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*"Where have all the soldiers gone? Gone to graveyards everyone. Oh, when will they ever learn."*

—From a classic by Peter, Paul and Mary

**A**RMED conflicts spare no one, children included. A closer look at pockets of armed confrontations both within and outside our national borders could unveil the disasters wars bring upon communities and the lives of people. Local and international organizations present varying figures as to the number of children who have been physically, psychologically and emotionally wounded and scarred by armed hostilities. UNICEF estimates that four to five million children around the world have been physically disabled and some 10 million have been psychologically traumatized by armed hostilities during the last decade.<sup>1</sup> Graca Machel, who conducted a pioneering study on children affected by war, pegs the numbers at two million dead and about six million permanently disabled or seriously injured.<sup>2</sup> The numbers may vary but still in millions—certainly a phenomenal rate.

Today's armed conflicts no longer just affect innocent children on the sidelines. They have heightened the risks for children as rebels and/or government-sanctioned armed groups recruit and employ them both as direct and indirect combatants with support functions.<sup>3</sup> This is a phenomenon that has long been happening but only



# IMPACT OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN ARMED CONFLICTS





now has it caught public attention.

Filipino children are no exception. Reports of children injured and killed during combat operations have found their way into national dailies – and these are just the documented ones.

The resolution of armed conflicts in our country is still a remote possibility. Meanwhile, physical, emotional, psychological pressures, and even death stare at the faces of children in battlefields. Those who are demobilized and have undergone rehabilitation are lucky enough to get another chance to rebuild life but this is no assurance of total healing from their traumas. Many child soldiers never got a chance to undergo rehabilitation. They have to face the trauma of violent experiences alone and unaided.

### **Why Children Should Not Be Recruited as Soldiers**

*“When I was a child I didn’t enjoy my childhood because of the war – we all knew that once we participated in the struggle, we could forget about our childhoods.”*

– A former child soldier<sup>4</sup>

Armed conflicts, with their massive levels of destruction, constitute a violation of every right of a child – the right to life, the right to be with his or her

family and community, the right to health, the right to development of personality and the right to be nurtured and protected.<sup>5</sup>

Child soldiers do not only face enormous risks but also abuses. Because of their underdeveloped physical and psychological capabilities, adults tend to exploit their innocence. Reports have it that in some camps female child soldiers are even raped or forced to marry adult fighters. Moreover, child soldiers are likely to suffer disproportionately from the rigorous nature of military life. Young children collapse under heavy loads and probably malnourished and ill because too much work and hazardous exposures start to weaken their bodily immune systems.

Childhood is the highest point in a person’s life when physical, emotional and cognitive development take place. Thus, special attention should be given to children at this stage to avoid the risk of stagnating the development of their full human potentials. Adequate and nutritious food, complete sleep and resting hours and opportunities to play and recreate are necessary so that children can develop able and healthy bodies. Similarly, children should be in the company and care of their parents and families to get emotional support and guidance they need

when faced with difficult and confusing situations. Moreover, they should be in schools and have the opportunity to socialize with other people to develop their intellectual and social potentials. The lack of opportunities for education (formal and informal) could result in the non-development of attitudes and skills necessary to form them to be responsible, caring, and productive adults.

Participation in armed conflict also hampers the moral development of children. It deprives children the opportunity to experience full socialization outside the context of the armed group. At this stage in their lives, many do not simply know what is right or wrong.<sup>6</sup> Without the necessary guidance from parents and responsible mentors, children could develop values and ideas about life and how to achieve their goals beyond the “normal” social confines. When the children’s formative years revolve around fear and violence their prospect of becoming functioning members of society in the future blurs out.

### **Physical Impact: Injuries and Deprivation**

*“I was in the middle of the rice field at 6 a.m. when the planes and helicopters carrying bombs arrived ... I was so confused and scared that in my thoughts I surrendered*

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myself to God because I was not sure if I would survive it. I saw that blood was all over me and I was wounded after the explosions. I was hit on my left leg and back ... I was told later that I had been walking aimlessly for two days without a thought to where I was going before I was found.”

- A Filipino child soldier <sup>7</sup>

As we have seen, physical harm or even death awaits children in battlefields. Similarly, their circumstances in camps could deprive them of certain needs integral to their physical health and development such as adequate food, immediate and quality medical care, and time for rest and leisure.

During face-to-face armed encounters, child soldiers are prone to different bodily harm. The injuries range from simple cuts, contusions and bruises to the more serious bullet wounds and loss of body parts that often result to permanent disability.<sup>8</sup> While armed groups often have medical units to attend to those wounded during clashes, there is still much concern over the quality of medical care and attention given to wounded child soldiers. Even having a medical unit in the camp is no assurance that wounded child soldiers could immediately be given proper medical treatment. A child soldier recalls how, in the heat of a clash, he was left on his own with a bullet wound. He wandered in the mountains for six days, sustained only by bananas and water from the coconuts, before folks from a nearby community found him.<sup>9</sup>

Accidents also happen outside actual combat range. Some children get deep cuts, wounds, sprains, and broken bones during trainings or while patrolling the rough terrains in battle zones. A seventeen-year-old girl child soldier captured by the military narrated how they had to walk barefoot at night resulting to deep cuts on her feet.<sup>10</sup>

Even during detention, rescued and/or captured child soldiers are at risk of physical abuse by military elements. The

law mandates that children arrested by the AFP should be immediately turned over to the DSWD. Despite this protocol, cases of children being tortured have been documented. Torture happens during tactical interrogations in order to get information or force a confession to get incriminating testimony. A seventeen-year-old boy arrested on suspicion of being an MILF member was repeatedly boxed by soldiers, his right foot repeatedly burned with cigarettes, his neck and legs hit with the butt of an Armalite rifle and his hands were tied for three straight days.<sup>11</sup>

Aside from the hazards of combat, child soldiers are also vulnerable to diseases due to prolonged exposure in the areas where the armed groups operate. Diarrhea, influenza, pneumonia and malaria are among those most commonly contracted.<sup>12</sup> And since armed



groups usually operate in remote areas, children often do not have access to hospitals or health centers for proper treatment, unless in serious cases when treatment by licensed medical practitioners is necessary. Comrades usually attend to sick child soldiers. Given the shortage in medical supplies, sick child soldiers are often administered herbal medication.<sup>13</sup>

### Psycho-Social Impact: The Invisible Wounds

*“I had bad dreams and I woke up thinking that somebody wanted to kill me. Now I wake up still from*



*bad dreams. I don't remember my dreams but I feel afraid when I wake up. At this time, I am still constantly afraid. Sometimes I change from feeling happy to feeling sad very quickly ...”*

*“Since that time, sometimes I feel scared when I remember the past. It's horrible to remember how the militia killed my friends in front of me.”*

*“Sometimes, about once a month, I have bad dreams of killing people. I become angry in situations when I feel I'm not good. Yes, I think of myself as violent. I drink to enjoy myself.”*

- Experiences of former child soldiers <sup>14</sup>

There is no question as to the emotional anxiety and stress that child soldiers go through as a result of their involvement in armed conflict. While child soldiering is a transitory status physically in that one can only become a child soldier for relatively few years, its consequences are real and far from transitory.<sup>15</sup> The danger that child soldiers are exposed to and the violence they witness pose serious and lasting threats to their psychological and emotional well-being and full development.

Child soldiers suffer more from hidden wounds than physical injuries both inflicted by armed conflicts. These wounds are known as psychosocial effects of war – the stress, traumas and fears developed by children, which are potentially more harmful in the long run than many physical injuries.<sup>16</sup>

Children who have been involved in warfare suffer problems such as nightmares, sleeplessness, bedwetting, eating disorders and the inability to concentrate. Some report post-traumatic stress disorders such as flashbacks of horrific



incidents that they witnessed or participated in.<sup>17</sup> This is so because the brutality of armed clashes are too much for children to handle. Witnessing death, serious injuries and suffering of others, especially of other children, are very traumatic. These are events that produce fear and stress because they are beyond the range of normal human experience. They are overwhelming and become deeply embedded in the memories of children.<sup>18</sup>

Emotional and psychological stress, however, surface not only during children's active involvement in war but also during times of relative peace. Even after they decided to leave the armed group, many continue to deal with the ghosts of their violent experiences. A number of children continued having nightmares long after they left an armed group. Others developed phobia, an intense fear of things, people and events that resembled their experiences in the past, and chose to isolate themselves.<sup>19</sup> Those who fail to cope with their fears suffer extreme changes in their behavior. Emotional impotence is another common

problem observed among former child soldiers. Their suppression of normal reactions to death and destruction has made them incapable of expressing themselves and empathizing with others.<sup>20</sup> Some become withdrawn, aggressive and destructive.<sup>21</sup> Some have developed alcoholism and drug dependency to escape their past. Others who have had severely distressing experiences even become suicidal.<sup>22</sup>

Experts also contend that a serious consequence of child soldiering is on moral and social development. Because their moral system has been dominated by violence, former child soldiers find it difficult to disengage from the idea that violence is a legitimate means of achieving one's aims.<sup>23</sup> Their identification with the structure and routines of the armed group may also lead to inability to plan for themselves and develop over dependence on others. If not properly addressed, they face the possibility of re-recruitment or involvement in any violent group to regain a sense of belonging.<sup>24</sup>

When they cease to participate in the fighting and return to their communities, former child soldiers find it difficult to



adjust to a more sedate surrounding.<sup>25</sup> Others who lack support from family and other members of the community become hesitant to interact with other people for fear of being ostracized. Lack of reassurance may also lead to constant fear or anger towards anyone in the role of authority and result to other discipline problems.<sup>26</sup>

### No Place For Children

The experiences of former child soldiers present a panorama of negative effects on the physical, emotional and psychosocial well-being of children. This is an alarming reality that warrants public attention and calls for immediate resolution from the government and other parties involved in the recruitment of children in armed groups.

In the light of the serious risks that soldiering brings to children, it is thus imperative to put a stop to the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. Inaction on this issue can lead to worse scenario that could go beyond the psycho-emotional devastation of these children. The real price we are likely to pay is a society composed of communities where many children have completely lost all potentials to become feeling, responsible, successful and thoughtful citizens. ■

### (Footnotes)

- 1 UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 1996* (Oxford, 1995) as cited in Merliza M. Makinano, *Child Soldiers in the Philippines* (Manila: DOLE International Labor Affairs Service, 2001); p. 2.
- 2 Graca Machel, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: A Critical Review of the Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection of War-Affected Children* (2000) as cited in Merliza M. Makinano, *Child Soldiers in the Philippines* (Manila: DOLE International Labor Affairs Service, 2001); p. 2.
- 3 *Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. Report of the Expert of the UN Secretary-general, Graca Machel, submitted pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 48/157 (26 August 1996); pp. 5 & 9.
- 4 UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers:*

Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region (2002); p. 56.

- 5 *Ibid.*; p. 10.
- 6 Youth Advocate Program International. *Child Soldiers: Youth Who Participate in Armed Conflict*. Booklet 1. (1997); p. 12.
- 7 UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers: Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region* (2002); p. 51.
- 8 Elizabeth Protacio-De Castro. *Children in Armed Conflict Situations: Focus on Child Soldiers in the Philippines*. KASARINLAN Vol. 16 No. 2 (2001); p. 130.
- 9 UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers: Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region* (2002); p. 51.
- 10 Elizabeth Protacio-De Castro. *Children in Armed Conflict Situations: Focus on Child Soldiers in the Philippines*. KASARINLAN Vol. 16 No. 2 (2001); p. 130.
- 11 *Ibid.*; pp. 129-130.
- 12 *Ibid.*; p. 130.
- 13 The Defense Monitor. *The Invisible Soldiers: Child Combatants* (July 1997).
- 14 UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers: Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region* (2002); p. 64.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 UNICEF, HADLOK: *Filipino Children Caught in the Crossfire*; p. 14.
- 17 Youth Advocate Program International. *Child Soldiers: Youth Who Participate in Armed Conflict*. Booklet 1. (1997); p. 12.
- 18 From the presentation of Mr. Toni Binalla of the DSWD as cited in the *Proceedings of the OPAPP Training on Handling and Treatment of Rescued/Surrendered Children Involved in Armed Conflict* (2003).
- 19 Morris Fraser. *Children in Armed Conflict* (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973); p. 98.
- 20 Youth Advocate Program International. *Child Soldiers: Youth Who Participate in Armed Conflict*. Booklet 1. (1997); p. 13.
- 21 Elizabeth Protacio-De Castro. *Children in Armed Conflict Situations: Focus on Child Soldiers in the Philippines*. KASARINLAN Vol. 16 No. 2 (2001); p. 131.
- 22 Youth Advocate Program International. *Child Soldiers: Youth Who Participate in Armed Conflict*. Booklet 1. (1997); p. 14.
- 23 The Defense Monitor. *The Invisible Soldiers: Child Combatants* (July 1997).
- 24 Youth Advocate Program International. *Child Soldiers: Youth Who Participate in Armed Conflict*. Booklet 1. (1997); p. 13.
- 25 The Defense Monitor. *The Invisible Soldiers: Child Combatants* (July 1997).
- 26 Youth Advocate Program International. *Child Soldiers: Youth Who Participate in Armed Conflict*. Booklet 1. (1997); p. 13.