

New crisis confronts Philippine military

by Linda de Hoyos

The government of Philippines President Corazon Aquino may face its gravest crisis yet, with the Jan. 14 resignation of Defense Minister Rafael Iletto. Upon his resignation, Iletto was immediately replaced by Armed Forces of Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff Fidel Ramos, who was then sworn into office without benefit of constitutionally mandated congressional approval.

Iletto had been brought into the Aquino cabinet in November 1986, to replace ousted Juan Ponce Enrile. Iletto has a reputation as a competent professional military officer. He was thrown into near-exile as ambassador to Thailand during the heydays of Gen. Fabian Ver's control over the military. His resignation has sent a shock throughout the region, and severely dented Mrs. Aquino's credibility within the ASEAN countries of Southeast Asia.

Iletto's resignation has been seen as the final result of a power struggle between himself and General Ramos, with Iletto attempting to maintain a balance among the various factions within the military. Iletto's resignation letter indicates that the consequence of Ramos's fractious behavior was the ineffectiveness of the AFP against the insurgent 25,000-man New People's Army.

"It has been my distinct impression that the reorganization of the military has not proceeded as I had envisioned, and I fear that divisive elements and controversial issues, if not checked promptly, will erode whatever gain we have achieved," said Iletto in his letter, indicating that he had faced continual challenges to his authority.

"Counterinsurgency operations are going very well, but not to the level that I had expected," he later told reporters. In an implied indictment of Ramos's own views, he added: "Maybe we have not concentrated on it [the insurgency]. Our actions had been too diversified, looking at so many things instead of concentrating on the main problem."

The acceptance of Iletto's resignation and his replacement by Ramos may end all possibilities for unity within the military. On Jan. 24, the Reform the Armed Forces Movement, comprised of the majority of officers under the rank of general, issued a declaration against the Ramos appointment. RAM played an instrumental role in the U.S.-backed military coup against Ferdinand Marcos in February 1986. Its leader

Gringo Honason then attempted a coup against Aquino in August 1987, and as a result Honason is now awaiting trial in a ship in Manila Bay. Despite this, the RAM remains politically the strongest and most activist element in the military, known for its nationalism and antipathy to the NPA.

In a statement published in the *Philippine Daily Globe*, the RAM called Ramos a weak military figure who has fostered factionalism in the armed forces. His boosting to defense secretary, the declaration stated, is "an ominous event . . . a serious blow on the morale of the fighting men of the armed forces of the Philippines and on the credibility of the entire government." The RAM warned that it might be "compelled to use whatever means necessary" to oppose Ramos's appointment.

Attempting to create some momentum, Ramos announced on Jan. 24 a five-point program for dealing with the insurgency. In a press conference, he said the points will include: revival of the death penalty for serious crimes, including rebellion, homicide, and drug trafficking; and the issuance of national identity cards to facilitate the arrest of NPA and Communist Party (CPP) members. He also called upon civilians to become involved with the counterinsurgency program, through the revival of "peace and order" councils. These councils, operative before the "February revolution," brought together civilian, military, and business sector representatives on the local level, in a local war council against the NPA. Ramos also said that he would reactivate reserve forces, particularly in the region around Manila, for actions against the NPA.

On the ropes

If a crisis in the military erupts, Aquino will face it from a far weaker position than during the Enrile resignation crisis, or the Honason attempted coup. During nationwide elections for local and state offices Jan. 18, voters indicated that the saintly image of Cory had worn off. Even in races where Aquino made personal endorsements, according to campaign strategist Paul Aquino, the "Cory factor" may have accounted for no more than 5%. In key elections, relatives of Aquino put in races to build the Aquino-Cojuangco political dynasty, were rejected by the voters. Her sister-in-law Mila Aquino-Albert was defeated in the race for mayor of Quezon City, and her cousin Victor Sumulong, lost his bid for the governorship of Rizal Province.

But the real winner of the elections, many observers agree, was the NPA. The NPA presence is particularly acute in central Luzon, where Manila is located. According to Col. Cesar Nazareno, the CPP-NPA supported some candidates in Central Luzon for the purpose of establishing a shadow government. The conditions for NPA support are: If elected, they will work for the disbanding of the Civilian Home Defense Forces, prevent the organization of vigilante groups, and support moves to dismantle the U.S. military bases in the country.