

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Alsa Masa:

"Freedom Fighters" or "Death Squads?"

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Dear Peter,

On a Tuesday morning about a dozen people are waiting outside the office of Lt. Colonel Franco Calida, police and military commander for Davao City. An old man with a gash across his forehead from a gunshot by a drunken soldier wants to press charges against the soldier--his relative. Ric Sardiña, reputedly a former guerrilla leader, complains that Davao City's Mayor had promised him \$50,000 for neighborhood employment projects, but has delivered only \$30,000. Mildred Maxey, a local reporter, has come to talk finances. Another man needs blood for his wounded buddy. They all have one thing in common. They are all members of the Alsa Masa--a vigilante group set up by Col. Calida to drive the communists out of Davao City on the southern island of Mindanao.

The Alsa Masa--literally, uprising of the masses--celebrated its second anniversary last July 17 amid growing controversy. The Philippine military considers the Alsa Masa and similar vigilante groups throughout the Philippines indispensable in fighting the communist New People's Army (NPA). Last year, President Corazon Aquino visited the Davao slum where the Alsa Masa was founded and said, "While other regions are experiencing problems in fighting the insurgency, you here have set the example." When U.S. military officials are asked to name the better Philippine military field commanders, Col. Calida often heads the list. But, Manila-based and international human rights groups accuse the Alsa Masa of widespread human rights violations. Last March, the Philippine Senate's Committee on Justice and Human Rights recommended disbanding the Alsa Masa and all other vigilante groups. Responding to increasing criticism at home and abroad, President Aquino announced in her State of the Nation address on July 25, that she had ordered the military to "begin the process of disbanding all so-called vigilante groups."

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The Alsa Masa is the Philippines' best known vigilante group, or what the government now calls Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs). Under the Philippine military's new, unpublicized counter-insurgency plan, Balikwas (lit. to jump up from a lying position because of fright or surprise), CVOs are assigned a crucial role in denying the NPA sanctuaries and local support. According to human rights organizations, there are some 200 vigilante groups throughout the Philippines, many of them established by local military commanders.

Davao City has been well-trodden by TV crews in search of Alsa Masa members brandishing bolos and posing as real-life Rambos. Last year, the hacking to death of a leftist labor leader by another, nearby vigilante group made headlines in Manila. But when I arrived shortly after the July 17 second anniversary of the Alsa Masa, the group had spruced up its image.

Col. Calida had taken down his Rambo "Cobra" poster encaptioned "Crime is a disease. He is the cure." that used to hang behind his office desk. He said that foreign photographers were always angling to get a shot of him with the poster in the background. So he removed the gift from his wife and hung it up in his private quarters. Mayor Rodrigo Duterte told Ric Sardiña, spokesman for the Alsa Masa, "to clean up his act"--no more walking the streets dressed in slippers, shorts, and a T-shirt, cradling an M-16. Visit after visit by foreign and Manila-based critics and human rights groups had convinced Alsa Masa leaders of the importance of outward appearances.

With an estimated one million inhabitants, Davao City is the Philippines' third most populous city; geographically, it is the world's largest city covering 244,000 hectares (about 940 square miles). Until 1986, Davao City was considered a laboratory for the NPA's new strategy of urban operations. Davao's large slum area, Agdao, was run by a revolutionary government and nicknamed Nicaragdao after the Central American country. At the height of Communist Party power, NPA partisans, called "sparrows," carried out liquidations of police officers with impunity. There were an average of two to three killings a day, whether by the NPA, right-wing groups, or criminals. According to police records, in 1986, over 40 government and police officials were liquidated or died in encounters with the NPA. In addition, legal left-wing groups led students, workers, and unemployed "out of school youth" in general strikes that periodically shut down the entire city.

Today the situation is radically different. Left control has collapsed. There are no more massive strikes. According to police records, killings of all types are down to slightly less than one a day. In the last fifteen months, only 10 government forces died in liquidations or encounters; the NPA suffered 16 deaths. Wealthy businessmen who fled to Manila have returned. Restaurants, bars, and discos that once had

few patrons because of fear are now jammed in the evenings. Said Mayor Duterte: "The peace and order situation has greatly improved with the advent of the Alsa Masa."

There are three versions of what happened in Davao City that led to the collapse of the NPA's power and the new regime of rough order dispensed by the Alsa Masa.

The government's version is that the Alsa Masa, like the other vigilante groups, was a spontaneous uprising by Davao's citizens against the excessive taxation and liquidations by the NPA. On July 17th 1986, 22 NPA members, they themselves tired of fear and violence, surrendered to Col. Calida. Other ex-NPAs and ordinary citizens joined as "Freedom Fighters" to drive out the NPA. Later, former sparrows led Col. Calida to mass graves where the NPA had buried over 140 of their victims.

The left's version, as told by a sympathetic source, highlights mistakes by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Too rapid expansion of the NPA in the Davao area led to the recruitment of undisciplined new members and facilitated penetration by military agents. By mid-1985, military infiltrators, the so-called Deep Penetration Agents (DPAs), had wreaked havoc within party and NPA ranks. Weakened internally by the DPAs and subsequent purges, and politically isolated by excesses committed by undisciplined sparrows, the NPA had retreated from Davao City before the Alsa Masa was formed. Finally, the CPP's tactical error of not supporting Aquino in the 1986 election further isolated the revolutionary movement. The mass graves dug up by Col. Calida were not those of NPA victims but victims of the military.

A third version emphasizes the role of the Philippine Marines based outside Davao City and later dispatched to the city proper. Led by then-Col. Rodolfo Biazon, the highly disciplined Marines showed Davao's residents, for the first time, that not all military elements were indiscriminately abusive. More importantly, during the Marcos years, Col. Biazon and the Marines worked to prevent an alliance between the moderate oppositionists to Marcos and the left. According to Biazon, in early 1985 it appeared that sparrow liquidations were alienating the public. Later that year, the Marines, aided by some 900 citizens who they armed and trained, forced the NPA's main regional guerrilla unit to retreat about 100 miles north of Davao City. Calida acknowledges that the Alsa Masa built on the success of the Marines. While Col. Calida and the Alsa Masa may not have driven out the communists single-handedly, for now, they prevent the return of the NPA.

The following narrative of my four-day stay in Davao City is intended to explain the rise of the Alsa Masa, its impact, and where it is going. It's important to report in some detail my interview with Col. Calida, the self-described "Godfather" of the Alsa Masa, since it is his creation.

For a 46-year-old reserve officer in the Philippine Constabulary, Lt. Col. Franco Calida has raked in a lot of awards. One wall of his office is covered with plaques:

Constabulary Officer of the Year for 1987 (presented by President Aquino); letters of appreciation from the Lions Club, Rotary, and the media; and the yellow and black shield of the U.S. Army Quartermaster's Corps. (The Philippine Constabulary is the second largest branch of the military and includes the police. As noted in a previous newsletter, the officer corps is made up of graduates of the Philippine Military Academy and reserve officers. Comprising only about one fifth of the officer corps, the Academy's graduates have a monopoly on top posts and awards.)

Lt. Col. Calida is stout and sports a wispy moustache unlike the more straightlaced officers from the elite Philippine Military Academy. He proudly displays four patches on his camouflage shirt. Three of the patches are from foreign military schools--the red airborne patch from Ft. Bragg, the yellow patch from the U.S. Quartermaster's School, and the black patch from the French parachutist school. A native of Davao, Col. Calida considers himself a man of the masses. He dislikes both the rich businessmen who grudgingly contribute to the slum dwellers of Alsa Masa and the officers from the Philippine Military Academy who are jealous of his success and cause him trouble.

Some human rights groups make much of Calida's Special Forces training at Ft. Bragg in 1974, implying that he learned dirty tricks there. They are off the mark. Probably more important in preparing Col. Calida for his present work was a previous assignment as head of the Narcotics Command for the Zamboanga City area at the western end of Mindanao. At that post, said Calida, he came into contact with people from all walks of life, helping him to understand how people work and what motivates them. That position probably also strengthened an important relationship with his superior, Maj. Gen. Ramon Montaño, then head of the Narcotics Command and now chief of the Philippine Constabulary. Col. Calida said when he has a problem, he doesn't go to his nominal superior in Mindanao, but goes directly to Gen. Montaño. Not surprisingly, Calida has a free hand in running his show in Davao City.

Col. Calida assumed command of Davao City's 600 police officers and 200 Philippine Constabulary personnel on July 14, 1986. One of his first orders was to countermand the "big mistake" of his predecessor who had disarmed the bodyguards of Wilfredo "Baby" Aquino. Until the NPA took over Agdao and eventually liquidated him, Baby Aquino (no relation to the president) had ruled the slum with a private army made up of members of the para-military Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF). (CHDF members are widely considered the most abusive of the armed elements under government control.) Col. Calida viewed these now-disarmed CHDF members--the original Alsa Masa--as the only group in Agdao that knew the neighborhood, was somewhat cohesive, and opposed the NPA. Thus, he re-armed them. Contrary to the government's statements, these CHDF members, not ex-NPAs, formed the core of the Alsa Masa. But Calida drew a critical distinction between the old and the new Alsa Masa. According to Calida, "The difference between the Alsa Masa set up by Baby Aquino and the Alsa Masa now is that the

Alsa Masa set up by Baby Aquino was only for his own protection. The Alsa Masa now is for the protection of the community."

Col. Calida explained that in establishing and running the Alsa Masa he uses many of the tactics of the communists. Said Calida: "I cook them with their own oil." Like the NPA once did, the Alsa Masa draws its members from young slum dwellers. Although it is very loosely organized, Alsa Masa reaches down to the "grass roots," said Calida, with 10 to 15 active members in each sitio (neighborhood). He also claimed there are one million members in Davao City, a physical impossibility. While it's difficult to get a good estimate on the size of the organization, most people call themselves Alsa Masa members, which means anti-communist.

Providing the muscle behind the group are about 3,500 armed Alsa Masa members, some of them NPA surrenderees. They carry arms issued by Calida or their own weapons under his authority. According to government officials, they are properly licensed to carry firearms. These members man checkpoints and form the armed element of the ronda--a nightly neighborhood patrol similar to those once organized by the NPA. Often a rag-tag collection of people with sticks, flashlights and a few guns, the ronda not only keeps out possible CPP organizers, it also gives people the feeling they are defending their own community. In addition, eight and ten-year-old children serve as pasa-bilis (lit. speedy delivery), passing on information on suspicious strangers.

At the top, a select number of NPA sparrows who surrendered to Col. Calida have been re-armed to track down their former comrades. Currently, 25 of these former sparrows patrol assigned sectors of Davao City. According to Calida and the Mayor, they receive a small daily allowance. Calida noted, "It's very effective fighting sparrows with sparrows." He said the ex-sparrows are used only for intelligence purposes and denied that they currently engage in encounters with the NPA or criminals.

These former sparrows belong to a larger group called the Rebel Returnee Organization. Calida claimed that the group's 200 plus members are all NPA surrenderees. Others doubt that they are all really ex-NPAs, but a good number probably are. I met the new president of the Rebel Returnees, Felix Recto, when he dropped by Calida's office with a local radio announcer. (The previous president died last February. It's not clear whether he died "in action" as Felix said, or playing Russian Roulette as Calida insisted.) Felix is a tall, quiet 23-year-old. He said that at age 19 he carried out his first of ten liquidations for the NPA. He was soon captured in 1985, however. Felix was released in early 1986 as part of President Aquino's amnesty for political prisoners, but like many of those jailed, he was suspected by the NPA as being a Deep Penetration Agent. Thus endangered, he joined with Calida.

At this point it was time to close out my interview with Col. Calida. I still had many questions for him--who financed

the Alsa Masa, how exactly did the ex-sparrows fight their former comrades, and what prevented some police from killing rebel returnees who had slain their fellow officers? But these questions would have to wait until the following day when Calida would take me on the standard tour of Agdao, birthplace of the Alsa Masa.

The next person I saw was Fr. Jack Walsh, Maryknoll Missionary and nemesis of Col. Calida. An affable man, Fr. Walsh has lived in Mindanao since 1962 and Davao City since 1979. He lives in Panacan relocation area, a seaside slum of about 9,000 people located eight miles north of downtown Davao City. According to Fr. Walsh, the Alsa Masa has meant "harassment, intimidation and killing for Panacan's residents." Asked how many residents support the Alsa Masa, Fr. Walsh said with a wry laugh, "I'm Alsa Masa," referring to Calida's assertion that virtually all residents are Alsa Masa members. Later, Col. Calida claimed that Fr. Walsh belongs to the National Democratic Front, the political front of the communist party. Although Fr. Walsh was wrong on a few points, his specific accusations against Alsa Masa members were often confirmed by others.

According to Fr. Walsh, the Alsa Masa members in Panacan belong to the Pogi 19 (lit. the handsome 19), a local youth gang. Two members of the Pogi 19 were arrested for an attempted armed robbery last June. Fr. Walsh claimed that the Pogi 19 brought a "reign of terror" in 1986 through harassment, a grenade bombing, and two murders. Fr. Walsh conceded reluctantly that there are less killings now than under the NPA. The Pogi 19, he said, are responsible for two deaths while the sparrow units once based in Panacan carried out 10 liquidations from 1983 to 1985.

Fr. Walsh emphasized, however, that there is a qualitative difference between the killings by the Alsa Masa and the liquidations by the NPA. Generally, he said, sparrows killed abusive or corrupt military and police personnel. "A certain type of justice was done," said Fr. Walsh. "Those without sins had nothing to fear." He added that somehow the average resident accommodated to the sparrows and their liquidations.

Although the total number of killings is down in his community, Fr. Walsh doubted that killings in all of Davao City had declined as dramatically as the authorities claimed. He said that the local radio announcers who used to thrive on rushing to the scene of killings were told by the military in 1986 to discontinue their body counting. Talks with radio announcers confirmed that all types of killings were way down, but that they had also been advised to stop their death tallies.

In closing, Fr. Walsh attributed the retreat of the NPA to Deep Penetration Agents, not the Alsa Masa. He claimed that the sparrows in his community had left in August 1985. Yet, Fr. Walsh credited Col. Calida with "fantastic success in perpetuating the myth that Alsa Masa got rid of the communists."

That evening I took a walk by the cemetery on the west side of town where the Alsa Masa have a checkpoint. I spoke with a cluster of grave diggers who, armed with an assortment of pistols, M-16s, and a Thompson submachine gun, spend most evenings gossiping. During our conversation in broken Tagalog and English, it became clear that their community of 72 families had all been NPA supporters since 1981. They had all paid 5 pesos and one sardine can of rice each month as taxes and hid sparrows during government raids. Some had joined the NPA as "political officers."

They all now considered themselves Alsa Masa members and, scorning the civilian leaders of the Alsa Masa, enthusiastically called Col. Calida their "Godfather." They said that only one member of their community had retreated with the NPA, calling her a "die hard." I asked whether, as is usually believed, the sparrows paid for their own food. They said no, they were afraid to ask the sparrows for payment. One woman even claimed that, out of fear, she bought ice cream for the sparrows. Overall, I was struck by the lack of indoctrination imparted either by the NPA or the Alsa Masa. It seemed that their community went with the prevailing force, whether from the left or the right. At the end of our talk I asked them: "If yesterday you were all NPA, and today you are all Alsa Masa, tomorrow what will you be?" One young man shouted, "Military." But most said they didn't know.

The next afternoon Col. Calida took me to see his showcase for visiting journalists, Barrio Santo Niño, set in the heart of Agdao by the sea. The people here were all squatters and most of the men worked as laborers, peddlers, or jitney drivers. Col. Calida, his bodyguard, and I sat on a bench by a basketball court that Calida had paved while Constabulary troops lounged in a nearby jeep. A crowd was soon assembled. Calida was in his element, urging people to relate stories of NPA atrocities and how the sparrows dumped bodies into the sea. A circle of cute wide-eyed kids pressed close and Calida asked them if they were NPA or Alsa Masa. A half-dozen tiny voices shouted back, "Alsa Masa!" Calida laughed, "We start them young."

It was evident from the people I interviewed that their stories about being former NPA assassins and the fear brought by NPA rule were influenced by Calida's presence. But the story of one person whom I talked to separately seemed credible. Rodelyo, age 27, worked as a messenger in a law office earning 900 pesos (about \$45) a month to support his wife and two children. Rodelyo had been an NPA political organizer for one year, having passed four NPA courses, including finance and politics. Arrested in September 1985, he was released in early 1986 and soon joined the Alsa Masa. Rodelyo said he wasn't sure whether he would have joined the Alsa Masa if he hadn't been captured. The biggest change in his life now that the NPA was gone, he said, was that he was free to stroll around after dark. Many others also complained that the NPA was too strict regarding fiestas and drinking parties.

Another man, who claimed to have killed seven people as a member of the NPA, said his profession was, then and now,

"lasto." "Last two" is a local gambling racket based on the last two digits of the national lottery. As a lasto man under the NPA, he was able to travel throughout Agdao collecting information and spying on the soldiers stationed around Agdao's outskirts. Now, as a member of the Alsa Masa he continued to make 150 to 200 pesos a week for his wife and family.

Perhaps the most credible story volunteered had nothing to do with Col. Calida or Alsa Masa. I asked what people thought of the Marines. An elderly man favorably related how four years ago, Col. Biazon had marched the Marines onto the basketball court and called the people for a dialogue session. Biazon asked all of those who were for the NPA to move to the left side of the court. No one moved. He asked all of those who were for the government to move to the right side of the court. With sparrows in the crowd, no one moved. Biazon said they would have to decide sometime which side they were on because when the shooting started between the military and the NPA, they would be the first ones hit. Apparently, these dialogue sessions gradually had an impact.

By this time the sun had set, and Calida pulled out some beers and sent a soldier off to buy some fish for dinner. Glancing at his jeep-load of Constabulary, Calida said he had never stayed this late past nightfall in Agdao. I asked Calida why the police didn't exact revenge against the former sparrows who had killed their brother officers. "It's weird," he said. "I have to tell my police, 'Even though he's a killer and he surrendered the gun of one of your [police] comrades, I'm protecting him.'" For the sparrows who surrender to him, said Calida, "I'm like a priest and confessor." When Calida first interrogates them in private, they tell Calida who they liquidated, and he absolves them of their sins, warning them not to reveal the names of their victims during their second interrogation by other police personnel. Caught between their former comrades in the NPA, and vengeful police, these ex-sparrows depend on Calida for protection and, naturally, are extremely loyal to him. This seemed to be the key to Calida's success. When the NPA was in turmoil, with purges of suspected infiltrators, Calida provided the only haven for sparrows, some of whom may or may not have been military agents. In addition, local toughs, namely the CHDF, who had laid low when the NPA ran Agdao, found in Calida a way to get back on top.

The system doesn't always work, however. In a few cases mentioned by Calida and verified by others, ex-sparrows who had been issued a "safe-conduct pass" by Calida had been killed by the relatives of their victims. And in one case, in nearby Barrio Gotamco, after the revenge killing of an ex-sparrow, the community paid 8,000 pesos (about \$400) as compensation to the sparrow's family to cover funeral expenses.

Our talk got around to enforcing discipline among Alsa Masa members. At this point Calida's bodyguard lumbered over to a man in the crowd and pointed at the man's ribs. The bodyguard smiled and held up two fingers, indicating the number of ribs he had broken. Calida said only four people had been so disciplined.

Calida then spoke of how he had meticulously organized the Alsa Masa, working first in one barrio and then the adjacent one so that in three months he had brought all of Davao under the Alsa Masa. During those early days there were some particularly tough areas (such as by the cemetery) whose residents had come to him, saying that they couldn't join the Alsa Masa because of sparrows entrenched in their communities. In those cases, said Calida, the sparrows were eliminated. When pressed, he said that "a little less than fifty" sparrows had been eliminated during those three months in 1986. Police records for government and NPA casualties that were sent to higher headquarters do not indicate these operations. But a local reporter thought that fifty was probably an accurate figure.

About this time, a woman stopped by to tell Calida she was glad that a local businessman had given money to refurbish the parish church. But, she asked, couldn't he have given a bit more to make it really spectacular? Calida rolled his eyes. He said that the businessman (who is relatively close to President Aquino) and a private foundation in Cebu City are the major private supporters of the Alsa Masa. Calida said he resents that many of the local businessmen who fled Davao when things were bad are now reluctant to give money to the people who indirectly guarantee their security--Agdao's residents. He's more pleased with Mayor Duterte who has provided \$30,000 and is trying to give more. Calida said that during the early, difficult days of the Alsa Masa he also used his own money to help out his boys.

Toward the end of our conversation, Calida spoke of his personal security. Ultimately, he said, it rested upon what his boys would do if the NPA got him. He claimed that his boys had drawn up a list of 45 leaders of the legal left who they wanted to eliminate. Calida said that he holds his boys back and that the NPA knows that.

Nevertheless, Calida admitted that he gets "tired" of constantly being on guard. He is hoping that he gets a chance to study at the U.S. Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth. Then, he said, "I won't have to worry about the NPA anymore." Col. Calida will be in stiff competition with officers from the Philippine Military Academy since they usually get four of the five yearly slots. But, said Calida, the outgoing head of the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group, Maj. Gen. Charles Teeter, told him that he would help lobby for him. After that, our conversation, and my note taking by candlelight, became unintelligible.

Col. Calida had been surprisingly forthcoming about the Alsa Masa's tough tactics: "Some members commit abuses, we are not perfect. But that does not mean we are turning them into death squads." In contrast, the local critics of the Alsa Masa whom I met in succeeding days were disappointingly lacking in details of alleged abuse. Human rights groups that once aggressively documented military abuses under Marcos seemed to no longer have the same zeal. Local human rights lawyers were no longer as active, with one of the better lawyers joining the Aquino administration and moving to Manila.

A case in point was the government's Human Rights Commission. Formed by the Aquino government, the Commission investigates complaints brought to its attention and initiates its own investigations. It can recommend prosecution to the appropriate civil or military authorities, but has no prosecutorial powers. Said attorney Dominador Calamba, the new Commission head for Southeastern Mindanao, "We only bark. We do not bite." And even their bark is, by Manila's standards, somewhat self-muzzled.

Calamba and the other staff members emphasized that after the exit of the NPA and the rise of the Alsa Masa, the human rights situation had improved overall. The Commission is currently investigating more than five cases brought against Alsa Masa members in Davao City alone. (It is currently investigating 121 cases for all of Southeastern Mindanao including a few cases against the NPA.) One case brought before the Commission was the December 1986 shooting death of a protester at an anti-Alsa Masa rally allegedly by Alsa Masa members. According to Calamba, the case was dismissed when the specific assailant could not be identified. Human rights groups, such as the Task Force Detainees, have brought other cases before the Commission. But, said Calamba, the groups don't provide enough evidence. "Their idea of evidence is different from ours," he added.

Calamba claimed that Alsa Masa members can be intimidating even if they are not breaking the law. He said, "it's a problem that Alsa Masa members are not trained" like the police or the military. But Calamba is quick to point out that "We have good rapport with Col. Calida." He said that unlike other military officials, Col. Calida responds promptly to complaints about Alsa Masa members. Calamba noted that these were minor cases in which Calida issued a warning to the errant Alsa Masa member.

Calamba's main complaint was with the Judge Advocate General's Office, which handles cases involving military personnel, not Alsa Masa members. Calamba claimed that the office "has not been responsive" to requests for updates on the status of cases as they are required to do. The Judge Advocate for Southeastern Mindanao, Major Angelito Moreno, attributed the delay to lack of personnel and that letters from the Commission were mistakenly forwarded to Zamboanga City.

No description of Alsa Masa would be complete without mention of Juan "Jun" Pala, radio announcer and former spokesman for the Alsa Masa. During the early days of the Alsa Masa, Pala issued death threats over the air. But today, Pala is a spent force. Col. Calida made Pala the Alsa Masa spokesman, leaned on the local radio announcers's association to keep them from kicking Pala out when he went too far, and then, after a dispute over finances, discarded Pala and made Ric Sardiña the current Alsa Masa spokesman. Pala still makes his tirades over the airwaves (sans death threats) and has formed a breakaway group of Alsa Masa members called Contra Force. But Pala said he is now a "socialist, but not a Marxist" and is struggling against U.S. imperialism. Pala continues his anti-communist crusade, but his political irrelevance is

an example of what happens to Alsa Masa members without Calida's guiding hand. Interestingly, I first met Pala when he was sitting in a coffee shop at the same table as attorney Laurente Ilagan, a human rights lawyer whose wife Pala had once threatened over the air. It's unlikely that at the height of Pala's power the two would have sat at the same table.

My narrative ends with the man who, according to Manila's guidelines on CVOs, formally supervises the Alsa Masa: Mayor Rodrigo Duterte. Formerly an anti-Marcos politician who would arrange meetings between foreign journalists and the NPA, Duterte scored an upset victory in last January's local elections by running as an independent candidate. He is young; friendly; easy going; and, according to his critics, has a hard time keeping his city council in line. More importantly, he lacks the personal connections in Manila to funnel funds and projects into Davao City.

Before he became Mayor, Duterte once derided the story of the spontaneous birth of the Alsa Masa as "a myth." But now, he is a big supporter of the group since peace and order is his number one priority. Business is picking up in Davao City and, from his view, the Alsa Masa insures the necessary stability. He said that the Alsa Masa has now become the community spirit of Davao City.

Mayor Duterte admitted that handing out guns to large numbers of people might bring future problems. But, he said, "there is a need to arm because of communism." He acknowledged that "There are abuses, but they are isolated happenings." He stressed that Alsa Masa members who break the law are punished, pointing to two members now in jail, one of them for armed robbery. He said that a total of about five Alsa Masa members have been jailed at one time or another. The new Mayor said he has a good working relationship with Col. Calida although there are "a few rough spots." Then he added, "Col. Calida is very courteous. He always communicates with me before he changes precinct commanders."

Mayor Duterte eagerly described his support for Alsa Masa. In addition to paying a modest daily allowance for the 25 ex-sparrows who patrol Davao's streets, he provides jobs for other ex-NPAs. Under his administration, city hall has granted \$30,000 for livelihood projects, such as a small cement block plant and an ice-making facility run by Alsa Masa spokesman Ric Sardiña. Duterte said that it is essential to maintain the "momentum" behind the Alsa Masa through such livelihood projects. According to him, "Without the support of the government the Alsa Masa would collapse." It seems that Mayor Duterte is proud to build on the improved peace and order situation that he inherited when he took office. Said Duterte, "It's hard to duplicate this success in other places."

The preceding narrative is intended to answer two questions. Why has the military has been unable to establish effective vigilante groups in Manila's slums? And will President Aquino's directive to eventually dismantle all vigilante groups be implemented?

According to an internal report by the armed forces that

was leaked to the press against its wishes, there are some 2,700 NPA personnel or Communist cadres in Manila armed with about 2,500 firearms. Last year, over 120 police and government officials were killed, some in personal disputes but most by NPA sparrows. Faced with this situation, Manila's authorities have been trying to establish vigilante groups.

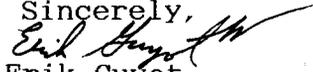
But several key elements of Calida's formula are not present in Manila. Calida said that instead of following his approach of meticulously organizing each barrio and giving locals the feeling that they were defending their own communities, Manila's police tried for quick success on too-large a scale. Calida has unchallenged authority in Davao City; in Manila, a web of local and national civilian institutions plus the media constrains the military. Most importantly, however, the NPA's liquidations in Manila have not prepared the middle class--the constituency for civil liberties--to accept harsh measures. Brig. Gen. Rodolfo Biazon, formerly of Davao City and now commander of Manila's military, said that after seeing communist power in Davao City, "people gave certain allowances for the defects and abuses of the [Alsa Masa] movement. Here in Manila, they are not yet at that stage."

As for the possibility that vigilante groups will be dismantled, the military weighs in against it. The armed forces view vigilante groups as one of their few success stories. Under the military's proposed counter-insurgency plan, Balikwas, vigilante groups will play a crucial role in assuming some of the military's garrison duty, thereby freeing up units to launch more offensives. The aforementioned internal military report, which is the impetus behind the proposed Balikwas program, recommends that more CVOs (ie. vigilante groups) be employed in "securing territorial areas to deny the enemy sanctuary, resources and mass base support while regular...armed forces fully operate against the insurgents."

The military's support for vigilante groups is reflected in the mixed signals from Manila. Thus two days after President Aquino's July 25 State of the Nation address ordering the eventual dismantling of all vigilante groups, Secretary of Defense Fidel Ramos issued the clarification that dismantling only meant that the "scalawags" in the CVOs would be weeded out. Sometime later this year, vigilante groups and CVO's will be reorganized as "Citizen Armed Forces Geographic Units" under tighter military control, but few real changes are expected.

The vigilantes are here to stay, if only under a new name. Yet, the success of the Alsa Masa in denying the NPA sanctuary may carry the seeds of its own destruction. Just as excessive taxation and liquidations turned citizens against the NPA, some of Davao's residents say that abuse by the Alsa Masa may eventually alienate locals. As the memory of the NPA's atrocities fades, the Alsa Masa's abuses, committed by some of the very same people, may no longer be tolerated. Asked about this possibility, Col. Calida said half-jokingly that the people of Davao would always choose the Alsa Masa over the communists because "they will settle for the lesser evil."

Sincerely,


Erik Guyot

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