From August 1 to 5, 2004, the Regional Emergency Psychosocial Support Network (REPSN) will conduct a consultation workshop in Tagaytay City, Cavite Province, Philippines. Twenty-eight participants from nine countries from East Asia and the Pacific Region are expected to become part of the workshop, conducted by the network secretariat, University of the Philippines’ Program on Psychosocial Trauma and Human Rights Program of the Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS PST), with the support of the United Nations Children’s Fund – East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (UNICEF-EAPRO).

The consultation workshop is the first of its kind in the region. It is part of the development of the capability of the East Asia and Pacific Region to provide rapid response in emergency cases. “The regional consultation workshop will focus on the interfacing between alternative healing and indigenous ways of local self-help and mutual support and traditional service delivery,” says Dr. Elizabeth Protacio de Castro, Associate Professor and Convener of the UP CIDS PST. According to her, “These local ways are very relevant, much more meaningful and helpful to the experience of the people of the region and the modules seek to draw out these alternative healing and indigenous ways to complement traditional service delivery ways.” Participants from countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Australia, East Timor, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines will be joining representatives from UNICEF-EAPRO, headed by Reiko Nishijima, Planning Officer – Emergency.

Entitled “Evolving Capacities in Emergency Psychosocial Support in the East Asia-Pacific Region,” the five-day consultation workshop is a pre-test of the modules developed by psychosocial support network consultant and Australia-based INMA enabler Dr. Les Spencer and the UP CIDS PST. The modules contain training materials, guidelines, methodologies and approaches to be used as reference by people and organizations involved in psychosocial care of children in emergencies. The consultation workshop covers themes ranging from strengthening and evolving culturally-appropriate psychosocial support with the community, the assessment of local psychological wellness and resources, and care and support for caregivers. Dr. Les Spencer and Mr. Ernie Cloma of the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) are the resource persons/facilitators for the consultation workshop. PETA has supported psychosocial action in Mae Sot near the Thai-Burmese...
The governments of Southeast Asia continue to face the issue of displacement, and their reactions include the repression or routine expulsion of refugees, migrant workers and asylum seekers. Already affected by displacement, the family is at the heart of these reactions. They may suffer even more in the case of repressive reactions or of inaction by the government of the host or home countries. For fear of being killed by the harsh regime in Burma, opponents of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), even those identified as their supporters, are forced to stay across the border in India or Thailand. Living in uncertainty, they, like the Acehnese refugees in Malaysia, are living with the reality of deportation to their home countries, where they face the possibility of summary execution, forced disappearance, torture, detention, or persecution.

Refugee families

While the international law and the international community call for the protection of refugees and internally displaced families, the 1951 convention on the status of refugees does not contain a specific right to refugee family or family reunification, both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights recognize that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state.” Meanwhile, the Executive Committee of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has concluded that respect for family unity is a “minimum basic human standard”.

In observance of the International Day of Families on May 15, Refugees International (RI) investigated the impact of armed conflict on families and also gave recommendations for their protection. Calling for the prioritization of the protection of refugee families, RI believes that the protection of refugees and other displaced families is not only in the best interest of refugees themselves, but also in the best interest of states. It recommended states and aid agencies to vigilantly uphold the rights of families to respect, protection, assistance, and support. It called upon them to respect the principle of unity of all families, including that of forcibly displaced families and to develop assistance programs that work within the frameworks of family and societal traditions. RI also recommends states and agencies to increase awareness of family kinship patterns and household structures, to facilitate timely communication.

For further reading: In 2003, Human Rights Watch issued a report on child soldiers in Burma entitled “My Gun Was as Tall As Me”, which is online at http://hrw.org/reports/2002/barma/. Additional campaign materials against the use of child soldiers in Burma can be found at http://hrw.org/campaigns/crp/barma/index.htm. Meanwhile, for an overview of efforts on the demobilization of child soldiers in the Philippines, please see article “Demobilization of Child Soldiers: The Philippine Experience in the newsletter Vol. 1 No.5 2003 issue. Please support the international campaign against the recruitment and use of child soldiers. For more information about the Southeast Asia Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (SAC), please contact its Regional Coordinator Maria Glenda R.Ramirez at seacoordinator childsoldiers@yahoo.com.
between separated family members, and to provide psychological counseling for families of missing persons.

HRW meanwhile called upon the governments of Malaysia and Thailand to ratify the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. It called upon both states not to refuse any asylum seeker or refuges to Indonesia or Burma. HRW called upon the Malaysian government to “recognize that in the light of ongoing armed conflict and widespread human rights violations taking place in Aceh, all Achenese in Malaysia should be treated as refugees and provided with protection and assistance. It called upon Kuala Lumpur to stop the deportation of Achenese to Indonesia, and to ensure that health, nutrition, and safety conditions in detention centers for undocumented persons and asylum seekers conform with international and domestic standards. Meanwhile, HRW called upon the Royal Thai government to abandon the current policy that only those fleeing armed conflict are entitled to protection and temporary stay in Thailand. It called upon the government to ensure that all Burmese refugees in the camps are provided with protection and assistance, including adequate health care, shelter, and educational opportunities. HRW also called upon the Indonesian and Burmese governments to end the abuses that have forced asylum seekers to flee abroad.

Protecting the refugee family

Protection expert Kate Jastram maintains that families are entitled to respect, protection, assistance and support. She adds that the right to family unity is inherent in recognizing the family as a group unit. She suggests that family unity in the refugee context means granting refuge or a similar secure status to family members accompanying a recognized refugee. Countries of asylum, such as Malaysia and Thailand, must likewise provide for family reunification, at least of close family members. This is because the family cannot be defined without the country of origin to enjoy reunification there. In host and resettle ment countries, family unity enhances self-sufficiency, and helps reduce the long-term social and economic costs. In addition, the support that family members can give to one another multiplies the efforts of external actors such as aid agencies. Extended family contacts are vital when decisions are made about returning home. (MP) ■


The experiences of Burma and the Philippines present two contrasting cases in a government’s position and reaction towards the use of children as soldiers. As the arena for the recruitment of child soldiers, the conflicts in Southeast Asia are notably geographically localized and of low intensity. Often, such conflicts receive little attention in the international community. Awareness about the issue of child soldiers is low among the affected communities in these two nations. At the forefront of the issue in the region is the Southeast Asia Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (SEACSUCS), which was formed in October 2002. Its establishment came about after the national consultation workshops in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thai-Burmese border in the early part of 2002.

Two contrasting cases

The continued recruitment of the Tatmadaw or the Burmese army, of large numbers of children into its ranks is appalling as it is inhuman. HRW estimated that 70,000 of the country’s 350,000 soldiers are below 18 years of age. The use and recruitment by the Tatmadaw is in violation of its own laws which specifies the enlistment age for military service as 18 years of age and provides for imprisonment of persons who abuse or torture children or employ them in hazardous work. The international human rights organization documented the forcible recruitment of children as young as eleven, the inhuman treatment they received in the training camps, their separation from their families and direct involvement in armed conflict. The repressive policies of the Tatmadaw and the widely reported cases of abduction of children for their recruitment into the national army brings into mind the untold suffering experienced by the child recruits and their parents. Separated from their families, the child recruits feel alone and unprotected. For the parents and family members, not knowing the fate of a loved one, especially a child, can be unbearable.

In the Philippines, there are no indications that children are being formally recruited into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). However, there have been reports of children being recruited into government-backed paramilitary groups like the Citizen’s Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGU). The government also reported that younger children have been joining armed opposition groups, particularly those included in the U.S. State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs). These include the extremist group Abu Sayaf, the New People’s Army, the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The Philippines had already ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts in 2003. Nine government agencies signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on the handling and treatment of children involved in armed conflict in 2001. While the Philippine government deserves credit in its efforts to tackle the issue of child soldiers, the problem lies in implementation, particularly providing support to former child soldiers. Some of the provisions of the children in armed conflict MOA are not being followed to the letter. Children, including possible child soldiers, have been killed during military operations to crush members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayaf. Former child soldiers do not always undergo the formal demobilization, reintegration, and rehabilitation (DDR) process. Already a target by their former comrades in the armed group as a result of their surrender, former child soldiers are sometimes forced or pressured by the military or government officials to act as “assets” or informers in counter-intelligence operations. This intensifies the ire of their former comrades, who are also targeting the child’s immediate relatives and other members of the extended family.

The regional coalition and partners – plans and actions

In March 2004, SEACSUCS, the Human Rights Institute in Burma, and the Asian Regional Resource Center organized a workshop to...
For much in its history, multi-ethnic Mindanao has seen the viciousness of war. People of Mindanao have witnessed a cycle of armed conflict. Roots of the conflict are deep, and the people, organizations, the academy, and other groups from the region have begun a journey to work for peace in Mindanao.

Christian Children’s Fund Basilan

The Puhmalin Children’s Peace Festival

Children and youth dressed in traditional clothing of the Yakan and Tausug cultural communities competed with Western-style marching bands in coloring a gym in one corner of Isabela City, Basilan in Mindanao. Waving balloons of green and yellow, they chanted and shouted the word “peace” in the different dialects spoken in the province. One youth leader led the congregation of children and adults as they sang and danced to a song of peace. “Peace!” he shouted, and the children replied, waving their hands in the air. “Puhmalin! Puhmalin! Puhmalin!” everyone shouted, echoing hopes and dreams for genuine peace in their island home.

The sixth Puhmalin Children’s Peace Festival, sponsored by the Christian Children’s Fund (CCF) Basilan, was held from May 29 to 30, 2004 in the provincial capital, Isabela City. Some 1,000 children from throughout the island province gathered together in two days of talent and skills exposition, dance and music competitions, and sharing about their experiences. The name Puhmalin was coined from the name of the three projects being undertaken by CCF Basilan, Puhmalinubung, Maluso, and Inspiracion. The two-day event certainly provided a different image of the province, where the Abu Sayyaf Group is notorious for its campaign of bloodshed, kidnapping, and extortion. The group is also known to recruit children as young as 13 into their ranks. However, even before the Abu Sayyaf came into being, Basilan has always been in the cycle of war and violence. In the 1970s when the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) fought the Philippine government for autonomy, Basilan was sucked into a war that polarized and divided the Christian and Moslem communities of Mindanao.

Still unable to recover from a destructive secessionist war that erupted in the early 1970s, many areas in Central Mindanao became the scene of tense fighting between the government and armed group. “The conflict here comes in a cycle. It’s like it erupts every two years,” says an NGO worker based in Pikit.

Conferences and Consultations

Regional Emergency Psychosocial Support Network (REPSN)

The consultation workshop in Tagaytay City is the first of two workshops planned by the REPSN for 2004 towards the formation of the Regional Emergency Psychosocial Response Team (REPRT). The workshop, held in May 30 to 31, 2004 in the provincial capital, Isabela City. Some 1,000 children from throughout the province gathered together in two days of talent and skills exposition, dance and music competitions, and sharing about their experiences. The name Puhmalin was coined from the name of the three projects being undertaken by CCF Basilan, Puhmalinubung, Maluso, and Inspiracion. The two-day event certainly provided a different image of the province, where the Abu Sayyaf Group is notorious for its campaign of bloodshed, kidnapping, and extortion. The group is also known to recruit children as young as 13 into their ranks. However, even before the Abu Sayyaf came into being, Basilan has always been in the cycle of war and violence. In the 1970s when the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) fought the Philippine government for autonomy, Basilan was sucked into a war that polarized and divided the Christian and Moslem communities of Mindanao.

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Children and young people are the first to suffer in armed conflict situations, and the wounds of war include the breeding of hatred between young, impressionable Christian and Moslem minds. This hatred remains as one of the deep emotional scars brought about by war – a legacy of violence that threatens reman even after the last bullet had been fired. It is a hatred that these children will pass on to their friends, and to their own children in the future. The Teaching Peace Project taps the classrooms, which are places of learning and social development and venues for developing the values, morals, and ideals that are the next generation will practice and uphold. The project came up with publication of teaching modules that would guide teachers on how to discuss the concepts of peace, human rights and conflict resolution in their classes.

On June 8 and 9, 2004, a team of volunteers from the Peace Center distributed copies of Teaching and Training Modules of the Teaching Peace, Human Rights and Conflict Resolution and peace-related books to schools in Cotabato City and in the towns of Pagangan, Aloeosan, Midsayap and Pikit. In all in a land that has seen so many wars, the path to peace proves to be difficult, if not a daunting task. However, with 1,200 copies of the Teaching and Training Modules distributed to schools in Central Mindanao, there is the renewed hope that communities, particularly children and young adults, would become eventually inspired to work for peace. “I am hopeful that these modules will continue to be enriched in the future by the learning experience that will take place in classrooms and other venues, and by the changing circumstances of the world in which we live,” runs the message of NDU President Fr. Ronan Bernabe. The satisfaction of teaching peace ultimately comes from the appreciation expressed by the children, their realization that peace means a better life and achieving it is very possible. (MPP)

Please see Typescript for a brief description of the Teaching Peace, Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Teaching and Training Manuals.