# Ill-advised, ill-timed, ill-informed | Inquirer Opinion

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Just when you think the government is finally exercising fiscal responsibility given the ongoing House hearings on the confidential funds issued to the Office of the Vice President (OVP) and the Department of Education, comes news that President Marcos has increased the budget of the controversial National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-Elcac).

From P2.5 million for each barangay, the President has approved an increase of up to P7.5 million per village—or P10 million each—under the task force’s Support to Barangay Development Program (SBDP), saying the original allocation would “hardly make an impact in terms of development,” National Security Council assistant director general Jonathan Malaya said.

Another P4.32 billion was allotted to 864 barangays for farm-to-market roads, school buildings, water and sanitation systems, health stations, rural electrification, and other relevant non-infra projects, Malaya said, adding that Mr. Marcos has expressed support for the P10 million per barangay item in the 2025 budget currently under deliberation in the Senate.

Although the amount is only half of the 2021 allotment of P20 million for each barangay, the budget hike for the anti-communist task force is unwarranted, ill-timed, and misinformed, given the more imperative needs of national security in the West Philippine Sea, and the exigencies from the devastation wrought by recent typhoons.

## Spent force

As for beefing up national security and quashing the threat of insurgency, wasn’t it the Armed Forces of the Philippines itself that harped on how the communist New People’s Army has become a spent force?

On Nov. 8, AFP Chief Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr. expressed confidence that the remaining guerrilla fronts in the Philippines would be “reduced to zero” before yearend. “[T]hey only have about 1,111 fighters left from the 2,200 last year,” Brawner said.

In April, Malaya said as much: While “there are remnants that can still create problems in geographically isolated areas … as a threat to the established order or to the democratic system, [the communists] are no longer a threat because they have been strategically defeated last year or the other year.”

The Supreme Court meanwhile ruled on May 8, 2024 that Red-tagging, vilification, labeling, and guilt by association threaten a person’s right to life, liberty, or security. While Malaya sought to downplay the ruling’s implication on the task force’s main activity, there’s no denying that the NTF-Elcac’s Red-tagging of activists, lawyers, judges, and other government critics has resulted in their harassment, arrest, detention, and even killing by unidentified assailants.

## Zero initiative

Aside from abetting—nay, rewarding—the task force’s rights violation, the increased funding also ignores the many instances that it has been found to be opaque in accounting for the millions of pesos allotted for its SBDP. During the plenary discussions on the 2025 national budget, Marikina Rep. Stella Quimbo disclosed that so far, 962 projects of the task force are under pre-procurement, 173 are under procurement, and only 20 are ongoing.

A previous budget hearing of the Department of the Interior and Local Government meanwhile revealed that zero initiative under the SBDP was accomplished as of August 2024. Recall as well that during the deliberations on the 2022 budget, NTF-Elcac’s proposed budget was reduced to just P4 billion from the proposed P28 billion, after a document presented to the Senate revealed that only 26 of the 2,318 projects of the task force for 2021 had been implemented.

In 2020, the Commission on Audit also questioned deficiencies such as incomplete documentation, low fund utilization or unutilized funds, unauthorized fund transfers, and lack of guidelines on the use of the NTF-Elcac’s funds.

## Cash cow

With next year’s elections just months away, what’s to stop barangay and local officials from taking advantage of such sloppy accounting and lack of accountability, to use the task force’s funds for their campaign expenses? Is there a mechanism in place to prevent this?

In the same manner that the House quad comm and the Senate have trimmed the OVP’s budget for dubious expenses, shouldn’t the NTF-Elcac be put under the same scrutiny before more funds are released to it? But will Congress have enough gumption to summon the task force’s chair—Mr. Marcos himself—to its next inquiry if only to conserve the country’s limited resources and curb the budget deficit that has resulted in a burgeoning public debt?

On its own, the task force should present proof of its meticulous and conscientious use of allotted funds, the barangay projects accomplished and beneficiaries reached, and a detailed plan on how its 2025 budget would be utilized—if only to show its continued relevance. Otherwise, the government should do away with this cash cow that might only be encouraging corruption.