

GMA orders agencies to pool resources for Children's Defense Fund

President Arroyo ordered the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and other government agencies concerned to put up a Children's Defense Fund (CDF) to prosecute cases of child abuse and exploitation.

"Our goal is a child-centered human rights agenda. This shall be built on training, preparing and equipping our children to be global citizens in a changing world. And protecting them with an intensity and fierceness that was practiced in ancient times to shield children from abusers and predators," the President said in her speech at the 60th anniversary celebration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights yesterday.

Mrs. Arroyo also scored the recruitment of children combatants by the New People's Army (NPA).

Colin Davis, Deputy Country Representative and Senior Program Officer of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) told the gathering of the many challenges the Philippines has to face in terms of child welfare.

Davis cited the increasing drop in the school enrollment rates in many regions of the country.

He said universal primary education, one of the Millennium Development Goals, "is unlikely to be met by the target date of 2015 at current performance so we need to try to do something to address that."

Davis said the government has to focus its attention on the rural areas in implementing laws for the protection of children.

Davis commended Congress for passing the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act.

He noted though that "the implementation is still slow and intermittent and there are many misconceptions about (its) provisions."

Mrs. Arroyo, on the other hand, assured Davis that the government is exerting all efforts to address the UNICEF's concerns.

"And that is why we share the concern of UNICEF about the rights of children in a situation of conflict especially the use of child combatants by the insurgents," she said.

Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process Secretary Hermogenes Esperon Jr. said the government would ask the National Democratic Front, the umbrella organization of the mainstream communist movements in the country, to stop recruiting children as combatants.

claiming the government programs to protect children in conflict areas are mere "paper reality."

The Salinlahi Alliance for Children's Concern said human rights violations against children in the country committed by government security forces are "on the rise." Salinlahi spokesperson Alphonse Rivera said the government continues to implement its counter-insurgency operation with impunity, with children caught in the middle of a conflict.

Citing a report of the Children's Rehabilitation Center (CRC), Rivera said cases of rights violations committed by security forces have continuously increased in the last seven years.

CRC executive director Esmeralda Macaspac also revealed a marked increase in the number of illegal arrests and detention among children within the 2001-2008 period.

Macaspac said the military even detained many children and subjected them to

physical and psychological abuse to extract information on the whereabouts of rebel groups in their community.

CRC said they documented 50 cases of torture among children since 2001.

Macaspac also detailed incidents where soldiers forced children to serve as guides in the conduct of military operations. She added women and

children were even forced to man military checkpoints, exposing these civilians to the risk of crossfire.

— With Katherine Adraneda, James Mananhangaya