



## Philippines: Soldiers on the School Grounds <sup>[1]</sup>

### Armed Forces Should Cease Military Use of Schools

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(New York) – The Philippine armed forces should end its unlawful use of schools for military purposes, Human Rights Watch said today.

During a recent eight-day investigation in the Cordillera Autonomous Region on northern Luzon island, Human Rights Watch found five cases in which the military, in violation of Philippine and international law, had used parts of functioning schools as barracks or bases for military detachments since 2009. This military use of schools lasted for periods ranging from three months to more than a year.

“Establishing army camps at schools puts both children’s security and their education at risk,” said [Bede Sheppard](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, senior children’s rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Schools should be places for learning and play, free from fear.”

Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 20 principals, teachers, and government officials in the Cordillera. Many expressed grave concerns about both the potential for attacks on their schools by opposition armed groups brought on by the military presence, and the possibility of inappropriate conduct by soldiers toward the students. The region has been affected by a long-running armed conflict between the Philippine government and the communist New People’s Army insurgency. Both government forces and the rebels in the area have been implicated in serious violations of the laws of war.

“The community was worried that something might happen between the two groups,” a teacher told Human Rights Watch, speaking of government troops previously based at her school and the New People’s Army

A teacher from another school used recently by troops said, “[Soldiers] staying there is a big threat. They just leave arms lying around and you know that kids may come play with them.”

Educators told Human Rights Watch that the presence of troops in their schools distracted students from their studies and created an inappropriate environment for children by bringing weapons, alcohol, and pornography onto school grounds.

The Philippine government banned the use of schools for military purposes in 1992 in response to abuses under the government of Ferdinand Marcos. Violations of the ban on using schools as military bases runs counter to statements by President Benigno Aquino III that he would end human rights abuses by the Philippine armed forces, Human Rights Watch said.

The laws of war prohibit attacks on schools unless they are being used for military purposes, and limit such use by parties to the conflict. The extended military use of schools may also violate students’ right to education under international human rights law.

“President Aquino should order the troops to get out, and stay out, of schools,” Sheppard said.

### **Sadanga National High School, Mountain Province**

When Human Rights Watch visited Sadanga National High School in Mountain Province on November 18, 2011, soldiers from the 54<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion were using part of the school. The school has over 200 students, ages 12 to 18.

Although Sadanga Mayor Gabino Ganggangan told Human Rights Watch that the soldiers were using adjacent private land, Human Rights Watch found some soldiers encamped on school grounds. A military vehicle was also parked in the school's courtyard and soldiers roamed the school grounds. The company's barracks were set up on the end of the school courtyard opposite the only entry point, requiring military personnel and vehicles to cross school grounds to enter and exit. A sentry overlooked the only access road to the school. Human Rights Watch was told the army had at one time deployed an armed sentry at the school's only entrance.

More than a dozen soldiers have been stationed at the site for over a year. Troops had constructed a small health center on school grounds, which school personnel cited as a positive outcome of their presence. While it is understandable that remote communities would appreciate any assistance offered, there are safer and more effective ways to provide services than housing a dozen armed men near students, Human Rights Watch said.

A sergeant at the school conceded to Human Rights Watch that their presence was "against the law," but said their presence was justified because it was done "with consent" of local officials. The town mayor similarly told Human Rights Watch, "We know about the law, but we are practical here."

### **Gueday Elementary School, Mountain Province**

Two weeks before the general election in May 2010, at least 12 soldiers established a base at Gueday elementary school in Besao municipality. The troops occupied a building used as a storage room for the school. The school has 54 students in grades 1 to 4, and four female teachers.

A local official told Human Rights Watch, "We told the children not to enter [the building] because the soldiers had arms everywhere." However, local residents said that the soldiers allowed some students to enter their quarters, where they sometimes fed the children and watched movies with them. "Children enjoy watching these bang-bang-bang movies," one resident said.

The soldiers asked children to run errands for them, such as to buy food. The school received a complaint from one parent that a soldier had allegedly threatened to shoot a child during a dispute over whether the child had returned the correct change after a food purchase. The military denied the incident to the school.

The soldiers did some sweeping around the school, led morning exercises for the children, and cut some of the students' hair. They also installed a basketball hoop near the local hall.

The soldiers stayed at the school for approximately three months, then moved to the local hall. The move was in response to parents' concerns that the presence of the soldiers in the school could endanger children by making it a target for attack by the New People's Army, and that the soldiers were distracting students from their studies.

After the troops moved into the hall, children in the neighboring daycare center were moved into the local church. A resident explained to Human Rights Watch, "We were thinking about the children's safety. Children might enter the [town] hall and there were guns there so it is for their safety."

The troops left the village in August 2010.

Principals and teachers at the other schools Human Rights Watch visited requested that their schools not be publicly named, out of either security concerns or fear of negative repercussions.

**Source URL:** <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/11/30/philippines-soldiers-school-grounds>

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[4] <http://www.hrw.org/bios/bede-sheppard>

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