

Children in War: The MILF Perspective

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Assalaamu Alaikum WaRahmatullahi Wa Barakaatuh, and a pleasant good day. At the outset, let me extend, on behalf of Brother Mohagher Iqbal, chair of Negotiating Panel of the Moro Islamic Liberation, our warmest greetings and congratulations to the Organizers of the Mindanao Interfaith Forum on Children, "in the pursuit of peace for and with the children of Mindanao from the MILF perspective."

We agree with the organizers of this Forum that Mindanao is a flashpoint of prevalent violations of children's rights to survival, development and participation; being an island of strife, poverty and neglect, the children of Mindanao are indeed among the most vulnerable and most wanting of services and advocacy.

In fact we are a witness in our midst of children who are victims of the violence reminiscent of continued colonial warfare in their homeland. We thought these colonial days are gone forever, yet the children of Mindanao particularly among the Moro communities continued to suffer when some of parties to the conflict, who are supposedly their protectors from various forms of oppression and repression, have behaved like a colonial army.

Their plight and predicament have reached the peak during the Marcos martial law regime and the all-out war launched by the former Estrada Government when the whole Moro communities, the children unspared, were subjected to brutal military operations, bombardment, and other repressive measures. Sad to note, these practices were being replicated during the fledgling Arroyo Government.

We are referring to the unprovoked attack on the MILF in Buliok complex in North Cotabato and Maguindanao on February 11, 2003 when the GRP-MILF formal peace negotiation was about to resume. The full power of the GRP forces was unleashed at several villages therein; despite it was a global holiday celebration for the Eid'l Adha marking the culmination of the pilgrimage to Mecca, the fifth pillar of Islam.

At this point, however, let us thank both the Government of the Republic of the Philippine (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) for their continued commitment to the peace process and cessation of hostilities that no doubt give a respite and relative peace negotiations, as monitored by the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) in Mindanao.

Before I proceed, however, let me state for the record the policy of the MILF regarding children amid the war in Mindanao:

1. The general policy of the MILF is not to involve children in its war efforts;
2. They should be better cared off by their natural parents rather than by others or organization even by the MILF; and

3. The rightful place of children, being in tender ages, must be in schools to prepare them for the future either as leaders of the community or as good, law-abiding, and productive members.

However, there are special situations that the MILF finds it the better part of judgment to allow children to be in its care. For instance, when as a result of armed conflict, orphaned children are better off in the care of the MILF rather than becoming street children and become drug pushers, drug users, criminals, and other forms of child delinquency problem. Their roles are purely “auxiliary” in character and not for combat, except when the whole MILF base/community is under attack, in which case, all and sundry will also have to fight to survive. But this situation is temporary, because, as you can recall, MILF camps like Camp Abubakar and Camp Bushrah are not really a camp in the strict sense, because we have established madaris (schools), playgrounds, etc. to attain to the needs of these children.

To date, the Mindanao children, as victims of violence, have suffered much in terms of psychological, physical and social inferiority and trauma, which have affected in no small scale their dignity, growth and development as human beings.

Over the years, violence in Mindanao has seen a number of children in the flashpoints and in various evacuation centers. Their life and future are still uncertain under this situation.

That is why, today, perchance we could witness in our own bare eyes children who hold guns as tall as their height. Some curious onlookers have interpreted this as conscription of minors. They are not; they are born to it, and have learned to it as a way of survival.

Most of the children of war are out of school. To cope up with this problem, the leadership, consistent with its commitment to a peaceful resolution of the armed conflict and the Mindanao problem, has designed a program for their rehabilitation and development, especially on education- atleast in the non-formal education teaching basic writing, readings and arithmetic.

This program has been entrusted to its madaris (schools) education, da’wah (call) and information agencies including its lower organs in the communities.

Sad enough there is a dilemma here on our madaris and da’wah programs in Mindanao, as suspects with the current global war on terrorism.

But rest assured this can’t stop and remiss us from our responsibility and duty in designing a suitable program for the survival, betterment and protection of our children in Mindanao.

Indeed the children of war are the burden of the organization. This is the main reason that for the rest, whose families are well of, we have encouraged them to send their children to the elementary, secondary and college education in their communities. We believe that an educated youth is well prepared to assume the task of the nation building that lies ahead.

Our main guidelines in the molding, protection and development of the children is the Glorious Qur’an and the Sunnah (Tradition) of the Holy Prophet of Islam, which embodied various provisions on the rights, development and protections of children including the

children of war, and on the rules of engagement and of the respect of the rights of noncombatants, like the children, clerics, women, aged, sick, lame, captives and wounded, etc.

Significantly, the GRP and MILF, whose peace negotiation is in progress under the Arroyo Government, commit, pursuant to the provision of the Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001, to the observance of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL), respect for the internationally recognized human rights instruments (including those pertaining to children's rights and welfare) and the protection of the internally displaced persons or evacuees, as instituted in the GRP-MILF Humanitarian, Rehabilitation and Development Accord dated May 7, 2002.

Towards this end, our organization in its limited way has conducted, either directly, series of community-based peace advocacy, assemblies, seminars and trainings, symposia, non-formal education, mosque-based lectures and house-to-house preaching on the noble and moral precepts of being a good member of the communities, focus groups discussions and small group studies especially on the right, development and protections of children as future harbingers of genuine peace and development in Mindanao.

As a revolutionary organization, those are some of the concerns and foci of the MILF relating to the survival, rehabilitation and development of Mindanao's children. But before winding up, we thank the organizers of this forum for giving us the opportunity to share our own perceptions on the rehabilitation, development and betterment of Mindanao's children in our homeland and communities. Thank you.