LETTER FROM ABRA



It takes almost four days to cross the mountains from the outskirts of the little highland town of Bontoc in northern Luzon to the province of Abra to the north. On the horizon is the silhouette of the Cordillera mountains. In the sky are heavy storm clouds, not yet dispersed after the morning's rain. From the abyss below there is the sound of a mountain torrent, cascading between rocks and down rapids.

The province of Abra is a zone of operation of the "northeastern guerilla front," and it is one of the areas where communist New People's Army (NPA) insurgents have gained considerable momentum over the past few years. When you listen to their stories, and what the village people have to say, it is not difficult to understand why.

Until only about a decade ago, Abra was just another of the Philippines' many neglected mountain provinces, where schools and hospitals were few and far between, the tribal farmers poor and the rich elite small, corrupt and isolated in the low-lying towns. Not much had changed since the days of the Spanish colonial regime. The Americans, who came later, introduced little new apart from spreading Christianity to the remote hinterland of the northern Cordillera, which the Spaniards never were able to penetrate.

Things changed drastically and rapidly in the mid-1970s. The Cellophil Resources Corporation (CRC) and its sister company, the Cellulose Processing Corporation (CPC) — a grandiose business venture run by Herminio Disini, an in-law of President Ferdinand Marcos — were in 1973-74 awarded adjacent concessions, covering almost 200,000 ha. of virgin forest land in the provinces of Abra, Mountain Province, Kalinga-Apayao, Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur. The objectives were to cut timber in that area and to establish a pulp mill in the highlands of Abra and a rayon staple fibre plant in the lowlands, which would process part of the pulp into rayon fibre. The pulp mill was intended to be one of the most sophisticated of its kind in the world, capable of producing 66,000 tons of pulp annually, mainly for export to Japan and Western Europe.

The local authorities tried to launch the Cellophil plan as a "development scheme." But it was not well received by the slash-and-burn farmers of the northern Cordillera, especially the Tinguians, who were the first mountain tribe to be affected by the plan. To them, the entry of the CRC/CPC into their homeland meant economic, social and cultural displacement. Traditionally, the Tingguians are rice farmers, fishermen and hunters living off their irrigated rice terraces and whatever fish and game they can catch in the rivers and the forests.

The prospect of a major logging operation — cutting down the forest at a rate of 200 trees a day — made them fear for their survival. The pulp mill threatened to pollute the rivers and kill the fish, the Tingguians' most important source of protein. Furthermore, it raised the crucial issue of ownership of the land. As one farmer explained it: "We have an ancestral right to the land here; it has been ours for generations. It can't simply be taken away from us like this."

As the activities of the CRC increased, so did the opposition to its plans. In 1977 the Tingguians of Abra, among whom intra-tribal warfare had been a way of life for centuries, declared a truce and called a meeting of all the previously feuding tribes. At this meeting, held in Bangilo, 1,265 Tingguian representatives signed a resolution expressing "total opposition to Cellophil operations in Sagada, Besao, Bontoc and Sandanga."

In the forefront of the struggle stood


Balweg: a sword of fire. BERTIL LINTNER

four young Roman Catholic parish priests, Conrado Balweg, Nilo Valerio, Bruno Ortega and Cirilo Ortega. They organised meetings, sent petitions to Manila and sent pleas for help to the bishop of Abra and the local authorities.

Today, they are still waging their struggle against Cellophil and its backers — but no longer by peaceful means from the pulpits of their village churches. In 1979, all four of them went underground to join the NPA, the armed wing of the outlawed Communist Party of the Philippines. Hunted by the military, they spend their time propagating revolution in the villages of their former parishes, ambushing Philippine Constabulary outposts in the valleys and eluding the authorities, who reportedly have put a ₱130,000 (US$13,000) on each of their heads.

Balweg, 38, whose family migrated from Kalinga to Abra several decades ago, describes himself as "a Kalinga by blood and a Tingguian in spirit. "He is probably the best known and also the most militant of the four rebel priests in Abra, and he was politically active already during his days in the seminary, where he joined Fr Edicio de la Torre's Christians for National Liberation.

"I'm not holding this gun because I enjoy killing people," said Bruno Ortega, who is himself a Tingguian. "I'm acting in self-defence. I'm fighting because we are attacked and our lives are in danger." Balweg added: "The Bible says 'Thou shalt not kill' — but remember that even God gave a sword of fire to the good angels so they could fight Lucifer."

However, the four rebel priests explain that their decision to oppose the violence of the ruling elite with armed struggle was not taken overnight. "It was a gradual process," said Bruno Ortega. "I read Mao Zedong, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Gutierez' *Theology of Liberation* when I was still at the seminary. We learned from the experiences of Latin America, from Brazil's revolutionary bishop Dom Helder Cámara and others. The Cellophil issue just tipped the balance and precipitated us from theory into deeds."

Balweg says that he first got involved with the communists in 1977 because the church authorities he had approached could not offer him any concrete help in the anti-Cellophil struggle. "I discovered Amada Guerrero's *Philippine Society and Revolution* and saw that nothing should prevent the application of revolutionary theory to Christianity," he said.

The fact that the armed insurrection in Abra is led by four former parish priests from the area has, of course, contributed to the success of the revolutionaries. They seem to enjoy a considerable amount of popular support, moving freely between the villages in the mountains with the villagers willingly giving them food, shelter, guidance and warnings about the movement of government soldiers in the area.

Although the four priests no longer appear in clergymen's dress or say mass, they appear to be well respected in their former parishes, where people still call them "Father." The authorities are reported to believe that if they could eliminate the four, support for the NPA would dwindle and disappear. But others argue that killing the rebel priests would only make them martyrs and create a legend, which would linger in the hearts of Abra's Tingguians forever.

— BERTIL LINTNER