

DEADLY PLAYGROUNDS: Child Soldiering in the Philippines

■ By J.M. Villero

WHILE other children their age are in school, in playgrounds, or safe within the protective folds of their families, these children spend their young lives in camps, constantly facing the dangers of war and violence. Instead of books, or toys, these children handle and lug around M-16s, Garands and other firearms. They don't do jigsaw puzzles; they dismantle and re-assemble rifles. They have seen their closest friends die in battle. They have stared death in the face.

Jessa, Raffy, Gani and Yoyong (not their real names) are just four of the Filipino children who have been forced by a host of circumstances to take part in a war raging in the Philippine countryside. They are among the 194 child soldiers (CS) documented by the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PhilRights), the research and information arm of the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA). At the time of the research project, 115 of the children were still active

members of various non-state armed groups and government-backed paramilitary organizations. Only 79 of them had been demobilized.

The PhilRights study, "Deadly Playgrounds: Child Soldiers in the Philippines", was launched on November 15, 2005¹.

Child Soldiers Fighting Adult Wars

International children's rights advocates estimate that there are more than 300,000 child soldiers world-wide who



Grinding poverty in the rural areas are driving young children to join armed groups.

Photos by R. ANDAG

are involved in more than 30 armed conflicts², including the Moro liberation movement and the communist insurgency in the Philippines. It is however extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the actual number of child soldiers – armed groups deny that they recruit children into their ranks, reliable documentation cannot be conducted, and children eventually become adults, thereby erasing the fact of child soldiering. Thus, current estimates may well fall below the actual number of children who are members of armed groups. Being invisible, the existence of child soldiers is easy to deny.

In the Philippines, despite denials from both government-supported paramilitary organizations and non-state armed groups, children are commonly recruited to the frontlines of a war that is not of their making. There may not be exact figures on the number of CS, but child rights advocates, research institutions and government agencies claim that the use of child soldiers is prevalent in paramilitary groups supported by the government, in private armies and in opposition groups waging armed struggle like the New People’s Army (NPA) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). CS have been documented among NPA, MILF, Revolutionary Proletarian Army-Alex Boncayao Brigade, the Abu Sayyaf Group, Citizen’s Armed Forces Geographical Unit, and the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

The children most vulnerable to recruitment or conscription by armed groups come from impoverished families in rural communities where fighting between government forces and separatist or insurgent movements is fierce, where livelihood opportunities are virtually nil, and where basic services are either inadequate or practically nonexistent.

These poverty-stricken communities, where most of the time the only state presence felt is that of the military (which more often brings harm than good to the residents), are fertile breeding grounds for anti-government sentiments and activities. A child who witnesses and is a victim of military atrocities, in an area of massive



In evacuation camps in war-torn hinterlands, children face unimaginable forms of hardships and deprivations. R. ANDAG



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anti-government propaganda and organizing work, where livelihood and education opportunities are not available, feels no other recourse but to sign up with a non-state armed group – especially when other members of the family have already joined.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers considers a child soldier “any person under the age of 18 who is a member of or attached to government armed forces or any other regular or irregular armed force or armed group, whether or not

an armed conflict exists.”² They perform combatant as well as non-combatant roles. As non-combatants, they may be deployed as medics, couriers, messengers, spies, porters, decoys, scouts, look-outs, organizers, or may be assigned camp duties like cooking and other domestic labor.

However, even when assigned adult tasks such as combat duty and other high-risk undertakings not normally given to children, child soldiers – because of their age – are left out of crucial processes

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involving decision-making.

“Charming amazona”

Jessa, described by social workers as “a charming young lady, who is always smiling, friendly and easily relates to other people,” was only 14 when she was captured by the military in the course of a firefight with elements of the 43rd Infantry Brigade. She was captured along with another 14-year-old girl, who was injured during the encounter. She does not deny her affiliation with the communist insurgents. Though she insists that she was not a combatant, she admits that she carried an M-16 armalite rifle for her protection. “If the military kills ordinary civilians, they will only be too happy to kill those who are involved in underground work. I had to have some weapon,” she reasons out. She had joined the underground movement less than a year before her capture, after attending several orientation meetings conducted in her community by the communist organizers. Soon, she herself was immersed in organizing and propaganda work among the upland peasant communities in a province in the Visayas.

Jessa would spend the next seven months hiking from one mountain barangay to another, imparting to upland farmers what she knew about the ills of Philippine society and the need to replace the existing exploitative system. “It was exhausting work,” she says. “Most of the time we had to move at night, to avoid encounters with the military. Sometimes we would walk for hours without food.”

But she never complained. For one, she says she was already used to walking long distances. And back when she was not yet involved in the underground movement, enduring hunger was already part of her daily life. With only a small patch of land to till, her parents can barely feed her and her five siblings. They couldn’t even send their children to school. “We only reached Grade III,” Jessa narrates. “There was no money for pencils and notebooks, and the time spent in school was better spent helping our parents in the house

and in the farm.”

It is not surprising therefore that Jessa found her organizing work better than being at home. “At least I was doing something good,” she says, “raising the awareness of other people who are poor and exploited like me.”

Does she regret that she joined the communist insurgents? “No,” she candidly admits.

Fighting for Allah

Gani was barely 15 years old when he became a mujahideen, fighting – as he puts it – “for the glory of Allah.” He was exposed to Moro separatist ideas at an early age, his father being a member of an armed group advocating Muslim separatism. Gani voluntarily joined the MILF. “I want to put

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a stop to the exploitation of my fellow Muslims, and to avenge the wrongs done by the government,” he explains. These wrongs include the heavy militarization of the Muslim communities that has made life extremely difficult for the families like Gani’s. “The military do not respect us, they look down on us. They think that Muslims are bad people. That’s why I’d like to help drive them out of our place,” he says.

Driving the military out of the Muslim communities means joining the jihad, carrying firearms and being at the frontlines of battle. And for Gani, it also means being prepared to die in battle. “I’m not afraid to die,” he says. “Because if I die in battle, Allah will bless me and reward me in the afterlife because I died for the cause of Islam.”

He has already participated in a number of armed skirmishes, and in 2003, Gani nearly lost his life. “We were being chased by the military,” he recounts. “We couldn’t return fire because they outnumbered us, and our leader



said it was better to flee than to engage them in combat.” As they were fleeing, one bullet whizzed past Gani. He thought he was wounded. “I checked for blood, but there was none. But my jacket had been ripped.”

The experience did not scare Gani. “I know that my life is always in danger, and I am prepared to die as long as it’s in battle.”

Would he consider leaving his group and going back to a peaceful life? “Only when we have already gained what we are fighting for,” he says. “Right now I consider it an honor to serve the Muslim people, and to follow our religious teachings. In fact, if I do get married and have children, I will not stop them from becoming mujahideens.”

From extreme left to extreme right

At the time of the interview, Raffy, 18, had already fought for both the extreme left and the extreme right: he had been a

full-time youth organizer for the CCP-NPA, then had become a CAFGU regular. Raffy exemplifies the children in war-torn areas who are sucked into a spiral of violence, and the only choice is between fighting for the NPA or joining the CAFGU.

In Raffy’s case, he didn’t even have a choice.

His parents were involved in the underground movement. His father was an armed regular of the New People’s Army, while his mother, according to his account, was the finance officer of the rebel forces operating somewhere in the Visayas. Thus, at a very early age, Raffy got used to “life in the mountains.”

“When there was a military operation in the area, we would hide in the forests,” he narrates. They would stay there sometimes for days, under cover of the thick forest canopy. He recalls that when the military dropped bombs on the area, they scampered like wild animals. “We would hug the



PEPITO FRIAS



Poverty and war rob children not only of their innocence, but also their basic rights to survival.

R. ANDAG

big tree trunks, then run to the next available cover. I was only 6 years old then."

"When my father was assigned on an operation, he would leave me in the care of sympathetic farmers," Raffy recounts. Once when he was staying with some farmers, soldiers raided the area. They took the 6-year-old Raffy to a military camp several towns away.

"My grandmother tried to get me out of the camp, but the military refused. Luckily, she got the help of a nun. That was how I got reunited with my parents."

When he was 14, Raffy became a full-time organizer for the communist movement. "There were seven in my group, all almost the same age as me, and we were tasked to organize the youth sector. We were not combatants, but we were allowed to carry M-16 rifles." Aside from organizing, Raffy's group also acted as spies, couriers and look-outs. "We

would immediately report any military presence, to warn our comrades. We were also tasked to carry messages."

Raffy's other tasks included soliciting material support from the masses. "I would go around collecting rice from supportive farmers, then bring it to the rebel camp."

Aside from his organizing and auxiliary work, Raffy also took part in alternative education conducted by the underground movement. "We learned about the ills of Philippine society, and how we could overthrow such an exploitative system."

Before long, his parents surrendered to the authorities. "I had no choice but to surrender along with my parents," Raffy says. "I knew that my father would be used by the military in their operations, and I didn't want to meet my father in combat."

They surrendered two M-16 rifles, worth P36,000.00 each under the "Balik Baril"

program of the government. "The military issued us a check amounting to P56,000.00 for the two firearms, but we only received P36,000.00 in cash. The rest they pocketed."

Soon after their surrender, Raffy and his father underwent basic military training, and were then integrated into the Citizens Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU). "I had no choice but to become a CAFGU. We couldn't go back to our farm. My father said it would be too dangerous."

Are Safeguards Enough?

Though children's involvement in wars and armed conflicts has a long history, it was only in recent decades that the campaign to end the use of child soldiers has gained prominence. The recruitment of children into armed groups, whether in government-backed or in non-state armed groups, is a despicable act that violates the most fundamental rights of the child, and which exposes the child to a host of other violations and abuses. Child soldiers have to endure indescribable deprivations and dangers. Even when they are eventually demobilized, the physical, emotional and psychological damage that they sustain will be carried for the rest of their lives.

In 2002, six years after the landmark Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children by Graça Machel, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict came into force.

The Protocol outlaws the involvement of children under age 18 in wars and armed hostilities, and raises the previous minimum age for compulsory recruitment and direct participation in conflict, from age 15 to 18. The prohibition covers both government and non-government forces.

In the same year, the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court also came into force. The Statute makes the "conscription, enlistment or use of children under 15 in hostilities a war crime."

The Philippines has likewise enacted several laws and measures aimed at protecting children from the atrocities of war, foremost of which is R.A. 7610 (or the *Special Protection of Children Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act of 1992*). RA 7610 declares children as "Zones of Peace" and prioritizes the protection of children in situations of armed conflict.

But the enactment of international standards and national laws are hardly enough safeguards.

For as long as the country is riven by internal conflicts, and as long as the root causes of these conflicts are not addressed, children will continue to be recruited as fodder in wars that are supposedly waged on their behalf.

¹ For more information on the said study, please contact PhilRights at 433-1714 or e-mail us at prights@tri-isys.com

² http://www.child-soldiers.org/document_get.php?id=966