



CAPABILITY OF THE PHILIPPINE ARMY RESERVE FORCE IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION

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Abstract:

This present study probed the capability of the Philippine Army Reserve Force (PARF) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the National Capital Region (NCR). The NCR Regional Community Defense Group (NCR RCDG) is a line unit of the Army Reserve Command, that acted instantly at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The instruments of descriptive research in terms of documentary analysis, survey questionnaires and interviews were utilized and the statistical design of the study was calculated using Slovin's formula with 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level. In order to assist in containing the virus, the PARF immediately set-out for provision of checkpoints, *libreng-sakay*, regional food drives, among others. The budget for these operations was not included in the Annual Program Budget of the AFP, hence, the budget for trainings underwent a realignment. Because of this unexpected phenomena with the COVID-19 coming in as a surprise to all, the PARF has managed to be satisfactorily responsive to the needs of the citizenry.

Background:

Republic Act 7077, also known as the Citizen's Armed Force Act or Reservists Act of 1991, was signed into law on July 1, 1991, which directed the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to organize and create units with the sole purpose of reservists' management to maintain, administer, develop, train, and organize Reservists units to help enhance and sustain national security and development.

The National Capital Region Regional Community Defense Group (NCR RCDG) is a line unit of the Army Reserve Command. It was created for the sole purpose of Reserve Force development and management, procurement, and organization in the areas encompassing the NCR.

The roles of the NCR include conventional and unconventional warfare, anti-guerrilla operations, combat support & service support, force multiplier, disaster rescue & relief, and community service.

The NCR RCDG has several line units under its command, making the administration and training of reservists more compartmentalized and territorial-based. For the base units, it includes the Headquarters & Headquarters Service Company, ROTC Training Unit, Citizens Military Training Unit, and Reservist Management Information Systems Office, while the line units are the 1301st (CAMANAVA) Community Defense Center (CDC), 1302nd (QUEZON CITY) CDC, 1303rd (MAMAPAPASANTA) CDC, 1304th (MANILA) CDC and 1305th (PAPAMUNLAS) CDC.

In the last quarter of the year 2019, an unknown viral disease emerged. Since it was not officially identified and movement of people from different places continued, it rapidly spread throughout the globe. Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is the virus that causes COVID-19. First identified in Wuhan, China, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020, and a pandemic on March 11, 2020. SARS-CoV-2 is a single-stranded RNA virus that is contagious in humans. As described by the US National Institutes of Health, it is the successor to SARS-CoV-1, the virus that caused the 2002 - 2004 SARS outbreak.

Military response to the global health threat helps in filling the gap of public health capabilities by helping the civilian public health workers mobilize the flow of information, thus allowing a more viable facilitation of health concerns.

This study gears to identify and examine the role of the Philippine Army Reserve Force in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It proposes to further identify its strengths and deficiencies of its operations that may be used for further improvement of the organization and reference for future studies.

Taking into account the subject of this study, the Researcher has personally opted to discuss about the Philippine Army Reserve Force (PARF) as by the authority of the Higher Headquarters, he served as the Group Commander of the National Capital Region Regional Community Defense Group (NCR RCDG) during the height of the pandemic, and through this paper, the Researcher would be able to present personal experiences at NCR RCDG relating to how the PARF has mobilized and confronted the challenges during the peak of COVID-19.

This paper analyzed the capability of the PARF in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and further identified the strengths and deficiencies of its operations that may be used as recommendations for future studies. It intends to purport the capability of the PARF in response to the COVID-19 in terms of its operations, manpower, training, available equipment and facilities as well as its financial resources. This paper also gears to describe the satisfaction of the Philippine citizenry on the PARF response, to recognize problems encountered in its operations and propose plans of action to further capacitate the PARF for future similar operations. The implication of this study to public administration was likewise determined.

Methodology:

The Researcher has utilized the instrument of descriptive research in terms of documentary analysis, survey questionnaires and interviews. This study was delimited to the National Capital Region (NCR) covering the year 2020-2022, and covered the operations of the PARF in the sixteen (16) cities and lone municipality of NCR, namely: (1) Caloocan City, (2) Malabon City, (3) Navotas City, (4) Valenzuela City, (5) Quezon City, (6) Manila City, (7) San Juan City, (8) Pasig City, (9) Marikina City, (10) Mandaluyong City, (11) Muntinlupa City, (12) Makati City, (13) Las Pinas City, (14) Paranaque City, (15) Taguig City, (16) Pasay City, and the (17) municipality of Pateros.

The statistical design of the study was calculated using Slovin's formula with 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level. This included the personnel from JTF-NCR (100), Reservists from NCR RCDG (100), People from the community (77), and Personnel from Higher Headquarters (66) with a total of 343 respondents.

Results & Conclusion:

In response to the COVID-19 in terms of its operations, the following undertakings were conducted by the PARF at the height of the pandemic.

Operations	Office/Personnel-in charge	Activities
Provision of checkpoints	per CDC in collaboration with respective LGU's	Limit and secure the movement of people per barangay in all cities in NCR
Libreng Sakay	S4 (Supply & Logistics)	Bringing of health workers to hospitals
COVID-19 Food Drive	S7 CMO Office (Civil Military Operations) in collaboration with private stakeholders	Distribution of food and relief goods to cities of NCR
Provision of quarantine facilities	S1 (Personnel)	Isolation of personnel who manifest symptoms
Provision of Antigen and Antibody Testing	Medical Dispensary	Testing of personnel for clearance to move outside NCR RCDG
Flu & Pneumonia vaccination programs	Medical Dispensary	Immunization and protection of personnel pending COVID-19 vaccines

Baaed on the line units, below is the table that depicts the capability on manpower of the PARF in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Positions/Unit	<i>f</i>	%	<i>R</i>
1303 CDC	554	17.71%	1
1305 CDC	547	17.48%	2
1301 CDC	532	17.00%	3
1303-1 CDC	497	16.00%	4
1304 CDC	475	15.18%	5
1302 CDC	457	14.60%	6
Headquarters	66	2%	7

As alluded, 1303rd CDC has the highest number of manpower in the PARF with 554 personnel, equivalent to 17.71 %, followed by 1305th CDC with 547 personnel at 17.48 %, then by 1301st CDC with 532 personnel at 17 % and 1303-1 CDC with 497 personnel or 16 %. The 1304th CDC recorded its personnel at 475, at 15.18 %. The 1302nd CDC has 457 personnel, at 14.60 %.

The headquarters has 66 personnel, at 2%, and which acted as the command center in all of the coordinations with every CDC and local government units (LGU). All these units mentioned were all participative in the conduct of COVID-19 operations as previously mentioned.

The following training courses aimed to present general overviews and information about COVID-19 infection such as signs and symptoms, modes of transmission, behavior of the virus both locally and globally, and to increase awareness on the exponential behavior of exposure.

Trainings Attended	No. of Participants	Date/Venue	Personnel / Unit/Agency In-Charge
Overview of COVID-19 by the Department of Health	100	April 05, 2020 Multi-purpose Hall, NCR RCDG	S7 (Civil Military Operations)
How to handle COVID-19	100	May 24, 2020 Multi-purpose Hall, NCR RCDG	Medical Dispensary
Update on COVID-19 vaccines	100	January 9, 2021 Multi-purpose Hall, NCR RCDG	Medical Dispensary
Mental Health Awareness	100	July 12, 2020 Multi-purpose Hall, NCR RCDG	S7 (Civil Military Operations) S3 (Operations)
First Responder Training	100	October 4, 11, 18 & 25, 2020	S1 (Personnel) S3 (Operations) And Medical Dispensary

As regards to the available equipment and facilities utilized by the PARF, these were the most available equipment on-hand during the outbreak of COVID-19, while the facilities were carried out as make-shift areas, albeit following protocol, in order to be used for isolation of symptomatic personnel.

Equipment and Facilities	Number of Equipment and Facilities	Function/ Use of the Equipment and Facilities	Personnel / Unit/Agency In-Charge
Km military truck	1	Transport medical health workers to hospitals	S4 (Supply)
Mitsubishi 6x6 military truck	1	Delivery of food and relief goods to barangays	S4 (Supply) and S7 (Civil Military Operations)
Quarantine Areas	1 in Headquarters and 1 per CDC	Isolation of symptomatic patients	S1 (Personnel) S3 (Operations) S7 (Civil Military Operations)
COVID-19 antigen and antibody test kits	400 kits	Screening of personnel to move outside NCR RCDG	S1 (Personnel) and Medical Dispensary
Procurement of disinfectant solutions	100 gallons	For perusal in the military trucks & quarantine areas	S4 (Supply)
Procurement of face masks & face shields	10, 000 pieces	For daily perusal of personnel	S4 (Supply) and Medical Dispensary

The provision of antigen and antibody testing was also one of the activities undertaken by the PARF, and which was facilitated by the Medical Dispensary. Its purpose is on the testing of personnel for clearance to move outside NCR RCDG in accordance with the protocols of the local government unit. The use of antigen test is part of the interim omnibus guidelines on surveillance, case finding, contact tracing, quarantine or isolation, and testing for COVID-19 approved by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases. (IATF-MEID) The guidelines provide for proper clinical assessment, which is anchored on two main

factors, namely, symptoms and exposure, that will serve as the basis for quarantine, isolation, testing, discharge, travel and return-to-work decisions.

In the table below, the Annual Program Budget (APB) underwent a realignment for the purpose of deployment support including vehicle maintenance, fuel & oils of which acquired the highest budget of Php 400,000.00. Primarily, this obtained the highest budget since based on the mentioned operations, the PARF provided Libreng Sakay to transport health workers to hospitals and the COVID-19 Food Drive which covered the distribution of food and relief goods to the different cities of NCR.

Particulars (Budget allocated for COVID-19 response)	Amount	Personnel / Unit/Agency In- Charge
APB realignment for deployment support including vehicle maintenance, fuel & oils	Php 400, 000	Group Commander (GC), Finance
APB realignment for other COVID-19 operations	Php 250, 000	Group Commander (GC), Finance
APB realignment for provision of quarantine facilities	Php 150, 000	Group Commander (GC), Finance
APB realignment for procurement of face masks & face shields	Php 150, 000	Group Commander (GC), Finance
APB realignment for procurement of disinfectant solutions	Php 150, 000	Group Commander (GC), Finance
APB realignment for procurement of COVID-19 testing kits	Php 100, 000	Group Commander (GC), Finance
APB realignment for COVID-19 trainings	Php 100, 000	Group Commander (GC), Finance

Among the standard army operations such as ground warfare, the Philippine Army Reserve Force undergoes rigid training in preparation to the likelihood of encountering threats. On the other hand, COVID-19 is a totally different enemy that even the most disciplined individual, lest the Philippine Army Reserve Force, was not at all prepared, hence, no prior trainings of fighting the virus were conducted at all.

With the declaration of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), the Philippine Army Reserve Force took an active part in the COVID-19 operations in the provision for food in 23 barangays out of the 16 cities and 1 municipality in the National Capital Region. It partnered with various restaurants that were also part of a simultaneous COVID-19 food drive which intended to give assistance to small and medium business entities who were also shut down due to the pandemic. With the participation of the private sector in securing these food items, the tasks of the Philippine Army Reserve Force mostly included, but not limited, to food assistance, transport, and delivery to various barangays, and utilized military transportation for easier access to checkpoints. However, the available equipment was also very limited, as the procurement of the Protective Personal Equipment (PPE) and thermal scanners also presented quite another difficulty.

From the information gathered, the general public reaction as regards the intrepid visibility of the Philippine Army Reserve Force in the National Capital Region, both drew mixed reactions. While some felt secured with the heightened presence of fully-armed uniformed personnel in strategically-positioned checkpoints, others considered and evinced it as a “militarization” of the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The table below presents the overall satisfaction of citizens on the PARF response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Parameter	Mean	Adjectival Description
Operation	3.20	Sometimes Satisfied
Manpower	3.40	Sometimes Satisfied
Training	2.20	Seldom Satisfied
Available Equipment	2.60	Seldom Satisfied
Financial Resource	2.60	Seldom Satisfied
Grand Mean	2.80	Sometimes Satisfied

Below is the summary of the problems encountered by the PARF in COVID-19 response

operations.

Problems	f	%	R
Risk of exposure	86	86	1
Infection of Covid-19	78	78	2
Availability of transport mobility	54	54	3

While the coronaviruses are actively replicating, the PARF is out in the streets of the National Capital Region with the foremost problem that was encountered by the troops was the high risk of being exposed and subsequently the higher likelihood of getting infected by COVID-19 themselves. Further, in its response to the delivery of food and non-food essentials, another challenge that was hurdled was the ready availability of transportation to meet the simultaneous and overlapping execution of the tasks. Without (yet) the benefits of any available anti-COVID-19 vaccines, the exposure of every Enlisted Personnel with the risk of infecting others increases exponentially.

The table below presents the proposed plan of action to further capacitate the PARF for

future similar operations.

Problems	Measures	Objective	Strategies	Personnel/Office In-charge	Expected Outcome
Risk of exposure	Equipped Health Services	The objective of the Health Service Units is to conserve the fighting strength of the tactical units by reducing the incidence of Disease and Non-Battle Injury (DNBI) in order to respond to combat and operational stress in ground warfare as the need arises. In the event of a Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) threat, the Philippine Army Health Service Unit is the backbone of the CBRN capability of the military, of which consists of CBRN passive protection, contamination avoidance, and weapons of mass destruction mitigation.	Purchase adequate equipment to provide health services among military personnel	Health Service Units	Low risk of exposure among personnel and enough equipment and facilities to accommodate infected military personnel
Infection of Covid-19	Protocol improvement	To improve medical and non-medical protocols to properly manage military personnel who fall under Persons Under Monitoring (PUM) and Persons Under Investigation (PUI).	Review and revisit the current medical and non-medical protocols imposed and make a further amendment, if possible, to suit the current need of the area and comply with the cascaded national policies	Health Service Units	Enhancement of the implemented medical and non-medical protocols to properly manage military personnel who fall under Persons Under Monitoring (PUM) and Persons Under Investigation (PUI).

Availability of transport mobility	Improvement of Strategic Communication	To improve the strategic communication between Philippine Army Reserve Force and civilians	Conduct orientations or seminars which will serve as an avenue for the Philippine Army to communicate with the civilians	Philippine Army Reserve Force	Enhanced communication between Philippine Army Reserve Force and civilians
	Profiling of areas	To identify communities that are at high risk to both COVID-19 infection and social unrest.	Conduct profiling activities to communities which are considered high risk	Defense Department	Updated profile of the communities which are considered high risk

