From a wider viewpoint

The history of wars and armed conflicts is also tragically a history of child soldiers.

It is a history that spans approximately 3,000 years from the time of King David (1000 BC) to the present, and sweeps across all centers of civilizations and their peripheries.

Evidences of children being involved in adult wars abound. King David of Israel (1000 BC) at a very young age slew Goliath in a confrontation between Israeli and Philistine armies. The Spartans and the Greek States (circa 700 BC) recruited and trained children after reaching the age of seven. Alexander the Great (340 BC) who was already several years a warrior, led an army at the age of 16. The Vatican Crusades and the wars of Medieval Europe employed pages, squires, and children armed brigades. The barricades of the French Bourgeois Revolution also did the same. Both in the American Revolution and the American Civil War children were employed in the militia. During World War I, World War II and the guerrilla wars and conflicts of the present time, child soldiers have been systematically recruited, trained and employed in war or simply participated to survive extermination.

These wars had been waged for various reasons and goals that were either offensive or defensive; either revolutionary or wars for restoration of the old order; wars for re-division of colonies or wars for national liberation. The protagonists and victims have always included the elderly, women and children.

The history of wars and armed conflicts is also tragically a history of child soldiers.

CHILD SOLDIERS PHENOMENON, THE PHILIPPINE CONTEXT

Current Trends: Children in adult wars

In the briefing for the 4th UN Security Council Debate on Children and Armed Conflict entitled Child Soldier Use 2003, prepared by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in January 2004, eighteen (18) nations were reported having child soldier problems perpetrated either by state actors, non-state actors or both. These are Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote D'Ivoire, Indonesia, Israel, occupied Palestinian territories, Liberia, Burma, Nepal, Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Uganda.

Based on this briefing report, two significant points immediately stand out as regards current trends of recruitment, employment or the presence of child soldiers. First, majority of the nations of the world no longer employ child soldiers and second, except in the case of Israel, most of the cases cited came from nations or states that are underdeveloped and poverty stricken.
Several interrelated factors appear to account for this namely:


2. Developments in communication and the ability of mass media to instantaneously report and monitor significant world events, and to create public opinion that reinforces adherence and respect for human rights and the rights of children.

3. Technological advancements in warfare and tactics among developed nations. Continuous scientific and technological advancements applied in warfare have made child soldiers obsolete among modern nations. Armies now employ fewer ground combatants but are backed up by much firepower support (air, tank, artillery, missile and naval tactical support) that can be deployed rapidly in the face of resistance. Moreover, modern ground troops are far better equipped and trained using such gadgets as satellite guided position locators for accurate artillery/missile/air strikes, night vision goggles, human heat detectors, and light but powerful small arms and explosives.

On the other hand, reports show that both state and non-state actors involved in armed conflicts in underdeveloped countries use children as soldiers to make up for the inferiority in warfare and logistical limitations in sustaining a war. Guerrilla armies with popular support, facing tremendous odds in conflict areas, more likely call for general armed resistance. As a result, the adversary treats whole communities as combatants. Children and youth are more likely to take up the “patriotic” challenge for various reasons as self-defense, idealism, or bravado, among others.

The sustained Intifada (uprising) among the Palestinians is a case in point where children start joining the war of resistance against Israeli incursions. They arm themselves with rocks and later volunteer for the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom. Recent armed conflicts between Muslims and western powers that include the ones happening in Iraq and Afghanistan appear to be following the same trend.

Furthermore, parties in armed conflict that lack popular support or have lost political influence tend to resort to kidnapping and forced conscription of child soldiers to wage an unpopular war.

The Philippine Context

The Philippines, like most Southeast Asian countries, had suffered under western colonial and feudal oppression and exploitation for hundreds of years. This long period of colonial domination deprived the country its natural course of development as an independent nation with abundant human and natural resources.

As a result, the Philippines has a long history of armed conflicts and social upheavals amid a panorama of underdevelopment. Armed conflicts continue, as basic problems remain inadequately addressed such as landlessness, poverty due to inequitable distribution of wealth, political disempowerment—the litany seems endless.

The nearly 400 years (1521-1898) of Spanish colonial and feudal rule spelt untold sufferings, abuse, and economic deprivations to the Indios who were used to communal living amidst the rich natural resources of the islands. Logically, many local uprisings and rebellions erupted during this period but were violently suppressed. The colonial authorities were able to use regionalism to mobilize tens of thousands of local inhabitants from one province or region to neutralize dissent in other areas.

Finally, after putting aside regional differences and developing a sense of nationhood, Filipino leaders and intellectuals waged the Philippine Revolution of 1896 and succeeded in defeating the Spanish colonizers.

However, it was a short-lived freedom as the American forces immediately moved in and invaded the country triggering the Philippine-American War.

The US expeditionary forces in their armed engagements
made no distinction between armed combatants and women and children. This brutal approach was applied due to the popular character of the anti-US resistance and the fact that leaders of the invading army were veterans of the Pacification through extermination campaign against the American Indians.

General Jacob Smith best articulated the common policy against the hostile population when he ordered to “kill everybody ten years and above” in the Samar islands. When the smoke cleared and before the new colonizers could establish “order”, one-fifth of the population perished as a result of the fighting, large-scale hamleting, disease, and massacre of entire villages. Leaders of the revolution who refused to yield and collaborate were executed, exiled or indefinitely jailed.

Peasant and millenarian-inspired revolts in Luzon and the Visayas and a Muslim rebellion down in Mindanao marked the entire period of American colonial rule.

In 1930, the struggle for independence and peasant uprising against feudal bondage took a new turn with the organization of the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) in Manila by militant union leaders led by Crisanto Evangelista with the help of representatives from Communist Internationale. Subsequently, the PKP merged with the Socialist Party of the Philippines that was the prominent peasant organization embracing Central Luzon and Southern Tagalog, a contiguous area where tenancy was most concentrated and cruel. This effectively replaced the orientation of successive social upheavals in Luzon and the Visayas from the ideology of the French Bourgeois Revolution and Liberal Democracy to that of Marxist-Leninist socialist perspective.

In 1942, Japanese forces invaded many parts of Southeast Asia including the Philippines and routed American, British, French and Dutch forces in the region. The PKP coalesced with the Allied forces and established the Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon (Hukbalaahap) that became the most effective and active guerrilla movement during the Japanese occupation.

When the American forces returned victorious, Hukbalaahap was disbanded and transformed into electoral campaign machinery as the PKP shifted to parliamentary struggle. It won congressional seats but its leaders were barred from participating in government and many were killed or arrested. The PKP returned to the underground and took up arms again and organized the Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB).

The PKP-HMB rebellion suffered a series of military defeats and arrests of its leaders mainly due to massive US support to the Philippine government and internal weaknesses that left the party in disarray and passivity in the latter part of the 50s.

PKP tried to bounce back in the early 60’s and resume political activities but factionalism and a power struggle, mainly ideological, erupted between its traditional leaders and Jose Maria Sison. The latter broke away from the old party...
and “reestablished” the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) on December 26, 1968.

The CPP-NPA-NDF Protracted War

The new party adopted the old party’s political program of waging a national democratic revolution with a socialist perspective but shifted to Maoist strategy of surrounding the cities from the countryside through a protracted war. This was a major deviation from the old party’s protracted legal struggle culminating to a swift, armed insurrection to seize political power.

A few months later, the CPP formed the New People’s Army (NPA) starting with a few HMB squads that they won over and aggressively expanded from their mass bases in the sugar-cane haciendas of Tarlac and Pampanga and the periphery of Mt. Natib in Bataan. It did not take long for the rebellion to spread to Northern Luzon, Southern Tagalog, Bicol, the Visayas and Mindanao.

President Marcos was quick to capitalize on the insurgency problem and exaggerated the strength of the CPP, NPA, and NDF to usurp power, declare martial law and establish a dictatorship. The ensuing gross violations of human rights and the economic crisis caused by massive plunder of the economy and siphoning huge foreign loans by Marcos and his cronies created the fertile conditions for the rapid growth of the NPA nationwide.

By mid-'80s, these underground organizations at the forefront of the anti-dictatorship struggle grew into a national force with a mass base of 10 million. However, the decision to boycott the snap presidential elections and their failure to unite the popular legal opposition led by Cory Aquino weakened their political influence after the EDSA uprising in 1986.

The national government initiated peace negotiations with the CPP-NPA-NDF under newly installed President Corazon Aquino but the rebels withdrew from the process after the infamous Mendiola Massacre in 1987.

Hostilities resumed with a prolonged military operation that lasted from 1987 to 1990 resulting in the displacement of more than a million people but only succeeded in slowing down the underground left’s momentum. However, a series of organizational and political mistakes led to fault-finding and a major split in 1992 that greatly weakened the numerical, political and military strength of the underground left by as much as one half of its former status.

President Ramos resumed the peace negotiations and President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo continued the peace process. The national government signed a Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG) with the CPP-NPA-NDF and other agreements leading to a political settlement are still being discussed in the ongoing negotiations.

The CPP-NPA-NDF though considerably weakened from their peak in the late ‘80s remains a significant force because there is still a fertile ground for rebellion. Chronic poverty, backward rural economy, joblessness, politicized military, and an inept and corrupt government hampered by huge public debts and fiscal deficit provide enough fuel for mass discontent.

The Muslim Struggle in Mindanao

Muslim Mindanao has a long history of struggle for independence and national liberation dating back to the Spanish and American colonial times. The Philippine Republic, immediately after securing its freedom from the US started to develop the country and encouraged settlers and farmers to migrate to Mindanao. Naturally, this policy caused bitter and bloody conflicts and fueled deep resentment among the Muslim population.

In 1968, traditional Muslim leaders forged the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) to continue Muslim aspirations for national independence. Younger and educated members of MIM led by Nur Misuari formed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and eventually broke away from the MIM. The MNLF’s vision was to establish an independent state composed of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan.

The Jabidah Massacre and the aggressive expansion of Christian settlers in Mindanao perceived to be protected and armed by government forces angered and alienated many Muslims from the “Manila government.” These prompted them to fight back mainly under the banner of MNLF. Sporadic clashes between Muslims and Christians urged MNLF to build the Bangsa Moro Army (BMA) and started training a core of officers abroad.

In 1973, a full-scale secessionist war exploded in Mindanao with many key cities rising up in arms supported by BMA regulars. Marcos was caught flat-footed and doubled the size of AFP combat forces and sent most of them in Mindanao to quell the rebellion.

Ironically, in 1977 a group under Hashim Salamat left the MNLF amidst heavy casualties and intense fighting in Mindanao and took the moderate position of autonomy. The breakaway group was at first called the “NEW MNLF” and later named Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Marcos encouraged the split to weaken the MNLF by not assaulting MILF areas and sending feelers for cooperation.

After the EDSA People Power in 1986, political leaders initiated negotiations for political settlement with the MNLF that was concluded during the time of President Fidel Ramos. MILF felt it was left out and was not consulted on the final stages of the negotiations and pursued a defiant stance. It started to expand its forces and operations while the MNLF began demobilizing its army.

In 2000, the Estrada administration launched an all-out war against the MILF to dislodge them from their camps in spite
of the peace negotiations with the group. The attacks were carried out due to persistence of sporadic skirmishes and amid allegations of violations of peace agreements of both sides. The MILF retaliated with their own military offensives and bombings in urban areas.

most celebrated case that drew the attention of the public on the issue was the capture of Jelyn Dayong, a 15-year-old combatant in the Island of Jolo, in September 2000. Latest estimate has the following figures on child soldiers:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>SOURCE</th>
<th>ESTIMATE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Out of 9,463 NPA fighters in 1999, between 13 and 18 percent were children under 18 years old.</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. State Department</td>
<td>Some 20 to 25% of new recruits in to the NPA are children.</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>Three percent of NPA members were boys and girls under the age of 18.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>The 6,000 to 10,000-strong MILF is also reported to use child soldiers. Teachers in Central Mindanao province of Maguindanao admitted that they were aware that many of their male pupils were being recruited to join the MILF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO sources</td>
<td>An MILF policy allows children, as young as 12 years old, to undergo military training.</td>
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Pres. Arroyo, upon her installation to power with the impeachment of Estrada in 2001, pulled back the dogs of war in Mindanao and peace negotiations resumed and awaiting final settlement.

End wars; end child soldiering

We have seen that where there are wars and armed conflicts there are child soldiers performing various roles including being combatants in military operations.

In the country’s pockets of wars that have dragged on for four decades now, children have figured as players. For instance, Philippine troops reportedly nabbed five teenage NPA fighters (two girls and three boys aged between 13 to 17) in August 1999. All were armed with pistols or grenades.

In February 2000, NPA captured Brigadier General Victor Obillo and Captain Eduardo Montealzo. These two officers reported after their release that 40 percent of the NPA cadres who guarded them in detention were children.

In December 2002 the Northern Luzon Command (Nolcom) allegedly rescued 80 children under training for guerilla war in NPA camps. The

While there is an urgent need for the government and other concerned groups to implement programs that would facilitate the demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of child soldiers, it is also undeniably true that the long-term solution lies in resolving the ongoing civil conflicts by attacking their root causes.

(Footnotes)

1 Samuel 1. Chapter 17, The New American Bible  
2 Ancient Greek and Roman Civilizations and also Alexander the Great, Britannica CD 2.0, Encyclopedia Britannica  
3 The Crusades, ibid  
4 Child Soldier Use 2003, Briefing for the 4th UN Security Council Debate on Children and Armed Conflict, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, January 2004  
5 New weaponry and tactics were culled from BBC, CNN, Fox News Reports during the 2003 War in Iraq.  
6 Differences in strategy between the CPP merger party and the reestablished CPP under Jose Maria Sison are discussed in various chapters of Dr. Jesus B. Lava’s, Memoirs of a Communist. Anvil Publishing 2002.  
7 A detailed history of the reestablished CPP up to 1989 from the viewpoint of the CPP can be found in Jose Maria Sison with Rainer Werning in The Philippine Revolution, The Leader’s View, Crane Russak, 1989.

Questions & more on DepEd’s bridge

DEPARTMENT of Education (DepEd) Secretary Edilberto de Jesus said 99.4 percent of all the (newly enrolled) freshmen actually flunked the high school readiness test (HRST) given last May 24, scoring below 75—the passing mark. But only half of them, or those who scored below 30 in the 90-item test would have been required to go through the bridge program (PDI, 10 June 2004). The DepEd’s solution to the dismal performance of pupils is to add another year in pre-high school remedial classes. Critics ask: What does DepEd hope to do in one year that it failed to achieve in six years of elementary education? Singapore-based Cesar Reyes Jr., writing in the Voices on INQ7.net throws some more questions: Are there enough trained teachers to implement it? Is there a proper program—with clearly defined objectives, instructions, guidelines and outcomes? Are there enough resources and textbooks for students to help them acquire the skills? Can’t the same effect be obtained if the teachers were the ones given professional development training? Or with the declining education budget, increasing number of schoolchildren and decreasing number of teachers, is the additional year really the most feasible solution?

CBPC firm versus death penalty

THE Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBPC) remains steadfast that death penalty should not be imposed in the country. Caloocan City Archbishop Deogracias Iniguez, head of the CBPC’s Permanent Committee on Public Affairs, said they believe in restorative justice rather than imposing the capital punishment. “We believe criminals, even the most evil of them, should be given a chance to repent and reform his ways,” he said. The CBPC has the Commission on Prisoners’ Welfare looking over cases of death penalties. Iniguez said they (bishops) would go by what governments all over the world stand for: no to death penalty. He said they will never stop convincing President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo that death penalty should be abolished. –PNA 22 June2004