

RP drive a rallying point for int'l breast milk advocates

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WHY DOES the world care about the Philippines' campaign against giant, multinational, milk companies?

Because whatever happens to the country's breastfeeding campaign would most likely happen to the programs of Third World countries.

"They see us as a rallying point," explained Ines Fernandez, executive director of the breast milk advocacy group Arugaan.

She said the other countries were looking up to Filipinos, wondering whether the local Milk Code could withstand the onslaught of multinational, infant formula companies.

Laos had come up with a similar measure and was also being "pressured" by big business, she said.

Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia were poised to introduce their own Milk Codes and were bracing for a tough battle with milk companies, she added.

"The Asian market is really very big and lucrative that's why milk companies are exerting so much pressure," she told the Inquirer yesterday. "They want to weaken national laws that promote breastfeeding."

Big issue

The August letter of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States of America to President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was such a big issue that breastfeeding advocates from around the world rallied behind the Philippines.

In fact, an international forum of academicians, doctors, writers and development specialists in Sweden tackled the "interference" by the US chamber.

The business group came under fire after warning Ms Arroyo about "the risk to the reputation of the Philippines as a stable and viable destination for investment" if she did not "re-examine" the revised Implementing Rules and Regulations of the Milk Code (Executive Order No. 51).

The code regulates the marketing of infant formulas and requires companies to put labels warning of the possible contamination of their products with bacteria.

"We wish to publicize and denounce the interference by the US Chamber of Commerce and express our support for the Implementing Rules and Regulations issued by the Department

of Health,” the participants said in a statement posted at the web site of the International Baby Food Action Network.

“We call upon the business sector in the US and in Manila to exercise restraint and also to call upon various arms of the government of the Philippines -- judiciary, executive and legislature -- to carry out their duties independently and without fear or favor so as to fulfill the right of the children of the Philippines to the best attainable standard of health.”

Potential hazard

Citing World Health Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) positions, the participants noted that the “use of infant formula is indeed a potential hazard to infant health, and that promotion of such foods undermines breastfeeding, putting health at risk.”

In a briefing paper he read before Congress last February, Dr. Jean Marc Olive, WHO country representative warned that babies who were not breastfed were 10 times more likely to die of diarrhea, 3.6 times more likely to die of pneumonia, and 2.5 times more likely to suffer from other infections.

Several international findings have also warned about the possible presence of “Enterobacter sakazakii” and “salmonella” in some infant milk formulas. Thus, the Milk Code requirement on label warnings.

E. sakazakii has been linked to sepsis and meningitis while salmonella is a common cause of food poisoning.

“Everybody should remember that we are in an emergency health situation here,” Fernandez said.

The battle is also economic.

In the briefing paper, Olive told lawmakers that Filipinos spent around P21.5 billion annually to purchase infant formula products.

He said 950,000 or 38 percent of infants used milk substitutes. Of the number of users, 25 percent were poor, he noted.

Advocates like Fernandez believe buying milk product substitutes is an unnecessary expense, since breast milk provides everything a baby needs from birth until the age of two.