



Security Council

Distr.: General
23 September 2024

Original: English

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 seventh report on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Philippines and covers the period from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2023.

In the report, the Secretary-General documents the effects of conflict on children in the Philippines, highlighting trends and patterns of the six grave violations against children, namely the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, attacks on schools, hospitals and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals,^a the abduction of children and the denial of humanitarian access. Where available, the report contains information on perpetrators. It also outlines the progress made in addressing grave violations against children, including through dialogue with parties.

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 child protection in the Philippines.

^a For the purposes of the present report, the phrase “protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals”, used in Security Council resolutions [1998 \(2011\)](#), [2143 \(2014\)](#) and [2427 \(2018\)](#) as well as in the statements by the President of the Security Council of 17 June 2013 ([S/PRST/2013/8](#)) and 31 October 2017 ([S/PRST/2017/21](#)), refers to teachers, doctors, other educational personnel, students and patients.



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 2022 to 31 December 2023. It is the seventh 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 to end and prevent such violations since the previous report ([S/2022/569](#)) and the adoption by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of its conclusions on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Philippines ([S/AC.51/2022/4](#)). It also contains information on progress and challenges in the engagement with parties to the conflict. Where possible, parties to conflict responsible for grave violations are identified.

2. In annex II to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/78/842-S/2024/384](#)), under part B, non-State armed groups that commit grave violations affecting children in situations of armed conflict not on the agenda of the Security Council, or in other situations, three non-State armed groups in the Philippines are listed for the recruitment and use of children, namely the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the New People's Army (NPA).

3. The information contained in the present report was verified by the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting in the Philippines, co-chaired by the United Nations Resident Coordinator and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) representative. Challenges relating to insecurity in and access to conflict-affected areas, along with access restrictions imposed by parties to the conflict, constrained the documentation and verification of grave violations against children. Therefore, the information contained 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 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 verified at a later date.

II. Overview of political, security and humanitarian developments

4. The reporting period saw a relatively low number of large-scale armed engagements in Mindanao. Nevertheless, sporadic low-intensity clashes continued to affect the overall security situation. As of December 2023, the Government and humanitarian agencies had recorded around 135,820 displaced persons in Mindanao, of whom approximately 87,424 were displaced owing to armed conflict, 7,908 owing to *rido* (clan feuds), and 12,905 owing to crime and violence. These displacements increased the risk of children being subjected to grave violations. Moreover, political violence became more frequent during the period leading up to the barangay (village) elections.

5. The national elections held on 9 May 2022 resulted in challenges for the conduct of child protection activities by humanitarian actors, especially in the Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur and Basilan Provinces, due to election-related security concerns in conflict-affected areas and the transition in the staffing and leadership of key government agencies.

6. In July 2023, the President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos, lifted the state of national emergency in Mindanao, which had been enacted in 2016 following a bomb attack in Davao City. The decision aimed to ease travel restrictions in the region and enhance economic activity and service delivery to benefit local communities, including children.

7. While the Government, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) remained committed to the peace agreement, the peace process was challenged by contentious local politics, uneven implementation of the peace agreement and pockets of local violence resurfacing throughout the region. In 2022, incidents of armed conflict reflected an escalation in violence, followed by a notable surge in 2023, owing to activities involving armed groups outside the peace process, notably ASG, BIFF and Dawlah Islamiyah groups, as well as intra-Moro violence involving local clans and MILF and MNLF. In the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao mainland, ongoing law enforcement operations by the armed forces against various armed groups, along with internal conflicts among these armed groups, led to repeated displacements of the population. In Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte Provinces, in addition to population displacement caused by violent *rido*, or conflicts between armed groups over turf and land, conflict collectively affected hundreds of non-Moro Indigenous Peoples, resulting in the suspension of in-person classes and the deployment of soldiers to the streets so as to provide security for educational personnel reporting for work.

8. The United Nations continued to raise concerns about allegations by government authorities that individuals, groups and organizations were affiliated with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) or NPA and thus were considered part of the country's communist insurgency. This practice, referred to as "red tagging", continued and targeted schools and related protected persons who had supported Indigenous communities and advocated for their rights.

9. The third-party monitoring team, which monitors the implementation of the peace agreement between the Government and MILF, noted that small skirmishes and ceasefire violations continued to occur, mainly in relation to horizontal conflicts over land and conflicts with political dimensions. Following the completion of the United Nations-MILF action plan in 2017, with support from UNICEF and civil society, the Bangsamoro regional government continued to implement a programme of follow-up and the provision of psychosocial assistance and life skills training to 1,869 disengaged children from MILF and their families. No cases of re-recruitment by MILF were recorded or verified.

10. In the Oslo Joint Communiqué of 23 November 2023, the Government and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) indicated their agreement to a principled and peaceful resolution to the armed conflict and agreed to develop a framework that will set the priorities for the peace negotiation, aimed at implementing socioeconomic and political reforms towards a just and lasting peace.

11. Several Da'esh-inspired armed groups continued to be active; among them, the Basilan Province faction of ASG, previously under the leadership of Furuji Indama, the Dawlah Islamiyah faction of BIFF under Abu Turaife, and another Dawlah Islamiyah breakaway from BIFF under Salahuddin Hassan. In Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur, BIFF, a splinter group of MILF, remained active and involved in armed skirmishes, causing displacement and protection concerns. In Visayas and Mindanao, sporadic clashes and continued military offensives against Dawlah Islamiyah-Turaife Group, BIFF, ASG and NPA generated a security threat for communities, causing protection issues and displacement, including of children and their families. The activities of ASG, including bombings, extortion, kidnappings for

ransom and assassinations, continued to affect humanitarian access and the monitoring ability of the country task force.

III. Grave violations against children

12. Between 1 January 2022 and 31 December 2023, the country task force verified 58 grave violations against 43 children (33 boys, 10 girls), which represents a decrease of 49 per cent compared with the previous report (115) ([S/2022/569](#)). The country task force verified 33 violations in 2022 and 25 in 2023. Four children (2 boys, 2 girls) were affected by multiple violations. As reported in previous years, killing and maiming, recruitment and use and attacks on schools remained the three most verified grave violations. After killing and maiming (43 per cent), recruitment and use has remain prevalent, accounting for 38 per cent of the total number of violations. In addition, four grave violations, against three children (2 boys, 1 girl), that had occurred in previous years, were verified in 2022.

13. Most violations were attributed to NPA (24), representing 41 per cent of the total. However, owing to the recurrence of crossfire from military operations against armed groups, the perpetrator in 11 incidents of killing and maiming remained unidentified. Other parties responsible for violations included the Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (9), the Armed Forces of the Philippines (7), Dawlah Islamiyah-Hassan Group (3), the Government's National Intelligence Coordinating Agency jointly with the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (2), ASG (1) and the Philippine National Police (1).

14. Some 53 per cent of the total number of violations occurred in Mindanao, which remained the most affected region, mostly as a result of the presence of all armed groups in that geographical area. Violations occurred in Mindanao (31) in the Provinces of Lanao del Sur (9), Zamboanga del Sur (4), Cotabato (4), Davao de Oro (3), Surigao del Sur (3), Agusan del Sur (2), Sultan Kudarat (2), Surigao del Norte (2) and Sulu (2). In Visayas Region (20), violations took place in the Provinces of Negros Occidental (11), Negros Oriental (5), Northern Samar (2), Samar (1) and Eastern Samar (1). In Luzon Region (7), violations occurred in the Provinces of Benguet (2), Batangas (1), Camarines Sur (1), Abra (1), Masbate (1) and Quezon (1).

15. Boys represented 77 per cent of the total number of victims. Boys and girls between the ages of 13 and 17 were the most affected by recruitment and use by armed groups. These children were also vulnerable to other grave violations, including use by State forces, killing and maiming, abduction, and rape and other forms of sexual violence.

A. Recruitment and use

16. The country task force verified 22 cases of recruitment and use affecting 21 children (17 boys, 4 girls), in 2022 (10) and in 2023 (12). One child was recruited and used by two perpetrators (NPA, Armed Forces of the Philippines). The children in question were between the ages of 13 and 17. The decrease in the number of cases of recruitment and use, compared with the previous reporting period (38), may be explained by the focused military operations, which limited the geographical presence, recruitment and activities of NPA. Incidents of recruitment and use were attributed to NPA (14), Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (4), ASG (2), and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (2). Children were used in combat (11) and support roles (8), including as informants for the armed forces (2), for unknown purposes (2) and for sexual purposes (1). Children were recruited and used in Lanao del Sur (5), Negros Occidental (3), Negros Oriental (2), Davao de Oro (2), Surigao del Norte (2), Agusan

del Sur (2), Sultan Kudarat (2), Sulu (1), Surigao del Sur (1), Samar (1) and Quezon (1) Provinces.

17. For example, a 16-year-old boy was affected by two instances of recruitment and use in Agusan del Sur Province. Between February and March 2023, he had been recruited and used by NPA in a combat role. After turning himself over to the Armed Forces of the Philippines following his association with NPA, the Armed Forces used him for 10 days, as an informant.

18. In another incident, a 16-year-old girl joined NPA for four months, hoping she would be able to go to school for free. She left the armed group after being wounded during a military operation in Sultan Kudarat Province. At the end of the reporting period, the child continued to be in custody of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, while receiving support from municipal social welfare and development personnel.

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

19. A total of 6 children (5 boys, 1 girl) between the ages of 6 months and 16 years old, were detained by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (5) and the Philippine National Police (1), for their or their parents' alleged association with armed groups. Four children were released and two remained in detention, as of December 2023. For example, in Sagay city in Negros Occidental Province, a two-year-old boy was held by the Philippine National Police pending the enrolment of his parents, who had left NPA, in the Government's enhanced comprehensive local reintegration programme.

20. Compared with the previous reporting period, the number of children detained for alleged association with armed groups decreased. Owing to the lack of reintegration facilities, government social welfare and development personnel conducted regular visits to facilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police in order to monitor such cases and provide interim interventions for children who remained in military custody.

B. Killing and maiming

21. The country task force verified the killing (13) and maiming (12) of 25 children (19 boys, 6 girls), 4 of whom were below 5 years old. There were 19 casualties in 2022 and 6 in 2023.

22. Verified incidents of the killing and maiming of children were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (11), NPA (5), the Armed Forces of the Philippines (4), Dawlah Islamiyah-Hassan Group (3) and Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (2). Violations were verified in Negros Occidental (5), Zamboanga del Sur (4), Negros Oriental (3), Cotabato (3), Lanao del Sur (2), Northern Samar (2), Camarines Sur (1), Surigao del Sur (1), Samar (1), Batangas (1), Masbate (1) and Sultan Kudarat (1).

23. Child casualties mostly resulted from crossfire between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and armed groups (10), as well as explosive ordnance (6). As an example, in Northern Samar, two boys, a 12-year-old and a 13-year-old, were killed in crossfire, when NPA members ambushed soldiers of the Armed Forces. In March 2022, in Surigao del Sur Province, a 16-year-old boy from an Indigenous community was hit and wounded in his right hand when members of NPA attacked two Armed Forces soldiers. Subsequently, the boy received treatment at a hospital. In another example, in Camarines Sur Province, a 17-year-old boy was wounded while aboard a motorcycle with four other civilians, after an improvised explosive device exploded.

24. There was a decrease in the number of child casualties compared with the previous reporting period (67); however, a considerable number of attacks in armed conflict areas could not be verified.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

25. In Negros Occidental Province, the country task force verified sexual violence against one girl, perpetrated by a member of NPA. After being abducted with another 15-year-old girl and forced to join the armed group, she was raped.

26. Sexual violence continued to be vastly underreported owing to stigmatization, the fear of reprisals, harmful social norms, the absence of or lack of access to services, impunity and safety concerns. The numbers therefore do not capture the full extent of cases of sexual violence against children that may have occurred in the Philippines but serve to illustrate the severity of the problem.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

27. The country task force verified seven attacks on schools and protected persons in relation to schools and hospitals. The attacks were attributed to Armed Forces of the Philippines (2), an unidentified Dawlah Islamiyah faction (2), jointly to the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency and the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (2) and to the Philippine National Police (1). The incidents included the killing and wounding of teachers and health workers, threats against students and teachers and the forced closure of an Indigenous Peoples' school. One attack on a school resulted in casualties among students and educational personnel.

28. As an example, on 3 December 2023, in Marawi city, Lanao del Sur Province, two teachers were killed and nine others were wounded after an improvised bomb went off at the Mindanao State University gymnasium, which also houses high schools. In addition, 20 students over the age of 18 were injured. Authorities linked the attack to an unidentified Dawlah Islamiyah faction, responding to the series of government offensives against them in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

29. The country task force verified the killing by the Armed Forces of the Philippines of two male volunteer teachers and one female health worker who were conducting community research in Davao de Oro Province.

30. Of concern, the proximity of armed conflict incidents to schools resulted in class suspensions in the Provinces of Basilan, Davao Oriental, Bukidnon, Masbate, Quezon, Rizal and Iloilo.

E. Abduction

31. In Negros Occidental Province, the country task force verified the abduction of two 15-year-old girls by NPA, for an undetermined period. Both were forced to join the armed group. One girl was raped while in captivity.

32. The country task force verified the abduction of one girl by the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Citizen Armed Forces Geographical Unit in the Province of Quezon, Calabarzon Region, which had occurred prior to the reporting period.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

33. Following an earthquake in Abra Province in October 2022, the country task force verified the denial of humanitarian access by NPA. NPA ambushed soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Philippines who were supporting disaster response in affected communities. Two soldiers were killed and another two were injured. They were among personnel of the Armed Forces recalled from combat operations to augment humanitarian relief operations in the area.

IV. Progress and challenges in ending and preventing grave violations against children

34. The country task force continued to support the Government's efforts in implementing Republic Act No. 11188, the "Special Protection of Children in Situations of Armed Conflict Act" of 2019, sustaining its commitment to provide technical assistance to ensure that the provisions of the national legislation are translated into the inter-agency handling protocol as a unified set of guidelines that outlines the case management process for children affected by armed conflict in the Philippines, as well as into agency-specific guidance. The country task force supported the completion of the protocols on handling children in situations of armed conflict of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police and efforts to create the Commission on Human Rights Charter. The agency-specific protocols of the Department of Education, the Department of Health and the Department of Social Welfare and Development were likewise developed and were ready for finalization and adoption. The issuance of these internal guidelines for key agencies is crucial in order to address detention cases requiring intervention by programmatic and social services providers, among other key issues.

35. In August 2023, the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict, with support from UNICEF, convened its members for a workshop in order to discuss and agree on strategies to disseminate the inter-agency protocol on handling children in situations of armed conflict, as well as agency protocols specifically developed by the Armed Forces of the Philippines. During the event, the country task force also shared its concerns regarding children associated with armed groups who remained in the custody of the Armed Forces owing to the lack of safe shelter facilities and the Armed Forces' process of "deradicalization" for such children in their custody.

36. The country task force continued to coordinate with the Council for the Welfare of Children, with respect to the Council's role as Chair of the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict, on activities such as the referral for response on detention cases, as well as the conduct of capacity-building activities on child protection for government personnel. From 15 to 18 February 2022, the country task force conducted a training on the protection of children's rights for the Western Mindanao Command, in which 31 officers of the Armed Forces of the Philippines participated. The Council for the Welfare of Children is strengthening its newly established monitoring and evaluation division project management team to operationalize the Government's monitoring, reporting and response system on grave violations. The same unit, which runs a hotline to address all types of abuse, underwent capacity-building supported by UNICEF.

37. The national strategic plan between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the United Nations ended in June 2023. Under that plan, from 2022 to 2023, the country task force monitored the conduct of capacity-building activities for military personnel and the implementation of the Armed Forces protocol on children in situations of

armed conflict, reaching more than 2,000 military personnel in Iloilo, Tarlac and Nueva Ecija Provinces, with training focused on human rights and international humanitarian law and Republic Act No. 11188. Periodic bilateral meetings between the Armed Forces and the country task force were organized to monitor the progress in implementing the strategic plan. Following a joint review of its implementation, the strategic plan is set to be extended for another 24 months. The proposed extension includes additional activities, as agreed by the Armed Forces and the country task force, such as interventions to reinforce and expand the definition of schools in the Armed Forces protocol on children in situations of armed conflict, in order to ensure adequate protection to learners and personnel in learning institutions not covered by the Department of Education.

38. The country task force provided input for draft legislation to promote and protect the rights of internally displaced persons. Among other provisions, the draft bill includes mitigation, prevention and response measures to protect displaced populations, especially children, from all forms of violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and discrimination.

39. The Bangsamoro Human Rights Commission, in partnership with UNICEF, developed an operations manual for its functions as ombudsperson for children in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

V. Observations and recommendations

40. I am encouraged by the decrease in the number of grave violations against children in the Philippines, in particular those killed and maimed. I remain concerned, however, that grave violations against children continue to be committed. I call upon all parties to conflict to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, to put in place measures to end and prevent violations against children, as well as to engage with the United Nations to adopt concrete measures to that end. I note the collaboration of the Armed Forces of the Philippines with the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines and the United Nations to address grave violations against children.

41. I welcome the finalization of protocols on handling children in situations of armed conflict by government departments and agencies. I call upon the Government to accelerate the dissemination of agency-specific protocols to government agencies and to military and key agency personnel, as well as to frontline service providers, so as to ensure their application in the field, including through timely, effective and appropriate assistance programmes for victims of grave violations.

42. I call upon the Government to ensure that detained children are immediately handed over and referred to civilian facilities, instead of detention centres, in accordance with the law, and are provided with adequate reintegration and support services. I remain concerned by the Armed Forces' process of "deradicalization" for formerly associated children currently in their custody. I note that under Republic Act No. 11188 on the special protection of children in situations of armed conflict, children formerly associated with armed groups should be treated as victims and provided with the assistance necessary, including medical, psychosocial, legal, shelter and education services, regardless of actual or alleged association with parties to the conflict. I call upon the Government to ensure that reintegration programmes are sustainable and integrated into existing governmental systems, including in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, including safeguards to prevent the re-recruitment of children by armed groups.

43. I welcome the coordination between the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict and the United Nations on the referral of detention cases, to enhance the protection of schools and to build the capacity of governmental and non-governmental partners to protect children.

44. I call upon the Government to revive the coordination between the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict and the country task force on ensuring the integration of child rights and child protection into the agenda of peace negotiations and agreements. I welcome the release of the Oslo Joint Communiqué, on 23 November 2023, which signalled the intention to reopen peace negotiations between the Government and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), which represents the New People's Army (NPA). I call upon the Government and NDFP to include child protection in peace negotiations.

45. I call upon the Government to continue its collaboration with the country task force to protect children affected by armed conflict, to extend and continue to implement the strategic plan with the Armed Forces of the Philippines, to align its priorities with the provisions of Republic Act No. 11188, and to prevent the "red tagging" of schools, teachers and children. I underline that civilians and civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools and their personnel, must be protected. I call upon the Government to facilitate access for the United Nations and partners to conflict-affected areas in order to protect children.

46. I call upon the Government to continue the implementation of Republic Act No. 11188, inter alia, by taking all necessary measures to prevent the extrajudicial killing, torture and abduction of children, to thoroughly investigate alleged cases of violations against children, including sexual violence, and to bring perpetrators to justice, including in cases involving the armed and security forces. I appeal to the Government to ensure that all victims have access to justice and are provided with comprehensive, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive protection services.

47. I call upon the Government to include safeguards in the provision of mental health and psychological support to conflict-affected communities, including children, and to ensure that such support is provided by specialized civilian actors.

48. I urge the Government to adopt the draft human rights defenders' protection bill in order to prevent human rights violations and abuses from being perpetrated against human rights defenders, including child rights advocates and Indigenous Peoples' organizations.

49. I call upon the Government to adopt the internal displacement bill in order to promote and protect the rights of internally displaced persons, including children in conflict-affected areas.

50. I call upon the Government to finalize the creation of a Commission on Human Rights Charter.

51. I urge armed groups to immediately end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, to release associated children from their ranks for reintegration purposes, to end and prevent the killing and maiming of children, and to end and prevent attacks on schools and hospitals. I call upon all armed groups to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

52. I urge parties to fully implement the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and its Annex on Normalization, particularly with respect to the decommissioning and disbanding of private armed groups, and I urge the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission to address conflict-related intercommunal divisions.

53. I appeal to the international donor community to provide resources for the United Nations, in particular for the Resident Coordinator and UNICEF, as co-chairs of the country task force, in order to continue building national capacities, monitor, verify, report on, respond to and prevent further grave violations against children, including through dialogue with parties to the conflict, and advocate with protection networks and communities.
