

An Interview with Lt. Col. Gregorio "Gringo" Honasan

(Editor's Note: On September 14, weeks after the failed coup attempt of Lt. Col. 'Gringo' Honasan, a Philippine daily, *The INDEPENDENT*, published an exclusive interview of the coup leader by one of its staff reporters. *KASARINLAN* is hereby reprinting that interview *in toto*.)

Col. Gregorio Honasan (GH): Well, I'd like to thank you, Leonie, and our countrymen for this opportunity to articulate the other side of what is perceived as the truth. It is very awkward for our people to be furnished only one side of the picture and this has been our impression ever since the start of this series of events. And I feel the Filipino people, our men in uniform, our leadership both in the military and the civilian sector, deserve nothing less than the truth.

LP: You and your group have been accused of firing on civilians in the Malacañang area, and causing casualties. Is this true, Colonel, that your men did kill these civilians?

GH: No matter what information has been given to the public and the Filipino people, please believe me when I say that we did not commit that atrocity, that of firing on civilians in the Nagtahan area. What happened there was that even the wounded in our group of soldiers that staged a "demonstration" in the Malacañang area were on the same side of the street as the wounded civilians were on. The truth is that the first ones to open fire were some armed men riding in a car whom we believe were companions of those inside Malacañang, along with snipers and other armed groups in buildings near Nagtahan bridge.

They opened fire on us, and we soldiers naturally took cover and dropped to the ground. Civilians cannot do this without training. So they were the ones hit by the gunfire from the other side of the street. And the soldiers we posted near Malacañang, Arlegui, and Laurel (streets) said that they heard no one cheering for Cory. In fact they say they heard applause for their attack on Malacañang.

And if truth is what we want then what should be looked into are the ballistics and the trajectories of the bullets that struck the civilians at the roadside. They will find out that the civilians lying on the pavement, the ones who were hit, were together with the soldiers from our group who were wounded. So we were not the ones who caused the deaths of those civilians. The firing began from the opposite side of the street, from unknown armed men in the buildings there.

LP: They say that your group ambushed and shot Noynoy Aquino. What is the truth of the matter?

GH: I believe the truth should come out that the group appeared near Malacañang did not stay in the vicinity of Arlegui and Laurel for more than 20 minutes. This is their testimony, and even the son of the President says that the incident happened around 3 or 4 in the morning. By that time our troops were no longer there. And we received some information that 15 soldiers assigned to the Presidential Security Group have been jailed for the incident.

Our information is that these men were the ones involved in the shooting where the son of the President was made to stop and alight from his car. We shall discover that the PSG soldiers were the only ones who knew the routes of the cars of the President's family and we have not received a report from any of my men that they encountered the group of Noynoy. I do not wish to judge this incident, but I believe that we were not guilty of the death of Noynoy's bodyguards.

There were reports that a young girl died and a military escort of the President's son is in serious condition at the FEU hospital, alleged victims of the shooting. We heard that the young girl's funeral is being arranged by the PSG.

I think the people have a right to know what really happened, and if the government means well, it should conduct a fair and honest investigation of the incident. It should not accuse us of anything without reason.

LP: Who was the wounded military escort?

GH: Someone by the name of Lt. Sanchez, one of Noynoy's military escorts. The young girl was Charlotte Datiles, a Maryknoll student. We heard that her burial was not properly conducted and I feel that those accused of her killing are having some problems. But in the name of justice the incident should be thoroughly investigated because the people have a right to know the truth.

LP: Thank you, Colonel. We at *The Independent* are not taking sides. We just want to know the truth; and we're balancing the issues by hearing both sides.

GH: I add Leonie, if you will permit me, the government is claiming that we intended to kill the President and her family. This is not true. Our force is strong enough to be able to do that, but that was not our intention.

What we really wanted to do was to air the sentiment of our soldiers and our people, which we could not do in a normal way.

Our intention was to fire and let soldiers in the camps feel that Malacañang was under siege, so that forces loyal to the government would rush to the Palace, giving us the opportunity to take over the camps.

That's the only reason; we never intended to kill or harm the President and her family. We won't do that, especially at this time when she is perceived to be sincere and honest.

We could not in conscience carry out our protest or "demonstration" in a bloody manner, particularly against those we deem as the leaders of our country. That is our belief, and if this resulted in bloodshed, it may be that we have some responsibility for it, but you must believe that we did not cause it. We were not the fundamental cause of these events. This has been going on for a long time. In fact, we believe that it is the fulfillment of what we began in February of 1986. We call this the continuation of the February 1986 Revolution.

LP: AFP Chief of Staff Gen. Fidel Ramos has accused you and your men of burning the General Headquarters at Camp Aguinaldo on August 28. He says that you poured kerosene or gasoline over portions of the building, and lighted the fire with an M79 grenade launcher.

GH: First, one must understand that an M79 has very little effect. I have used an M79 in actual combat, and anyone who has will know that it would be impossible to pour gasoline on something and ignite it with a grenade launcher. The truth is that we bypassed GHQ; we did not pay attention to it and we did not attempt to enter it, because we knew that Generals Ermita and Montano were on the third floor, and their honorable men were ready to defend the seat of the Armed Forces. When we entered there were no gunshots because the gates were opened for us freely. We have heard it said that Col. Templo let us in. He did not. Other comrades of ours who sympathized with what we were fighting for opened the gate (Gate 5) at White Plains and we entered there. Even those who met us accompanied us into the camp. At 10 a.m. I inspected the perimeter of Camp Aguinaldo, and everyone there was for us. Except for the group of Col. Templo and Col. Juanchon and other officers and a few men who remained on their side, who stayed in Headquarters and Headquarters Service Group (HHSG) in a corner of the camp near the gate. And the people in the camp did not bother us when we made our rounds. I spoke to some men manning tanks at the gate and told them that there was no reason for us to fight and shoot it out, and that we were fighting for the same thing—the rights and the future of our children and other Filipinos who still hope for protection from us. So we did not harm GHQ. The only thing I changed during my inspection tour was the flags—I had them inverted to show that we were now in control. I thought it was important to leave the seat of the Armed Forces alone and I did not see the leaders of the AFP there at their assigned posts.

LP: Greg, how did GHQ catch fire?

GH: I do not know. There is no other explanation for that except that the people inside dropped a lighted cigarette on a pile of papers. In fact, we wondered why the airplanes attacked the GHQ building, when they knew that their comrades were inside. We were not at GHQ. We were at the perimeter because the attack had begun from Crame and we knew that something would happen in the vicinity of the perimeter and the fence. But we did not think that the ones who gave the attack order would have ignored the fact that this was a populated area and bullets that missed their targets would hit civilians and others inside the camps. That's what we never tried to do. So we chose to take up defensive positions instead because we believed that no one on the other side would open fire because the military and government officials knew that the military was now one in its objectives and in what they were fighting for.

LP: One more charge against you, Col. Honasan, is that you wanted to grab power. This exercise was carried out for you to grab power and you would be the head.

GH: You know, Leonie, I am not that ambitious nor do I deceive myself about what I can achieve. I do not deceive myself that I can take responsibility for the livelihood and future of our millions of fellow Filipinos. All that we really want to do is to straighten that which we had begun in February 1986.

What we only asked then was that government be run better so that we could see that it was different from the preceding administration.

But this did not work out. Because, unlike with the past dictator, we could not afford to make mistakes anymore. Too much is at stake—the welfare, honor, livelihood, future and freedom of millions of our countrymen.

We no longer have time for politicking again, to discuss and argue, to accuse one another, to enrich ourselves or to fool each other and still hope somehow that we can rescue ourselves from these problems.

We are not being too hasty either, Leonie. They say that we are in too much of a hurry, that we cannot wait. What we are saying is, let us make clear our objectives, let us clarify our starting point and it is in so doing that we can begin to have better goals and directions.

We are not saying that for this we need a military dictator or a military junta.

Our dream from the start has been, from the time we began to take a stand against the dictatorship of the former president, our desire has been to have genuine unity and reconciliation. Not a system that thrives on anger and vengeance. That is what's happening now.

It is now as if only those in government have the right to call on God's name, as though they alone have the right to say that they are right. No one else, not even those who had remained upright even in Marcos' time. They, for all intents and purposes, have the Marcos stamp on them and are forever suspect.

This cannot be, the Filipino people will not allow this. For us to have true unity, there must be no trace of anger or revenge in our dealings with each other.

Can this not be done? Is there anything wrong with wanting this? Of course, they will say that the people have spoken but that is another issue, that election.

Government people say that if the military had not been involved in election anomalies, it can be said that the elections were clean.

In my opinion, and the Filipino people know this, the recent elections were not that clean or orderly.

A fraudulent election was one of the issues that led to former President Marcos' ouster. In my view, the recent election is again one of the burning issues in the people's mind. And we cannot close our eyes to this.

LP: Recently, Colonel Isleta, who claimed to be a relative of yours, appealed over radio station DZXL for you to surrender. Are you going to surrender?

GH: At present, surrendering is out of the question because we have reached that part of our lives where we cannot anymore talk about personalities.

My dear relative Colonel Isleta once said that during Marcos' time, he left the military because he did not like Marcos' rule.

We all have the same sentiment then. He (Isleta) was not the only one who felt disenchanted and frustrated. But why did he leave us in the military?

We needed leadership then, a guide who would teach us to correct the mistakes that were being done then.

But he and the others who quit the military then, including Col. Guillermo Cunanan, they all say now that they are worried about what has happened to us, our nation, our armed forces. But why did they leave us?

We were the only ones left. But we and the likes of Isleta were of the same sentiment then. In fact, if anybody had to leave the service, we should have been the ones to have done it because we had the leverage, we had the options, we were younger than them and we possibly had more opportunities to redirect our lives' path. But how come the opposite happened? We who had the bigger stakes for the future were the ones who stayed in the service.

How come they, whom we hoped would serve as our guide, were the ones who quit? And what is their right now to judge our sentiments and our actions, now that Colonel Isleta has returned to the service?

I love that relative of mine. We once met in a Bible fellowship and he embraced me, saying I should not lose hope because there is a God who will lead me to the right path.

For his part, Colonel Cunanan said he was worried about his family and that our nation is in danger because many believe in our cause. Was he saying that those whom he left in the military (during Marcos time) had no mind of their own and would lead them astray?

He did not give even a little consideration to the thought

that those soldiers and officers who believe in our cause have their own principles to uphold.

Is that the way he insults the group he has abandoned? What I'm fighting for, Leonie, are the rights of our worried comrades in arms.

They are questioning my motive. It's very difficult to question a motive because it is a person who owns that motive. You do not have sufficient information; you do not have the bases, except the result of the action that has been taken.

What did we do in February 1986? Are they now thinking that we spearheaded the EDSA uprising for our own good or for the good of certain people or groups?

LP: Another issue being raised against you and your group by top military leaders and by Dr. Soriano is that what you did has further strengthened the NPA, and that the threat posed by the communists against our nation has increased. These are the same communists whom you said are also your enemies.

GH: What Dr. Soriano referred to should have been tackled then. This is a problem that the government ought to have resolved earlier. Had the government taken more concrete steps before, the problem wouldn't be here now—the Communist Party wouldn't be that strong, the secessionist movement wouldn't have taken heart had the initial steps been more decisive.

That's what we are trying to point out: the government stumbled in its initial steps. They should not be referring to us as the causes of these problems.

In fact, we're not totally blaming them for the missteps for these were carried over from the former regime.

What I was saying is that when we had ousted the former regime, the margin for error that has been provided the new government became smaller. We can't afford to make mistakes. But we took missteps for our initial steps and we can see the results thereof, a mess. They shouldn't blame our group for the mess because they are in the government (and we're not).

The question that needs to be asked is, "How come national problems have grown this big?" Why is the whole nation and the military so disunited? I am not the president, sir. Neither am I the highest leader in the armed forces.

What we have done was to prove that we can govern with order—when the security or welfare of the citizenry is imperilled, we shall rise to the occasion for we are sworn to do that.

LP: Are you readying another attack on Metro Manila?

GH: If I were to be given a chance at changing the course of events, there is one thing I would like changed—the incident where civilians, our fellow countrymen, were killed, where some soldiers on our side were slain, and where others heeded orders from their superiors.

I believe that those soldiers who obeyed their officers' orders were not afforded the chance to show what they really felt. They simply followed orders and perhaps, they had no inkling what the results of the order would be. That's my

regret—we really do not want a bloody confrontation.

In answer to your question, Leonie, it is really impossible for me to want another armed confrontation where issues aren't clear.

At this point, we can't divulge what we intend to do — the plans of a more important group than mine would be imperilled.

Nag-iisa lang po ako sa nagpapaliwanag ngayon but I'm speaking not only on behalf of my comrades here outside Metro Manila but also on behalf of those troops who made no moves as they were not given the chance to ask what side of the issues presented they would respond to.

I believe this situation is giving headaches to the government and our leaders—the situation now is the same as that before February 1986.

Then, both President Marcos and Gen. Ver had no inkling how many we were, where we were, and who we were. The same conditions exist now.

Does the government know the extent of our following? How many in the military secretly go by the principles we are fighting for? The government also doesn't know when these secret supporters will make their move.

I'm telling you now that I have no control over what the members of the armed forces feel. I have said the same thing before.

Leonie, I have told this to our leaders—what I felt to be a seething within the organization which is greater than the groundswell before February 1986.

It seems they don't believe this because they feel "everything is under control" and they are "on top of the situation."

You noted the reversed field in the Filipino flag? The red field's on top?

This banner patch on the right arm of the armed forces uniform was our countersign in February 1986. It was adopted by the entire AFP. Because it was a symbol of reform.

Now what we mean by putting the red side up is that the situation is not normal. We are either in a state of emergency or at war.

What the government and our confused leaders are saying is that everything is all right, that we should have no reason to worry because even if there are few problems these are capable of being solved. If we are able to solve them how did we come to this?

Everything is not all right. What is happening is not normal. What we want to point out is that our situation is very grave and that the situation is far from normal. The central issue before us today is no longer ideology or politics or personalities. The issue is that our country is dying and that if we continue to say that everything is all right then we are lying to each other and fooling ourselves. This is the root of all our problems—that we are constantly lying and fooling each other with regard to the state of the nation.

LP: So, as far as you are concerned, could we tell the people of Metro Manila that you are no longer going to attack?

GH: I would like to reassure our countrymen, especially those who are beginning to develop some fears about the

situation in Metro Manila, that if you consider me still as a professional soldier and as your protector, I will not engage in any action that is confrontational and that will jeopardize the security and safety of the public.

Notwithstanding, the disinformation that has been fed to the public about the events last August 28. It was not my intention to allow that amount of bloodshed.

In fact, I did not start this. I did not initiate this. All we wanted last February 1986 was good government. And eighteen months after that February we do not have any semblance, any shadow of good government or any direction leading to good, honest, competent, properly managed, truly reconciliatory government. And this is the reason why we have manifested this action. Now, I would like to assure that we will not engage in terrorism, and in indiscriminate violence.

We will not engage in a confrontation with whoever are still referring to themselves as the rightful leaders in our country. We will not do this, in the name of the security and welfare of the public that we have sworn to protect.

This has been a onesided affair all throughout in the sense that before we were given a chance to air our side, judgment has been passed on us already, by people who absolutely have no right.

In the interest of justice and truth, if we want to start all over again with the proper perspective, with the objective of truly unifying our people who are not polarized and fragmented basically by disinformation.

I would like to make this very clear, some groups will try to perpetrate terrorism in our name. I would like to issue this warning to these groups and to inform the public to please give us that amount of faith, trust, and respect.

If you can still find it in your hearts to do so, after even our media has been subtly suppressed.

LP: *Salamat*, Col. Honasan, and we still have something to take up with you. *Nalathala sa mga pahayagan na si Mayor Brigido Simon, Jr. ng Quezon city ay nagre-raise ng pondo- isang milyon daw- na ibigay na gantimpala sa kaninuman na makahuli sa iyo.* What can you say about this?

GH: In connection with the supposed effort of raising funds for my capture, for my head. I would like to state here that it seems to be contrary to what they are espousing — non-violence, non-confrontation, the abhorrence of bloodshed.

And I am just sorry for those who, because of personal reasons, will try to take him up on this offer.

I find this completely contradictory to what they are espousing, the principles they are espousing. And considering the fact that there are many who share or sympathize with our cause. I feel that it will not be that easy either to undertake this effort.

So I just hope that Mayor Simon and those who advocate this or those who propose this bounty for my head will be enlightened about the real objectives of this effort to finally unite our people and propagate reconciliation.

This act is not reconciliatory.

LP: Deputy Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Ed Ermita said that what you and your group are doing now is counter-productive in the counter-insurgency campaign because the resources and assets which should be used to fight the communists are now being utilized to preempt any violence or any attack that may be perpetrated by your group. What can you say about this?

GH: Well, earlier, I mentioned that we will not engage the Armed Forces in any confrontation and we will not engage in terrorism, indiscriminate acts that will jeopardize public safety and lives.

But the basic question, really, which should be addressed to Gen. Ermita and the other spokesmen of the Armed Forces is "How did it come to this?"

These are problems that they should have considered way before these incidents or the series of events started. We had intentions to really unify the Armed Forces and, in fact, most of the questions we were asking within the Armed Forces, the answers are to be found outside the Armed Forces. We are talking here about the highest leadership.

The question is, why are they giving out these comments just now? If there were any efforts to unify and to make the Armed Forces more effective, it should have started a long time ago. These basic grievances should have been addressed a long time ago.

In which case, the consequence is that we would have a much stronger Armed Force now, we would have a more manageable situation not only in the military but in the whole republic. And would not have problems of divisiveness, problems of unity in the Armed Forces.

Now, I will never do anything to jeopardize the combat effectiveness of the Armed Forces unless provoked, by the oneness of the information system through the media, which in general terms is controlled.

But I will not initiate anything to diminish the now depleted strength of the Armed Forces.

I suggest very strongly not only to Gen. Ermita but to our chain of command and highest leadership that the issues be addressed as early as possible and the remedies be instituted.

There should be tangible reforms not only in the military but in government so that we can address the basic issues already.

LP: I think that Secretary Ito was more kind to you because he said in a press interview that "We should give credit to Col. Honasan and his group because they are helping us fight against the insurgents."

GH: Actually, we are now engaged in an effect on many fronts. There are some headhunters like the group of Mayor Simon who are after us, the CPP - NPA is after us, some elements in the AFP, especially in the higher level, are after us. They are even trying to discredit us. Now, if they want a truly united effort, why do this? The AFP, likewise, does not need another enemy.

LP: And talking of Secretary Ito, in his statement the other day he said he would like a dialogue with you and your group. In fact, I've heard that he sent some feelers to some of those whom he considers your friends or your intimates, for the possibility of holding dialogues. What can you say about this?

GH: We have no plans, Leonie, of closing any avenues for dialogues.

However, what should happen is that we should first see the beginning of a new course, a new direction with regard to meaningful reform.

We will insist on this for what else will there be to talk about except the traditional complaints of common soldiers and common Filipinos. That is where the dialogue should begin.

Not until we start talking about real reform will we have any basis for talking at all.

Otherwise, all we will achieve will be to end up talking in circles. We will just end up talking about why we took this action in the first place. We will just end up talking about the rights, duties and powers of government. We will just end up talking about our hurt pride and our hurt feelings against one another. Nothing is going to come out of this. What we ought to have is a starting point, a frame of reference.

Are the reforms starting to happen already? Are we setting new directions? More realistic directions? Directions that will spell unity and reconciliation, justice for everybody? Total absence of vindictiveness? Absence of self-righteousness which they have arrogated unto themselves? It is hard for a group which is only one of the many groups who effected the transition to declare its moral ascendancy over the others.

There will be problems because each group will claim that it is more righteous than the others. It has a moral basis.

Until an attempt, a visible attempt to put all these groups together not to put them in positions of power but to hear their side also and to make them part of this ongoing effort to set directions, we will not have any basis for dialogue.

LP: Let's talk about the foreign press. Have they tried to reach you? There is a lot of talk about your asking for \$20,000 per interview. Of course I don't believe this but there is supposed to be a white woman correspondent who says she is willing to pay \$70,000 for an interview. How true is this?

GH: These are the same questions I am asking. What regard, what value is there left for the truth? What price tag do we have to place on truth?

For us in particular and especially because we feel that there is no more freedom in our own media, in some of our own newspapers, in some of our broadcast media. It is true that some foreign media representatives have been coordinating with us to bring out our side of the controversy.

We have accepted the offer of at least one group because we believe that it is only through this that we can bring out the real picture of the conditions in our country and to bring out our side.

That is why we saw it as necessary to give the foreign press that opportunity. It's not really because we don't trust the local media. It was more because we wanted to get our message across to the rest of the world, to bring the truth to other countries, so they would hold no bias against us and our cause and be able to judge us accordingly.

Now, as for the local media, we are talking to you so that you can bring our side to our other friends in the local media, to tell them that we have not done this to insult them or to show them that we have no faith in them. We simply felt that we could not bring our message to our countrymen if we could not first bring this message across to the rest of the world. This is why it happened this way.

LP: This is also our objective in *The Independent* and among my colleagues in the Defense Press Corps. What we want, Greg, is for the people to know the truth about what is happening, the issues involved.

GH: This is why I dared to try to seek you out for an interview, and we would like to inform our countrymen that please, please give us a chance to air our side also.

And then, after you have all the facts complete, then form a conclusion. And please don't be railroaded into forming an opinion by a one-sided source of info.

I mean, this dispensation, just like the old one, has mastered the art of monologue. They claim it is a dialogue, it is an *ugnayan*, it is a consultation and they are able to draw out the feelings and opinions of people but actually it is one-sided orchestration or effort.

I have to admit to you that we do not have any media facilities around and we are appealing to the members of the media to give us fair share.

We would hate to think that what is being given to our people is only one side of the picture.

So we are earnestly asking for assistance by way of presentation of balanced picture. We cannot afford to give only one half of the truth at this point because our people deserve a total picture—the truth from both sides.

And unfortunately, the propaganda machinery of the present dispensation has monopolized all the facilities for giving their side of what they perceive to be a power grab.

And they have even, I think, poisoned the minds of some of our leaders, including the president and it has been reflected in her initial statements.

It was more an emotional reaction rather than a well-thought out reaction to something that has not yet been fully understood.

And I think, in the interest of justice and truth, I hope the local media will assist us in this.

LP: What can you say, Greg, about the reaction of the soldiers? *Si vice president Laurel ay umikot na sa mga military camps*

at narinig natin yung reaction ng mga sundalo, not only the enlisted men but also the officers regarding you. What can you say about *yung reaction nila sa iyo*?

GH: It is a very big source of pride to us who have been directly continuing this struggle. The thought that a lot of our comrades-in-arms who are not articulating their sentiments have manifested their support.

This is a tribute again contrary to what is projected by some self-appointed critics. This is a tribute to the basic intelligence and duty consciousness and patriotism of our soldiery. Some of our men may not be able to articulate in basic terms that the government and our leaders can understand but I am sure they must be getting a dose of the truth right now.

They cannot suppress this anymore. This is a part of the groundswell which I have repeatedly articulated. And this groundswell will continue until the basic issues are addressed.

The men have a right to know both on the personal side and the professional side what they are fighting and dying for! This is something which has never been clear to us.

From the very start, by way of initiatives from the government against any dynamic organization among our traditional enemies. They do exactly what their objective is. No amount of Oplan Katatagan or Oplan Mamamayan will be able to translate this into something our rank and file can understand.

LP: Greg, before we end this interview, do you have any message to the Filipino soldiers, especially those who are supporting your cause?

GH: To my comrades in the Armed Forces, I say raise your heads high. Let us not weep over the difficulties we face. We never promised each other that this would be an easy task. We may, in fact, be misled if change and reform come too easily. Let us have hope in the realization that we are fighting not only for our rights or for the rights of other groups. Let us be true to our oath and to our calling as soldiers—that we are pledged to defend the rights, the freedom and the future of the Filipino people.

I know very well how difficult it will be for you, being separated from your loved ones, but I have great hope that together we shall see a new dawn, we who are comrades-in-arms. I have great faith that we shall live to see what we have long been hoping for, a truly united Armed Forces. Let us continue to have faith that God will grant us this dream.

Let us greet each other *mabuhay* and wish each other well as we go forward in our struggle in the name of this republic and in behalf of the Filipino people.

LP: Well, Greg, thank you very much.

GH: Thank you, Leonie.