

34/04.06

UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES
FILIPINIANA SECTION

LIBERATION

SPECIAL ISSUE 1

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FRONT OF THE PHILIPPINES

SEPTEMBER 1988

Ocampo and Zumel speak on the negotiations

“No matter how small the chance for peace, we will pursue the talks”

NDF peace negotiators Satur Ocampo and Antonio Zumel held a press conference last Sept. 16 in Metro Manila to clarify the NDF position on the peace talks and answer charges made by certain government and military officials. Also present in the meeting were NDF officer Carolina Malay Ocampo and lawyers Romeo Capulong and Arno Sanidad who will assist the NDF panel.

Said Ocampo: “This is our first opportunity to meet a considerable number of journalists during a relatively tense situation regarding the NDF panel’s relations with the government panel. It is a situation we want to defuse back to a sane level – no matter the controversy between the positions of both parties.”

LIBERATION is publishing here the major points raised in that press conference, so that the public may know the full side of the NDF negotiating panel which has been unfairly distorted by certain quarters out to block the peace process. We enjoin all national democrats and our NDF allies to discuss this paper and actively launch a propaganda campaign among the people on the real issues underlying the ceasefire and peace question.

ON THE GOVERNMENT PROPOSAL FOR AN IMMEDIATE 30-DAY CEASEFIRE

SATUR OCAMPO (SO): We would like to put the matter in perspective. The peace talks are still in a preliminary stage. We are still laying the basis, (or) what we call mutually agreed conditions of establishing mutual trust and confidence, as well as providing both negotiating panels equal access to facilities, immediate access to each other, so that when we get to the substantive formal phase of the negotiation, there won’t be any more hassles. Right now, we are coming out from the “underground.” We have to fix a particular, undisclosed place to meet the government panel, make all sorts of arrangements and precautions. Because no matter that Gen. (Fidel) Ramos has issued safe conduct passes for Tony and me, we find that these are not adequate. That is why we submitted a proposal that would commit both parties in writing to specific safeguards and guarantees.

TONY ZUMEL (TZ): We may mention that at the last meeting with the government panel, we asked them what arrangements they have in mind. How would we go about implementing such a (government-proposed 30-day) ceasefire? The word was that we were supposed to call upon our forces to stop firing. Mrs. Aquino was supposed to call upon the

Armed Forces to stop firing and hopefully, the shooting would stop. We told them that without any guidelines, without any meticulous preparations for this, within 24 or 48 or 72 hours, there will be firing again. Even the government will not stop even when there is a ceasefire, they will not stop entering the areas we control and conducting counter-insurgency operations. So we told them, there would actually be no stop to the fighting. Whatever agreement we sign will be just a scrap of paper. It would be a mere public relations exercise without any substance. We believe that even if it



Zumel and Ocampo in the press conference

takes a little longer to attend to the details, it would be more meaningful in the long run.

SO: If there was any message to us about a deadline as Tony here said, we got it through the newspapers. Now, we don't normally consider the newspaper as the official venue for messages, so we don't treat it as a deadline.

In our Sept. 6 meeting, Mr. Mitra, in his very charming way, said this (government ceasefire proposal) has nothing to do with the presidential visit to the US. He said this was the President's desire. I think later on, he again mentioned that it has nothing to do with the US visit. That was why we were wondering why they were pressuring us.

When we said it will take us time to think about their proposal, we could have rejected it for the reason we have stated. But we wanted to be gentlemanly, so we said, we will consider your proposal and consult our organizations, but give us time. And then we said, we are willing to meet again after you return from your US visit. Mr. Mitra said that's good. So everything was fine. We left and assumed that there won't be any talks in the interim, until they return. Now come these statements from the press that we have to respond to their proposal (in three days.)

ON THE NDF'S ATTITUDE AND GENERAL POSITION REGARDING THE PEACE TALKS

SO: We approach the peace negotiations in the context of a comprehensive political settlement. What we mean here is that both the government and the National Democratic Front must agree on the points or factors that cause the armed conflict.

We advert to the statement of President Aquino at the University of the Philippines graduating class in March this year, where she said the basic or the main cause of the insurgency is massive poverty and the unjust social structures, and that to address this problem, we must address the very causes. We think we find a common ground for that and this should be the context of the premises of the talks.

Unfortunately, the government panel doesn't seem to be prepared to approach the peace talks from that context and they immediately want just a ceasefire without any previous discussion whatsoever on its basis, mechanics, guidelines for implementation.

There was a ceasefire agreement arrived at after three months of negotiations in Davao del Norte and the President rejected it. So if that is not workable, how can a ceasefire without prior discussions work out on a national level? That is why we say, we don't want to be approaching this question from a perfunctory manner as the government panel does.

We have no doubt about the sincerity of the President's statement that she would like to exhaust all possible means of attaining peace. We are holding on to that notwithstanding all these bellicose statements of Minister Enrile, and now (Vice President) Laurel wanting to have a deadline for the talks. There should be no (deadline) when you are talking for peace. You don't impose your conditions on the other side. That is no negotiation. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, I think Mr. Laurel should study his diplomacy.

We will continue talks as long as the Aquino government wants to talk. Stopping the talks will not come from us, unless of course it becomes so untenable that it would be a threat to the security of the negotiating panel or its staff to carry on the talks.

TZ: As long as we see that there is a chance for peace in the talks, no matter how small it is, we will endeavor to pursue the talks.

SO: We have repeatedly said, and the government panel agreed, that we are not categorizing the negotiations as "cease-fire talks" because the term delimits the character of the peace negotiations. These are "peace talks" of a comprehensive character.

ON THE AFP'S CONTINUING ANTI-INSURGENCY DRIVE

SO: If you can recall in early August, or thereabouts, Minis-



Streamer in August 21 rally: Hoping for a just settlement of the armed conflict

ter Enrile spoke on television - "Meet the Press" - almost simultaneously with President Aquino's program "Dialogue with the President." In that program, Minister Enrile categorically stated that the Armed Forces of the Philippines operates under written orders, and since there has been no written orders from President Aquino on how the Armed Forces would behave vis-a-vis the New People's Army, the old operational guidelines under the Marcos regime continue to be implemented.

TZ: There have been many occasions in the past to say that the government seems to speak with so many voices. The President says she has issued orders that the AFP adopt an active defense policy. Then in a recent interview with *Veritas*, Col. (Greg) Honasan was quoted as saying they are in a passive defense position. But as pointed out by Satur, you have Minister Enrile saying that there has been no policy change from those that were operational during the Marcos administration. And indeed, out there in the field, the policy is all-out counter-insurgency.

SO: We are particularly concerned with the effects of these operational policies of the AFP (since it is) the rural population that suffers the burden of the counter-insurgency campaign. What we refer to as an adjustment in the operational policies, for instance, would (involve) the removal of detachments and checkpoints in the barrios and interior towns as well as the AFP's advance staging and tactical posts. With the widespread AFP deployment in major areas of the country - like Cagayan Valley, the Southern Tagalog and Bicol regions, Negros provinces, Northwestern Mindanao, Southwestern Mindanao - the very presence of these military detachments is already a big cause of concern among the people. And when these Armed Forces units undertake counter-insurgency operations, particularly armed assaults, they use not only troops on the ground, but (also) aerial bombings (with) *Tora-tora* planes, artillery, howitzers, mortars. This type of warfare, which is (being) introduced by the AFP in a more massive scale under the Aquino government, is causing a lot of destruction of human lives and property. It is (because of) this humanitarian implication that we think the government should make the first move to create an atmosphere for the ceasefire agreement.

ON THE GOVERNMENT AGREEMENTS WITH THE MORO NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT AND THE CORDILLERA PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY (CPLA)

SO: It's natural that Minister Enrile would be enthusiastic

CEASEFIRE TALKS!

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(about ceasefire agreements forged with the MNLF and the CPLA). In the case of the CPLA agreement, the AFP got its way. Conrado Balweg started by saying that as a condition for a ceasefire, (he wanted) the demilitarization of the Cordilleras. There is no such stipulation in the agreement. It is stipulated instead that the CPLA of Mr. Balweg would allow the movement of the Armed Forces, and that's excellent for Minister Enrile. Now, in the case of the MNLF, it doesn't change anything in the situation as far as we are concerned. Because of Minister Enrile's very virulent anti-communist posture, we think that any cessation of hostilities that may result in the pullout of military forces, say, against the MNLF or CPLA (is advantageous to the AFP because) it could concentrate forces on the NPA. That would be a source of joy for Mr. Enrile.

TZ: Mr. Balweg's force is small. It occupies only a small part of the Cordilleras. The bigger part, the much, much bigger part, is a base for the NDF forces. I think Mr. Balweg himself knows that. I think Mr. Butz Aquino and the President herself know that.

ON REGIONAL CEASEFIRES AND ON THE AUTHORITY OF BOTH PANELS

SO: We have said even before, that it is our policy to centralize on the national level talks for peace, including ceasefire talks. That has been conveyed to the regional organizations of the NDF and its member-organizations. However, as part of our work to enhance the economic and social welfare of our people, we are open to discussing with local civilian officials areas of cooperation on how the people's livelihood, the people's security, the people's general welfare, can be enhanced. But as far as ceasefire talks are concerned, this has to be on a national level. We have not been informed of local initiatives by our forces directly addressed to the President.

If (there is any substance to) Enrile's charges that the national leadership of the underground movement had lost control of its regional commands, then there would be chaos. We don't see that.

ON THE ALLEGED INTRANSIGENCE OF THE NDF

SO: When the government panel submitted their (30-day ceasefire) proposal in a very convivial atmosphere, Monching Mitra was all smiles. He said, "The President had asked us to convey to you her desire to have an immediate 30-day unconditional ceasefire."

We immediately said that is not the way we think the ceasefire should be, and so, we argued. And then we said, let

it not be interpreted as intransigence on the part of the NDF if we criticize or set aside for the moment that proposal. And we reiterated it is not a question of the NPA or the NDF being intransigent.

We want to approach a ceasefire on reasonable grounds, on a realistic assessment of what actually is the situation in the military confrontation. We believe that for a ceasefire to work out, we have to do something first about rearranging the disposition of forces in the field.

ON U.S. INTERVENTION IN THE TALKS, AND U.S. PRESSURES ON THE AQUINO GOVERNMENT

SO: It is no secret that the US government would like to scuttle the talks. In fact, they have been pushing or trying to push Mrs. Aquino into abandoning it and launching all-out counter-insurgency campaigns against our forces. It's no secret that it is their official policy and this jibes with the repeated proposals of Mr. Enrile, the Marcos loyalists, and other fascists in the AFP.

If the American government tries to destabilize the Aquino government in order to reintroduce the type of a government that was prevailing under the Marcos regime, the NDF would be supportive and defensive of the Aquino government. Our basic interest is to revoke American control, foreign intervention in our national affairs. So, for long as the Aquino government takes a very strong stand against foreign intervention and impositions, we are supportive of her government.

So far, Mrs. Aquino has made it plain that she would like to pursue the talks. But the posture of the United States is clear at this point. We will certainly applaud President Aquino if she resists efforts of the American government to impose their views on how the peace talks would be implemented.

TZ: In the last meeting with Mr. Mitra and Mr. Guingona last Saturday (Sept. 6), it was agreed that this is a Philippine problem, a problem of the Filipino people. And that no foreign entity should be allowed to interfere in any manner. Now whether Mrs. Aquino will (prefer to) listen to the US government or not is something we have to (see).

(Press Question: Are you saying that the NDF would support her if she stands by the national interest of the country?)

TZ: I think that if President Aquino stands by the national interest, she can count upon the support of the Filipino people and that includes our own forces. And she would not have to fear from any source about destabilization or any threat of the sort. If she has the support of the people by standing by our national rights, I think she can withstand any pressure from the US or from other rightist forces in the country.

ON CHARGES THAT THE NDF HAS MADE UNREASONABLE DEMANDS SUCH AS FLYING THE COMMUNIST FLAG IN THE VENUE OF THE NEGOTIATIONS

SO: About the flag-flying . . . definitely not. Our lawyers here can attest to the fact. They have helped us draft our proposed memorandum of agreement and you can read it later as you would want to. If you can find anything about a flag, particularly the hammer-and-sickle alluded to in that document, then we plead to having been tricky. We could be very, very tricky indeed if you find it there.

TZ: Even those which Minister Enrile classified as demands, they are not demands. Monching Mitra himself said that they are *talking points* (underscoring ours), meaning to say, we proposed that. Let's negotiate on them if you agree on them, okay? If you disagree, tell us in writing. Or let's sit down and discuss them.

SO: Enrile made it a point, as always, to find occasion to hit us and then impute motives, all sorts — practically calling us names and he has a very fertile mind. Maybe his paranoia for communism makes him see hammers and sickles even in his sleep.

Mr. Enrile said that we disclosed the contents of the memorandum in an issue of LIBERATION. You have a copy

of the LIBERATION issue in your kit. There is an open letter signed by me. It makes a general statement about the proposal but no specific provisions. At one press conference, he waved a clipping of a story by Nonah here (Ocampo's journalist daughter) saying that it also disclosed the specific provisions. It was not so; it was also a general statement.

I think it is a very little matter whether one side or the other disclosed the contents. The fact is, we did not intend to make them secret. It is in the proposal, but once there is an agreement, we are suggesting that the whole agreement be published in at least two publications. (We had) no intention to hide, no secret agenda behind that proposal.

ON THE NDF PROGRAM FOR A DEMOCRATIC COALITION GOVERNMENT AND THE NDF'S LONG-TERM PROSPECTS IN THE TALKS

(Press Question: Do you see much chance in the establishment of a coalition with the Aquino government, at this point when it is being torn in so many directions and with the rightist faction becoming more and more visible? Is it realistic to hope for a coalition government?)

SO: Hoping is one thing and being realistic is another. We can always hope, but when we look at the situation, there is no ground to be optimistic about the possibility of a coalition with the declared position of the Aquino government of not wanting to accommodate the Left in her government.

If the direction of the (Aquino government's) negotiation, as Mr. Laurel is suggesting, is for us to surrender, then I don't think there is any basis for talks. We made it very clear from the start that in coming to these negotiations, surrender is not a perspective or premise. There must be a recognition (instead) that we are a political force with considerable popular following in many areas of the country, that we have a program that has been to some degree implemented in some areas of the country and found beneficial for the people. We are offering this program as a point of negotiation for the Aquino government. But right now, we haven't come to that point yet.

TZ: What we envision is that we sit down with government executives, try to find out if there can be a meeting of minds as to the problems of the country, as to their roots, as to their nature. We will try to find out if we can agree on the solutions. The first agreement will be on the problems and on the solutions. I imagine that their forces and ours could cooperate with one another in pursuing the solutions. The form of cooperation that may come about is yet to be seen in the future. You might say, it is the coalition government. There could be other forms, but we don't know yet at this point.

ON THE STATUS OF BELLIGERENCY

Atty. Romeo Capulong (RC): First of all, a belligerency status exists on the basis of conditions. With or without government recognition — whether tacit or expressed — one can have a status of belligerency as long as the following conditions are met: that the NDF as the party which seeks the status, has an army, a program, control of substantial territory, and that it has great chances of seizing political power. Therefore, whatever the Aquino government does in relation to the status of the NDF, and whether or not it has already acquired that status or may eventually acquire (it) — is irrelevant. The point is, the necessary conditions are present.

ON THE SAFE CONDUCT PASSES PROPOSED BY THE NDF

RC: When we (the two NDF lawyers and the two government negotiators) met on Sept. 1 at the Mandarin Hotel, we discussed point by point the 13 major provisions and the nine subsections (of the Memorandum of Agreement on Security and Immunity). We were able to narrow down the differences (between us) to the transferability of the safe conduct pass, the accessibility of the NDF negotiators to the media, and their objection to some parts or provisions on the belligerency question.

On their objection to what they call "internationalizing the agreement" by requiring it to be registered with the UN

and be witnessed by two representatives from two foreign embassies, let me explain that we merely wanted an impartial body to see to it that the provisions of the agreement, if reached, are implemented and there are witnesses to this.

On the (issue of) transferability, we argued that if the nature of the safe conduct pass is such that the holder of the pass need not disclose his identity nor anything about himself — that was agreed with by Mr. (Jose) Diokno (the other government negotiator) — naturally, it becomes transferable. To control the transferability of the pass, we provided for some safeguards, such as we will limit its number and that the transfer has to be approved by a negotiator of the NDF.

On the open and continuous framework for discussion, we merely wanted to get out of the framework where you have to meet the negotiators clandestinely, so that they can surface. That would be in the interest of both parties.

TZ: We have asked the government negotiators to respond to the working draft in writing, to state their objection and comments, and they agreed to do so. That was more than a month ago, and they have not done so.

ON THE GOVERNMENT PANEL

TZ: After every meeting, Mr. Mitra reports to the President and then meets the press. It is their account alone that is printed in the media, shown on television and aired on radio. There are so many gratuitous statements made by the other side, and one or two days later, we find ourselves preparing a statement of clarification. It is so difficult, because we are not free to meet the press as they do.

SO: Unfortunately, I don't know whether Mr. Mitra keeps track of the course of the conversation because when we meet him, he would, all of a sudden, interject personal recollections, and Tony (Zumel) and I would have a hard time trying to get him back on proper track. Maybe, if Sen. Diokno comes back, we'll have a better system in the talks.

ON COMMUNISM AND THE NDF

SO: In the first place, as a democratic front, the NDF is *not* a Communist organization. Although the Communist Party is part of it, the NDF is not a total communist organization, nor its program, communist. Communism is not on the agenda of the national democratic revolutionary movement. Even today, communism is (still) something in the perspective of the socialist countries that are now established in other parts of the world. It just becomes convenient for those who would like to crush or deter the advance of the national democratic revolution in the Philippines, to come up with this virulent anti-communist hysteria, knowing that for a long, long time, Filipino minds educated under an essentially American-introduced educational system, have been moulded to assume or to take as a matter of fact that communism is evil. And from that point, they developed the theme that the social and economic emancipation of the Filipino people, which we want to see happen in this country, is doomed. We are seeking liberation, not destruction.

ON THE NDF PROGRAM

SO: The National Democratic Front Program is a dynamic program. It is an evolving program although it has its basic elements. Since there has been a change in government, revisions are being made now in consideration of the perceptible changes in the situation.

The fact that we are making (such) adjustments is a recognition of the necessity of accommodating more of the middle classes' interests. The NDF program will also be the starting point in the peace negotiations when we come to the economic and political questions. So we are coming into these talks not only in representation of the NPA or the CPP, as falsely or erroneously portrayed by (some government officials). We are moreover representing a broader confederation of political forces. If the Aquino government would take cognizance of this fact, and make accommodations on the programs of both sides, we will have a real prospect for peace. □