the armed struggle, they contend, would only isolate the NDF further, especially after the successive setbacks of the national democrats in major tactical political battles starting with the 1986 snap polls up to the recent congressional elections.

To the NDF and the Communist Party of the Philippines, however, the armed struggle appears to be a settled issue. While the NDF entered into a 60-day ceasefire with the Aquino government and opened itself to a political settlement through negotiations, it resumed armed hostilities against government forces when the ceasefire agreement lapsed last February.

The NDF/CPP now characterizes the present government as a "regime that is profoundly pro-imperialist and reactionary, even as it puts up a centrist or reformist image".¹⁰ The rebel forces now regard the government as a "puppet of US imperialism" and "the main instrument of reaction and counterrevolution in the country"¹¹, and refer to it as the "US-Aquino regime".

In a statement on the eighteenth anniversary of the NPA last March 29, the Central Committee of the CPP called upon the national democratic revolutionary movement to "expose and isolate the US-Aquino regime". The CPP leadership

identified as the movement's main task at present: "to further spread and intensify armed struggle and bring it to a new and higher level".

Despite the defeats of the Left in recent tactical political battles, the NDF/CPP appears not to be too worried about becoming politically isolated. Leading elements privately concede that Cory Aquino now has the support of the majority of the middle forces and wide sections of the unorganized masses. The NDF believes, however, that the Aquino regime will in due time be exposed as not only lacking the political will to effect genuine social change, but also actually being the obstacle to it. And it seems confident of eventually winning over the majority of the people, including the middle forces, to its side.

The March 29 statement ended on this note of optimism: "Over the next few years, the US-Aquino regime and the reactionary ruling classes which it represents and serves will try might and main to crush the revolution and impose their will on the Filipino people with even greater impunity. But the rapid worsening of the crisis in which it is enmeshed will overtake this regime's efforts to consolidate and weaken it in a big way. The revolutionary forces are also in a much better position today than before to expand and develop their armed and political strength while engaging the enemy in all-sided, complicated and difficult struggles, to intensify and bring to a new and higher level the armed and entire revolutionary struggles of the people."¹²

The optimism may have some concrete basis. No less than the US Assistant Secretary for Defense Richard Armitage stated early this year that intelligence estimates showed a 9 percent growth for the NPA last year. Its influence also allegedly expanded by 20 percent in rural areas.¹³ NDF sources, on the other hand, have placed the rate of the NPA's expansion last year at 10 percent, very close to Armitage's figure.

The debate between the NDF and its critics within the Left on the issue of armed struggle versus parliamentary struggle continues, with both sides quoting extensively from Marx, Engels, Lenin and other revolutionary thinkers. It appears very improbable however that the NDF will be convinced to change its position on the armed struggle.

Guerilla Warfare in Marx's and Engels' Time

To opponents of armed struggle within the Left, guerilla warfare is "left adventurism", pure and simple, or even "terrorism". Any further discussion on urban guerilla warfare would be pointless, since the distinction between rural and urban guerilla warfare would be immaterial.

But for those within the Left who approve or remain open to armed struggle, the phenomenon of urban guerilla warfare needs to be studied deeper. To be able to answer the question raised regarding the alleged "terroristic" nature of the NPA's "sparrow" warfare, it would be best to look back in



history and examine the association between urban guerilla warfare and "terrorism".

There was a time when guerilla warfare, as a whole, and not just urban guerilla warfare, was considered as terrorism, particularly in the more advanced countries. And not only that. It was also widely associated with banditry, hooliganism and anarchism.

In Marx's and Engel's time (19th century), guerilla warfare was a relatively minor form of warfare in Europe and North America. The mass armies of the European powers and in the US had just emerged; regular warfare using these armies was the main form of warfare. Since guerilla warfare then did not abide by the strict rules for the conduct of war (as regular warfare did), it was looked upon with a certain amount of disdain by the "civilized" powers.

Nonetheless, guerilla warfare continued to be employed, either independently or in conjunction with regular army operations. It was practised in some major wars like the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and the American Civil War, and in the campaigns of national liberation movements in Poland, Ireland and Macedonia.

Marx and Engels wrote much on military affairs, but guerilla warfare rarely preoccupied them. In their writings, Marx and Engels dealt more with insurrection and civil war involving regular armies. At a time when the communist ideology had not yet substantially influenced revolutionary movements, Marx and Engels, were all too conscious of the possible negative features of unenlightened guerilla bands.

In "Revolution in Spain", they noted that guerilla bands formed from the wrecks of Spanish armies defeated by Napoleon had "taken to roving habits, freely indulged all their passions of hatred, revenge, and love of plunder", and that

"they must, in times of peace, form a most dangerous mob, always ready at a nod in the name of any party or principle, to step forward for him who is able to give them good pay or to afford them a pretext for plundering excursions."¹⁴

Marx and Engels, however, did not rule out guerilla warfare as a legitimate form of struggle by oppressed peoples. During the Franco-Prussian War, several months before the Paris Commune, Engels wrote favorably of the guerilla warfare waged by the French people against Prussia after the regular armies of France had been annihilated.

He wrote: "Ever since the American War of Independence and up to the American War of Secession, it has been the rule rather than the exception for the people to take part in war. Wherever a people has allowed itself to be subjected for no other reason than its armies have been incapable of offering resistance, it has earned general contempt as a nation of cowards; and wherever a people has energetically waged such irregular warfare (guerilla warfare), the invader soon found it impossible to carry through the obsolete law of blood and fire."¹⁵

Guerilla Warfare in Lenin's Time

It was Lenin who first attempted to utilize guerilla warfare as a method of struggle in a proletarian-led revolution.

Guerilla warfare – urban and rural – spontaneously arose and became widely developed and extensive in Russia in 1906, after the failure of the December 1905 uprising in Moscow. It had two aims: "assassinating individuals, chiefs and subordinates in the army and police", and "confiscation of monetary funds both from the government and from private persons". This form of struggle was adopted as "the preferable and even exclusive form of social struggle by the vaga-

bond elements of the population, the lumpen proletariat and anarchist groups".

"The usual appraisal (of guerilla warfare)," said Lenin, "is that it is anarchism, Blanquism, the old terrorism, the acts of individuals isolated from the masses, which demoralize the workers, repel wide strata of the population, disorganize the movement and injure the revolution. Examples in support of this appraisal can easily be found in the events reported every day in the newspapers."¹⁶

Lenin cited as one example of a newspaper having such appraisal *Novoye Vremya*, which "rages and fumes" against the "revolutionary law" and "terror government" of the Lettish Social Democrats (Bolshevik), whose paper had published lists of spies and called on the people to execute them.

Even among the Social Democrats, there were those who proudly and smugly declared: "We are not anarchists, thieves, robbers; we are superior to all this; we reject guerilla warfare."

Lenin criticized this "proud smugness" and rose to the defense of guerilla warfare as a revolutionary method of struggle. He explained that as the class struggle grows more acute, the enemies of the revolution "become more and more organized and receive the support of the reactionary strata of the bourgeoisie. In certain periods of acute economic and political crises, he said, the class struggle assumes "the higher and more complex form of a prolonged civil war embracing the whole country, i.e., an armed struggle between two sections of the people".

"In a period when the class struggle has become accentuated to the point of civil war," Lenin further said, "Social Democrats must make it their duty not only to participate but also to play the leading role in this civil war. The Social Democrats must train and prepare their organizations to be really able to act as a *belligerent side* which does not miss a single opportunity of inflicting damage on the enemy's forces."

In defending the use of guerilla warfare after the 1905 Moscow uprising, Lenin distinguished guerilla warfare from terrorism, Blanquism and anarchism. "The old Russian terrorism was an affair of the intellectual conspirator; today as a general rule guerilla warfare is waged by the worker combatant, or simply by the unemployed worker. Blanquism and anarchism easily occur to the minds of people who have a weakness for stereotype. . ."

Blanquism was a trend in the French socialist movement headed by prominent revolutionary Louis Auguste Blanqui. The mass movement maintained that the revolution could be accomplished by a small group of revolutionary conspirators. "Blanquism," Lenin wrote, "expects that mankind will be emancipated from wage-slavery, not by the proletarian class struggle but through a conspiracy hatched by a small number of intellectuals."¹⁷

"It is not guerilla warfare which demoralizes (the movement)," Lenin further said, "but *unorganized*, irregular, non-party guerilla acts. We shall not rid ourselves one least bit of

this *most unquestionable* demoralization by condemning and cursing guerilla actions, for condemnation and curses are absolutely incapable of putting a stop to a phenomenon which has been engendered by profound economic and political causes. It may be objected that if we are incapable of putting a stop to an abnormal and demoralizing phenomenon, this is no reason why the *party* should adopt abnormal and demoralizing methods of struggle. But such an objection would be a purely bourgeois-liberal and not a Marxist objection, because a Marxist cannot regard civil war, or guerilla warfare, which is one of its forms, as abnormal and demoralizing *in general*. A Marxist bases himself on the class struggle, and not social peace."¹⁸

On the contention that guerilla warfare brings the proletariat into close association with "degraded, drunken riffraff", Lenin admitted this to be true. But, he said, "*all*, positively all, methods of struggle in bourgeois society (e.g., strikes, parliament, newspapers) bring the proletariat into close association with the various nonproletariat strata above and below it and, if left to the spontaneous course of events, become frayed, corrupted and prostituted." Thus, he clarified, guerilla warfare "must be ennobled by the enlightening and organizing influence of socialism."

Finally, Lenin pointed out the duty of Bolsheviks "relentlessly to combat stereotypes and prejudices which hamper the class-conscious workers in correctly presenting a new and difficult problem and in correctly approaching its solution".

Guerilla Warfare in the Third World

Unlike in Europe and North America, guerilla or irregular warfare was common in colonial and feudal countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 19th century. In fact, it was the main form of warfare in many areas. Guerilla wars were fought by subjugated peoples fighting for national liberation against colonial rule; by weaker countries against invading powers; and by landless peasants rising against landlords. But guerilla methods were also used by bandits and other anti-social elements.

Only starting in the 1920s did guerilla warfare, as a method of struggle in colonial and semicolonial countries, gain a "proletarian imprint". The Chinese revolutionary forces under Mao Zedong and later the Vietnamese under Ho Chi Minh waged guerilla warfare over a protracted period before they were able to build regular armies, engage in regular mobile and then positional warfare, and eventually move on to a final offensive to seize political power.

Since the Chinese revolution, most of the successful national liberation movements in colonial and neocolonial countries (with or without communist hegemony or influence) have waged guerilla warfare as a major, if not the main, form of struggle.

The victorious anti-colonial struggles of such countries

as Morocco and Algeria (against the French), Cyprus (against the British), Indonesia (against the Dutch) and, more recently, Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau (against the Portuguese) involved the extensive use of guerilla warfare. In most cases, the guerilla forces were not really able to defeat the colonial rulers militarily, but they sapped the economic resources and eventually the political will of the latter.

The revolutionary forces of Cuba and, much later, Nicaragua conducted guerilla actions which inspired the masses to rise up and overthrow the pro-US fascist regimes of Batista and Somoza. In Zimbabwe, the rebel forces waged a prolonged guerilla war against a white supremacist regime backed by South Africa and Western imperialist powers, eventually winning power through a political settlement and parliamentary elections.

Through the years, ruling regimes of colonial and neocolonial countries have branded guerilla movements challenging their rule as "terrorists" and "bandits". However, with the extensive use of guerilla warfare by successful national liberation and anti-imperialist movements as well as antifascist struggles (especially in World War II), much of the stereotyped thinking of guerilla warfare as being "terrorism" and "banditry" has been shed. Guerilla fighting against colonialism or neocolonialism have now gained a positive image as "people's armies" or "people's liberation armies".

(It has reached a point, in fact, that the US has financed guerilla groups to challenge left-wing regimes in Nicaragua and Angola that had once been guerilla movements! US President Reagan refers to the US-sponsored Contras in Nicaragua as "freedom fighters" and the ruling Sandinistas as "terrorists".)

The "terrorist" tag on guerilla movements has diminished also because, unlike in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, guerilla warfare is now covered by international rules of war, following the Geneva Convention of August 1949. Protocol II of that convention aims to limit the human sufferings caused by situations of non-international armed conflict including insurgency.

The international laws for all combatants provide: that all civilians, particularly women, children and aged people, must be respected; that captured combatants must not be killed, attacked or mistreated; and that wounded or sick prisoners must receive medical treatment. The taking of hostages, execution without regular trial, torture and all cruel and degrading treatments are prohibited. So too with deportations and transfers of population, in general. Pillage and unnecessary destruction of property are forbidden.¹⁹

During the peace talks with the government early this year, the NDF prodded the government to accede to Protocol II, "in accordance with which both sides would bind themselves to respect and observe international humanitarian principles and the laws of war."²⁰ Whether in response or not, the government recently committed itself formally to Protocol II. With such official declarations from both sides, Protocol II should have a deterrent effect on at least some excesses in the

war between insurgency and counterinsurgency, even if it cannot put an end to the armed conflict itself.

"Terrorist" Tag on Urban Guerillas

Much of the stereotyped images of guerillas as "terrorists" and "bandits" have been eroded but this is true mainly for guerillas fighting in the mountains and countryside, not for guerillas fighting in the cities. Today, urban guerilla warfare is still very much associated with terrorism. Many liberals could still sympathize with left-wing guerilla movements in the countryside but regard left-wing urban guerilla warfare as urban "terrorism".

Why the discrepancy?

Urban guerilla warfare has been commonly associated with the headline-grabbing operations - hijackings, kidnappings and assassinations - of such highly "notorious" urban "terrorist" groups in capitalist countries as the Weathermen and the Symbionese Liberation Army in the US, the Red Army Faction (Baader-Meinhof group) in West Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy and the Japanese Red Army.

By Lenin's standards, the urban guerilla groups mentioned above could easily be classified as "Blanquists" and "the old terrorists". They are marginal in character - consisting of a few intellectuals and *declasses*, without much of a mass base. They do not operate within the context of a popular uprising or a civil war, although they may attempt to artificially create conditions for a revolutionary situation. They resort to dramatic acts of violence for political impact, hoping to destabilize the state and to sensitize public opinion on cases of oppression.

Drawing media attention is not very difficult, since Western media accord an often disproportionate amount of attention to spectacular acts of violence. Drawing mass support is an entirely different matter. Too preoccupied with military tactics and techniques, these groups usually do not have the patience to engage in painstaking mass work and thus generate little mass support, if any. Not surprisingly, they do not last very long.

An exception should be made in the case of the Provisional Irish Republican Army which has continued the decades-old armed struggle of the Irish people against British imperialism, which partitioned Ireland in 1920 and now directly rules Northern Ireland and dominates the affairs of (southern) Ireland. The Provisional IRA is the military wing of the Provisional Sinn Fein, which is working for "national independence and a social revolution in all Ireland".²¹

The Provisional Sinn Fein/IRA combines guerilla warfare (urban and rural) and parliamentary/electoral struggle, involving the people in both southern and northern sections of the country. Directly fighting British and surrogate troops in Northern Ireland, the Provisional IRA is made up largely of ordinary Irish workers and farmers, and has substantial support from the Irish masses.

Urban Guerilla Warfare in the Third World

In the Third World, the guerilla wars waged by national liberation movements were fought mainly in the countryside. The few victorious national liberation struggles which used urban guerilla warfare extensively (e.g., Morocco, Algeria and Cyprus) were anticolonial struggles in which Marxist elements did not play a leading or major role.

Over the last three decades, urban guerilla warfare has been a common phenomenon in Latin America. This is understandable if we note that the percentage of urban population of many Latin American countries is much higher than in Asia and Africa, where the overwhelming bulk of the population still live in the rural areas. For instance, 84 percent of the population in Uruguay, 72 percent in Argentina and 54 percent in Nicaragua live in the urban areas.²²

Uruguay's urban guerillas, the Movement of National Liberation, better known as the Tupamaros, are the most widely-known of Latin America's urban guerillas. In the early 70s, they scored a succession of tactical victories such as the capture of the navy headquarters²³, and the kidnappings of the Brazilian consul Dias Comide and the CIA agent Dan Mitrione (which became the subject of the Costa-Gavras film "State of Siege").

The Tupamaros, who initially engaged in political organizing work among the Uruguayan workers, fell into virtually the same mistakes the urban guerillas in capitalist countries committed. According to urban guerilla theoretician Abraham Guillen, the Tupamaros became "overly professionalized, militarized and isolated from the urban masses".²⁴ They were thus virtually decimated in the 70s. Now, under the "centrist" regime of Julio Sanguinetti, the Tupamaros have been granted amnesty and have become a legal political party engaged in parliamentary politics.²⁵

Another well-known urban guerilla group in Latin America was Brazil's Action for National Liberation (ALN) which was active in 60s. It was led by Carlos Marighella, formerly a leading member of the Brazilian Communist Party, whose *Minimanual* became a guide for urban guerillas in many countries. In theory, Marighella attributed equal importance to rural and urban guerilla warfare, but in practice, he concentrated entirely on urban guerilla warfare. From the city and "with the support of the people", Marighella hoped to develop rural guerilla warfare rapidly.²⁶ He did not get very far. In 1969, Marighella and other ALN leaders were gunned down by the police.

Despite the demise of the ALN and the abandonment of armed struggle by the Tupamaros, urban guerilla warfare continues to be waged, now usually in coordination with rural guerilla warfare, by left-wing movements in Latin America. In 1985, some 35 attacks (urban and rural) against multinationals and their executives in the region were reported - roughly half of all such attacks worldwide - prompting

Business Week magazine to declare Latin America as "the riskiest place on earth to be in business".²⁷ According to the US State Department, Colombia, Chile, Peru and Bolivia were the countries with the most attacks on US companies in Latin America in 1985.

Among the most prominent (or "notorious") rebel movements now engaged in both rural and urban guerilla warfare in Latin American are: the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) of El Salvador; the Manuel Rodriguez Patriotic Front (FPMR) of Chile; the April 19th Movement (M-19) of Colombia; the Maoist *Sendero Luminoso* and the Castroist *Tupac Amaru*, both of Peru. According to US and Colombian intelligence, the M-19 has been giving combat training to a growing number of guerillas from neighboring Peru and Ecuador.

Outside of the Latin American urban guerilla movements, the most well-known urban guerilla organization in the Third World is the Palestine Liberation Organization. The PLO is perhaps the only national liberation movement in the Third World which has managed to sustain urban guerilla warfare on an international scale.



Suspects in a spiral of violence and counter-violence.

Driven out of their homeland and scattered throughout the globe by imperialism and Zionism, the Palestinians have been left with no option but to bring their armed struggle to the major cities of the world. Urban guerilla actions against imperialist agents have served to dramatize the Palestinians' plight, and, combined with a vigorous diplomatic offensive, have succeeded in establishing the legitimacy of their struggle before the world, with the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people.

The Particularity of the NPA "Sparrow" Warfare

A closer examination of the NPA's "sparrow" warfare (or what the NPA prefers to call "city partisan warfare") would reveal a lot of dissimilarities with the urban guerilla groups in capitalist countries and even with the Tupamaros, the ALN and the PLO.

Unlike the isolated acts of urban violence of the Weathermen, the Baader-Meinhof group and the Japanese Red Army, the NPA's "sparrow" warfare is being waged within the context of a civil war that is already taking place all over the country. The war may appear to be "low-intensity" (to use the latest US parlance), but it still is a civil war. It will be recalled that Lenin himself said that a civil war could take the form of guerilla warfare.

The NPA "sparrows" do not appear to be a mere conspiratorial group of a few intellectuals isolated from the masses. Their ranks include young workers and semiproletarian elements from urban poor communities, as well as students. According to the ABB, their recruits "come from the most devoted sons and daughters of the oppressed masses".²⁸ And they seem conscious of the need for mass support, as evidenced by their efforts at "partisan based" building. They now claim to have 12 partisan bases in Metro Manila.

To the NDF/NPA, "sparrow" warfare is merely the natural consequence of the overall development of guerilla warfare in the entire country. According to ABB spokesman Romero, urban guerilla warfare supports overall guerilla warfare by forcing the military to spread its own forces thinly, denying the military a safe haven in the city, and protecting rebel bases and rebel gains in urban areas.²⁹

The NDF/NPA adheres to the Maoist strategy of "encircling the cities from the countryside", in contrast to Marighella, who hoped to develop guerilla warfare from the cities to the countryside. Unlike the ALN and the Tupamaros in the 60s and 70s, and unlike urban guerilla groups in capitalist countries which use urban guerilla warfare as their main form of struggle, the NPA regards urban guerilla warfare only as secondary to rural warfare, which is envisioned to develop from guerilla warfare to regular warfare.

Aside from being aware of the relation between urban and rural guerilla warfare, the NDF/NPA appears to be conscious also of the relation between urban warfare and the popular movement. According to ABB spokesman Romero, the main objective of urban partisan warfare in the Philippines

is "to support the revolutionary mass movement in the city and indirectly, armed struggle in the countryside" He cited the role of urban warfare in preparing the masses for the eventual development of the mass movement into armed urban insurrection.³⁰

In combining rural and urban guerilla warfare and mass struggles, the NDF has much more in common with the Sandinistas of Nicaragua in the late 70s, and currently, with the FMLN of El Salvador and the FPMR of Chile. The Sandinistas, however, considered the insurrectional mass movement as the focal point of their struggle with guerilla warfare (rural and urban) in a secondary role.³¹

NPA "Sparrow" Operations and Technique

In terms of weaponry and military technique, the NPA "sparrows" would look like a bunch of amateurs beside the Tupamaros who worked with an array of modern weapons and with clockwork precision. Demonstrating their high level of military/intelligence capability, the Tupamaros kidnapped CIA agent Dan Mitrione and, in the process of interrogation, confronted him with detailed information on his counterinsurgency activities in different countries, before finally executing him.

The armed city partisans of the NPA attempted "highly-specialized" operations like the assassination of Brig. Gen Tomas Karingal in 1984, but they could not sustain these. They now seem content to develop urban guerilla warfare slowly but sure-footedly, starting with the punishment of local "bad elements", particularly those involved in the suppression of local mass struggles. As their experience and resources grow, they would later probably aim for bigger targets.

ABB spokesmen have said that "sparrow" operations have been launched not so much for their political impact but to eliminate persons obstructing the urban mass movement. According to the ABB, urban warfare in the Philippines differs from that launched by the PLO and the IRA which conduct urban guerilla operations in order to make a political statement.³²

Certainly, between a general like Karingal and an abusive cop, the killing of the latter would not have much of a political impact. But twenty cops in a row have had a cumulative effect and have made a bigger political statement, even if the NPA may not have wanted to, thanks to the sensationalism of metropolitan tabloids. The NPA can no longer continue with its urban military operations without making waves in the overall political picture.

By Latin American standards, the types of urban guerilla operations that the NPA conducts would be very much on the conservative side. Over the past few months, the NPA "sparrows" have thus far limited themselves to killing and disarming "abusive" lawmen and other bad elements.

While the NPA rural guerillas engage in "revolutionary



taxation" and "expropriation" on logging and mining firms, the NPA urban partisans do not engage in the confiscation of funds of the government or big business, nor in kidnapping US agents and multinational executives, as do their counterparts in Latin America, who have been very good at these. The Salvadoran rebels, for instance, raised \$70 million in the late 70s through kidnappings and bank expropriation.³³ (It will again be recalled that the Bolsheviks did resort to confiscation of funds from the government and private individuals after the failed uprising in 1905.)

Nor do the NPA urban guerillas resort to sabotage activities. In El Salvador, the FMLN has systematically waged sabotage against the Duarte government's war economy — destroying power plants, roads, bridges, communications system, etc.³⁵ Blackouts are routine in the capital, San Salvador, as in the capitals of Chile and Peru.

At some later period, the NPA could decide to engage in types of operations other than executions and disarming of "bad elements", but it is likely that they would totally shun hijackings and bombings in public places which have been commonly done by urban guerilla groups in capitalist

countries. Such actions usually harm many innocent civilians and incur strongly adverse public reaction. Besides, they are expressly prohibited by the international rules of war which the NDF has declared it will follow.

Bombing incidents in Metro Manila during the past year have been largely attributed to ultra-rightist groups, not the NPA. During the Marcos era, urban guerilla bands of the bourgeois opposition — the Light-a-Fire Movement and the April 6 Movement — not the NPA, staged some bombing attacks in the capital region which they soon enough admitted as theirs.

A War for Hearts and Minds

Urban guerilla war, just like any guerilla war, is more than just a military confrontation between two armies; it is a political confrontation between two forces battling for the "hearts and minds" (to use US parlance again) of the people. Tactical military victories may be important, but the support of the people is decisive in the long run.

If the NPA's urban guerilla warfare is to be judged simply on the basis of the reported strong public reaction to killings of police and military men by the "sparrows", then it would be easy to conclude that the NPA is losing the urban guerilla war.

But the perceived "strong public reaction" may not necessarily be accurate. How much of this reaction actually emanates from multinational executives and the bourgeoisie who feel threatened with an insurgent movement now operating in the heart of the capital? How much of this reaction is actually created by the bourgeois-controlled media with their bourgeois liberal bias? The media today rage and fume against the "terrorism" of the NPA "sparrows" in much the same way that the *Novoye Vremya* did against the "terrorism" of the Bolsheviks in Lenin's time.

To be sure, there definitely is a certain amount of negative reaction from sections of the urban population that the NDF/NPA wants to win over to its side, especially from the middle forces. This may be largely due to the fact that the majority of the middle forces support Aquino (at least for now) and they do not want her government to be "destabilized". This may also be due to long-held prejudices against urban guerillas in general, which have been developed and fanned to a great extent by the Western media.

To succeed in its urban guerilla war (and in its overall revolutionary struggle, for that matter), the NDF/NPA will have to chip away at the bourgeois liberal image of the Aquino government, as well as at the bourgeois liberal prejudices mainly of the middle classes against revolutionary violence and urban guerilla warfare — even as the NPA partisans proceed with their urban military operations.

ABB spokesman Tito de la Paz has stated that a balance should be sought between the demands of "revolutionary

justice" and the need to be "politically astute" at a time when popular sentiment is not as polarized against the government as in the previous regime.³⁵

"Political astuteness" would require the NPA urban guerillas to devote more effort in their propaganda war against the government, to explain their military actions to the national and even international audience, and not just the common people in the local community — the jeepney driver, the sidewalk vendor and the slum dweller — who may already be aware of these actions' intent and importance.

It would require intensive political organizing work and the building of solid "partisan bases" especially in the poorer sections of the metropolitan area. Taking into account the level of preparedness of the urban masses, the NPA "sparrows" would have to proceed gradually in raising the level and type of their military operations.

If the NPA urban partisans play their piano well, the "terrorist" label on "sparrow" warfare in Metro Manila will fade or just lose its bite. **K**

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¹⁹International Committee of the Red Cross, "The Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949: Summary for Members of the Armed Forces and the General Public".

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²⁵Bradley Graham, "Uruguay Citizens Press for Trial of the Military", *The Manila Chronicle*, March 24, 1987.

²⁶Carlos Marighella, *Minimanual*.

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³⁰Ibid.

³¹Marta Harnecker, "Nicaragua: The Strategy of Victory" (interview with Humberto Ortega), *Granma*, January 27, 1980.

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³³Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, "El Salvador: A Revolution Brews", *NACLA Report on the Americas*, July-August 1980.

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