Philippine Army (PA) Captain Jose Rene N. Jarque dead at 40, in the prime of life, with so much yet to give to family and country. It is both shocking and especially sad when the good die young unexpectedly.

(26.08.2005)

Rene was a man, a Filipino soldier, ahead of his time - Ironically now even in dying well before his time. But already what he has started, what he has worked on, shows good signs of living on - not just being remembered but being carried out - after his passing. For most people who knew Rene, whether close up or from a distance, it is his advocacy of “Reforming the Armed Forces” that will undoubtedly for the most part be remembered and carried on. And rightly so.

But Rene had another special contribution as a Filipino soldier that perhaps only a few knew about, among them myself, and which must be part of the credit that we give him as we mourn his passing. This was his contribution to the Philippine Armed Forces and consequently government policy that eventually fed into a ground-breaking international humanitarian ban on anti-personnel landmines in October 1997 known as the Ottawa Treaty. This in turn led to the conferment of the Nobel Peace Prize on the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) in December 1997 in recognition of the significance of that humanitarian ban and the process which led to it. Rene was part of this process.

On 7 February 1996, Rene prepared a paper on “Landmines in the Philippines” for the Strategic Studies Division, Office of Strategic and Special Studies, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). This paper was then carried by then Col. Alfonso Dagdag, Chief of Staff, 7th Infantry Division, PA to the Meeting of Experts on the Military Use and Effectiveness of Anti-Personnel Mines held on 12-13 February 1996 in Geneva, Switzerland sponsored by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The most important conclusion of this meeting and a concommitant expert study was that the military utility of anti-personnel mines is limited and cannot outweigh the grave humanitarian, socio-economic and environmental consequences of their use. This was the first of several such expert meetings sponsored by ICRC with the subsequent meetings being held in the regions, like one for Asia which was held in Manila in July 1997.

It is now acknowledged that these unofficial or semi-official “Track Two” meetings (as distinguished from official diplomatic “Track One” meetings) contributed to the momentum and political will of the Ottawa Process leading to the Treaty. In fact, this process created a new model of diplomacy anchored on the close partnership of like-minded pro-ban governments led by Canada and a core group which included the Philippines, on one hand, and a wide array of humanitarian and anti-landmine NGOs and international organizations exemplified by ICBL and ICRC, on the other. Such a partnership can form the basis of a “new kind of superpower” in the unipolar world of one preeminent superpower.

Rene may have helped prefigure Philippine practice of this new model of diplomacy when his own expert/policy paper “Landmines in the Philippines” quoted favorably a “Proposed Philippine Position” which had been earlier presented by the non-governmental Philippine Campaign to Ban Landmines (PCBL) in a Policy Brief on the Landmines Issue in the Philippines issued in September 1995. Among the recommended Philippine positions then were: (1) An international ban on the use, production, stockpiling and sale, transfer or export of anti-personnel mines; (2) Extension of the scope of the existing protocol on mines to apply also to internal armed conflicts; and (3) Institutionalization of NGO participation.

Ten years hence, all these have come to pass at both international and national levels. As early as December 1995, then President Ramos issued a policy statement which included a dramatic call to the AFP to disarm and safely dispose without delay some 2,460 claymore mines still in its inventory. Then, in January 1998, President Ramos issued his Instrument of Ratification of the 1997 Ottawa Treaty. Eventually, in January 2000, the Senate issued its Resolution of Concurrence in the ratification. Since February 2000, or for more than five years already, the Philippines has been a State Party to the Treaty with corresponding international obligations and also privileges.

Rene at least lived to see these happen in his time - even if the same may not be said for the armed forces reform which was his main passion. In more recent years, he would tell me how he somehow nudged Commander-in-Chief Ramos’ order to AFP to dispose of its claymore mines. You see, claymore mines, which are anti-personnel mines, are not necessarily banned by the Ottawa Treaty if they are used in command-detonated mode, i.e., if they are not victim-activated. Claymore mines by their design can be used either way, command-detontated or victim-activated. The former would make it a legal weapon, while the latter would make it a banned one. The New People’s Army (NPA), to their credit, know this international humanitarian norm very well. Field accounts show extensive NPA use of command-detonated improvised claymore mines as part of ambush tactics. This notwithstanding, the AFP, to their credit also, has so far not reversed the policy against its use of claymore mines, even though it could still legally do so in command-detonated mode say for perimeter defense of small detachments. Sometimes, giving up the use of a certain weapon is repaid in the form of higher moral ground by one side’s contribution to the elimination of a global scourge like anti-personnel mines.

Perhaps just as important as the substantive achievement of a humanitarian ban on anti-personnel mines was Rene’s example of a Filipino soldier (and later ex-soldier) reaching out to the “usual suspects” on the NGO front like us in PCBL. Later, he himself would form or join advocacy NGOs like the Actions Against Tyranny and Corruption Now (ACT NOW) and Initiatives for Peace-Mindanao (InPeace Mindanao). Some of these NGOs are even characterized as “Left-leaning.” But it is precisely this kind of reaching out - from both sides now - that is needed for the peace, unification and reconciliation of this country. I think Rene presages a coming effort at more genuine dialogue between Filipino soldiers, on one hand, and peace advocates, human rights activists and humanitarian workers, on the other. And there is something about a soldier (or ex-soldier) as a peacemaker that seemingly ironically makes his peacemaking more effective than usual. Maybe part of it is the trust reposed by his own comrades-in-arms, warriors being asked to take a leap of faith into peace.

One of the best possible tributes to Rene would be the emergence in due time of an honest-to-goodness advocacy network on security sector reform, one of the few advocacy issues not yet really touched enough by Filipino NGOs which are already all over so many issues. And our security sector reformers will definitely derive some guidance from Rene’s writings on the subject.

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He had the gift of writing, and the thing with writing is that it can go a long way, as we know even beyond death, in achieving good, as was with the landmines ban, as we hope with military reform. I believe we have not heard or read "the last word" from Rene. As is often the case with writers, there are written pieces here and there which may not have yet come to light. That is why we bring to light his seminal AFP paper on "Landmines in the Philippines." No, we haven't heard the last of Rene Jarque. Because there are bound to be other Rene Jarques.


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