

Breast-feeding backers step up fight vs comm'l greed

By Christian V. Esguerra

LOCAL ADVOCACY GROUPS HAVE stepped up their offensive against giant international milk formula companies, forming what they called a "grand alliance against corporate greed and predatory commercial interests."

The coalition of at least 11 Filipino groups is backed by counterparts from Geneva, London, Boston and Canada, such as the Baby Milk Action and the Infant Feeding Action Coalition (Infact) and the International Baby Food Action Network (Ibfan).

Local members include Nurturers of the Earth Inc., Arugaan, Liga ng mga Barangay ng Pilipinas, Philippine Pharmaceutical Association, Pro-Life and Our Lady of La Leche Movement.

Objective

The alliance's primary goal is to take milk formula companies to task for alleged violations of Executive Order No. 51 or the Milk Code.

Nona Andaya-Castillo, director of Nurturers of the Earth Inc., said she had been monitoring "palpable violations" of the Milk Code by infant formula companies since 1977.

She cited the provisions barring companies from giving "directly or indirectly gifts of any sort" to the general public or to pregnant and nursing mothers. She mentioned one American company, which allegedly sponsored a "Parenting 101" class for parents at a top hospital in Pasig City.

Dr. Elvira Henares-Esguerra, director of Children for Breastfeeding Inc., was unfazed by the existing temporary restraining order imposed by the Supreme Court on the revised implementing rules and regulations of the Milk Code.

Morality

"This is a public health issue, a moral issue involving public good versus private gain, and public health against corporate greed," she said in the alliance's statement to the INQUIRER.

The coalition is banking on the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of 1977 to prosecute milk companies. The group said the law imposed an audit procedure that could purportedly catch an "improper payment of even one paper clip."

Latest supporters

Using the act as basis, "the coalition hopes to send at least one official of a US milk company in the Philippines to jail with the help of the US Department of Justice and Securities and Exchange Commission," it said in a statement.

A key backer of the new coalition is the

Framework Convention Alliance of Geneva, Switzerland and the Public Health Advocacy Institute of Boston. It described the Massachusetts-based group as the "most successful health lobby in the history of advocacy."

The coalition said the two groups had

promised to lend their expertise in instituting class suits against milk companies over the deaths of around 16,000 babies yearly.

The World Health Organization and other advocacy groups had warned that 16,000 babies died annually because

they were not breast-fed.

Follow conscience

Esguerra said milk companies should "follow their conscience" and cease challenging the IRR drafted by the Department of Health.

The DOH earlier came under pressure from the Chamber of Commerce of the United States of America whose president and chief executive officer, Thomas Donahue, had raised the issue to President Macapagal-Arroyo.

