

Child Soldiers in the Lanao Provinces: A Case of Human Rights Violation

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Abstract

This is a study on human rights violations committed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in its recruitment of boys and girls as child soldiers. It is based on primary and secondary data taken from interviews and unpublished researches. Respondents are from the two Lanao provinces.

The recruitment of children into the MILF denied them of their opportunities. Children as young as 7 years old are deliberately taken into MILF camps to be given military trainings and to perform auxiliary services. Consequently, they are brought away from the school and from the safety of their homes. These young recruits are indoctrinated to fight for a *jihad* aimed at the establishment of an independent Islamic state. They are motivated by a religious obligation and the lure of martyrdom which are systematically inculcated to them by their elders in the camp. The process develops young people who believe that armed struggle is their only option available for them to be delivered from poverty and bad governance.

By exposing these young boys and girls into armed conflict not of their making, the MILF violated International Humanitarian Law (IHL), particularly Protocol II on the prohibition on the recruitment of children to become fighters and involving them into hostilities. Having attained a belligerent status, the MILF leadership must be reminded that it has the responsibility to respect International Humanitarian Law. Ironically, the MILF may not and cannot stop the entry of children into its ranks. Only good governance in Mindanao can stop the recruitment of child soldiers.

Key Words: child soldiers, human rights, *mujahideen*, *jihad*, Lanao provinces, Moro Islamic Liberation Front

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Acknowledging the Child Soldiers

The issue on child soldiers in the Bangsa Moro Islamic Armed Force (BIAF) of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is a recurring concern. In a documentary video produced by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism in 1998 entitled, "**Behind the Veil: Voices of Moro Women,**" some women and children were shown undergoing training in various MILF camps in Mindanao. Benjie Midtimbang, the head of the MILF Military Academy was shown saying that even Moro women and children should be prepared to defend themselves.

Kaka Duma¹, former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) general and staff of Nur Misuari acknowledged the presence of child soldiers in MILF camps, but he argued that the training of children in MILF camps is an issue of survival and the right to defend oneself.² According to him, there is no difference between a Moro child trained to defend himself, and a boy scout, or a Citizens Army Training (CAT) cadet in high school or an ROTC cadet who can be 16 and 17 years old. However, children should be trained for a defensive purpose and they should remain in camp. Anybody who would take them in an offensive mission outside the camp should be responsible for their death. Kaka Duma also noted that during the early years of the MNLF struggle, he never saw a boy in the ranks of their combatants. Changes occurred as the armed struggle dragged on. It left many orphans who took refuge in the MILF camps, where the group is obliged to provide shelter, protection and even military training.

The issue on child soldiers resurfaced in 2008 following the simultaneous MILF attacks in various places in Mindanao, including Kauswagan and Kolambugan in Lanao del Norte on August 18, 2008. Some survivors of the attack in Barangay Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte claim that teenagers were among the attackers.

The leadership of the MILF has repeatedly denied the presence of children among their combatants. On October 19, 2008, the MILF spokesperson, Atty. Eid Kabalu, claimed that it was against the MILF

¹ Kaka Duma or Kuya Duma is a nickname of the key informant.

² Interview with Kaka Duma in Marawi City, September 11, 2010.

policy to recruit children to train into combatants.³ Interestingly, he added that there is nothing wrong with the MILF caring for orphaned children of fallen comrades as the group is “trying to give these kids normal lives inside the camps.” While these kids were not forced to fight, he admitted that it was possible for them to become MILF combatants.

Atty. Kabalu, while discussing the reason why some children are in MILF camps, unwittingly presented the entry pattern of child soldiers into the MILF. From his pronouncements it is clear that MILF camps provide refuge to orphans who either voluntarily came on their own or who were brought inside by MILF combatants. Most MILF camps are sprawling communities, complete with mosques, farms, markets, *madrasahs* and other institutional structures needed by a self-contained rural community. Their totality provides socialization for orphans, which logically makes them biased towards an eventual integration into the MILF.

In December 2008, the MILF admitted to recruitment of child soldiers and it agreed to stop recruiting. In addition, MILF officials agreed to enter into an action plan with the United Nations for the protection of children.⁴ But the denial continues among some MILF leaders. By April 16, 2009, some officials were still saying that it was not the policy of the MILF to recruit children.⁵ But in July 30, 2009, Sammy Al Mansoor, chief of staff of BIAF representing the MILF, signed an action plan with the UNICEF in Sultan Kudarat. This action plan paved the way for the protection of children in wars involving the MILF.⁶ The signing of this action plan is an implied acknowledgment by the MILF of the presence of children in their ranks. It however, did not stop the systematic recruitment of child soldiers into the MNLF, at least in the Lanao provinces.

“Philippines: Child Soldiers in Spotlight as Mindanao Battle Rages,” <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=81015...> 08-21-2010.

“MILF Vows: No More Child Soldiers,” <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view/20081212-177661/MILF-vows-No...> 08-21-2010.

“MILF Reiterates No Recruitment of Child Soldiers,” http://www.luwaran.net/index/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=682:milf... 08-12-2010

“MILF, UNICEF Sign Pact to Ban Child Soldiers,”

http://www.zabida.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=328:milf-un... 08-12-2010.

The Rights of a Child in the Battle Zone

A child is defined as a human being below the age of 18 years.⁷ The period of childhood is a period of dependency that diminishes towards independence as maturity is reached. It is also a period of physical and mental development requiring a nurturing environment. As a human being, the child is entitled to all the rights guaranteed by the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** of 1948. Among these are being born free and equal in dignity and rights (Art. 1) and being endowed with the right to life, liberty and security of person (Art. 3). The child has the right to education which shall be free and compulsory at least in elementary (Art. 26) and in the case of the Philippines until high school (Sec. 2(2), Art. XIV, Phil. Constitution; Sec. 2, RA No. 9155).

The child has special needs and he/she has inherent rights. This demands for specific instruments to guarantee that they are respected and enforced. These include international conventions and domestic laws in the Philippines. In the **Geneva Conventions of 1949 Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War**, Article 24 tries to ensure that..."orphans or children separated from their families are not left to their own resources and their maintenance, the exercise of their religion and their education are facilitated in all circumstances." Article 64, on the other hand prohibits death penalty for child offenders while Article 51 prohibits the enlistment of people below 18 years in the armed forces.

The protection of children is also expressed in **Protocol II Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflict** of June 8, 1977. Article 4(3.c) of this protocol prohibits the enlistment of people who have not attained the age of 15 in the armed forces or groups and bans them from taking part in hostilities. Article 2 of the **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict** in 2000 increased the age for compulsory recruitment in the armed forces to 18 years. Even in circumstances where children are forced to participate in hostilities, their protection under **Protocol II** and the **Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War** continues. If they are captured, they

⁷ Article 1, Convention on the Right o the Child.

should not be tortured, mutilated, or killed. As much as possible, they should be provided quarters, given needed medication and food, returned to their families and rehabilitated.

Under the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, a child is endowed with rights that he/she enjoys whether in time of peace or in time of conflict. All the rights of the child should be respected, protected, and fulfilled (Art. 3). These include among others: the right to be treated fairly and not to be discriminated on any basis (Art. 2); the right to survival and development (Art. 6); the right to live with their parents (Art. 9) or to be reunited as a family in the event that they are separated from their parents for whatever reason (Art. 10); the right from abduction and human trafficking (Art. 11 and Art. 35); the right to be involved in decision-making in matters that affect their interests (Art. 12); the right to be cared for by their parents and with the assistance of the government (Art. 18); the right to quality healthcare (Art. 24); the right to adequate standard of living (Art. 27); right to education (Art. 28); right to play and join cultural activities (Art. 31); the protection from work that harm their health and education (Art. 32); the protection from being forced or recruited to join the armed forces or take part in war (Art. 38); the right to rehabilitation for those neglected, abused or exploited so that they can be reintegrated into the society as healthy individuals (Art. 38), and the right to know their rights (Art. 42).

Of the 54 articles of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, one (Article 38) focuses on the rights of the child during armed conflict. This article states that in time of war, the rules of International Humanitarian Law relevant to the child should be respected; that those who have in their armed forces people who have not yet reached the age of 18 should not allow them to have direct participation in hostilities; and that persons who have not attained 15 years should not be recruited in the armed forces. As already noted, 15 was raised to 18 for compulsory recruitment.⁸

In 1992, the Philippine Congress passed **Republic Act No. 7610, (An Act Providing for Stronger Deterrence and Special Protection Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination, and for Other Purposes)**. This act declared a child as zone of peace (Sec. 22) and the state and other concerned sectors are responsible to resolve armed conflict in order to

⁸ Article 2, *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*.

fulfill the conditions that make them such. This act states that children should not be the objects of attack and should be protected from torture and inhumane and degrading treatment. They should not be recruited into the AFP or in any armed group and should not be allowed to take part in fighting or be used as guides, couriers or spies [Sec. 22(a); Sec. 22(b)].

Tradition of Child Soldiers in the Philippines

The involvement of children in armed struggle in the Philippines has a long history. In Southern Philippines, the four centuries of continuous armed struggle by the Moro people has seen entire communities provide support mechanism during armed struggles. While women and children are not brought to the front to fight, the mobile Moro fighters bring their families with them, not wanting their women or children to be left behind and captured by their enemies.

During the series of wars against the Spaniards, women and children in Southern Philippines were supposed to perform only auxiliary services in support of their fighting men but they were ready to fight when necessary, especially when cornered. To prepare them for eventualities, they were trained in native martial arts, like in the use of the kris in armed combat and kuntaw for unarmed self-defense.

In 1637 a determined effort by the Spaniards to pacify the unconquered Moros led to a bloody encounter between the forces of Sultan Kudarat and Governor General Sebastian Hurtado de Corcuera in Lamitan. Kudarat was later forced to evacuate when his cotta fell. To avoid capture, one of the wives of Sultan Kudarat jumped from a cliff with her baby.⁹ This tragedy proves the presence of families of Moro warriors in the battle front along with their fighting men.

In 1638, a strong Spanish force of 600 Spaniards and 1000 native allies assaulted Sulu. Among those Tausug warriors who retreated to the safety of their cotta at the foot of Mt. Tumantangis were women and children who equally bore the brunt of a three-month siege that followed.¹⁰ Moros prefer to see their children fight and die rather than be

⁹ Majul, Cesar Adib (1999 edition: 150). *Muslims in the Philippines*. Quezon City: UP Press.

¹⁰ Majul, Cesar Adib (1999 edition: 152). *Muslims in the Philippines*. Quezon City: UP Press.

captured in battle. In 1845, during a Spanish attack of the Island of Balangangi, the Samal defenders resorted to killing many of their women and children to save them from becoming prisoners of the Spaniards.¹¹

The warrior culture that involved children is not unique among the Moros. It is pervasive in the Philippines, even among the Christianized Indios. Whenever there was conflict the children were conditioned to defend themselves, to help protect their communities and to die if the situation calls for their death.

The case of the Balangiga massacre in Samar which happened on September 28, 1901 shows a community cooperating to fight the Americans. When the Americans retaliated, children were among their victims. The act was justified by the allegation that children participated in attacking the Americans.¹² This is not a lone case in Philippine history because earlier in Sulu, children were known to have stood by the side of their parents against the Americans in the battles of Bud Dajo in 1906 and Bud Bagsak in 1913.¹³ In both cases, the Americans found themselves counting casualties which included women and children.

During the troubled 1970s, many of the members of the Ilaga group in Cotabato were high school students. They fought against the Blackshirts, which in many instances, were their classmates.

The armed struggle in Mindanao is violent and it has not spared anybody of any age along its path. Left on their own, people in the war zones of Mindanao learned the wisdom of preparedness. For them it is better to die fighting than to be killed.

The Maranao Child Soldier

This is a descriptive and exploratory study of MILF child soldiers in the Lanao Provinces. It looks into the circumstances which brought children into the MILF camps to become child soldiers. It focuses on the influences of the family, peers/friends, *madrasah* education and poverty in their recruitment. Their training and their role as child soldiers are also

¹¹ Majul, Cesar Adib (1999 edition: 325). *Muslims in the Philippines*. Quezon City: UP Press.

¹² Lumacto, Mila (2005:6). *Deadly Playgrounds: The Phenomenon of Child Soldiers in the Philippines*. Quezon City: Philippine Human Rights Information Center.

¹³ Gowing, Peter Gordon (1979: 35). *Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers.

looked into. Lastly, it looks into how the rights of a child soldier are violated and who are responsible for the violation.

The study does not probe into other less observable factors that may have influenced the recruitment of a child soldier, like hatred which fans the desire for revenge among those whose parents and relatives were victims of military operations. It also does not look into the concept of *maratabat*, the intense pride of Maranaos which, according to Judge Nagamora Moner, is a reason why children, especially those orphaned, are obliged to prepare for battle.¹⁴ Finally, there is no effort to look into human rights with an Islamic perspective or define a child in Islam.

a) Respondents

There are 33 individuals in the study: 8 from Poona Piagapo, Lanao del Norte, 12 from Lumbayanague, Lanao del Sur; 10 from Camp Masjid,¹⁵ Lanao del Norte; and 3 from Dilabayan, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte.¹⁶

Of the child soldiers, there are 16 females and 17 males. The data were gathered from different places and in different time periods: December 2001, January 2002, July 2002, January 2009 and September 2010. The presence of child soldiers in dispersed places show their widespread recruitment in the two provinces of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte. The presence of child soldiers in the MILF ranks in various periods suggests their continuing presence in the Lanao provinces despite denials made by the MILF leadership and despite promises to stop allowing them into their ranks.

b) Recruitment Process

There is a common understanding among respondents that their recruitment began when they started military training in the MILF

¹⁴ Interview with Nagamora Moner (his real name; used with permission), former *Shariah* court judge, in Iligan, August 21, 2010.

¹⁵ Pseudonym used for confidentiality but the camp is located in Lanao del Norte.

¹⁶ Some data on Poona Piagapo child soldiers were taken from the work of Cairon Ali, et al.; some data on Camp Masjid child soldiers were taken from the work of Cheryl Teaño, et al.; and some data on Lumbayanague child soldiers were taken from the work of Noronisa Dimaampao Acmad.

camps. But in many instances these children were already in the camps before they were trained to become combatants.

Table 1. *Age of Respondents when Recruited*

Age	Male	Female	Total
7	1	1	2
8	2		2
9		1	1
10	4	2	6
11	1		1
12	1	2	3
13		3	3
14	5	1	6
15	3	3	6
16		2	2
17		1	1
Total	17	16	33

The data in Table 1 show that the youngest recruits in the MILF are 7 years-old, a boy and a girl. The girl who practically grew up in the camp is a daughter of an MILF combatant. At a very young age her father used to bring her into the camp to attend *madrassah* school. The boy, on the other hand is an orphan who moved with his siblings into an MILF camp when their parents died in an ambush. They were happy that there was always food, provided by local and foreign supporters in the camp. As soon as he could perform some chores in the camp, like fetching water and gathering firewood, his total dependence ended and like the girl soldier, he began performing auxiliary tasks in the camp. When he became older, he was allowed to join the basic military training. At 13, he started carrying a gun.

The average age of those recruited is 12.36 years. During the periods of data gathering, 23 respondents were still below 18 years old while 10 respondents already reached 18 years and above. Thirty were still active in the movement when they were interviewed and only 3 said

they were already demobilized. Those three professed that they would always come to support their comrades if necessary as a part of their "Islamic obligation." They were also still active in raising funds for the movement.

Table 2. *People Responsible in the Recruitment of the Child Soldiers into the BIAF-MILF*

Recruiter	Frequency
Parents	13
Friends	7
MILF recruiters	6
Relatives	4
Personal Choice	3
Total	33

Table 2 shows that parents rank first among the recruiters of the child soldiers studied. These parents are also members of the MILF. They are responsible in exposing their children to MILF camps by bringing them whenever they go on duty. In many cases, their homes are built within MILF camps and they send their children to *madrasah* schools inside. The children's friends are usually *madrasah* classmates who are either members of the MILF, in the process of being recruited, or are looking for friends to join them. MILF recruiters are members of the movement tasked to recruit new members. Relatives are sympathizers who act as fund raisers and recruiters for the MILF. Only three respondents claim that they joined the MILF as a personal choice. However, considering the web of influences and pressures surrounding the child in a rural Maranao village, personal choice may not be taken as an independent and personal decision of the child. Moreover, it may be difficult to say that a single factor is responsible in the recruitment of a child. It is the interplay of various factors, including cultural and institutional pressures, which leads the child in becoming a soldier.

c) Factors Influencing Maranao Children to Join the MILF

Child soldiers join the MILF for different but interrelated reasons. Some Bangsa-Bai warriors (*mujahidat*) believe that they should help the MILF in establishing an Islamic state. Likewise, their male counterparts believe that it is their obligation to fight a *jihad*. Fighting a *jihad* among the Moros is not recent in history. One early known *jihad* in Mindanao was in 1656 when Sultan Kudarat of the Maguindanaons declared a holy war against the Spaniards due to their persistent efforts to convert the Muslims into Christianity.¹⁷ All the respondents believe that it is every Muslim's duty to wage *jihad*. According to one child soldier, once one becomes a *mujahid* he fights in the way of God and when he dies, he becomes a *shahid* or martyr. A former child soldier said that he never felt fear while fighting because he welcomed the opportunity of becoming a *shahid*. For him this is the sweetest way to die for a Muslim. It is a passport to paradise.

Among the factors that influenced young Maranaos to become child soldiers of the MILF are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Factors that Influenced the Respondents To Become Child Soldiers*

Influencing Factor	Frequency
Madrasah Education	29
Exposure to MILF camp	18
Parents	12
Friends/Peers	11
Religious Obligation	6
"Kasigi" of Envy	2
Being Adventurous	2

¹⁷ Gowing, Peter Gordon (1979: 33). *Muslim Filipinos-Heritage and Horizon*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers.

Poverty is not identified among the reasons listed above, but the profiles of the child soldiers indicate poverty in the family prior to joining the MILF. The process of the recruitment of child soldiers among the Maranaos is an integral part of socialization.¹⁸ None of them expressed that they were forced to join. Some said that they were volunteered by their parents at a tender age. Considering that their parents are either MILF fighters or MILF sympathizers, their recruitment is acceptable in the family, as well as, in the community. Some are persuaded by friends or peers. These are classmates at the *madrrasah* who are already child soldiers or are sympathizers of the movement. Recruitment is one of the assignments of child soldiers. Sympathizers in the *madrrasah* who are contemplating to join the MILF, are looking for companions to go with them. Most of the respondents had gone to a *madrrasah* school. Some used to visit MILF camps, or their communities are just adjacent to a camp. The constant sight of armed men in a nearby camp and the perception that these men are heroes influenced the desire of some respondents to emulate them by becoming child soldiers. There are also those who say that they were adventurous that they enjoyed moving around with guns, so they joined the MILF. Some joined because they were envious of their peers who were already with the movement. They also wanted to carry guns, to wear uniforms and be looked up to as *mujahideens*.

d) Parents

All child soldiers in the study are from rural areas in the two provinces of Lanao wherein social services are difficult to access. All fathers are involved in various capacities with the MILF. Some are commanders, others are ordinary MILF combatants, some are financial supporters and still others are organizers. Majority are farmers who also serve as MILF officials and *aleems*. Two are government employees; one is a driver and another is a bodyguard of a local politician.

¹⁸ Abitona, Cheryl Teaño, Lutchie Salvacion Aljas and Nancy Blanche Dignos Paurillo (2002). *A Case Study on Children's Involvement in the Revolutionary MILF Group in Camp Masjid, Province of Lanao*. Undergraduate Thesis in AB Sociology, College of Arts and Social Sciences, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology.

Table 4. *Occupation of Parents*

Occupation	Frequency
Farmer	14
MILF official	6
MILF/Aleem	3
MILF/Farmer	3
Government Employee	2
MILF/Farmer/Aleem	1
Driver	1
Bodyguard	1
(Deceased)	(2)
Total	33

e) Educational Attainment of Child Soldiers

The data on educational attainment were taken during the interviews of respondents, when some of them are already at least 18 years old. Majority of the respondents only attained elementary education. One-third reached high school and six of them completed it. None proceeded to college due to poverty and absence of an accessible college education in their localities. Some respondents also confided that it is difficult to pursue a college education while being actively involved with the MILF. What is unique in their education is the *madrasah* studies which are pursued simultaneously with mainstream education under the Department of Education. They attend their *madrasah* schools during weekends. Of the 33 respondents, only two do not have *madrasah* education. Arabic is the medium of instruction in *madrasah* schools where they meet their peers who later invite some of them into MILF camps. It is also there where they learn the concept of *jihad*.¹⁹ Their

¹⁹ Acmad, Noronisa Dimaampao (2009). *The Roles of MILF Child Soldiers in Barangay Pantaon, Municipality of Lumbayanague, Lanao del Sur*. Undergraduate Thesis in AB Political Science, College of Arts and Social Sciences, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology.

madrakah education is instrumental in shaping what they perceive as Islamic obligation to fight for the establishment of an Islamic state.

Table 5. *Educational Attainment of Respondents*

Highest Educational Attainment	Frequency
Elementary Level	7
Elementary Graduate	15
High School Level	5
High School Graduate	6
Total	33

f) Life in the Camp

Some respondents describe life in the MILF camp as spartan. Food is scanty and supply from supporters does not come regularly. Furniture are a luxury and child soldiers, like their adult counterparts, are used to sleeping with rice bags as blankets in foxholes. The floor is usually lined with wooden planks and covered with anything dry to make it warm. Considering the high altitude in most mountainous campsites and the humid atmosphere of the forest where they are located, it is not surprising that the camp environment is harsh to the young recruits. Coughs and colds are common. Cold at night, humidity during the day and constant exposure outside while on patrol or while doing sentry duty overnight make even a toughened adult fighter susceptible to various respiratory illnesses. Compounding the difficulty is the lack of sufficient nutritious food and the lack of sleep which weakens the immune system of growing children. Strict military discipline also takes its toll. If a child is found sleeping while on sentry duty or if he violates camp rules, he is subjected to disciplinary actions like running around the camp or being soaked in a drum of water. To be soaked in icy water in a forest at dawn is a torture sufficient to scare the children from committing further violations.

But there are others from different camps who say that an MILF camp is hospitable. They disagree that MILF camps suffer from austere

conditions. They surmise that the austere conditions mentioned refer to those of new recruits undergoing training. They say that they gain much weight in the camp because food is abundant and there is not much to do but sleep. They say that their complexion even improved while in the camp, perhaps due to lack of exposure to sunlight, which they are used to as farm hands. These descriptions are more of the camp conditions during relatively peaceful times when MILF combatants have enough time to rest and prepare their food. Some respondents recount that during the 2000 armed conflict they had to stop schooling since the group to which they belonged constantly moved to elude government forces. For several weeks, they had no contact with the outside world. They missed their parents but they were under strict orders to stick to their command. During day time they had to eat raw food or go hungry the rest of the day because they are not permitted to make fire for cooking as the smoke could be detected by aerial reconnaissance. At night, they had to use fire within their tents to prevent detection. Every time armed conflict erupts, the children suffer deprivations due to forced marching and to the need for constant alertness. One respondent shared his experience of a three-day sleep deprivation brought about by an order to move to a neighboring province to provide reinforcements. They had to cross mountains and rivers double time. But the adrenalin level was so high for everyone in the company that the same respondent said that they only felt the exhausting effect of the forced march a week later.

g) Training and Tasks in the Camp

The training of a child soldier is tough. The basic training lasts for a year, and according to a former child soldier, there is retraining every six months after completion of the basic training. The training consists of physical and mental exercises as well as military training.²⁰

The physical training includes jogging, push-ups, squat jumps, self defense, mountain climbing, river crossing with a rope, rappelling and other standard physical exercises in the military. The similarities in the basic standard trainings of the MILF and of the AFP are part of a

²⁰ Abitona, Cheryl Teaño, Luchie Salvacion Aljas and Nancy Blanche Dignos Paurillo (2002). *A Case Study on Children's Involvement in the Revolutionary MILF Group in Camp Masjid, Province of Lanao*. Undergraduate Thesis in AB Sociology, College of Arts and Social Sciences, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology.

tradition of the Maranao MILF attributed to the original organizer in Lanao del Norte, the late Commander James Bond, the elder brother of the incumbent commander, Commander Bravo. Commander James Bond was a P2Lt of the AFP working for his “call to active duty” (CAD), when he turned rebel commander in Lanao del Norte in 1972.

The mental toughening involves seminars, lectures and related activities wherein the objectives of the MILF to reclaim the Moro ancestral domain and to establish a *dar-ul-Islam* (Islamic state) are taught. These activities complement the *Madrasah* teachings which exhort believers to perform jihad and to become *fil-sabil-ullah* (fighter on the way of God). Child soldiers are conditioned not to fear death because dying while fighting makes them *shahid* (martyrs). Mental toughening makes child soldiers psychologically prepared to perform perceived religious obligations. Out of a child, it makes a man who does not know how to cry, who does not blink before extreme danger and who does not hesitate to execute a mission under threat of losing limb or life.

While undergoing the toughening part of their training, the children are also taught housekeeping tasks or auxiliary functions, like cooking and laundry for girls, fetching water and gathering firewood for boys. They are taught how to make tents and foxholes. The girls are taught basic health care and first aid activities. They learn herbal cures for many illnesses along with the proper ways of preparing and administering them to the sick and wounded.²¹ Moreover, they perform sentry duties and accompany patrols.

The girls are separated from the boys in the MILF camps. However, there are training activities in which they are brought together. According to some child soldiers, military training begins in the third quarter of the year. At this phase, they are given familiarization training in firearms which they call “*kapanongkas*.”²² They are trained to identify various firearms from pistols to RPGs, and they learn how to dismantle

²¹ Ali, Cairon, Samera R. Bari and Gordie Mark F. Paraguya (2002). *The Roles of Moro Islamic Liberation Front Bangsa-Bai Women Rebels in Poona Piagapo, Lanao del Norte During the March 2000 Mindanao Conflict*. Undergraduate Thesis in AB Political Science, College of Arts and Social Sciences, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology.

²² Aemad, Noronisa Dimaampao (2009). *The Roles of MILF Child Soldiers in Barangay Pantaon, Municipality of Lumbayanague, Lanao del Sur*. Undergraduate Thesis in AB Political Science, College of Arts and Social Sciences, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology.

and assemble them. Then they proceed to firing exercises called "*katimbak*," which aims to develop their marksmanship. It is also at this stage when the assigned commander identifies potential snipers and the kind of weapon each child is attuned to handle. As their training advances they are taught various formations and they learn to operate and maneuver in squads, in platoons, and in company. Apparently, they are not used to a bigger organization in their camps. According to Bobby (nickname), a former child soldier who have fought in field battles, bigger formations are usually organized during major battles where other camps are mobilized to reinforce.²³ Some child soldiers claim that they experienced reinforcing in as far as Zamboanga peninsula and Cotabato areas. There are child soldiers who reveal that during outbreaks of armed conflicts, like what happened in 2000, the manpower of a camp can readily swell to 500 fighters which sheds light on the availability of reserves for the MILF and on its ability to mobilize.²⁴

A former child soldier reveals that in order to compensate for the cost of firing an expensive rocket propelled grenade during training, they used live targets by ambushing military personnel. Few child soldiers were selected to go into training in bomb-making. This is a delicate and highly specialized training which, according to one, takes three years. Only one in every 12 volunteers is selected and many of the volunteers end up losing their fingers, their arms and in few cases, their lives. The informant who was already 26 years old during the interview boasted that he could make a bomb to bring down a 12-door apartment.²⁵ He revealed that some components of a bomb they made were taken from cannon canisters from the military and from unexploded bombs dropped during aerial bombings.

One final component of their training is a one-week bivouac in which they are individually sent out with only a knife and a gun but no food and water. For days and nights, a child soldier will traverse rivers, mountains and other inhospitable terrains in order to reach an objective. Unknown to the child, an experienced scout is assigned to tail and observe

²³ Interview with Bobby (nickname), a former child soldier, in Iligan City, September 1, 2010.

²⁴ Interviews with Ian (nickname), former child soldier, in Iligan City, September 1, 2010.

²⁵ Interview with Bobby (nickname), a former child soldier, in Iligan City, September 1, 2010.

him unnoticed.²⁶ Though a harrowing experience, every boy child soldier is proud of surviving it.

h) Future Plans

Despite the tough experiences they underwent in environments of conflict, the child soldiers also dream of peace and a better life.

Asked about their future plans, the child soldiers said they will continue their involvement with the MILF. However, some wish for the coming of "*kalilintad*," (peace) so that they can go back to their *kampong* (village) and help their parents in their farms. One wishes to be able to go home and plant coconuts so that if he dies in battle, he has something to leave his parents. Others dream of simple lives with basic necessities. There are those who desire of finishing their studies and finding stable jobs so that they can support their parents. Most of the girls dream of having families of their own and of having small businesses to support decent lives.

A former child soldier, already demobilized, was preparing to go abroad during the interview. With a stern face he said that he was going to the Middle East to earn money to support the MILF. One relative who was listening interposed that the real reason for working is "*para makapangaruma*," (to be able to marry). Among the Maranaos, dowry is still a requirement for a man to be able to marry.

²⁶ Abitona, Cheryl Teaño, Lutchie Salvacion Aljas and Nancy Blanche Dignos Paurillo (2002). *A Case Study on Children's Involvement in the Revolutionary MILF Group in Camp Masjid, Province of Lanao*. Undergraduate Thesis in AB Sociology, College of Arts and Social Sciences, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology.

Conclusion

Four decades since the guns of separatism opened fire in Buldon in the former united Cotabato province,²⁷ there is still no immediate resolution in view for the Mindanao conflict. As the armed conflict rages on, poverty and hopelessness are strengthening their grip in war-torn communities. When bread winners of families join the inconclusive war, their children are abandoned and many become orphans.

The continuing conflict in Mindanao testifies to the failure of the government and the MILF to promote the goal of children as zones of peace. Due to this failure, many children are living in conflict zones where the language of peace is not articulated. These conflict zones provide a compelling atmosphere for the recruitment of abandoned and orphaned children into the MILF. Under the guise of humanitarianism and with the cultural pressure to provide food and shelter to these children, the MILF introduces them into the way of the Moro warrior purportedly for their own defense. In so doing, they are opening the gates of their camps to the entry of child soldiers, thus violating existing protocols related to the protection of the rights of children during armed conflict.

All the rights of children should be respected, protected and fulfilled both in times of war and in peace. Both the government and the MILF are responsible for the realization of these objectives in the case of the child soldier. By not providing the requisites for peace like genuine economic development, education and good governance, the government has failed in protecting and fulfilling the rights of the child soldier. The MNLF on the other hand, cannot hide from its culpability by arguing that they are helping the children to survive by providing them food and shelter. A humanitarian gesture should not be short-sighted and limited to mere survival. It should be a process where other rights like the right to development and education are equally upheld.

²⁷ The former Cotabato Province is now divided into North Cotabato, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao and Sarangani. Buldon now belongs to the province of Maguindanao.

There are many instances where the rights of the Maranao child are violated while he/she is engaged in soldiering. The following are among them:

1. Some child soldiers still have their parents. It is their right to live with them in order to be protected, cared for and educated;
2. Some child soldiers were volunteered by their parents, some of whom are MILF combatants themselves. These child soldiers have the right to be cared for by their parents, and not brought into conflict zones where their lives and health are threatened;
3. Being left to the elements or to survive under extreme conditions in the camp is contrary to their right to an adequate standard of living;
4. Child soldiers cannot actively do their duties while studying at the same time. It is not logical for a rebel to be attending a school in town or in the city where he/she becomes a "sitting duck" to the police and military. Child soldiering is contrary to the child's right to be protected from work that harms his/her health and education;
5. The socialization of the child soldier is geared towards the indoctrination of the mission of the MILF and the acceptance of *jihad* as the master strategy for its attainment. Limiting the education of the child to what his/her educators deem necessary compromises his/her right to know as well as his/her right to choose what is best for him/her;
6. When children go to war, they are exposed to capture and death. When captured, they are further exposed to the possibility of torture, mutilation, inhuman and degrading treatment, and summary execution;
7. The process of child soldiering is in itself an institutionalized abuse and torture. A child in the battlefield experiences a series of deprivations, including lack of sleep or rest due to sentry duties, patrols and forced marches. At a tender age, they go into dangerous trainings like mountain climbing and river crossing. They are taught how to make bombs which could maim or kill them. The camp is far from being a nurturing environment for a child;

8. By teaching *jihad* as the only option, child soldiers are taught the culture of violence which pushes them into perpetuating their own conflict zones; they are taught to create their own violent environment.

Implications

All the child soldiers affirm that they will continue their involvement with the MILF. Their determination shows a streak of fanaticism resulting from a rigid socialization where they are taught very limited options in dealing with a problem. The child soldier is feeding the ranks of the MILF with dedicated fighters difficult to demobilize because their training and frames of mind are not prepared for other vocations.

All child soldiers are from poor families. This trend in recruitment could lead to an MILF filled with combatants from impoverished backgrounds, which affords them little motivation for turning back. With bleak prospects if they go back to their *kampung*, it may seem more hopeful for them to fight and fight fanatically.

The entry of child soldiers into the MILF may indicate a weakness on the part of the MILF. Allowing children and even women into the MILF ranks may suggest their inability to recruit able-bodied male adults. Moreover, child soldiers are easier to maintain. Resorting to their service may suggest a dwindling support. Through children, the MILF is recruiting less educated fighters. During the MNLF time, the combatants were better-educated. With the signing of the Final Peace Agreement with the government in 1996, it was easier to find reintegration strategies like allowing thousands of former combatants to join the PNP and the AFP because there were many high school and college graduates among them. The same was not easy in the cases of those who were not able to finish high school.

With many local and international instruments for the protection of the rights of the child, the legitimacy of the MILF as a belligerent group will continue to be an intense question as it allows children in its ranks. The group may deny their recruitment, but it may not be able to hide their existence. The MILF will not stop and cannot stop their recruitment for as long as the conflict continues. The recruitment of child soldiers into the MILF ends only when the conflict in Mindanao ends.

Recommendations

The conflict in Mindanao is not without a deep-rooted cause. Definitely, it is not religion, although it is always used as a convenient tool to gain support. The main problem is poverty. It is not a coincidence that the most depressed provinces are in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and in other places inhabited by a majority of Moro population. The poverty in these places has always been the justification for the claim that the *Moros* are neglected and discriminated by the central government. There is a rebuttal that the Moro leaders, like the successive leaders of ARMM, are the ones to blame for their failure to deliver promised services to their constituents. But a closer look shows that even these leaders are in place to serve the designs of the residents of *Malacañang*. Every president has installed his/her governor whose main qualification is the ability to deliver votes during elections. The issue that compounds poverty in these places is bad governance. It is the absence of transparency, accountability, integrity and lack of participation that is stifling development in Mindanao.

Genuine economic development in Mindanao cannot be achieved without good governance. With genuine development, other opportunities will be opened to the child soldiers and other residents in their communities. From the dreams of the child soldiers, we know that they, too, want to have families of their own; they, too, want stable jobs; they, too, dream for peace; they, too, want to support their parents; they, too, wanted to finish their studies; and they, too, wanted simple and decent lives. If given opportunities to fulfill their dreams, soldiering would lose its appeal.

This time the government should be sincere in resolving the armed conflict in Mindanao by fulfilling its promises. Specifically, development projects should be prioritized in Mindanao with the right people, willing to go through democratic processes. In addition:

- a) The government must provide its troops with human rights education. Abuses by the military were often cited as triggering factors for children to become rebels; forcible use of children as guides and couriers during armed conflict should be stopped;

- b) The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) should intensify its effort to link up with the MILF leadership for information dissemination on International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in MILF camps; if the entry of children into MILF camps is difficult to stop, at least the direct use of child soldiers in hostilities should be stopped;
- c) Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) should give more attention to the rehabilitation of war-torn communities in Mindanao.
- d) Industries operating in Mindanao should allocate a portion of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) fund for the development of communities devastated by conflict. Right to peace is a solidarity right, thus peace building in Mindanao is everybody's concern;
- e) Development programs should be given to depressed Moro areas where child soldiers are usually recruited. This should include the strengthening of the Department of Education's Accelerated Teachers Education Program (ATEP). This program is designed to upgrade the competence of the teachers of *madrasah* schools so that they can pass the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET). The government should hasten the integration of the *madrasah* school system into the Department of Education in order to standardize quality of education and ensure strict supervision of said educational system. The curriculum of *madrasah* schools should include the study of human rights and as well as peace education.

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