

The NDFP's Defense of the Rights of the Filipino Child



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November 25, 2005

At least 90 per cent of Filipino children suffer gross human rights violations under the semicolonial and semifeudal ruling system of the comprador big bourgeoisie and landlord class. They are victimized by the same foreign and feudal oppression and exploitation that torment their worker and peasant parents.

They live in appalling conditions of poverty and gross deprivation. They are malnourished and are prone to illness. They have extremely limited or no access to education, health care, medicine and proper housing. The overwhelming majority of them do not go beyond grade 4 and generally regress into illiteracy and innumeracy. Long before they reach the age of 15, they engage in hard labor to help their parents in eking out the subsistence of the family. The overwhelming majority of children live in the countryside under feudal and semifeudal conditions and they take part (often as unpaid labor) in agricultural production, some primary processing of the products and handicrafts.

Under the system of export-oriented semi-manufacturing, children are harnessed as cheap wage labor to do piece work either in their own homes, in plantations or in makeshift sweatshops in urban slums and village communities. They are made to work for long hours, at times extending beyond 12 hours, at subhuman wages. A considerable number of children take to the streets to engage in petty peddling and other odd jobs in order to augment the inadequate incomes of their parents or make up for their parents' lack of employment.

Street children are exposed to extremely degrading conditions. Some of them are drawn to petty crimes, prohibited drug use and prostitution. They experience daily extortion and bullying from the police and are vulnerable to sexual molestation. They are often rounded up and dumped into crowded jails where they are mixed with hardened criminals. Here some of them are recruited as runners between the corrupt police officers and crime gangs and generally they are further abused by their hardened criminal cellmates.

The worst cases involve the murder and trafficking of children. In a southern city, street children are murdered by the police whenever the local authorities want to show off that they are suppressing street crimes, drug trafficking and burglaries in wealthy subdivisions. There is also the trafficking of children for illegal adoption, for making them sex slaves or sometimes for the sale of their internal organs abroad.

Not only the children of workers and peasants are vulnerable to human rights violations. Children of low middle class parents who go abroad in large numbers and take up menial jobs are left behind and also become susceptible to the risks of being without direct parental

attention and motherly care. In these cases, the violations of the rights of the child are often veiled by the illusion that the remittances of their parents take care of everything.

The children of the Bangsa Moro and other national minorities suffer not only the class exploitation and oppression of the workers and peasants. They also suffer national discrimination in general and specific terms. The Manila-based authorities know well how to deliver the rich natural resources and cheap labor in the areas of the national minorities to foreign plantation and mining corporations and to local exploiters. But they allot extremely low public funds for the education, proper nutrition and health care of children and nursing mothers. There are no resources available for promoting intercultural understanding to combat discrimination at all levels.

Filipino children of the toiling masses in any ethno-linguistic community in the Philippines are usually made invisible or of less concern by the powerful and wealthy in the current social system. When the sight of them cannot be denied, because genuine advocates of their rights call attention to them, they are often regarded as merely the objects of pity and not as conscious and active actors in gaining respect for and fulfilling their rights. There is an ever urgent need to arouse, organize and mobilize the children to fight for their own rights and interests.

The National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) concerns itself with the rights and welfare of the millions of children below 18 years of age by addressing the root causes of the violations of the rights of the child. These root causes are in the rotten ruling system of oppression and exploitation, of extreme wealth for a few and extreme poverty for so many. In the concrete, the NDFP defends the children from the assaults on their rights by the three evils in semicolonial and semifeudal Philippine society: foreign monopoly capitalism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism.

The NDFP upholds, defends and promotes the rights of the child in accordance with its own principles, policies and regulations as well as with the international norms and standards set forth directly and indirectly in conventions and treaties. It has a program for the Filipino people to work and fight for national liberation and democracy against the foreign and local oppressors and exploiters. It aims to uphold national sovereignty and empower the working people, to carry out land reform and national industrialization, to foster a patriotic, scientific and democratic culture and to pursue an independent foreign policy for world peace and development.

The NDFP requires the working committees on education under the organs of political power, the designated teachers for elementary and high school education and the mass organizations (especially of the teachers, women, youth, children and cultural activists) to realize the educational program of children below the age of 18 years in the areas under the people's self-government. Public school teachers of the GRP are encouraged to perform conscientiously their teaching functions and to promote patriotic and democratic values, ideas and practice among the children.

The NDFP looks after the health of the mothers and children, promotes health education, healthy diet and sanitation and directs the building of a system of disease prevention and health care delivery. The working committees on health under the organs of political power

and the mass organizations of health workers cooperate with the other mass organizations and the health department of the New People's Army. The health system includes professional health workers and local paramedic volunteers. Day care centers or systems of collective or shared child care are established wherever possible.

The parents are advised to keep in school their children who are 15 years and below and to let them perform tasks that are commensurate to their age and that do not prevent study time at home. Due to extreme poverty, the children as young as 8 or 9, as long as they are able-bodied, want to participate in the work of adults. Nevertheless, the organs of political power and the mass organizations prohibit exploitative practices in farms, plantations and sweat shops. Children below 18 and above 15 are given basic instructions and training on how to protect in cooperation with their parents and the rest of the community their family and community from the assaults of the GRP military, police and irregular forces.

The NDFP encourages the organs of political power and the mass organizations of youth, women, teachers and cultural activists to set up children's organizations in recognition of the right of children to uphold and advance their own rights and participate in social transformation on the basis of their capacities and capabilities.

The Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) is a gross violator of the rights of the child for as long as it is the instrument of the oppressive and exploitative ruling system. All the policy proclamations and legislation and signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and related conventions and treaties by the GRP, avowedly in favor of the children, amount largely to hogwash because they are used merely to prettify a system that oppresses and exploits the toiling masses of workers and peasants and their children.

The NDFP takes pain to stress to all entities honestly concerned with human rights in general and the rights of the child in particular to take a comprehensive and profound view of the fact that human rights violations against the toiling masses of workers and peasants, women and children are rampant in the Philippines, whether the people wage armed resistance or not. And when armed conflict occurs, it is the military, police and irregular forces of the GRP that wantonly unleashes the unjust violence to preserve the unjust ruling system.

The US and other imperialist governments and their puppet governments like the GRP are today using their official agencies and those of the United Nations as well as certain imperialist-funded nongovernmental organizations, academic hacks, ideologues and publicists to obfuscate the fact that human rights violations are generated by systems of oppression and exploitation, such as the world capitalist system and domestic ruling system of the exploiting classes, and to make it appear that armed revolutionary movements for national liberation are responsible for human rights violations.

From the viewpoint of the armed revolutionaries, the oppressed and exploited people have no choice but to wage a just war of national liberation, strive for victories and thus have hope of fundamental change for the better. They cannot simply allow the oppressors and exploiters to escalate oppression and exploitation. The absence of the people's armed resistance does not put a stop to human rights violations. In fact, it emboldens the escalation of human rights violations through the daily violence of exploitation.

Indeed, the imperialists and their minions are busy escalating exploitation and oppression under various slogans. With the slogan of “free market” globalization the monopoly capitalists inflict a vicious assault on the national industries and economies of the undeveloped countries, on the hard-won trade union and social rights of the working class and people and on the social and natural environment. With the slogan of “preemptive war on terror” they justify wars of aggression against assertively independent states and the open rule of terror against national liberation movements and the people of the world.

The ideologues, politicians and publicists of imperialism and puppetry constantly devise “new language” to discredit and stigmatize the national liberation movements. Semantically they frame and denigrate these as “nonstate actors” to be contraposed to what is presumed as “duly-constituted state actors.” Then they proceed to misrepresent the “nonstate actor” as “terrorist” and pontificate that the latter can undo the misrepresentation only by capitulating to the oppressive state and betraying the people.

The NDFP represents in peace negotiations with the GRP the people’s democratic government which is the co-belligerent of the GRP in the current civil war. This people’s democratic government has effective power over an extensive population and territory. It is led by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). It has the New People’s Army (NPA) as main component of state power. The NDFP encompasses a wide array of political forces and mass organizations. In fact, two states now exist in the Philippines: one is revolutionary, representing the people’s democratic power, and the other is counterrevolutionary, representing the foreign and domestic oppressors and exploiters.

In peace negotiations with the GRP, the NDFP represents the people’s democratic government, which has its own constitution with a bill of fundamental rights. As a belligerent force under international law, the NDFP has proclaimed its Unilateral Declaration of Undertaking to Apply the Geneva Conventions and its Protocols and has deposited it with the Swiss Federal Council. The GRP and the NDFP have succeeded in forging and approving the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL) by acting as co-belligerents equally using the International Bill of Rights and the International Humanitarian Law as frames of reference.

Since 1988, ahead of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People’s Army have categorically adopted the policy of prohibiting the recruitment of children below 18 to serve as combatants. And time and again the NDFP has declared that both its policy and the law of the people’s democratic government prohibit the NPA from recruiting children below the age of 18 to serve as combatants that can be deployed for military offensive campaigns and operations.

Those between the age of 15 and 18 may be trained and directed by the mass organizations not for the purpose of participation in combat or hostilities but for the purpose of safety and self-defense in their own homes and communities. They are civilians and are not required to carry firearms. They are no more military combatants or actual soldiers than high school and college students engaged in preparatory or basic military training. In this regard, the position of the NDFP and the people’s democratic government is far more advanced than the standard set by the Geneva Conventions. Such standard allows the military recruitment of

children or youth from the age of 15 to 18, provided within this age bracket priority is given to the recruitment of the older ones.

However, certain malicious detractors of the NDFP and the people's democratic government, in UN and US official agencies and imperialist-funded nongovernmental organizations define a so-called child soldier as anyone below 18 years of age, who may simply be in a community under attack by the armed forces of the reactionary state and who even if without arms may be misrepresented as combatants for being presumably lookouts, spies, porters, messengers, cooks and what else of the NPA. It now becomes a crime just to be a Filipino child living in a community under attack by the GRP military, police and paramilitary forces. By lumping the NPA with certain irregular forces in Africa, there is even the insinuation that the NPA could be recruiting children as sex slaves. This shows complete ignorance of the strict Family Code of the people's government, which governs courtship, marriage and family relations.

There are those slanderers who have faked researches and findings, blatantly using hearsay, and have come up with such fantastic claims that from 10 to 30 percent of children in NPA areas are "child soldiers." These claims are patently false because they would make the number of NPA fighters run into hundreds of thousands, instead of the well-known varying estimates of 7000-12,000 NPA fighters made by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). The shallowest kind of slander has been made by a foreigner who upon mere sight of short-sized NPA fighters concluded that they were children below 18. Filipino adults are often 4'10" to 5'2" in height. An American or European can easily mistake Ka Roger Rosal, CPP spokesman, for a teenager.

There are those who have capitalized on a handful of false cases of "child soldier" fabricated by the GRP military psywar experts and have extrapolated these into a far bigger number of "child soldiers" supposedly arrested by the GRP military and police. These are belied by the records of the Joint Monitoring Committee (created by CARHRIHL) and by earlier reliable records. In the well-known case of the child Edfu de la Cruz, the GRP military misrepresented him as a "child soldier" and actually subjected him to a series of human rights violations. He was seized by AFP troops while he was outside of his home. They forced him to tell them in which house were his parents and they proceeded to strafe the house and murder his parents. Then he was misrepresented and humiliated before the press as NPA "child soldier."

He was illegally detained indefinitely in the compound of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DWSD). His grandmother and other close relatives were prevented from taking him home, until the demands of the NDFP in the peace negotiations and public opinion compelled the authorities to release him.

All entities spewing out the propaganda that the NPA recruits "child soldiers" below 18 years and that there is a high proportion of NPA "child soldiers" among the children below 18 years in NPA areas are themselves violators of the rights of the child. They play loose with the definition of the so-called child soldier. Anyone below 18 who is alleged to have any role in the NPA, even if a noncombatant, is a child soldier. In a perversion of justice and due process, they put on the NPA the burden of proving that it has no "child soldiers" and they

do not bother to bring their accusations and evidence to the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations or the Joint Monitoring Committee under CARHRIHL.

After four years of existence the UNICEF-funded Philippine Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has not attempted to establish direct communication with the NDFP. Even the UNICEF has neither presented positive proof nor asked NDFP to comment on the researches (which is normal academic practice) that it has used to conclude that there are child soldiers in the NPA.

The detractors have maintained a hypocritical silence over the well-proven misrepresentation of children as “child soldiers,” as in the well-documented cases of Edfu and others. They thus make themselves party to the violation of the rights of these children by acquiescing to the military psywar labelling the children as “child soldiers.” The UN and UNICEF have not engaged the NDFP in serious dialogue but have preferred to rely on the false claims of the GRP military and some NGO entrepreneurs with special axes to grind against the NDFP.

Contrary to their claims that they defend the rights of the child, the detractors of the NPA actually pave the way for the GRP military, police and irregular forces to arrest, detain, torture and murder children in their own homes and communities. In their attempt to demonize the NPA, they spread the propaganda that children in communities suspected of being pro-NPA are fair game for military attack. They also conceal the crimes of the armed minions of the GRP and make the large-scale real violators of the rights of the child appear innocent of their crimes.

The outlandish and irresponsible definition of the so-called child soldier emboldens the military, police and irregular forces of the GRP to perpetrate the worst violations of the rights of the child when they unleash campaigns of suppression against the people and areas suspected of supporting the revolutionary movement. The aggressors justify their brutal attacks on the children because supposedly these are active members or reserves of the NPA. They direct lethal fire at children whom they subsequently misrepresent as NPA fighters.

GRP military campaigns of suppression often involve the wanton killing of adults and children through bombings, artillery fire, strafing from airplanes and by infantry, looting and burning. After the GRP troops secure control of a village, children who are estimated to be at least 10 years old are at risk of being falsely accused as NPA combatant and being arbitrarily arrested, beaten up, tortured or murdered. In fact, it is an old continuing practice of GRP troops to feel out the shoulders of such children supposedly to find out whether the shoulders are hard enough to indicate frequent carrying of rifles. The GRP troops continue the tradition set by US General Jacob Smith in Samar during the Filipino-American War when he ordered the killing of all Filipino males who were at least 10 years old and supposedly old enough to carry a gun.

Increasingly, the military and police of the GRP abduct the children from suspected NPA-supporting communities and misrepresent them to the mass media as so-called child soldiers of the people’s army. Then these children are detained in compounds of the DWSD or in municipal or city jails and the closest relatives are prevented by orders of the military

from visiting them and bringing them home. These children detained in such a manner are relatively better known to the public, especially when there is military psywar in the press that these children are NPA combatants. In such cases, human rights organizations can quickly move to get the facts against the false claims of the military. In the worst cases, the children who are detained in military camps and forced to become orderlies and sometimes sex slaves are practically closed to human rights organizations for prompt investigation and documentation, unless the parents and other close relatives and mass organizations of the child or children concerned approach the human rights organizations for assistance.

Whenever they target an area for military suppression, the GRP military, police and irregular forces engage in food blockades, force the people to evacuate or let them stay in their community under the terms of the concentration camp or "strategic hamlet." Under conditions of food blockade or forced mass evacuation, the worst harm is inflicted on so many children. They go hungry, become sick without health care and have no chance to go to school for a long time. When the people are made to stay in their village, the troops occupy the school house as barracks and deprive the children of schooling.

In evacuation centers, the children are mainly the casualties. They are hit the hardest by outbreaks of diseases, like diarrhea, respiratory illness, measles and the like. They are also vulnerable to sexual abuse due to the flimsy accommodations, if any. If they survive, long after suffering hunger and illness, they will bear for a long time in their adulthood or until the end of their lives the invisible scars from their traumatic experience and will have serious difficulties in attaining normalcy or relating to conditions as they grow up.

The children of today live in an unprecedentedly harsh world, in which US imperialists and their followers can violate human rights with impunity and stigmatize the victims as the culprits. Under the auspices of the United Nations, the IMF, World Bank and the WTO coordinate the exploitation of the people of the world under the inhuman neoliberal economic policy. The US and other imperialist powers have used the UN repeatedly to justify, facilitate, carry out, prolong or prettify aggression and repression.

How many children in Iraq were killed by being deprived of food and medicine under the UN and US-UK policy of economic sanctions for more than ten years? At least 500,000 children. And how many more children have been killed by the US war of aggression against Iraq and Afghanistan and by the murderous policies and acts of the occupation and puppet government? How many of the children have been felled by disease for lack of clean water and proper food and have been deprived of education due to the destruction of the social infrastructure? How many children are scarred for life by the traumatic experience of the cruelties of aggressive war? Further, how many more children are to be killed, maimed or traumatized by cruel sanctions and wars of aggression as the US continues to impose its imperialist power on the entire Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, East Asia and elsewhere?

The US and its bilateral and multilateral instruments (including the UN) cannot claim moral authority whatsoever to sit in judgment of and discredit genuine national liberation movements. It is clear that the US and its imperialist and puppet allies exploit the issue of human rights and humanitarianism as the pretext for military intervention and aggression.

Thus they work hard to manipulate the highly emotive issue of child rights and invent stories of the violation of child rights by the revolutionary forces in order to discredit the very people and the revolutionary forces that oppose the system that exploits and oppresses children and that therefore violates their rights in so many ways.

But the people of the world know better than to let the US and its accomplices go on violating the national and democratic rights and the entirety of human rights, including those of women and children. They are rising up to resist imperialist war and plunder. They want to build a new and better world in which they can enjoy the blessings of national independence, democracy, social justice, development and world peace.