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Children and armed conflict in the Philippines

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the sixth report on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Philippines and covers the period from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2021.

In the report, the Secretary-General highlights trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children by all parties to the conflict and provides information on the perpetrators of the violations. The report also contains information on progress made in ending and preventing violations, including through dialogue with parties to conflict.

Lastly, the report contains a series of recommendations addressed to all parties to the conflict, aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children and strengthening the protection of children in the Philippines.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, prepared pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, covers the period from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2021. It is the sixth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Philippines to be submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. In the report, the Secretary-General highlights trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children by parties to the conflict in the Philippines and provides details on the progress made towards ending and preventing such violations since the previous report ([S/2020/777](#)) and the adoption by the Working Group of its conclusions on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Philippines ([S/AC.51/2020/9](#)). He also outlines the progress made and challenges involved in conducting dialogue with parties to the conflict. Where possible, perpetrators of grave violations are identified. In the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/76/871-S/2022/493](#)), the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the New People's Army (NPA) are listed for the recruitment and use of children in annex II, section A, as parties that had not put in place measures to improve the protection of children.

2. The information contained in the present report was verified by the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting in the Philippines, which is co-chaired by the United Nations Resident Coordinator and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and related response measures, including restrictions on movement, exacerbated existing challenges in documenting and verifying grave violations against children. Consequently, the information presented in the present report does not represent the full extent of grave violations committed against children in the Philippines during the reporting period, and the actual number of grave violations is likely to be higher. Where incidents were committed earlier but verified only during the reporting period, that information is qualified as relating to an incident that was later verified.

II. Overview of political and security developments

3. Since the previous report ([S/2020/777](#)), there have been sporadic and low-intensity clashes between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and armed groups. The period under review was marked by the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of related measures to contain the spread of the virus, including community quarantine protocols imposed throughout the country. On 26 March 2020, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), composed of an armed wing, NPA, and a political branch, the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), announced a unilateral ceasefire to facilitate the response to COVID-19, in line with the appeal for a global ceasefire issued by the Secretary-General. The announcement came three days after a similar announcement by the Armed Forces. Despite the ceasefires, attacks were carried out in Davao del Norte and Rizal Provinces, allegedly by NPA, according to the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines.¹ NDFP denied the allegations and accused the Armed Forces of being responsible for the

¹ Jacqueline Ann de Guia, spokesperson for the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines, statements on the attack against the indigenous community in Davao Del Norte and on the armed encounter between the military and the New People's Army in Rizal, 26 and 30 March 2020. The Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines is an independent national human rights institution, created under the 1987 Constitution and established on 5 May 1987, by virtue of Executive Order No. 163.

attack in Rizal Province. Following reciprocal accusations of attacks by both NPA and the Armed Forces, both parties ended their ceasefires in April 2020.

4. On 3 July 2020, the Government of the Philippines adopted The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 (Republic Act No. 11479), which was intended to prevent, prohibit and criminalize terrorism in the Philippines. The Commission on Human Rights raised concerns about the broad definition of terrorism included in the Act, which the Commission stated was prone to abuses, in particular towards vulnerable communities, including children, as well as towards humanitarian actors who have been accused of association with armed groups and designated as terrorists and had limited access to legal safeguards. Following the adoption of the Act, some indigenous community schools in Mindanao were forced to close by the Government, owing to their suspected association with NPA. The practice of “red-tagging”, which consists in the Government accusing individuals of links with CPP-NPA, led to the arrests and killings of civil society members and human rights defenders; most of those killings remain unresolved (see [A/HRC/44/22](#)). On 7 December 2020, the President, Rodrigo Duterte, announced that he would not declare the usual holiday ceasefire with NPA and would no longer participate in any peace talks with its political front, NDFP, for the rest of his term, citing continuing armed offensives by NPA.

5. On 5 February 2021, the President signed Proclamation Nos. 1090 to 1093, by which a national amnesty commission was created to process applications for granting amnesty to armed group members who had committed crimes while fighting for their political beliefs. Separate proclamations were issued in February 2021, including for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), for the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and for CPP-NPA and CPP-NPDF. In addition, on 28 October 2021, the President signed Republic Act No. 11593, by which the transition period of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority was extended from 2022 to 2025, which is expected to allow for the completion of transitional programming and institution-building necessary to sustain the peace process in the region.

6. During the period under review, the security situation in Mindanao remained fragile, with continuing military operations by the Armed Forces against members of NPA and against the Dawlah Islamiyah-Turaife Group, BIFF, ASG and other Da’esh-inspired groups, including in new areas, such as Datu Hoffer Ampatuan, Guindulungan and South Upi municipalities. Armed Forces military operations against armed groups intensified, resulting in civilian casualties among MILF communities. In addition, violence by Da’esh-inspired groups continued throughout the reporting period.

7. Those developments led to the continuation of a long-standing pattern of population displacement, mostly affecting indigenous communities. The Government placed Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Mamasapano, Shariff Saydona Mustafa and Talitay municipalities under a “state of calamity” on 6 April 2021, owing to conflict and population displacement. In the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, attacks by the Armed Forces targeting indigenous communities, in particular community leaders and schools, increased during the reporting period. The combined threats of armed conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic posed further challenges to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, such as shelter, food, livelihood, water, sanitation and hygiene, to internally displaced persons.

III. Update on the main actors involved in the armed conflict

8. NPA has remained active since the previous report ([S/2020/777](#)), and the increase in grave violations against children attributed to the group coincided with the revocation of peace talks between the Government and NDFP and the

implementation of the “whole-of-nation” approach² adopted by the Government, which was expanded to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in October 2020, following the creation of the Bangsamoro Task Force – Ending Local Armed Conflict under Executive Order No. 0010 of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority.

9. ASG continued to engage in bombings, extortion, kidnappings for ransom and killings, which represented a serious challenge to the work of the country task force. In April 2020, a senior leader of ASG surrendered in Parang city in Sulu Province. Some 128 members of the group also surrendered in December 2020, during intense military operations conducted by the Armed Forces. In 2021, another 20 members surrendered, following the death of two sub-leaders of ASG, and benefited from reintegration programmes.

10. In addition, two of the three factions of BIFF, namely the Imam Bongos and Karialan factions, have been advancing discussions for cooperation with the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, and more than 900 BIFF members have expressed their willingness to rejoin MILF.

11. Grave violations against children committed by Da’esh-inspired groups continued. Among them, the Maute Group, which had been the main perpetrator of violations during the siege of Marawi, has been dissolved since the death of its leaders. However, the Group’s remnants have joined the Dawlah Islamiyah faction, becoming the Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group. Aside from those groups, several other armed groups active in the country have reported ties with Da’esh, for example, the faction of ASG based in Basilan Province, led by Furuji Indama, the Dawlah Islamiyah faction of BIFF led by Abu Turaife and another Dawlah Islamiyah splinter faction from BIFF under Salahuddin Hassan.

12. According to the Government, following the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in March 2014, 19,345 MILF combatants were decommissioned during the first phase, conducted in 2015, the second phase, conducted over the period 2019–2020, and the first part of the third phase, conducted in 2021/22. The third phase is set to be completed in 2022, during which another 14,000 MILF combatants are expected to be decommissioned. The decommissioning process is a key provision of the Comprehensive Agreement and its Annex on Normalization, which is aimed at helping with the reintegration of former MILF-Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) combatants.

IV. Grave violations against children

13. Between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021, the country task force verified 115 grave violations against 104 children (62 boys, 42 girls). This represents a decrease compared with the previous report (331), although the latter covered a three-year period (S/2020/777). The country task force verified 63 violations in 2020 and 52 in 2021. Two children (one boy, one girl) were affected by multiple violations. Killing and maiming, recruitment and use and attacks on schools and hospitals were the three most verified violations. Killing and maiming remained the most prevalent, accounting for more than half of all violations (67). A high number of child casualties could not be attributed to a specific party (21), as they resulted from crossfire during clashes between government forces and armed groups (16) or from explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices (5). Recruitment and use was the

² Campaign implemented under Executive Order 70 of 4 December 2018 by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, created to institutionalize a “whole-of-nation” approach.

second most verified violation, with 38 children affected, followed by 7 attacks on schools and hospitals.

14. When perpetrators could be identified, the highest number of violations were attributed to NPA (47). Other parties responsible for violations included the Armed Forces (21), ASG (16), the National Police (5), the Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (2) and BIFF (1). Mindanao remained the most affected region during the reporting period, with 83 per cent of the total number of violations, which is explained mostly by the presence of all armed groups in that geographical area. The majority of grave violations verified were committed in Maguindanao (27), Bukidnon (17), Agusan del Sur (9), Surigao del Sur (9) and Davao del Norte (7) Provinces. An increasing number of violations were also verified in the regions of Northern Mindanao and Davao, affecting predominantly indigenous people in the context of the armed conflict between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and NPA.

15. In addition, the country task force late-verified two cases of sexual violence affecting two girls, attributed to the Armed Forces, that had occurred in 2018 and 2019.

16. The number of children detained for alleged association with armed groups decreased since the previous report, but the lack of facilities and limited capacity of social workers to address the special needs of detained children are an ongoing challenge, including in the implementation of the Special Protection of Children in Situations of Armed Conflict Act (Republic Act No. 11188). In addition, some children who had been detained were affected by delays in their case management, owing to COVID-19-related restrictions that further constrained bureaucratic processes to facilitate their reintegration.

17. Access and security concerns and increasing risks and threats to human rights defenders and monitors posed challenges for the verification of violations, in particular in remote areas of the country. In addition, the limited capacities of the country task force have varied over the period under review and hampered its ability to monitor, document and verify grave violations. Furthermore, continuing restrictions related to COVID-19, including on movements, also rendered monitoring and reporting more difficult. As a result, the data contained in the present report does not represent the full extent of grave violations committed in the Philippines.

A. Recruitment and use

18. The country task force verified the recruitment and use of 38 children (19 boys, 19 girls), aged between 11 and 17 years. Of those, 12 were under the age of 15 years at the time of recruitment. This is a decrease compared with the previous report (67) and could be explained by the absence of cases attributed to MILF following the signature of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and the subsequent ratification of the Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (Republic Act No. 11054) in February 2018. The main perpetrators were armed groups (36), namely, NPA (33), followed by Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (2) and ASG (1). Two cases were attributed to the Armed Forces. Children were used in support roles (11), for example, as medics or supply officers, in combat roles (6) and for unknown purposes (21). Children were recruited and used in Bukidnon (9), Davao del Norte (7), Negros Oriental (4), Misamis Oriental (4), Agusan del Sur (3), Negros Occidental (3), Surigao del Sur (2), Davao Oriental (2), Leyte (2), Agusan del Norte (1) and Sulu (1).

19. NPA was responsible for 80 per cent of all cases of recruitment and use (33) verified by the country task force. Children were used in support and combat roles. Recruitment and use by NPA continued in spite of its internal 2012 declaration and

programme of action for the rights, protection and welfare of children, which sets the minimum age of recruitment by the group at 18 years of age, but stipulates that, from the age of 15 years, children may be admitted as trainees or apprentices and assigned to self-defence and other non-combat units and tasks. For example, on 9 September 2021, an 11-year-old boy and a 17-year-old girl, who had been used as a medic within the armed group, were arrested along with eight NPA members during a military operation in a forested area in San Fernando municipality in Bukidnon Province. The city social welfare office provided food and clothing, but, owing to a lack of available facilities, both children stayed at the Armed Forces military camp while applying for the Government's local reintegration programme. In another example, in Davao Oriental Province, a 17-year-old boy who had joined NPA in 2018 voluntarily surrendered to the Armed Forces during the reporting period. He had served as a courier before participating in combat.

20. The country task force verified that two children (one boy, one sex unknown) were used by the Armed Forces in support roles. For example, a 17-year-old boy from an indigenous community was used as a guide by the Armed Forces for two days in November 2020. In a separate incident, on 3 November 2021, a 15-year-old boy was killed by NPA in Buenavista, Agusan del Norte Province, after he was asked by two Armed Forces soldiers to drive them to their military detachment. In addition, and of concern, in Davao del Norte Province, a 15-year-old boy and 16-year-old girl recruited by NPA as a supply officer and a medic, respectively, voluntarily surrendered to the Armed Forces with five adult members of the armed group. They stayed at an Armed Forces crisis centre, but were brought to a military camp for debriefing and used during a press conference.

Deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged association with armed forces or armed groups

21. A total of 29 children (15 boys, 14 girls), some as young as 5 months old, were held in detention by the Armed Forces and the National Police, in connection with alleged association with armed groups. Of those children, 21 were released later. However, and of concern, eight remained in detention as at December 2021, for reasons that included lack of childcare facilities. Periods of detention ranged between two days and four months. In Sulu province, 10 children (5 boys, 5 girls), aged from 5 months to 10 years, and their mothers, were arrested by the Armed Forces and the National Police on suspicion of being relatives of members of AGG. Owing to the lack of available programmatic services, they were held in National Police custody from 18 February to 15 May 2021, before they were all released. During that time, the children could not be handed over to other relatives because of alleged security concerns.

22. UNICEF has continued to refer cases of children detained for alleged association with armed groups to the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Council and to the Council for the Welfare of Children for further coordination and action by the Government's Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict. Children previously detained at military camps have been reintegrated with their families through the facilitation of the municipal offices for social welfare and development and have received financial assistance through the Government's local reintegration programme.

B. Killing and maiming

23. The country task force verified the killing (19) and maiming (48) of 67 children (46 boys, 21 girls), 19 per cent of whom were below the age of 5 years (13). There were 46 child casualties in 2020 and 21 in 2021.

24. Verified incidents of the killing and maiming of children were attributed to the Armed Forces (16), ASG (14), NPA (12), the National Police (4) and unidentified perpetrators (21), the latter set during crossfire between the Armed Forces and BIFF (14) or between the Armed Forces and NPA (2) or by explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices (5). Violations were verified in Maguindanao (27), Sulu (14), Surigao del Sur (6), Agusan del Sur (4), Sorsogon (4), Davao de Oro (3), Albay (3), Masbate (2) North Cotabato (2), Capiz (1) and Agusan del Norte (1). Child casualties were mostly the result of crossfire between Armed Forces and armed groups (16), followed by explosive remnants of war and the use of improvised explosive devices (9). For instance, in March 2020, four children, aged 12 to 14, were maimed by a grenade launched by NPA during an encounter with the Armed Forces in Sorsogon Province. On 24 August 2020, an attack carried out by ASG in Jolo, Sulu Province, killed 2 boys, aged 15 and 16 years, and wounded 12 other children from an improvised explosive device attached to a motorcycle parked in front of a restaurant and a person-borne improvised explosive device carried by a woman. On 4 June 2021, four children (two girls, two boys), aged between 1 and 9 years, were wounded during a police operation in search of loose firearms in Maguindanao Province.

25. Teenage boys were documented to be more at risk of being killed or maimed, owing to their roles at the front lines, for those associated with parties to conflict. The number of child casualties decreased since the previous report (139), owing most likely to hostilities in remote locations, which lowered the risk of civilian casualties, but also hampered access by the country task force to monitor violations owing to the inaccessibility of the locations.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

26. The country task force verified one case of sexual violence against a 13-year-old girl who was forced to marry an ASG member during her association with the armed group in Sulu. In addition, the country task force late-verified two violations against two girls, attributed to the Armed Forces, that had occurred in 2018 and 2019, noting constraints in the timely investigation of and action on such incidents. Further allegations of sexual violence affecting two girls in 2020 and two girls in 2021 were received but not verified.

27. Incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence continue to be underreported. Local government officials and country task force partners have received information of alleged incidents, but victims and/or their families did not wish to report further, owing to fear and risks of stigma.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

28. The country task force verified 7 attacks on schools and related protected persons and none on hospitals, a significant decrease compared with the previous report (62 attacks on schools and 36 attacks on hospitals). Most attacks (5) occurred in 2021. Four attacks were attributed to government security forces, specifically the Armed Forces (2), the National Police (1) and the Armed Forces and National Police jointly (1), followed by BIFF (1), NPA (1) and unidentified perpetrators (1). Incidents took place in Bukidnon (2), Surigao del Sur (1), Sultan Kudarat (1), Cebu (1), Agusan del Sur (1) and Maguindanao (1) Provinces. The incidents included threats made against three education personnel, including two who were indigenous community schoolteachers, the shooting of one school principal and the demolition of three indigenous community schools.

29. For example, in October 2020, following a clash with military personnel in Surigao del Sur Province, NPA members shot a school principal they mistook for a soldier. On 21 October 2021, BIFF members harassed Armed Forces soldiers in the area, resulting in armed confrontations, during which the school was hit. No students or teachers were hurt, but the incident caused fear in the community, especially among children.

30. Indigenous communities were especially affected by incidents of attacks on schools. For instance, both military personnel and local government officials demolished an indigenous community school in Bukidnon Province in June 2021, for the alleged association of the school, its personnel and its students with NPA and for their alleged participation in anti-Government rallies. Threats against indigenous school personnel by the National Police in Cebu Province were also verified. Five teachers were detained for the alleged kidnapping, trafficking and abuse of children from indigenous communities. The teachers were also accused of being associated with NPA and of recruiting students for the armed group. They were detained from 15 February to 14 May 2021, and the charges against them were subsequently dropped for lack of evidence and lack of probable cause. While in detention, the teachers were reportedly isolated and denied visits by their lawyers and families. In a separate incident, indigenous community schools were forced to close by the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, owing to their suspected association with NPA, and the transfer of indigenous children to State-accredited schools was a challenge because classes were being conducted online owing to COVID-19. Access to education for indigenous children therefore remained limited during that period.

Military use of schools

31. The country task force verified the military use of three schools by the Armed Forces in 2020. For example, in two separate incidents in Agusan del Sur and Isabela Provinces, the Armed Forces used the facilities of two schools while encamped in the area. The Armed Forces vacated the schools after four days in Isabela, and after a month in Agusan del Sur, following dialogues with school administrators and leaders of the indigenous community school, as well as with key member agencies of the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict, including the Council for the Welfare of Children and the Committee on Human Rights.

E. Abduction

32. The country task force verified the abduction of two boys which took place in 2020 and 2021, both in Agusan del Sur Province. The perpetrators were NPA (1) and the Armed Forces (1). For instance, the task force verified the abduction, on 16 February 2021, of a 14-year-old boy in Agusan del Sur Province by the Armed Forces. Following his abduction, the boy was used as a hostage by Armed Forces elements to lead them to his family residence and to force his parents, alleged NPA members, to surrender. He and his family were shot and killed by the Armed Forces.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

33. No incidents of denial of humanitarian access to children were verified. However, two alleged attacks by NPA were reported during pre-emptive evacuations in Surigao del Sur Province and food aid distribution in Leyte Province, before and after Typhoon Rai, and are under verification. The monitoring and verification of violations was challenged by access restrictions due to the volatile security situation,

the remote location and inaccessibility of communities and the implementation of community quarantine protocols in the entire country.

V. Progress in and challenges to ending and preventing grave violations against children

34. The country task force continued to engage with the Government of the Philippines to strengthen the protection of children. Their partnership was strengthened in Manila and Mindanao, and, as a result, a monitoring and reporting mechanism was established nationwide.

35. Following the enactment of Republic Act No. 11188 in January 2019, and pursuant to its implementing rules and regulations, the country task force supported the finalization of the Protocol on Handling Children in Situation of Armed Conflict, formally adopted on 29 September 2020. All previous guidelines and regulations issued by different implementing agencies on children in situations of armed conflict were combined and updated in the Protocol, and, starting from December 2021, it was being promulgated by the relevant government agencies with the aim of being mainstreamed into the chain of command of the Armed Forces in order to strengthen protection systems for children.

36. From March to June 2021, the Regional Committees and Sub-Committees for the Welfare of Children and the Regional Child Protection Working Groups conducted a series of nationwide orientation sessions on Republic Act No. 11188 and the handling protocol, in partnership with the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict. Supported by the country task force, the initiative reached a total of 3,139 child protection actors across 17 regions, including members of the Government security sector.

37. On 9 June 2021, a strategic plan to prevent and respond to grave child rights violations in situations of armed conflict was signed between the Armed Forces and the country task force. The members of the country task force provided technical support on the conduct of training for military personnel, held from 1 to 3 December, on policies, principles and mechanisms relating to children in situations of armed conflict, including the relevant Armed Forces protocol and the United Nations-Armed Forces strategic plan. The activity was organized by the Armed Forces of the Philippines Center for Law of Armed Conflict. In addition, UNICEF has been supporting the Commission on Human Rights to assist the Armed Forces and other key government agencies in developing their agency-specific protocols on children in situations of armed conflict. Of note, the Commission raised concerns over children released from armed groups who remain in temporary military custody at Armed Forces camps, without access to adequate facilities to ensure appropriate rehabilitation and reintegration.

38. On 13 June 2021, the National Police issued its child protection policy, through which it outlined and adopted provisions of Republic Act No. 11188 and its handling protocol, so as to ensure compliance by its personnel and prevent grave violations against children.

39. On 22 July 2021, the United Nations and the Government of the Philippines signed the United Nations Joint Programme on Human Rights, a three-year programme developed jointly with the United Nations Resident Coordinator; the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; the Office of Counter Terrorism; and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution [45/33](#), a report on progress made in the implementation of the

resolution and the Joint Programme will be presented at the fifty-first session of the Human Rights Council, in October 2022.

40. The Regional Committee for the Welfare of Children and the Regional Juvenile Justice and Welfare Council in Northern Mindanao convened a meeting on monitoring and responding to cases of grave violations against children and established a reporting mechanism within the region. UNICEF participated in the discussion, together with regional and provincial inter-agency representatives from the Commission of Human Rights, the Armed Forces and the National Police.

41. The country task force continued to coordinate with the Council for the Welfare of Children, as Chair of the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict, on areas of concern for the protection of children, including regarding the referral of detention cases, notably in the Northern Mindanao region, and the reported presence of armed security forces at the reopening of a school in Pangasinan Province. In response, the Council referred the latter incident to the Philippines National Police Women and Children Protection Center and the Regional Sub-Committee on the Welfare of Children and provided relevant materials on policies relating to children in situations of armed conflict, to be disseminated among police personnel on the ground, in order to prevent military presence in schools. In addition, the Department of Education issued a statement on the need for field officials and school administrators to comply with the National Policy Framework on Learners and Schools as Zones of Peace.

42. Through support from UNICEF, the Commission of Human Rights hired eight protection monitors for children in situations of armed conflict in five regions of its national and Mindanao offices: Western Visayas, Western Mindanao, Northern Mindanao, Southern Mindanao and Caraga Administrative Region. The monitors are tasked with strengthening the Commission's efforts in monitoring cases of grave violations against children in areas identified as most affected by conflict and with helping to collect relevant data.

43. In September 2021, the Council for the Welfare of Children facilitated the hiring of a communication for development specialist, primarily to assist in the development of advocacy materials on Republic Act No. 11188 and other policy advocacy priorities, as an alternative to conducting face-to-face activities, given the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the Council officially launched a social media campaign to raise awareness about the Act, entitled "War is not a game for children", to promote the new law.

44. In December 2021, the Council launched another social media campaign to raise awareness about Republic Act No. 11188. That campaign was aimed at highlighting the rights of children in situations of armed conflict, as provided in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and national laws.

45. On 10 December 2021, the President signed into law the Act Prohibiting the Practice of Child Marriage and Imposing Penalties (Republic Act No. 11596). That was seen as an important step in upholding children's rights and securing their well-being, including in situations of armed conflict. Under the law, penalties are imposed for the facilitation and solemnization of child marriage and for cohabitation by an adult with a child outside wedlock. This serves to address cases of the forced marriage of girls to armed group fighters and other acts resulting in sexual exploitation or violence.

46. The country task force documented the lessons learned from the implementation of the United Nations-MILF action plan and the disengagement of children associated with MILF-BIAF. The Bangsamoro regional government, with support from UNICEF and civil society, continued the programme of follow-up and psychosocial assistance

and life skills training to 1,869 children disengaged from MILF and their families. The reintegration programme facilitated the provision of life skills, psychosocial support and referral services to 738 children (who were under 18 years of age), as well as the distribution of one-time financial assistance for 1,568 families. Building on previous gains from and experiences in community-level engagement, UNICEF engaged with religious leaders to deliver messages on child rights and child protection through *khutbah*, or pulpit addresses, read regularly during Islamic services.

47. The Government's continuing counter-insurgency operations and the arrest of former peace consultants has resulted in the termination of the dialogue with NDFP, which represents NPA, facilitated by the United Nations. While the country task force attempted to sustain its dialogue with NDFP, the issuance of Executive Order No. 70 in December 2018 and subsequent operations have affected the availability of NDFP to continue its engagement with the country task force.

VI. Observations and recommendations

48. **I am encouraged by the decrease in grave violations against children in the Philippines since my previous report, in particular the significant decrease in killing and maiming and in attacks on schools and hospitals, but I remain concerned that grave violations against children continue to be committed. I call upon all parties to the conflict in the Philippines to immediately halt and prevent grave violations against children and comply with their respective obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.**

49. **I commend the Government of the Philippines for the signature, by the Armed Forces jointly with the United Nations, of the strategic plan to prevent and respond to grave child rights violations in situations of armed conflict, as well as the issuance by the National Police of its child protection policy, to prevent grave violations against children. I call on the Government to swiftly disseminate and implement those commitments. I encourage the Government to strengthen the functionality of the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict, in order to reinforce the protection of children's rights, including by taking all measures necessary to prevent sexual violence against, and the killing, torture and abduction of, children in the context of armed conflict, to thoroughly investigate allegations of violations against children and to bring the perpetrators to justice.**

50. **I further call upon the Government to continue its collaboration with the country task force and the United Nations to address ongoing violations against children; support the development of agency-specific protocols on children involved in armed conflict, in compliance with the Special Protection of Children in Situations of Armed Conflict Act (Republic Act No. 11188); facilitate access to conflict-affected areas for child protection actors; and strengthen the capacity of its armed and security forces and auxiliary forces on the matter of child protection.**

51. **I call upon the Government to endorse the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (the Paris Principles).**

52. **I am concerned about the detention of children for alleged or actual association with armed groups and call upon the Government to respect international juvenile justice standards and to continue the implementation of Republic Act No. 11188, which provides that children should be treated as victims and that their treatment must be determined with the best interests of the child as the primary consideration. I further call upon the Government to enhance the**

prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

53. I remain concerned about persistent attacks and threats of attacks on schools and their personnel, in particular in indigenous communities. I urge the Government to fully implement its National Policy Framework on Learners and Schools as Zones of Peace of November 2019 and to advocate the prevention of the “red-tagging” of schools, teachers and children. I reiterate my call upon the Government to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration.

54. I am concerned that improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war continue to be a leading cause of the killing and maiming of children. I call upon the Government to fully implement the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction, and upon armed groups to refrain from using landmines, improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war.

55. I appeal to the Government and other parties to integrate the protection of children as a central issue in ongoing and future peace negotiations and agreements and encourage the use of the *Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict* issued by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

56. I call upon the Government to respect and continue the implementation of its peace agreement with MILF and to use the lessons learned and best practices collected by my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and UNICEF to prevent violations against children. I further call upon the Government and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority to expedite transitional priorities, including transitional justice and reconciliation, as well as the adoption of the Indigenous People’s Code.

57. I urge armed groups, in particular NPA and ASG, to immediately halt the recruitment and use of children, to release associated children from their ranks for reintegration purposes and to end and prevent the killing and maiming of children. I call upon all armed groups to abide by their respective obligations and commitments under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including through the provisions of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and to recognize the Paris Principles. I call upon listed armed groups to enter into dialogue with the United Nations for the purpose of developing action plans to end and prevent child recruitment and use and other grave violations, in particular killing and maiming.

58. I urge all parties to allow and facilitate safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access in order to provide assistance to children, in particular from indigenous communities, and to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian partners.

59. I encourage the international donor community to provide financial resources to the United Nations, in order to strengthen its capacities for the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict and to respond to and prevent further violations against children.