

Army commander bucks proposed NTF-ELCAC abolition

By Mary Judaline Partlow November 10, 2021, 7:58 pm

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MEDICAL SERVICES. Residents of Basay, Negros Oriental line up for free medicines during a medical mission conducted by the provincial government in October 2021. The medical missions, headed by Governor Roel Degamo, aim to complement the efforts of the national government in fighting the communist insurgency in the province. *(Photo from the Facebook page of the Negros Oriental provincial government)*

DUMAGUETE CITY – A ranking official of the Philippine Army here on Wednesday said abolishing the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) will be a huge setback to government efforts to crush the decades-long insurgency in Negros Island and other parts of the country.

In an interview with the Philippine News Agency, Brig. Gen. Leonardo Peña, commander of the 302nd Infantry Brigade based in Tanjay City, Negros Oriental, said abolishing the NTF-ELCAC would be detrimental to the fight against the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF) amid the gains and accomplishments of the government in the past years.

Peña was reacting to news reports of Vice President Maria Leonor "Leni" Robredo saying that she would abolish the anti-insurgency task force of President Rodrigo Duterte if elected to the presidency in the May 9, 2022 polls.

Robredo said she would instead push for a "conducive environment" for peace talks with the insurgents and do away with the "militaristic" approaches.

Peña, however, noted that the Whole-of-Nation approach of the Duterte administration, embodied in Executive Order No. 70, does not focus only on military and combat operations in resolving the government's internal conflict with the CPP-NPA-NDF.

"Even before (the NTF-ELCAC), our problem with the insurgency is not only with the armed elements of the CPP-NPA-NDF but we have seen that it is deeply rooted in economic (problems) and poverty," he said in mixed English and Cebuano.

Therefore, the solution to end the insurgency is not just via military approach "but more of good governance and the NTF-ELCAC is a complete replica of good governance because that is where you can find the collaboration of the different government agencies through the whole-of-nation approach," he added.

The whole-of-nation approach also involves the community cooperating and collaborating with the government, the Army commander stressed.

In Negros Oriental, many local chief executives are throwing their support behind the ELCAC initiative and it will be such a waste of efforts if this would be abolished, Peña said.

"We have learned from our experiences in the past during the Oplan Lambat Bitag counter-insurgency strategy of the government during the (Corazon) Aquino and Ramos presidencies, when we were almost close to ending the insurgency," he said.

However, back then, the approach was purely militaristic and the government agencies, local government units, and other sectors were not involved in providing sustainability in the development aspect, Peña noted.

The reason government agencies are now participating in the anti-insurgency efforts is because of the strong presence and leadership of the commander-in-chief, he added.

“We have lots of accomplishments now, not because of the military but because of the collaboration of the different government agencies, and if the NTF-ELCAC is abolished, I am afraid we will be back to square one,” the Army commander said.

The provincial government of Negros Oriental, headed by Gov. Roel Degamo, has provided road networks in insurgency-affected areas, among other things, to complement the efforts of the provincial and local ELCAC task forces, not to mention the local government units and their contributions as well, he noted.

The 302nd Infantry Brigade’s area of coverage includes the central and southern parts of Negros Oriental, the 6th district of Negros Occidental, Cebu, Bohol, and Siquijor. (*PNA*)

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