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## **RICH LAND - POOR PEOPLE: PHILIPPINE PROVINCES AS AN INSURGENT SPAWNING GROUND**

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*January 1987*

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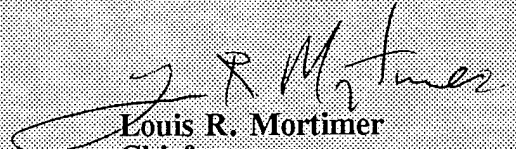
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## PREFACE

This research product responds to a specific request for data on conditions in the Philippine provinces of Quezon (Luzon) and Agusan del Sur (Mindanao) on the eve of the NPA insurgency and on the growth of the insurgent movement itself in the two provinces over the last decade and a half.

CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
QUEZON - Background	
Geography .....	1
Coconut Industry .....	1
Fishing Industry .....	2
Logging Industry .....	3
Provincial Problems .....	3
QUEZON - As An Insurgent Spawning Ground	
On the Eve of Insurgency .....	4
Spread of the NPA Movement .....	5
AGUSAN DEL SUR - As an Insurgent Spawning Ground	
Provincial and Regional Conditions .....	8

## QUEZON - Background

### Geography

Quezon, an elongated and narrow province (average width 25 kilometers), lies on a north-south axis following the east coast of Luzon and terminating in the Bondoc Peninsula to the south. Administratively Quezon is in Region IV, also known as the Southern Tagalog. It is the longest province in the Philippines (430 kilometers) and the largest on Luzon (11,946.2 square kilometers). It is bounded on the west by Isabel, Nueva Vizcaya, Nueva, Ecija, Bulacan, Rizal, Laguna, and Batangas provinces, and on the southeast by Camarines Norte and Camarines Sur provinces. Quezon includes the offshore islands of Polillo, Alabat, Platnangan, and Jomaliz.

Quezon was formerly known as Tayabas; its name was changed in 1946 to honor President Manuel Quezon. Important towns include the provincial capital of Lucena, Tayabas, Lucban, Calauag, Mauban, Catanauan, and Atimonan.

The northern two-thirds of Quezon is mountainous, forested, isolated, and sparsely inhabited, while the southern third, sometimes referred to as "coconut country," is a densely populated area characterized by a plantation economy. Quezon's most significant topographical feature is the Sierra Madre Range, which runs its entire length. Except on the Bondoc Peninsula, the province has no dry season and has a pronounced rainy season between October and January. Annual precipitation is about 2,750 millimeters. Quezon, especially in its northern reaches, is also under the seasonal threat of typhoons.

Quezon has an estimated 1,287,000 people, almost 97 percent of whom are ethnic Tagalogs. The province is predominately Roman Catholic. Demographic trends suggest that Quezon's annual population growth rate is higher than the national rate. Literacy, which stands at 92 percent, is also higher than the national standard. However, Quezon is also a province in which widespread misery is apparent. Housing is woefully inadequate (sometimes several families share the same dwelling), malnutrition is common, and underemployment the norm. These factors, along with glaring economic inequities, have made Quezon a target for successful Communist infiltration.

Agriculture is the economic base of Quezon with coconut and copra processing as the mainstay. Also important are the fish production, logging, and mining industries. A variety of local and external forces have brought about depression in all of these industries. The failure of each has a role in producing the socioeconomic conditions conducive to insurgency in Quezon.

### Coconut Industry

Since 1980, the world coconut market has become volatile primarily because of the interchangeable nature of coconut and other seed oils. In addition, the industry generally has not modernized its technology (Philippine coconut processing mills are, at present, notoriously underutilized and inefficient).

Approximately 25 percent of all coconut trees in the Philippines are over 60 years old and will not produce much longer.

But the coconut industry has gone awry not so much in production as in marketing and pricing. In the pre-Marcos days a levy was placed on coconut producers as a device for subsidizing domestic coconut oil prices when world prices were high. After world prices collapsed, Ferdinand Marcos continued and even increased the tax rate on producers to as much as 40 percent. These taxes were purportedly slated to finance replanting programs and social welfare programs, but rarely did so. Instead, a select number of Marcos' cronies controlled the coconut marketing apparatus and, along with the president, added fantastic sums to their bankrolls.

Most coconut-producing land is owned by absentee landlords and about 75 percent of the total hectage is tended by tenant farmers and laborers. There are three types of workers in Quezon--huskers, climbers, and gatherers, all working on the "Tersohan" or 33-66 share system. One-third of the produce goes to the workers and two-thirds to the landlords. Such a highly inequitable scheme could succeed only when demand for coconut products was high. When the coconut market dropped, belated government-sponsored programs such as crop diversification and intercropping could only delay the resultant human misery.

In 1985, the United States, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank all exerted pressure on the Philippine Government to open trading and to rehabilitate its erratic and surreptitious financial policies. The Aquino government has declared its intention to initiate these reforms. The Presidential Commission on Good Government has sequestered over 90 percent of the shares of the United Coconut Planters Bank, once a powerful tool of manipulation for Marcos and his cronies. However, administrative control of the bank as well as of the Philippine Coconut Authority--a powerful regulatory organization for the industry--still remains basically under the control of former Marcos loyalists.

### Fishing Industry

Filipinos rely on fish for their main source of protein. This dietary preference and the Philippine archipelago's abundant coastlines have made fishing and fish production a special economic sector. It is not a strong or growing sector, however, and several factors combine to make the fisherman's lot a particularly miserable one. This industry, like many others in the Philippines, is hostage to technological backwardness and inadequate funding for change. Offshore fishing, for example, has suffered from the pollution of coastal waters and competition with large-scale, deep-sea fishing.

Southern Tagalog ranks third after the Western Visayas and Central Luzon in fishpond production, and Quezon Province itself accounts for almost 60 percent of the total hectage devoted to this industry in the region. Although production methods in Quezon are more modern than in most other places in the Philippines, they still rely on primitive techniques.

As with coconut production, control in the fishing industry is in the hands of managers and distributors. The fisherman is usually indebted to several echelons of middlemen who charge him for the transportation of his goods, ice for storage, and stall rentals. These charges can raise the price of fish dramatically, but the price increase does not benefit the fisherman because he is at the bottom of an exploitative hierarchy. Like the coconut farm laborer, he may be susceptible to any promise of a new economic order. Although most fishponds are leased by the government, reform of the industry will have to go beyond mere privatisation and must involve the whole productive and distributive process.

### Logging Industry

Large-scale logging operations in the Philippines have long supplied a ready source of revenue for the Communist New People's Army (NPA) in the form of protection money. The threat of destruction by the NPA of expensive property such as trucks and other vehicles provides an incentive for logging company owners to pay "progressive" or "revolutionary" taxes. In mountainous northern Quezon, the isolation of the logging operations and the lack of a developed communications network makes protection from subversion problematic.

### Provincial Problems

The socioeconomic problems common to Quezon province are shared by much of the bundok or rural Philippines. Grandiose development schemes launched by the Marcos administration were either ill conceived or sidetracked because of corruption. When Corazon Aquino took power in February 1986 she inherited a bankrupt economy and political instability. The rural populace, comprising the majority of Filipinos, arose after years of neglect in optimistic anticipation of what the "Yellow Revolution" would bring. So far, however, Aquino's writ runs strongest in the urban areas and it may be some time before she is able to vigorously implement rural reform. The argument can be made, however, that the public's overwhelming approval (about 75 percent in favor) of her new constitution in February 1987 gives Aquino, for the first time, sufficient leverage to promote dramatic socioeconomic change. The nationwide success of the plebiscite emphatically confirms that Aquino, and not her Communist opponents, represents the aspirations of the Filipino people.

Peter R. Blood



## QUEZON - As An Insurgent Spawning Ground

### On the Eve of Insurgency

In 1969, at the time the New People's Army (NPA) was founded, the Bicol geographic region, which overlaps into southern Quezon Province, was reported to be an oasis of tranquility amid the fractiousness of politics elsewhere in Luzon. During this period, the area was described by a foreign observer, perhaps with questionable accuracy, as a region where crime and political frictions were minimal and where the people were less volatile and less embittered than elsewhere in the Philippines. The population was acknowledged to be poor, but there was supposedly less landlord absenteeism, a more equitable distribution of wealth, and an absence of hungry masses.

In the late 1960s, the Bicol area, including Quezon Province, appeared to be a region on the move. Four years previously, in 1965, the Bicol Planning Board (BPB) had been formed to plan and coordinate private, national, provincial, and municipal development efforts in the region, including Quezon Province. The BPB had committed itself to increasing agricultural output with the new strains of miracle rice just being propagated, and to aiding farmers diversify their crops and apply scientific methods of cultivation. In 1969, the Board had just promulgated a 5-year plan aimed at expanding road construction, railroad lines, harbor and air services, and rural electrification. The US Peace Corps was deeply involved in BPB programs and activities, and the administrator of the secretariat was a former Peace Corps volunteer who had elected to stay behind to help the Philippines.

It is not clear when the BPB ran out of momentum and the optimism in Bicol began to fade. Stagnation probably set in after the proclamation of martial law in September 1972 and the onset of "crony capitalism" under President Ferdinand Marcos. Rising fuel prices in the 1970s and falling copra prices also exacted a sobering economic toll on Quezon, the Philippines' largest coconut-growing province. In addition, share-cropping arrangements were revealed to be highly inequitable, with tenant farmers retaining one-third of their yield, and two-thirds going to the landlords. These arrangements, combined with usurious practices by moneylenders of various social strata, perpetuated the economic deprivation of the rural population, and in time handed the incipient NPA an issue ripe for exploitation.

The entry of the NPA into Quezon Province can be traced circumstantially through infiltration from neighboring provinces. To the southeast of Quezon, the NPA was identified in Camarines del Sur around December 1970, and fought its first engagement against the Philippine Constabulary (PC) the following August. In Isabela Province to the north of Quezon, initial clashes with the NPA were reported around October 1971, and by 1975 the insurgent movement had grown sufficiently in the province to require large-scale operations by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) coupled with a compulsory resettlement program. In Nueva Ecija, the province east of Tarlac where the NPA was founded, and immediately west of Quezon, the first incidents were reported around May 1973. Minor clashes in all three provinces bordering Quezon occurred throughout the early 1970s. In 1972, the proclamation of martial law swelled NPA ranks in southeastern Luzon with an influx of leftist or

disillusioned campus intellectuals and radicals who fled Manila for the Bicol area. Overall guerrilla strength remained low, however. In May 1973, the total number of NPA insurgents in the region was estimated at 150 combatants functioning autonomously under 13 different commanders, but with no groups operating specifically in Quezon.

#### Spread of the NPA Movement

The first NPA presence in Quezon Province itself was reported in September 1974, but for several years thereafter fragmentary evidence indicates that it was confined primarily to the Bondoc Peninsula. If the latter is the case, it is likely that the first guerrilla bands that entered the province infiltrated from Camarines del Sur. Subsequent movement into Quezon from neighboring Isabela and Nueva Ecija Provinces may have occurred as a result of AFP operations that dislodged NPA bands from these latter central Luzon provinces in the mid-1970s.

In the light of evidence that later became available, insurgent activity in Quezon focused initially on proselytizing rather than fighting. NPA propaganda efforts centered on two main themes: the wretchedness of the peasants' existence in the countryside, and the venality or ineffectiveness of the Philippine Government.

The first theme was developed by focusing on the lowest strata of the landless peasantry and gaining its support for and participation in "agrarian revolution." This program was defined as calling for the reduction of land rents, an end to usury practices by landlords and rich peasants, and an actual redistribution of land to the poorest farmers. NPA activists later bragged that in areas of Quezon under their influence, wages for day laborers had risen over the years from about US\$1.00 to US\$2.50 by 1980. At about the same time, landowners in Quezon reported ruefully to western observers that the NPA had revised the sharecropping arrangements, with tenant farmers now retaining two-thirds of their coconut crop and only one-third going to the landlords.

The second theme of government ineffectuality was brought home to the peasants by drawing their attention to the reality of conditions around them: the widespread, rampant unemployment, the absence of law and order, the absence of any channel for the redress of social injustice, and the corruption of government officials conspiring with vested interests to keep the poor in conditions of virtual servitude. To these grievances was added yet another as the insurgency took root: the heavy-handed tactics of the PC, AFP, and untrained, undisciplined militia that failed to distinguish friend from foe. The uninspired tactics by the government forces resulted in the deaths of countless innocent peasants, in the unwarranted designation of free-fire zones, and the expulsion or forced relocation, without compensation, of rural inhabitants amid stillborn civic action schemes and stringent population control measures.

To these conditions, the NPA initially brought a rough, frontier-style justice, killing government informants and lawless ruffians, ambushing paramilitary vehicles and patrols, and intimidating officials or landlords into an acquiescence to insurgent demands and presence. To the peasants among

whom they moved with increasing freedom, the NPA brought a sense of participation and involvement in their own fate. Peasants who could be induced or coerced into active roles were assigned to various committees and revolutionary organizations. In Quezon Province and the Bicol region in general, barrio revolutionary councils were formed to constitute the NPA infrastructure in towns. The insurgents themselves in the early 1980s were organized into mobile squads who enforced NPA writ in the countryside, propaganda units who proselytized among the masses, and other special units, probably death squads, operating in the urban areas. All NPA combatants in Quezon reportedly were armed with captured weapons and ammunition. They were recruited from uneducated peasant youths throughout the rural areas of the province and reportedly underwent up to 1 or 2 years of screening and indoctrination before becoming full-fledged members of the guerrilla movement.

Quezon Province became an area of intensified guerrilla activity beginning in 1980-81. Because of this, the AFP designated southeastern Luzon the Quezon-Bicol Zone (QBZ) and subjected it to punishing military operations. By early 1983, these operations had begun to take their toll. NPA bands in the province had been decimated and were on the run. AFP offensives in the meantime had been combined with civic action programs, but the programs' effect on the population was unreported. The NPA, however, aided by the hardship caused by a decline in real wages throughout the Philippines, and by this time, a well-polished propaganda effort tailored to specific, local abuses, was able to weather its losses and keep recruiting. Toward the end of the Marcos era, the movement was able to recoup its strength and remain a potent force in the Bicol region.

The waning of the Marcos years saw the emergence of three new developments among the NPA of Quezon Province. The first was a willingness to engage the AFP, rather than just the PC or local militia, in armed clashes or ambushes. The second was a trend toward larger operations. In past years, NPA-initiated actions might have involved 10 to 20 combatants. By the mid-1980s, engagements hinted at involvement by up to 50 guerrillas. In late 1986, a clash in Quezon reportedly involved up to 300 NPA combatants. Even allowing for AFP hyperbole, this would have been the largest concentration of guerrillas ever assembled for a single engagement in the province. The third development was the NPA's growing tendency to discard its Robin Hood image and itself become an instrument of repression. NPA guerrillas were reported resorting to extortion, intimidation, execution of innocent villagers, forced contributions from poverty-stricken rural residents, and all of the other human rights abuses that insurgent propagandists had long accused the Philippine Government of perpetrating.

In the early months of the Aquino presidency, the AFP and the NPA observed an unofficial, local ceasefire in Quezon Province. This was broken in mid-summer 1986 with the guerrilla ambush of an army convoy. With the approach of a countrywide ceasefire, the NPA in Quezon struck a higher profile, releasing several captured AFP members after well-publicized negotiations. Following the implementation of a nationwide 60-day truce between the government and the insurgents, foreign journalists, finding the Bicol region an easy trip from Manila, were permitted to visit NPA groups behind the lines and were received without hostility by the guerrillas themselves. In the meantime, there has been a further erosion of the government position. The Sierra Madre

Mountains, which run like a spine down the length of Quezon Province, are for all intents and purposes under insurgent control. Army detachments have been forced into a defensive posture and are increasingly reluctant to leave the security of their fortified bases to engage the NPA in combat. Most ominously, the insurgents are now active along the main highways from Manila, leading south through Laguna and Quezon Provinces to the Bicol region. It is possible that they could isolate this area in the future.

In an attempt to address the causes of the NPA insurgency, President Corazon Aquino has a number of long-range plans on the drawing board. None are known to address Quezon Province specifically, and there has probably not been time to implement in the area any of the broader-based nationwide schemes under consideration.

Russell R. Ross

## AGUSAN DEL SUR

### Provincial and Regional Conditions

At the time the New People's Army (NPA) was founded, in 1969, northeastern Mindanao, including the province of Agusan del Sur, had abundant exportable resources that brought precious foreign exchange to the Philippines. There were extensive farms of rubber, bananas, and pineapples throughout the region, while Agusan del Sur itself was the site of major concentrations of coconut plantations and logging camps. The prevalence of plantation agriculture, and the region's reputation as a major foreign exchange earner, however, conveyed a sense of orderliness that was illusory. Beneath the surface there were a number of prevailing discordant conditions that boded ill for the future stability of the area. Prosperity, for example, was confined to the elite, and the area was dominated economically by foreign corporations in partnership with Filipino businessmen. The plantations, in turn, paid low wages and bought land cheaply, thereby increasing the dispossession of the rural inhabitants. Law and order was tenuous, and armed bands or private armies enforced the interests of their patrons at the expense of the general public. For the poor and the powerless, it was an existence of deprivation and intimidation at the hands of the armed, the powerful, and the well-connected.

Beyond these indignities, after the Moro insurgency broke out in 1972, the population was subjected to recurrent human rights abuses by the government forces. These violations included summary executions, beatings, torture, extortion, and in Agusan del Sur at least, indiscriminate bombing raids. Villagers also feared compulsory relocation, which would force them to vacate and demolish their huts, sometimes repeatedly, and move to settlements that were badly overcrowded, unsanitary, far removed from cultivable fields, and in which they were confined by dusk-to-dawn curfews. It was amid these conditions of government insensitivity and egregious social injustice in Agusan del Sur, and in Mindanao generally, that the NPA was able to implant itself and thrive in the mid-1970s.

The exact time that the NPA intruded into Agusan del Sur is unrecorded. In 1971, the Communist movement boasted expansively that it was extending operations to Mindanao. However, independent sources did not confirm an NPA presence in the region until 1974. In mid-1977, fragmentary evidence disclosed that the Communist insurgents could operate in Agusan del Sur "with impunity." Late the following year, the first specific action attributed to the NPA in the province was disclosed. In this occurrence, the manager of a tree farm was abducted and killed after he ignored threatening letters demanding protection money. The incident disclosed that in the selection of the victim, a plantation executive, the NPA was still posing as the defender of the oppressed, but that in the demand for money, it was not letting revolutionary ideals interfere with pecuniary profit, a sentiment not unknown among other armed bands in Mindanao. Such small-scale violence set the tenor of NPA operations in Agusan del Sur for the next 5 years.

Incidents in the province increased over the years, however. In the fall of 1981, security in the area had deteriorated so badly that the AFP undertook a month-long operation against the guerrillas. The offensive resulted in the

reported surrender of "1,500 NPA members and sympathizers" in Agusan del Sur alone. The subsequent effect on insurgent activity was minimal, however, and the guerrillas increasingly showed a propensity to take on Philippine Army units in combat while concurrently raiding plantations, killing civilians, and enforcing their control over the countryside. Agusan del Sur in the early 1980s was subject also to the depredations of a private army dubbed the "Lost Command." This extortionary band, hired to protect a foreign plantation, made its own contribution to driving the inhabitants into the arms of the NPA.

In the meantime, relations between the government and the population went from bad to worse as inexperienced, badly trained, and demoralized government troops, unable to locate and defeat the NPA, took out their frustrations on hapless rural villagers. The Marcos administration itself was responsible for recurrent, ineptly carried out resettlement projects. In addition, Government development schemes, including one to convert the province into a major industrial export zone, apparently fell victim to the economic stagnation of the later Marcos years. There is no evidence that the plan for the export zone was implemented.

Since 1983, there has been no indication that a reversal of the security situation has taken place in Agusan del Sur. NPA groups fighting the AFP have grown larger, sometimes numbering several hundred, and anarchy in the region has increased. In mid-1983, a British observer characterized the conflict in Mindanao as "a war of attrition fought by the Communist and separatist guerrillas against a government that has lost popular support in the cities and countryside and which does not hesitate to use military force to impose its political will on a disaffected and resentful population." The following year, a US Embassy analyst in Manila called the situation in Mindanao "all but impossible to resolve," while an opposition leader noted that "the government is fighting a losing war because continuing military abuses have alienated the people." Then AFP Acting Chief of Staff General Fidel Ramos observed at the time that "a social solution is imperative because the problem involves economic security and social justice for the people of Mindanao."

Since the advent of the Aquino presidency, there has been no evidence of governmental progress in Agusan del Sur, and for the time being there are few grounds for optimism concerning the province or the region as a whole.

Russell R. Ross