

CHAPTER 16

Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines and its Rebolusyonyong Hukbong Bayan (Revolutionary People's Army) (MLPP-RHB)¹

Overview

The Rebolusyonyong Hukbong Bayan (RHB, Revolutionary People's Army) is the armed group of the Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines (MLPP), a splinter group of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA). It is based in Central Luzon, in the northern Philippines. It has also incorporated former elements of the CPP's Metro Manila Provisional Regional Party Committee, the National Trade Union Bureau, and the National Peasant Secretariat.

Basic characteristics

Typology

Communist/socialist. The group is pursuing a rural-based people's war to overthrow the Manila government and establish a Communist republic along Maoist lines.

Current status

There are conflicting reports about the current status of this armed group. Media and other public sources indicate that it remains active, but has been and continues to be decimated in encounters with both the military and the New People's Army (NPA-CPP) and by the surrender of its leaders in Central Luzon. Two senior MLPP-RHB leaders—Domingo Tarectecan (known as comrade Delfin) and Christopher de Guzman (comrade Acay)—were arrested in La Union province, Luzon, in February 2007 (PNP, 2007; Lazaro, 2007).

According to the military and to a former RHB leader, the depleted group now relies on robbery to sustain itself (Bayoran, 2006; Lazaro, Roxas, and Espinosa, 2005). The group has been vilified by the mainstream CPP-NPA, which accuses it of counter-revolutionary and criminal acts and has launched attacks on RHB troops in the Southern Tagalog and Eastern Visayas regions (Bautista, 2004).

The leaders of three other 'rejectionist' Marxist-Leninist groups, the RPM-P, the RPMM, and the PMP, provide more favourable accounts of the MLPP-RHB, crediting the group with more sincerity in its aims and stating that it is expanding to other regions in Luzon (Bautista, 2004). Indeed, Tarectecan had been reportedly overseeing RHB expansion into La Union and Benguet provinces when he was killed (Jane's Strategic Advisory Service, 2007).

Origins

The Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines (MLPP) comprises the CPP regional party committee in Central Luzon, former elements of the CPP's Metro Manila Provisional Regional Party Committee, the National Trade Union Bureau, and the National Peasant Secretariat. These cadres first 'reaffirmed' CPP-NPA leader Jose Maria Sison's return to a peasant-based protracted people's war strategy in the 1992 debate but later separated over ideological and organizational differences. In 1997, Philippine-based CPP leader Benito Tiamzon expelled the Central Luzon cadres who argued that they should work in the urban areas of Luzon and should engage with legal NGOs. Tiamzon accused them of 'civilianization of the [Central Luzon NPA] army, exceptionalism, and factionalism'.² When they did not receive the support they expected from Sison, the expelled cadres established the MLPP in September 1998 (Quimpo, 2001). The group formally severed its ties with the CPP-NPA in 1999. In 2000, the NPA launched attacks on the MLPP, liquidated one of its military units, and assassinated a well-known NPA Commander who had become the RHB's Chief Military Staff. The MLPP now maintains a policy of active defence against the NPA (MLPP, 2003; Bautista, 2004).

Aims and ideology

The party is Marxist-Leninist-Maoist. It respects Maoism and its members study the works of Leon Trotsky, but it is critical of Stalinism. The aims and ideology

of the MLPP-RHB are broadly the same as the CPP-NPA's: both groups consider Philippine society to be semi-colonial and semi-feudal, and wage a protracted people's war in the countryside with the aim of overthrowing the Manila government and establishing a Communist republic along Maoist lines. The MLPP-RHB is said by a number of rejectionists and leftist activists and former activists interviewed for this publication to be 'more RA (reaffirmist) than the RAs'.

Leadership

Francisco Pascual, Caridad Magpantay Pascual, and Luisita de la Cruz hold senior positions in the MLPP-RHB hierarchy (Lazaro, Roxas, and Espinosa, 2005; MIPT; Office of the Press Secretary, 2002). A news report from 2002 states that Frank Pascual split from the MLPP to form the Marxist Leninist Caucus. His ex-wife, Caridad Magpantay Pascual, now leads the MLPP-RHB (Gloria, 2002, p. 9). Francisco Pascual has reportedly since formed a legal organization working for land reform. Leonard Guevarra and Red Olalia sign as the MLPP Information officer and Information Officer of the RHB, respectively.

The MLPP has a Central Committee that guides the RHB's Interim National Command and its activities in the regions. The political party issued a constitution, by-laws, and a statement of principles in 2000. The MLPP-RHB criticizes the CPP-NPA's centrism in organizational matters and policies.

Support

Political base

The underground Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines (MLPP) commands the RHB. The legal Kilusan para sa Pambansang Demokrasya (KPD, or Movement for Nationalism and Democracy), led by Millet Morante, has been identified with the group (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2001; *Leftist Parties of the World*, 2004).

Combatants and constituency

The combatants are expelled members of the CPP-NPA and their recruits mainly drawn from the rural poor of western Luzon.

Sources of financing and support

The group has been accused of extortion and other criminal activities in Pampanga and other parts of Central Luzon (Lazaro, Roxas, and Espinosa, 2005). The military states that the rebels collect as much as PHP 50,000–70,000 per month (USD 1,100–1,530) from residents in Pampanga, Bataan, Zambales, Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, and Aurora provinces (Isip, Sy Egco, and Esconde, 2005). The RHB denies the claims, however, stating that support comes from voluntary contributions and the five peso (USD 0.06) monthly dues of its members. The group says it practises self-reliance, depends on the masses, and strictly prohibits ‘dirty jobs’, such as bank robberies and kidnapping. It claims it has no policy of forced taxation but says ‘contributions from the class enemy are negotiable.’³

Military activities

Size and strength

In 1998, the MLPP claimed it had over 500 individual members who were expelled from the CPP. Media reports in 2005 and 2006 put the number of RHB armed guerillas at fewer than 50, down from a 2003 estimate of 271 armed cadres (Isip, Sy Egco, and Esconde, 2005; Bayoran, 2006; MIPT). Squad-sized units were spotted in Eastern Visayas in 2002 (Bautista, 2004). The group claims to operate nationwide and to be expanding, though its presence outside of Luzon is likely to be confined to individual cadres or small units.

Command and control

The leader of the armed RHB is Caridad Magpantay Pascual (Gloria, 2002, p. 9).

Military organization

Like other Marxist-Leninist armed groups in the Philippines, the MLPP gives primacy to political work and asserts the party’s political control over the armed RHB. The RHB operates in squad-size units, with each squad consisting of seven to nine guerillas.⁴

Areas of activity

The RHB operates in Central Luzon; in particular, Pampanga, Bataan, Zambales, Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, and Aurora provinces. It has reportedly tried to operate in Southern Tagalog, Eastern Visayas, southern Negros, and Bicol (Orejas and Villa, 2005; Bautista, 2004).

Strategy and tactics

The group has been involved in guerilla warfare in the countryside and is open to urban warfare, though has yet to be involved in urban conflict. The RHB is not known to have conducted any offensive operations against the security operations. Given the disparity in size between its own forces and those of the NPA-CPP, it does not seek to attack the NPA-CPP either, though its members have been drawn into skirmishes with the group.

Small arms and light weapons

The military in the Visayas has reportedly recovered 15 high-powered firearms in several encounters with RHB fighters since 2001 (Bayoran, 2006). In Nueva Ecija, among the weapons recovered from the RHB in 2005 were six M16 rifles, one M653 rifle, one M14 rifle, one Thompson .45 sub-machine gun, one Uzi, one .30 M2 carbine, one Garand rifle, one .45 pistol, three rifle grenades, and ammunition (Lazaro, Roxas, and Espinosa, 2005). A 9 mm pistol loaded with five bullets, one Super .38 revolver, four .38 revolvers, and three fragmentation hand grenades were taken from the group in Bataan, Central Luzon, some of which had been reportedly taken from the police (Isip, Sy Egco, and Esconde, 2005). In Ilocos, in 2004 the group also reportedly surrendered one .30 M1 carbine, one .30 Springfield, one home-made 5.56 mm bolt-action, and one unserviceable M15 rifle (MIPT). The CPP-NPA said it seized one M2 carbine, one M79 grenade launcher, two grenades, and one rifle grenade from the RHB in Eastern Visayas, though the RHB denies this last report (Bautista, 2004). The RHB is estimated to hold no more than 250 firearms (Jane's Strategic Advisory Services, 2007).

Human security issues

Children affiliated with fighting forces

The group reportedly targets minors and teenagers to augment its dwindling forces (Bayoran, 2006; MIPT). The RHB denies this, however, stating it recruits only those aged 18 years and older.

Human rights

The group mistakenly killed a radio correspondent in 2000 and apologized for it (Committee to Project Journalists, 2000). Members of the RHB also reportedly killed a police senior superintendent while they were acting as hired guns for a shipping magnate (Andrade, 2005). The CPP-NPA has directed a litany of accusations against the RHB, including serving as the private army of local politicians and gambling lords, extorting money from the poor, abducting a Central Luzon CPP cadre, and even murder, rape, kidnap, and harassment of leaders and members of militant organizations (Bautista, 2004).

Outlook

The MLPP states that it would welcome a truce with the CPP-NPA (MLPP, 2003). It has not attempted to enter into negotiations with the Philippine government, nor has the government proposed any formal peace process with the group. On 29 March 2008 the MLPP became the second armed group in the Philippines to sign up to the Rebel Group Declaration of Adherence to International Humanitarian Law on Landmines. The Declaration, drafted by the Philippine Campaign to Ban Landmines, commits groups to a ban on anti-personnel mines. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Much of the information for this chapter comes from an interview with 'Ka' (Comrade) George, conducted in March 2007. Ka George states that he is an ordinary member of the group but was authorized by the leadership to speak for the MLPP-RHB.
- 2 Interview with Ka George, March 2007.
- 3 Interview with Ka George, March 2007.
- 4 Interview with Ka George, March 2007.

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