

*Aida became a child soldier in The Philippines at the age of 15. Her narrative was recorded in 2002 by staff working for the Quaker United Nations Office.*

### Aida

The problem then was... at first we were happy... but then there were times that we cannot buy rice because we don't have money, my mother would then be very problematic with what we are going to eat, in fact it was not only our mother who think about this, even us! I would do what I could so that my mother could eat, so that my mother wouldn't feel so troubled. It's all right that I experience difficulty, as long as I could help my mother. When I was small, I wanted to do the laundry, so that I could help my mother I would give my earnings to my mother. My employer would give a loan/advance to my mother, and then I would work to pay for that. My father wasn't earning much during this time... My mother is really more progressive or more knowledgeable than my father — in almost all aspects. I will not depend anymore from my mother.

My employers said that they might go back to Sugbu, and they had been thinking what would happen to me if they left? Maybe they thought that I wouldn't be able to find work without them. I took care of their children, I did the housekeeping and I would have to feed the pigs. Her husband worked in the rice field. That's why I couldn't go to school, because I had so many house chores. I had to wash the clothes and then take

care of the child. I would wash the clothes at night, so that when I woke up, there would be less work to do. I would start at six o' clock to cook, then wash and then clean the house. I would wonder how long I could stand the work because I was still a child. When I was already busy with a task, then she would ask me to do something more. I was still small, so when I joined the movement, the people would point out how small I was. So I went to my mother, and later I joined the movement.

There were 30 persons all of them armed. They spoke with me and convinced me to go with them. They told me that I should join them that I should be on the side of the farmers. They explained to me that there should be equality, that when the farmers sell their products, they should get a fair price for their products, these were the things that they were explaining to me. They told me that if I was inside the movement, then I would be able to help more people. So I thought about it. After they spoke to me, that very night, we left. When I arrived to meet them that day, they politicized me. They told me that even if I was still young, I could be a big help. My mother wouldn't agree to let me go with them.

In the movement they said that if I get caught I will surely be killed. I really felt so bad that I cried. I was in such a miserable situation, I just thought of walking out of there because I wanted so much to see my mother, my siblings and my father. I felt so bad and sorry for my life. I would do what I could so that my mother could eat, so that my mother wouldn't feel so troubled. It's all right that I experience difficulty as long as I could help my mother. Instead of buying my materials for the school project, the first thing that comes into my mind is to give the money to my mother, to buy food, just so I could help. If I have money I spend it all to buy food. I was in grade two then. I thought

that I would not be able to pass with a score of 85 in the card. I was so worried because I really thought I wouldn't pass. But it turned out that I had the highest grade. I said to myself I could really make it. But I stopped schooling after that. What a pity.

I experienced so many problems. Regarding food because there were times when we had no food to eat. The presence of enemy troops was always a problem. During military operations, sometimes for a week, there were times when we could not eat at all. Cooking rice is not allowed to avoid producing smoke. Usually, we would be able to eat only during nighttime. But the next day, you cannot be choosy with food. You have to fill your lunchbox with whatever leftover food is available. You eat even the leftover. As for long walks, it's really very tiring to walk under the heat, in the dark night, or through the rain. You'll really feel some crisis inside. Once, I wept when I fell off a cliff because I was so sleepy but still had to go on walking. It's not a life with few problems. But the worst is when you are sick and there are enemy troops around. It's likely that your condition will worsen into a very severe disease. That's the life in the group. Perhaps the hardest for me was about getting sick. Sometimes I get sick for a week. That's my most difficult crisis. I can go on without food but I really cannot bear getting sick. What I really want to avoid is the situation wherein I'm so sick, of course I'm not a civilian but in the group, but still had to walk far and fast but what if I cannot do it, what are they going to do with me? When we start walking, we really walk fast!

I ask them if they can give some help, they would say, what about? My father needs money. They would always say, don't worry because we will write down your request. But we need to find some money first. I told them that might be too late. My

father's life is more important to me than money. I said maybe it would be better for me to go home first so that I'd be there whatever happens to my father. They tried to stop me by saying it's not my father who will die but rather it's me who might be killed by the military. The highest problem, they say, is capitalism.

I experienced gunfire only once. There was one incident that we were supposed to be the one to conduct a raid, but instead we were the ones who were almost caught by enemy troops. They came right after we left the area. We had just left when the enemies arrived. I fired my rifle but I had not killed anyone yet. I'm even afraid of looking at the dead, how much more in killing someone? I saw a comrade dying, but I never had the chance of killing anyone. But I feel so sorry. I have gone through such grave experiences. Imagine the stories I'll tell my children. If it's only possible I would like to go back to my tasks in the movement. I really don't know. I just want to forget everything because I really feel like dying inside when I remember my experiences in the movement. So when I just don't want to remember the experiences, I take a breather and go outside. I just want to forget... or else I'd go crazy.

I would say to the staff that I just want to go home because I can't take it any longer; I don't know what's going to happen here. So, I really can't bear going back. I think it's best for me to go home to give me the chance to think of what I should do, rather than stay here and remain uncertain about my life. The best is to go home. I have this feeling that I'd be able to forget about the movement. At home, I think I'll be able to forget about my dilemma. I just want to laugh. I am always crying, always crying because of my problem. If ever I want to go on with the struggle, I want to know where will it take me and how long will it be until we reach victory. That's what I really want to know,

how will I be certain about winning or not? But it really depends upon each of us, how long will it take to defeat the enemy. Because it is impossible that we won't have enemies, it all depends on what side are you. I cannot deny that I'm still interested in the movement, but some of the things I believed in have been disproved by my own experience.

What I know in the movement is that they are not accepting minors that are not allowed. But at that time, there were many, a lot of minors who joined the armed struggle... they said even if I had killed someone, I would not be penalized because I'm still a minor. The soldier said that I can say how many I've killed and, still, that wouldn't be against me. What happened, he said, was that I was deceived by the armed group. I tend to believe that's true. They said that the leadership of the armed group receives money. There is a leader who receives all the money while we in the Philippines do not receive a single centavo. According to the soldiers, we are only being used...that is true anyway. And then we that stayed here in the Philippines...we are the one being, ah...they said we are pitiful, because he continuously receives money while we do not receive even a peso. The soldiers said that we would just die in the struggle, yet there's still no future. That struck us, gave us some food for thought. It's true, we're still so young to be in this struggle and we end up not being able to follow the laws outside the movement.

But in the armed group I also know that we have some right to say what we want to say. But I think there were also those who were deceived. Because in the movement, you just can't question things and say that maybe the group is deceiving is. That's a no-no. That's why whatever the soldiers said, I just kept quiet. I really don't know. We are afraid that we would be victimized that's what we are afraid of, why can we speak of

things like that, they said that those who can discuss things like that were considered as enemies. Why is it that the things that were discussed to us there were not the same as the policies here. We are afraid to be persecuted and accused as an enemy, why are you doing and saying things that are not the same as our policy? For example, if I were given a task to get rice and I questioned it, they will question my being critical. Because you cannot really be disobedient, you have to follow their word.

I really want to go home. I wish that I could go home. I already decided that I would help my family. My mother used to wonder what would happen if I leave them. She would say, Where are you my child, what will happen to us if you leave us? I told her that I would not leave them, that I would just be around to help them. For me, if I can return home, I can go to school. My big problem is my mother because she is quite old already and has no clear livelihood. I really want help, if there's anybody to help me continue schooling. How can I continue school when I'm torn between going to school and helping my mother? My mother is more important to me, I really want to help her.