

# Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)

## Measures undertaken by MILF

A number of measures have already been in place and observed within the MILF-BIAF hierarchy, including the following:

A) Article 36, paragraph 4 of the General Order No. 2, otherwise known as the Code of Conduct of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), also provides for the General Staff (GS) to take feasible measures aimed at ensuring the protection of the rights and welfare of children affected by the armed conflict in Mindanao. For example, the MILF Central Committee approved a GS plan for a continuing educational program directed at the entire BIAF command structure which focuses on the issue of care and protection of children.

B) The same Code of Conduct lays the ground rules on the issue of recruitment of members into the BIAF. It states that in respect of recruitment for regular membership in the BIAF preference shall be given to those who possess Islamic values and morality, good morale, physical and mental fitness, and maturity for those above 18 years of age at the time of induction. The same applies to training for military activities.

C) The Code of Conduct likewise prohibits the admission of children into the BIAF.

## Policies on military and other training

All other activities designed or intended for adults, and not physically or mentally appropriate for children, which might violate their rights as children, are basically disallowed and prohibited<sup>1</sup>. Also, activities of a more delicate nature are likewise not permissible for children. An example of these activities is fasting during the month of Ramadan, where children who have not attained the age of puberty (estimated to commence at age 14 or 15) are not required to fast, although this is an obligation for all Muslim men and women. Even mature individuals are not obliged to fast, if they are not in a position to do so.

The time bound Action Plan, an agreement between the MILF-BIAF and UNICEF signed on August 30, 2008, is a concrete manifestation of the BIAF-MILF desire to further strengthen the protection and care of children affected by the conflict in Mindanao. This action plan works with NGOs acceptable to both parties. The programme was launched with the

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<sup>1</sup> There appear to be slight differences in political or civilian affairs and other support activities wherein children, even at a tender age, are already trained in schools or madrassas to prepare them as future leaders, explaining to them the important role they play as youth, acknowledged as the hope of the nation. English or madrassa (Arabic school) children, even in elementary grades, have been trained in activities associated with a military background, such as the boy scouts or cub scouts. At the secondary school level they are also required to undergo military training called Civilian Auxiliary Training (CAT); and in college they are likewise required to undergo training as Reserve Officers Training Cadets (ROTC). Although in the past this was optional, recently there has been a move to activate ROTC in college.

Institute of Bangsamoro Studies (IBS). As a result of the extension of the programme, Plan International (PI) also became involved with an initial four-month contract with UNICEF with the agreement of the BIAF-MILF leadership.

The Rapid Registration programme attempts to register all children below the age of 18 in the MILF community (Base Headquarters), whether they are associated or not with the armed conflict. Prior to registration, training workshops for the enumerators had to be organized and are now nearing completion. Each of the 21 base commands is required to nominate at least 10 enumerators. Three base commands have yet to provide the required training for their enumerators, but we anticipate that the programme will be completed after the fasting month of Ramadan, God willing.

Enumerators have already compiled lists of several hundred children and provided them to UNICEF, which will undertake the evaluation of the data and submit a work plan. As provided for in the Action Plan, the children should eventually be reintegrated into the community, hopefully for a new and better life. For us, the community is where the families of our commanders and men live and where they exercise and practice their own way of life. In some cases they are the sons and daughters of our commanders on the ground. This is true for almost all MILF camps and communities: our definition of what a camp is all about is totally different from that of the Philippine military. This is, indeed, a unique situation applied only in the case of the Bangsamoro people in Mindanao.

### **Challenges faced by MILF**

There are problems in the determination of the age of children not only in the field of recruitment but throughout the whole system. This is because we have to admit the reality: births or deaths are not normally registered in our community.

Admittedly, there are many challenges faced by our group in pursuit of these particular issues and concerns, among which we note that:

- Some people continue to perceive that the Rapid Registration program runs counter to the basic principles of Islam, particularly on the issue of the definition of a child. In Islam an individual becomes adult upon reaching the age of puberty. Puberty normally comes between the ages of 13-15. In some cases, a female may attain puberty earlier than a male.
- Some members continue to speculate that the Program is but part of the so-called anti-insurgency campaign. Admittedly, the Program is a novelty for a large number of our constituents, and as such we can always expect mixed or even negative reactions from them. It is normal in an organization, whether small or big, for people within the organization to express their opposition on matters that they feel are new to them. You cannot expect oneness or unity of opinion and understanding. Admittedly, there are hardliners in every organization and the MILF-BIAF is not an exception. Thus those identified as hardliners within the organization normally do

not just bow their heads and express their appreciation for things which are new to them without first scrutinizing every aspect of the issue or concern.

- As a revolutionary organization we do admit to a lot of difficulties in carrying out programs and activities aimed at realizing the mandate provided for by the Code of Conduct. An essential requirement is resources. As part of our continuing education of our men on the ground, the BIAF-MILF issued an order imposing financial penalties and prison on those found guilty of violating the commitment provided for under the Action Plan. Other concrete measures have had to be postponed due to a lack of the required resources. To be fair, the Armed Forces of the Philippines/Philippine National Constabulary apparatus is actually not a hindrance to the implementation of such a program.

We do believe that all of the above are some of the many steps that had already been undertaken by the MILF-BIAF leadership in its honest-to-goodness concerns and commitment aimed at protecting children from the effects of armed conflict. What remains to be seen, however, is the manner by which these measures can be translated into meaningful and fruitful action.

These objectives are part of our over-all struggle for a long-term and enduring programme to address this particular concern, but the search for just, fair and meaningful peace and development in Mindanao remains elusive. That goal would allow us to more easily sustain measures and programs of this kind. But we have not lost hope, and remain confident that sooner or later a formula shall be found towards a final and peaceful political solution to the problems of the Bangsamoro people in Mindanao.

### **International standards and reporting**

We are aware of the standards set by the international community, such as the UN's stipulation that sets the age of recruitment for military service. Our commitment to these standards is demonstrated by the MILF-BIAF leadership decision to sign a time bound Action Plan with UNICEF.

The office of the UN Secretary-General reported sometime in 2008 regarding alleged violations on child soldiers in the Philippines that of the more than one hundred violations committed against children, 50 percent were committed by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Another 15 percent were committed by the NPA-CPP, while the rest were committed by the ASG and other groups. Only one percent of the violations were attributed to the MILF-BIAF, the report concluded. A visit in 2007 [by Mrs Coomaraswamy, the special representative of the UN SG] led to the formation of UNICEF and MILF panel leading to the signing of the UN-MILF Action Plan on July 30, 2008. Notwithstanding the insignificant number of violations attributed to us, the MILF-BIAF formed its own five-man panel to negotiate with UNICEF in order to clarify the issue. This resulted in the agreement with UNICEF, a clear manifestation of our willingness to cooperate and work within the standards set by the UN.

## **International cooperation**

The MILF-BIAF believes that it is still too early to conclude whether or not the Action Plan will attain its objectives, which depend on correct and accurate implementation, and flexibility in terms of the needs of children affected by armed conflict. Nonetheless we feel that the character and abilities of the people involved in the implementation of the programme are expected to make a big difference towards its success.

The Action Plan contains a number of unimplemented programs, but BIAF-MILF maintains its sincere and honest commitment towards their full implementation, in close coordination with UNICEF and mutually-agreed partner organizations.

Suggestion: Continuing information and educational campaign focusing on the substance, benefit and importance of the program, not only to BIAF-MILF members, but to the community as a whole.