



Philippine Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

BORN in 2001, the *Philippine Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers* was an offshoot of a national consultation on this issue held in the same year in Davao City. This activity was organized as a follow through process of the **Asia-Pacific Conference to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers** held a year earlier in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Since its inception, the Philippine Coalition has issued a challenge addressed to local and national leaders and society as a whole to act and prevent the recruitment of children as soldiers whether in government sanctioned paramilitary forces or in any of the armed rebel groups.

The Philippine Coalition along with its affiliates stands firm in its conviction that children's participation in armed hostilities is a gross violation of the whole gamut of children's rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and that this is a worst form of child labor.

Aside from the CRC, the Coalition also draws from and champions the Optional Protocol to the CRC that expressly prohibits the employment of persons below 18 years of age to whatever tasks within an armed conflict situation.

Recognizing that involvement of children in armed conflict is indeed an undeniable reality existing in the Philippines, the Coalition deals with this phenomenon using multi-pronged approach ranging from information dissemination, research, education, lobbying, negotiations, dialogues, consultations and public campaigns.

At present, the coalition is pursuing a 10-point action plan which involves the following:

1. Develop a standard framework on the disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration

(DDRR) of child soldiers for inter-agency cooperation, and develop and expand the coverage of DDRR programs in areas where child soldiers are identified to exist. To conduct training of personnel, and ensure the active involvement of children, youth and their communities in the development of the DDRR framework and programs, providing alternatives for former child soldiers;

2. Conduct research and documentation for the creation of a national database on child soldiers, on cultural and religious traditions related to the protection of children, and on the experience of organizations which are engaged in work with armed groups;

3. Lobby for the inclusion of the child soldiers' issue and DDRR concerns in the peace talks and negotiations between the GRP and the armed opposition groups;

4. Lobby for the review and amendment of pertinent laws, policies and guidelines applicable to child soldiers, i.e. relevant sections and provisions of RA 7610. To push for clarifications on the issue of amnesty as well as arrest of child soldiers by authorities;

5. Foster close inter-agency cooperation between members of the coalition and various stakeholders (including children) involved in the prevention, protection and DDRR programs through capacity building measures, information exchange and sharing of experiences;

6. Engage NSA's in the coalition's efforts to stop the use of child soldiers in the country, calling for more dialogues and

the adoption of a "deed of commitment" from NSA's to secure their cooperation in DDRR interventions, in the monitoring of its compliance, and commitment against the recruitment and re-recruitment of children as soldiers.

7. Work for capacity-building geared towards the empowerment of families and individuals, and strengthening of peace ties among Christians, Muslims, and IP communities;

8. Intensify public awareness and advocacy on the issue through information dissemination, and lobby for budget allocations for DDRR programs;

9. Expand the coverage and replicate peace education programs through strategic use of formal education institutions and non-formal systems in reaching communities, in recognition of the role of education and culture in preventing children from joining armed groups;

10. To develop and implement a reintegration plan at the local level.

“Red Hand Day”

In pursuit of its plan to push for the ratification of the CRC optional protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, the Coalition launched the “Red Hand Day” campaign on February 12, 2002 at the Philippine Senate grounds. Senators Blas Ople and Francis Pangilinan led the

planting of Red Hands and Coalition members pinned “Stop Child Soldiers” buttons on both legislators and on President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who later appeared on television wearing the same button-pin. More than fifty (50) delegates from NGOs, students, government agencies, embassies and international organizations participated in the said activity.

On August 26, 2003, the

Philippine government ratified not only the Optional Protocol on child soldiers but also the one on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography just in time for the UN General Assembly.

Aside from this particular campaign, the Coalition is also engaged in different education and other initiatives on child soldiers such as printing and distribution of a primer on child soldiers in the Philippine context, participation in forums and symposiums, consultations with child soldiers themselves, and linking up with other groups such as the International Red Cross and Philippine National Red Cross.

Affiliations

The Coalition, a loose network of human rights organizations and other civil society groups, is spearheaded by the following organizations who compose the steering committee: Amnesty International-Pilipinas, Philippine Human Rights Information Center (Phil-Rights), UP-CIDS PST, Balay Integrated Rehabilitation Center for Total Human Development (BirthDev), Feed the Children Philippines and Indigenous People's Center for Development Services (IPCDS).

The Philippine Coalition was also instrumental in the formation of the South East Asian Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers which was also a result of the South East Asian meeting of national workshop convenors held in Iligan City in October 2002.

The Coalition is also affiliated with the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers based in London. ■