

UN report on child soldiers in the Philippines

The United Nations can be commended for speaking the truth about child soldiering in the Philippines. It had identified the New People's Army (NPA), the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as "persistent users" of child soldiers in armed conflict.

We do not dispute this report. It is factual and documented. We confess that even to this day, the MILF is not totally immune from child soldiers in its ranks for various compelling reasons. We have explained this to Madame Radhika Coomaraswamy, the United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, during a meeting more than a year ago. However, since we signed with the UNICEF an agreement to protect children's rights and to delist the MILF as users of child soldiers last year, progress has been made in this regard. The annual report sent to the UN Security by the same group attested to this and it said that progress has been made with some groups which have recently signed action plans in which they aim to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers. This included the MILF, alongside the SPLA and the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist. All three insurgent groups have signed such plans with the UNICEF.

But what is not very wholesome in said annual UN Report is the light sentence obviously accorded to the Philippine government, which in previous report identified it as the main violators of children's right. Of the 100% violations recorded, 50% were committed by the state, the remaining 50% by the NPA, ASG, and MILF in that order. However, only 1% of these were committed by the MILF.

We are not trying to taint the personality of the UN; that we will never do. We just want to be clarified, because in said report, it merely "expressed serious concern about national armed forces using children for military intelligence and interrogation purposes". It does not come to our mind that governments are exempted from provisions of the UN Resolution on children's rights particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Philippines is a member of the UN and therefore must abide by every UN Convention.

Consider the following open and blatant instances of government's violations of child rights:

- The recruiting, training, and arming of minors -- including sending them to combat -- as members of the Civilian Volunteers; Organizations (CVOs) and Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGUs);

- The continued recruitment of children as military assets or informers, spies, or as laborers, etc.;

- The continued recruitment and admission of persons below 18 years old into the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) and the National Police Commission (NAPOLCOM); and

- In the field of sports, boxing especially, young people are continuously recruited. Boxing is almost a sport of death.

In the three citations above, it is very clear that the government is a violator of child rights. To be absolutely clear on this, let us have a mathematical computation. A child enrolls in grade I at age 7; finish the primary school at age 11; elementary school at 13; and high school at age 17. The moment he qualifies to the PMA or NAPOLCOM, he is below 18 years old. The UN says, a child soldier “is a person under the age of 18 who directly or indirectly participates in an armed conflict as part of an armed force or group.”

We appeal to the UN to ensure that the rights of children are safeguarded by all and sundry especially governments. The right to protect the people including children is a responsibility of governments. They must be told to comply and be held accountable when they renege. On the part of the MILF, we would like to see the 1% violation on our part becomes zero. After all, it is not to our liking and interests that children are in our ranks. We want them sent to schools and other child-friendly activities not just soon but if possible right now.

Ref.: http://www.luwaran.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1371:-un-report-on-child-soldiers-in-the-philippines&catid=89:editorial&Itemid=384