

Cotabato City, the Philippines, 8 April 2011 - The Philippines has made significant strides in stamping out the use of children as combatants by insurgent groups, but the problem continues, say officials.

Speaking to reporters in Manila on 8 April following a five-day visit to the country, UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, said rebel groups such as the New People's Army (NPA) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had indicated a willingness to police their ranks and stop recruiting minors.

The 5,000-strong NPA is the armed unit of the Communist Party of the Philippines, which has been waging a Maoist rebellion since 1969 in what is considered to be one of Asia's longest insurgencies. The 12,000-strong MILF has been fighting for an independent Islamic state on the country's southern island of Mindanao for almost four decades.

Both rebel groups are in peace talks with the government of President Benigno Aquino in hope of striking a political settlement during his six-year term, which ends in 2016.

A third group, the Al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf, is considered a terrorist organization that also employs child soldiers, but is often beyond the reach of official government representatives.

Coomaraswamy said she had secured a pledge from representatives of the NPA's political wing, the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), to develop an "action plan" on child soldiers.

"It is the first time that we have been able to reach out to the NDFP and I am hopeful that we will be able to sign an action plan as soon as possible," Coomaraswamy said.

Coomaraswamy also met the MILF leadership, which promised to complete the registration of children in its ranks within nine months. She said about 600 children (by law, younger than 18) had been registered with the support of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

"In Mindanao, where girls and boys are born into communities where armed elements are a constant feature, we have to get the entire village working on the successful protection of children," Coomaraswamy said. "We agreed to accelerate the process of registering children."

Cultural factors

MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu said the rebel group was committed to eliminating child soldiers from its ranks, but insisted there were differences in cultural definitions. Boys older than 13 are normally considered adults in local Islamic law, and if born into families involved in the fight for independence, are duty-bound to help in the struggle.

"We adhere to the standards set by the UN," Kabalu told IRIN. "While there is no forced conscription among our ranks, there are certain definitions that are different from [the western norms]. These children identified so far by UNICEF are not really fighting on the frontlines, but are helping in MILF communities. It is an obligation for anyone born into the struggle to help achieve our goal of a Muslim homeland."

Kabalu would not say how many of these child soldiers were in various MILF positions and camps, but Coomaraswamy said it could be in the early thousands, including boys as young as eight.

Marco Puzon, national coordinator of the Philippine Coalition to Protect Children Involved in Armed Conflict, said determining the actual numbers of child soldiers deployed was difficult without adequate monitoring mechanisms.

"The actual numbers are difficult to determine because they remain an invisible population," he said.

He said children were forced into joining the rebel ranks in complex ways, but noted that extreme poverty in areas rocked by conflict could be a push factor. "There are also personal factors why a child joins the rebel ranks - he might join to prevent his loved ones from being killed in the conflict. Some like the cases in Mindanao join the MILF to avenge the death of relatives, and there are cultural factors, like religion and ideology, for instance."

He said children's roles in the combat zone ranged from being actual fighters to providing support services, such as cleaning and fetching water.

An internal military report seen by IRIN stated that NPA documents recovered from fallen rebel camps indicated the guerrillas often accepted or forced children into joining their cause.

One document said children as young as 15 were taken in, and were taught lessons in self-defence, or to provide support to fighters.

It said as many as 40 child soldiers from the NPA were either captured, surrendered or rescued between 2005 and 2007. Meanwhile, as many as 15 percent of the MILF's forces were reported to be under 18, as of 2008, the report said.

According to the UN, there are some 250,000 children worldwide recruited to participate in armed conflicts as soldiers, messengers, spies, porters, cooks or to provide sexual services in violation of international law.

Source: [IRIN](#)

