



BREASTFEEDING RATES PLUMMET IN EAST ASIA: WIKILEAKS CABLE REVEALS AGGRESSIVE LOBBYING BY USA ON BEHALF OF INFANT FORMULA INDUSTRY

On 1 May 2012 UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, issued a press release lamenting the major declines in breastfeeding rates across East Asia, and called for greater attention to be paid to the critical importance of breastfeeding for children's survival and cognitive development, as well as economic development in the region.(1)

France Begin, UNICEF nutrition Advisor for East Asia and the Pacific, is quoted as saying "The falling rates of breastfeeding across East Asia are alarming. In Thailand as little as 5% of all mothers breastfeed while the rate is less than 20% in Vietnam. In China, only 28% of babies are breastfed."

UNICEF claims that the low breastfeeding rates are the result of both economic developments enabling more women to enter the workforce, as well as aggressive marketing of infant formula in the region. It is calling on infant formula companies to adhere to the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, while encouraging the efforts of several countries in East Asia to adopt the Code of Marketing and enforce it through national legislation.

In India where all advertising for formula is prohibited, sales of infant formula remain low and breastfeeding rates are not declining.

In the Philippines breastfeeding rates had declined significantly since 1987 while sales of infant formula have increased dramatically. By 2007 only 16% of babies between 4 – 5 months are exclusively breastfed which is one of the lowest documented rates in the world. As 70% of Filipinos have inadequate access to clean water, the result is a public health disaster. The World Health Organisation estimates that around 16,000 Filipino children die as a result of "inappropriate feeding practices."

At the end of last year the release of more WikiLeaks cables, revealed how in 2005 the US embassy lobbied against a breastfeeding campaign in the Philippines and blocked revisions in the Philippines' Milk Code's implementing Rules and Regulations (IRRs). (2) The Milk Code and its IRRs regulate the advertising of milk formula for infants. They are based on International Labour Organization Maternity Protection Convention 183 and the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, as well as the UNICEF's Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding.

WikiLeaks cable 05MANILA5839 referred to a meeting between the US embassy's economic counsellor and the Philippines Department of Health Undersecretary, Alex Padilla on 12 December 2005, held to convince the government to meet with the pharmaceutical companies before signing the revised Implementing Rules and Regulations of the Milk Code into law. At the meeting Padilla provided a copy of the latest draft IRRs, noting that several controversial provisions had already been removed. He pointed out that Philippines has a high mortality rate for children under 5 years of age and that diarrhoea is a significant cause of death for this group. Much to the annoyance of the US embassy staff he singled out infant formula as a major cause of diarrhoea.

Following this meeting, the pharmaceutical industry, through the Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP), continued to lobby the government regarding its objections to the revised IRRs through subsequent talks with Padilla, and sought a Supreme Court order that would restrain the Philippines' Department of Health from introducing the new IRRs.

The chief executive of the US Chamber of Commerce in Washington then wrote a letter to Philippines President Gloria Arroyo, objecting to the new rules which he claimed would have "unintended negative consequences for investors' confidence." The reputation of the Philippines "as a stable and viable destination for investment is at risk." Four days later, the Supreme Court reversed its earlier decision and imposed the restraining order that PHAP had requested.

The Department of Health then asked a senior government lawyer, Nestor Ballocillo, to contest the order. In December 2006 Ballocillo and his son were shot dead while walking from their home. Following the shooting, the Solicitor General said the killing may be linked to Ballocillo's advocacy for breastfeeding, although the murdered lawyer was also involved in other cases that challenged powerful vested interests. (3)

In February 2007 PHAP ran a series of advertisements expressing concern for women unable to breastfeed their children. These ads were described by the UN's special rapporteur, Jean Ziegler, as "misleading, deceptive and malicious in intent" in that they manipulated data with the sole purpose of protecting the interests of the infant formula industry and thus ignored the best interests of Filipino mothers and children. PHAP also filed a suit against the Department of Health secretary and all the undersecretaries and assistant secretaries who had signed the revised IRRs in 2006.

In 2007 the Supreme Court threw out sections 4 & 11 of the Milk Code's IRRs that had banned the advertising, promotion or sponsorship of infant formula, breastmilk substitutes, and other related products. It also declared null and void a section on administrative sanctions. (2) The effect of this ruling meant that the Philippines government was unable to prevent companies from breaking the international Code.

In an email sent out alerting breastfeeding advocates to the UNICEF press release, a breastfeeding advocate commented *"We should all be concerned about these major declines in breastfeeding as New Zealand is playing a big part in the marketing of infant formula in countries such as China and the Philippines mostly through Fonterra/Golden Fern products for example. A globally well respected nutritionist who has worked and lived in China calls the flooding of milk and milk products into China (which had one of the healthiest diets in the world) 'planned nutritional contamination'."*

References

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2. www.abs-cbnnews.com/-depth/09/10/11/wikileaks-cable-us-lobbied-vs-breastfeeding-philippines
3. <http://www.babymilkaction.org/press/press14dec06.html>