



SEN. JINGGOY ESTRADA

MANILA — A non-government organization has pledged to provide scholarships to children of the soldiers killed by members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Basilan last week.

Retired Maj. Gen. Renato Garcia, executive director of the Help Educate and Rear Orphans (HERO) Foundation Inc., said they assured the families of the slain soldiers that educational assistance will be provided to their children.

“We are ready to provide (educational) assistance but only one child per family is entitled to the scholarship grants,” Garcia said.

The foundation is still verifying how many children have been orphaned by the recent killing of military troops.

Last week, members of the business community and the HERO Foundation held a benefit dinner in Makati City to raise some P14 million for the scholarship fund.

The foundation estimates that 6,000 orphans of soldiers killed in action need financial support for their education, but the HERO Foundation can only provide for 700 beneficiaries per year.

Founded in 1988 by the late President Corazon Aquino, the HERO Foundation provides educational assistance in the form of stipends to children of Filipino soldiers killed in action or totally incapacitated while in the line of duty.

Since 1988, the foundation has provided more than P98 million in stipends to 2,156 qualified scholars to augment the scholarships provided by government educational institutions.

Most HERO scholars come from Mindanao (41 percent), others from Luzon (33 percent), Visayas (18 percent) and the National Capital Region (eight percent).

The foundation needs P126,000 to support a HERO scholar from elementary to college.

The provision of the annual stipend is estimated as follows: P5,000 for elementary, P8,000 for high school and P16,000 for college.

Senate President Pro Tempore Jinggoy Estrada, meanwhile, has filed a bill seeking education benefits for children of soldiers and police officers killed in action.

Senate Bill 753 stipulates that the orphans be provided free tuition, as well as allowances for books, school supplies, transportation, food and clothing until they finish secondary education.

Should the bill be passed into law, the effect will be retroactive for the children of soldiers and police officers killed in action before the passage of the bill.

Beneficiaries who reach the age of majority but have not finished secondary education shall continue to be entitled to the benefits until they complete high school.

“This is in recognition of their contribution to preserving the national integrity and security of the country. While a financial grant cannot match their priceless act of sacrifice, it intends to secure their family’s welfare even when they are gone,” Estrada said.

The bill was referred to the Senate committees on public order and dangerous drugs and national defense and security.