



## THE LIFE OF A REBEL RETURNEE: A TESTIMONY OF EXPERIENCES

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Philippine Government has been in constant battle against the Communists Party of the Philippines (CPP) particularly its armed force which is the New People's Army (NPA). For decades now, the government has led efforts in order to have peaceful agreements with this group so to end the armed conflict and eventually to convince the members of NPA to surrender. A few have surrendered, while many are still fighting for their ideologies. This study generally aimed to look into the lives of rebel returnees. This study used the descriptive-qualitative research Method, particularly the case study. This undertaking made use of two tools as the main data-gathering instruments, to wit; Protocols – These are recorded interviews that were the basis in coming up with a more accurate transcript of the rebel returnees' accounts and Interview Checklist – This contained the specific questions that the researchers asked the rebel returnees. The accounts of the rebel returnees were thematically presented and analysed. Three themes which are the Profile, Life as a Rebel, the Surrender and Life after Surrender were used to categorise the information gathered. Each theme was discussed and documented through the respondents' accounts and the researchers' observations. Confidentiality of the identity of the respondents was withheld. Based on the results of the study, it is recommended that the government should sustain its efforts in assisting rebel returnees and ensure a wider dissemination of the benefits of surrendering in order to convince rebel returnees to go through the formal process and the government should conduct sustainable programs and activities aimed at assisting out-of-school youth in finishing their education or engaging them in productive activities like local youth oriented groups, sports and livelihood projects to prevent them from being allured to the temporary benefits of the rebel groups.*

**KEYWORDS:** *rebel returnee, testimony, new people's army, returnee's accounts, armed conflict, ideology, harassment*



## **INTRODUCTION**

The Philippine Government has been in constant battle against the Communists Party of the Philippines (CPP) particularly its armed force which is the New People's Army (NPA). For decades now, the government has led efforts in order to have peaceful agreements with this group so to end the armed conflict and eventually to convince the members of NPA to surrender. A few have surrendered, while many are still fighting for their ideologies.

In March 2018, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana claimed that more than 4,000 communists had already surrendered in the first quarter of 2018 (Romero, 2018). In a news by Barcelo (2018), President Rodrigo Duterte softened his stance against the communist rebels and even offered members of the New People's Army good life by providing them houses and jobs. In his brief remarks at the inauguration of Gaisano Grand City gate Mall, the President also acknowledged the initial support the NPA had given him when he was running for the presidency.

On October 2, 2018, President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, led the distribution of financial assistance to 15 former members of the New People's Army (NPA) under the government's Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP). The Chief Executive provided each former member of the NPA financial assistance ranging from P15,000 to P85,000, a Modified Conditional Cash Transfer (MCCT) from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) amounting to P5,000, an additional P50,000 for livelihood, P450,000 housing assistance, and remuneration for every firearm surrendered. Also, President Duterte instructed the Department of Agrarian Reform to provide at least 2.5 hectares of mainly barren state-owned land to each of the former rebels (PND, 2018).

In Cagayan, NPA's continue to flourish while a few have chosen to surrender. A recent news reports show that two members of the Milisyang Bayan (MB) / People's Militia of the New People's Army (NPA) on Tuesday surrendered to the military in Rizal, Cagayan (Lazaro & Inigo, 2018). In February 2018, a total of 17 more members and supporters of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army voluntarily surrendered to joint



elements of the military troops and the local police of Rizal, Cagayan on Feb. 11, 2018. It was said that of the 17 who surrendered, three belonged to the "Militia ng Bayan" (MB), the armed territorial element in the barangay (Agoot, 2018).

The efforts of the government may have convinced the leftists to surrender. However, the question on why they joined, why they left, how they lived and how they manage to live normally now is kept behind the curtain. The researchers believe that it is important to understand the lives of the former rebels, most especially about their lives as surrenderers. As future law enforcers, such exploration is their way of uncovering things that may result to peace between the government and the CPP and eventually, the cease of the NPA.

In a related development: The Communist Party of the Philippines is willing to resume peace negotiations with the government whenever President Duterte was ready. In a statement posted on his Facebook page, founding Chairman Jose Maria "Joma" Sison said it was up to the President to end his position of having terminated the peace negotiations through Proclamation 360. Duterte reiterated to them the significance of working with the government. The New People's Army has been fighting a guerrilla war since 1969 in recognition of its lack of personnel and firepower to engage government troops in conventional warfare.

The NPA is the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. The President, through an executive proclamation, declared the NPA as a terror group in December 2017. The Chief Executive also reassured the rebel returnees that jobs were waiting for them, especially in Davao, and they could avail themselves of livelihood training skills from the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority.

Another news by **Romero** (August 26, 2018) titled "Duterte threatens to stop taking in NPAs who surrender" reveals that the fate of the peace talks between the government and the communists remains uncertain as President Rodrigo Duterte has threatened to "raise the bar" in the fight and no longer accept surrenderers. Duterte castigated the New People's



Army and communist party founder Jose Maria Sison for threatening him, saying they do not have enough forces to defeat government troops.

The government has a surrender and reintegration program called the Comprehensive Local Integration Program that gives former rebels financial assistance to help them rejoin mainstream society. These surrenders, based on past reports, are done after negotiations and not on the battlefield. Duterte has promised to work for a settlement with the communist rebels who have been waging an armed struggle against the government for about 50 years. However, disagreements between the two sides have hampered the progress of the negotiations. Duterte wants the negotiation to be held in the Philippines but the National Democratic Front (NDF), the negotiating panel of communists, said it should happen in a neutral territory.

The Communist Party of the Philippines has played down the supposed surrenders and said in response that the supposed rebels who had given up outnumber the Armed Forces of the Philippines' estimate of the CPP-NPA's strength. Sison claimed that Duterte was in a coma last week but the president denied this and claimed that the communist leader has cancer. Duterte had also called Sison a discredited leader and a freeloader who does not pay his hospital bills in the Netherlands.

DPAO chief, Captain Jeffrey Somera, said the rebels yielded to the 17th Infantry Battalion (17th IB) under the 5th Infantry Division (5ID) and the local Police of Rizal town. The 17IB has jurisdiction over five barangays of Apayao province in the Cordillera and the whole of Cagayan Valley Region. Somera said the surrender was facilitated by Rizal Vice Mayor Joel Ruma. He identified the surrenderers as residents of Barangay Masi, Rizal, Cagayan. He said of the 17 who surrendered, three belonged to the "Militia ng Bayan" (MB), the armed territorial element in the barangay. According to 17IB Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Camilo Saddam, the mass surrender is attributed to the aggressive information dissemination about the government's programs to aid the rebels and their supporters to again embrace the law and be assisted to live peacefully. Somera relayed Saddam's



statement, saying the people in the area were already spilling the names of their companions. In a statement, Brigadier General Perfecto Rimando Jr., 51D commander, commended the effort of Vice Mayor Ruma in assisting his constituents on the right path.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

This study generally aimed to look into the lives and experiences of rebel returnees. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions.

1. What is the profile of the rebel returnees in terms of:
  - 1.1. Age
  - 1.2. Sex
  - 1.3. Civil Status
  - 1.4. Educational Status
2. What are the significant experiences of the former rebels before, during and after surrender particularly focusing on the following aspects?
  - 2.1. Reason for joining the rebel group
  - 2.2. Reasons in surrendering
  - 2.3. Process of surrendering
  - 2.4. Benefits of surrendering
  - 2.5. Integrating into the community
  - 2.6. Problems encountered

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study used the descriptive-qualitative research method, particularly the case study. Pressadacemia.com defines that case studies are based on an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group or event to explore the causes of underlying principles. A case study is an exploratory analysis of a person, group or event. In this study the researchers had an in-depth investigation and analysis of the experiences of the rebel returnees using direct observation, protocols and interview. The respondents of this study were three rebel returnees who are now living as normal members of their community. Mixed sampling,



particularly convenience-purposive sampling, was used to identify them because the study deals with sensitive issues.

## **DATA-GATHERING INSTRUMENTS**

This undertaking made use of two tools as the main data-gathering instruments, to wit; Protocols – These are recorded interviews that were the basis in coming up with a more accurate transcript of the rebel returnees’ accounts and Interview Checklist – This contained the specific questions that the researchers asked the rebel returnees.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The accounts of the rebel returnees were thematically presented and analysed. Three themes which are the profile, life as a rebel, the surrender and life after surrender were used to categorise the information gathered. Each theme was discussed and documented through the respondents’ accounts and the researchers’ observations. Confidentiality of the identity of the respondents was withheld.

## **THE DISCUSSION OF THE INFORMATION AND ISSUES**

### **The Case of ‘Ka Danica’**

Ka Danica is 48 years old, female and married. She joined the rebel group at age 16. She is a high school undergraduate. According to her, she joined the communist group due to the brutality of the soldiers who sexually abused women in the late 80’s by means of rape. Back when she was young, she personally heard the sad truth from the women in her community, including some of her relatives. She believed that joining the group would give her the opportunity to obtain justice on behalf of the women victims and to stop this act by the forces of the government. While in the group as a rebel, she patiently related that “life was not easy and a lot of sacrifice is required in order to achieve your purpose.” These were the words of Ka Danica. Before she joined the communist group she undergoes medical examination and 6 months of training. The first task that was given to her was to hold their



kitchen utensils before handling a gun. She added that their group would not eat without the help of the community. So, they often request for goods from the residents, something that she got used to but later hated. They also did not have permanent routes and camps, which made it difficult because their mode of transportation is through walking and difficult to cope with physically. The base that was first assigned to her was in Ilocos because they don't allow them to base on their respective locality and the first gun that was handed on her was the M16. They called their leader as platoon leader. She once encountered to battle against the Government and she stated that the first platoon was the attacker and the second platoon was in-charge on the cadaver of their member. The techniques used to hide their whereabouts are through sack, they put the cadaver into the sack to avoid spreading of blood.

Despite all those hardships, her mission remained her source of strength. She thought that everything would pay off. She felt fulfilment every time she had the opportunity to express the rights of every woman in their community through dialogues. Along this, she got to hear the grievances of the women in the community. As the years passed, she realized that she was not getting the results she was expecting. When asked further, she said that is not right to fight against the government and but it is also not right to discriminate the rebels.

Difficulties encountered as a rebel – this was Ka Danica's main reason in surrendering. *"Things became hard to deal with, most especially when your body deteriorates because of insufficient food, clothing and shelter."* Through the care of (DSWD) Department of Social Works and Development, Ka Danica surrendered and was under this agency's custody for (6) six months. She underwent debriefing, counselling and physical recovery. Aside from this, the amnesty provided by government and the opportunity to be reintegrated into their society were the best part of surrendering, according to her. Furthermore, she said that did not encounter any problem in surrendering because the authorities were supportive and understanding. She now considers herself fully and successfully reintegrated in the community. She now lives normally with her loved and enjoying the privileges and benefits of a Filipino citizen.



## **The Case of “Ka RJ”**

Ka RJ is 21 years old and single. He joined the rebel group on November 6, 2013. He said he was not able to finish high school due to poverty. Being an out of school youth, Ka RJ was one of those who were not busy about anything, so out of curiosity, he joined the communists. As a rebel, he served as an S4 or a cook in his team during his first year with the group. Later, he joined the armed force. It is through this that he was able to enhance his self-discipline by undergoing (4) four months training, during the training he learned how to create a bomb and how to read a map, he is the one who completely do the task that had given to them, just like 25 to 50 meters shooting using caliber .45 and m16 and they learned how to deal with quickly draw of gun in close combat shooting, according to him. However, being in the armed team brought him some difficulties because he experienced to walk in the evening and there was no time to rest if it was blue alert or warning. It is during this time that they have overtime on duty.

A situation happened according to Ka RJ that one Ita reported to them that one of his relative was sexually abuses his own child so they responded immediately. After they arrived to the house of the said person they immediately captured and brought it to the forest. According to Ka RJ, himself and some other members of their platoon was commanded to kill the said person but deep inside of him, he feels pity not on the part person but in his child but he had to do it because of the sin that he committed.

The main reason of Ka RJ in surrendering is his family. He said that it was not only danger that one is facing but also the loneliness of being away from family. Even just a visit to them is not possible because it is forbidden. Due to this, Ka RJ plotted an escape plan. One day, he volunteered to get vegetables at the community residential areas. It was then that he never came back because he already surrendered. He directly went to the camp of 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion in Alcala to surrender.



Ka RJ claims that he appreciated the effort of the government in assisting them to be integrated in to the community. The amnesty amounting to Php 65,000 helped him secure a stable source of living and start anew. When asked how his life now, he considers himself as successfully reintegrated into the community. He has no regrets at all because there is no discrimination against him. He added that he did not encounter any problem in the process of surrendering and reintegrating into the community.

### **The Case of “Ka JM”**

Ka JM joined the New People’s Army when he was 19 years old. He is currently 29 years old and married. He did not finish high school due to poverty. During the interview, he said that he joined the rebel group because of curiosity in handling guns. According to Ka JM, his life as a rebel was difficult, most especially during calamities. He experienced not sleeping in the forest and risking his life just so to find a place to hide in case of battles. He also experienced extreme hunger when their troop did not eat for one week. He said that it was so difficult to be in this kind of situation especially when they need to continue walking and hiking, especially if it is raining. Despite of all his hardships, he felt good because it seemed that he was an Army. He can hold gun and can freely use it. He also experienced becoming a team leader, which made him feel more powerful and able.

Ka JM revealed that his very reason in surrendering was that he could no longer endure those hard times, sleepless nights and hunger. His body deteriorated so much that he thought it was not worth sacrificing his life for no cause at all. As his first step, he informed their upper officials about his intention to surrender. Their officers approved his decision and so he proceeded. Furthermore, he said that he was not after any benefits that a surrenderer may get. He clarified that he only wanted to be reintegrated into the community again.



As of now, Ka JM is successfully reintegrated in the community and lives normally in his hometown, in Cagayan. He feels contented because there he feels no discrimination by the people in the community. He further said that he did not encounter problems at all.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the revelations of the rebel returnees, it came to the conclusion that:

1. It is not because of the ideals and advocacies of the rebel groups that some members join; instead, it is because of their personal reasons and worst because they simply want to handle guns and to keep themselves busy, being that they were out-of-school youths.
2. The main reason for the surrender of the rebel returnees is the difficulty of living in the mountains.
3. Most of the rebel returnees surrender formally through government agencies, while others simply leave the group and returned to their normal lives. Those who formally surrender receive amnesty and were assisted financially.
4. The returnees consider themselves successfully reintegrated to the community without discrimination.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the results of the study, it is recommended that the government should sustain its efforts in assisting rebel returnees and ensure a wider dissemination of the benefits of surrendering in order to convince rebel returnees to go through the formal process and the government should conduct sustainable programs and activities aimed at assisting out-of-school youth in finishing their education or engaging them in productive activities like local youth oriented groups, sports and livelihood projects to prevent them from being allured to the temporary benefits of the rebel groups.



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