

Denise became a child soldier in The Philippines at the age of 16. Her narrative was recorded in 2002 by staff working for the Quaker United Nations Office.

Denise

We were very poor, so I would also try to help out by working. My stepfather is in a very pitiful state. He doesn't have a job. I was sent to live with relatives to help earn money and provide for my own survival. The people I lived with had work. I guess they tried to help, but it's really different from having your real parents around. They had to take care of two other children. They had other nieces and nephews, aside from me. They had arrived first, so they were prioritized and had to be taken care of first. I was so lonely I really wanted to go home. I was hesitant to run away because I didn't have any money. I have to wash the dishes before going to school in the morning and also after school. I would have to cook again, then I would have to do more housework. Sometimes I would ask myself, why is mother like this? And she wouldn't shut up unless you answered back. But I didn't want to answer back. So I would have to keep on sitting and just listening to her. And I would think, when is she going to stop her talking, it's so noisy and I wish I could just keep quiet. But sometimes I would lose my temper and then I would answer back. So, sometimes, to avoid answering back to her, I would just leave the house. So I would go to my aunt's house, since I pitied my mother and wanted to avoid talking back to her. I would seldom answer back, but I would realize how painful it must have been for her. I shouldn't answer back because I am just a child. But sometimes, she kept going

on and on, I would say something very hurtful, so that's why I would just leave to avoid saying something painful. So I told my aunt I would rather leave than say something distressing to my mother.

With regards to my half-brother, I feel that I don't feel any affection towards him, even though we are related. This is probably because when I was still small, I still needed my mother's attention, but suddenly my mother got married again and then I had a younger sibling, and my mother couldn't pay attention to me anymore because all her attention was focused on the younger ones. I still have elder siblings and I want their attention focused on me and not grabbed by the smaller ones. But sometimes the smaller ones still get all the attention. Sometimes we squabble among ourselves, probably because I'm also hardheaded. After being captured and when first allowed to see my mother, I really wanted to go home. My mother was crying, so I told her it's only now that you are crying for me, when I was still at home, you wouldn't pay any attention to me. And when I would stay with you because I had missed you, you would ask what I was doing there in your house. You would even ask me what my business/errand was to visit you. You treated me in this way. When you told me that you would send me to school, this did not happen.

It was then that my sister told me that they wouldn't allow me to go to school or to go work. So I looked for a way to look for a job that would allow me to be a working student. I was also getting fed up, I had run out of money and my family even borrowed money from me. I borrowed money so that I could look for a job, but I couldn't find a job as a working student. I found one but they were looking for a high-school graduate, so it was very difficult. I had a friend who invited me to join a training and I asked her what

kind of training, I thought it might be something like karate only. My friend said, not just karate, don't you want to learn everything? So I said yes, so let's go to the training together. She said she wanted to go to the mountains. So I asked her will we become part of the armed group? She said yes. So I said, I don't want to go, we might die there. She assured me, they still have to train us. Our situation here isn't getting better, we can't go to school and we can't find a job. When we want to go somewhere, we can't because we don't have any money. And when we do get to go somewhere, when we get home we get scolded so much. So that's why I was convinced by her explanation. So I said, Why don't we go right away today? So that afternoon we went. So I made up a story for my mother, just a make believe story so I could go. I told her that I found a job in Binay-binay. I even made a sketch of where I was supposed to work. It was just a fake sketch. I just did that so I could get away, even if it was wrong. I felt sorry to leave my mother, but my mother was so poor. I couldn't bear it anymore, just suffering there. For me, I was looking for a way to let off steam and have a chance to be happy.

But I enjoyed it so much in the mountains, because the comrades were very good to us. So I was able to endure it there because almost all of my concerns were addressed. When you make a mistake, they would patiently explain it to you in a soft voice. That's why we got along well with each other. Even when it was difficult, we enjoyed ourselves a lot. That's why I decided to become a full-time member. But I told my comrades that I should visit my mother. They allowed me to see her, but my letter to my mother wasn't delivered to her.

We would be up by 4 a.m. and then we would get ready. That's our Standard Operating Procedure. Either we would walk but we all had to be up by then because they

said that's usually the time that the enemy would attack. At 4:30 we would start walking. After walking for some time, then we would check around, visit the houses of the contacts, because sometimes they would be living in different *sitios*. Then we would gather the people together for a community meeting. Quite a large number would attend. Then in the afternoon, around 5 p.m., we would start walking, to transfer to another place. When we reached the place, since it was already evening, we would stop, and that's where we would sleep. We would eat the food that we brought along with us, sometimes we had some rice, a pot, and we would cook our dinner. We would stay in the houses of the people. But whenever we stayed in the houses, we would be afraid that we might be raided by the enemy. That's why I can't sleep right away when we are in the houses of the masses.

I was with a small group. There were just seven of us. There are propaganda units and also propaganda teams. Sometimes the masses would give some support to the party. I don't really know where the funds come from. It would just arrive, and the team leader receives the money for the team. That's what we would use to buy the needed supplies. The team leader would ask what we needed to buy. We didn't have an allowance. We just specify what we need. Before I joined, according to the comrade who told my friend who brought me here, that there was an allowance of P300/month (\$6), aside from supplying the things we need, that there was additional P300/month. So I thought that if they would supply our needs, then I could send the P300 to my mother. Then she would believe that I was really working. I thought that I could help my mother, but it turned out that it wasn't true that I would receive this money.

I really like the times we come together but there were times, when I felt so tired, because it was so tiring to keep on walking. So sometimes, I would request the comrades to rest for a while because I was so tired. Especially when there are messages that the enemy is around the area. Then they would say, what if we just left you behind because you are so slow. But I knew that they wouldn't really leave me behind, I knew that. It was just a story. But sometimes I could convince them to rest, because I would really insist. Whenever it was time for our groups to separate, then we would cry. When we have meetings, then we are together for two to three days, then we have to separate again, it would be so lonely, we would cry, hug each other when we have to leave. So sometimes, we would tell each other not to cry, because tears could lead us to our defeat. So we just cheer each other up. It's hard, but we would tell each other that we would see each other again.

After three weeks, they let me hold a gun, but I was so afraid that it might fire accidentally, then I might get hit and die. So they asked me, what's more important, that I die or I kill. So I told them. I won't die if I just hold the gun. So sometimes, I had to bring the gun. Once, XX asked me to bring the gun, but it was so heavy. Especially at night, when we have to walk and we have to carry our pack, then you have to hold your slippers and it's very dark. So I told him, "You be the one to bring the gun," and he said "OK, I'll carry the gun but you carry the bullets, just stay behind me so if there's any emergency, you will be close by."

Sometimes, when we keep on walking you feel very tired and then when there's news that the enemy is close by, I wonder, will I still have the strength to run when the emergency happens? Sometimes when they say that you are one the bringing some

trouble and that I'm delaying them because I'm a girl and I'm moving very slowly. And then, most of them are men, while I'm the only girl in the group. But the truth is that, when we are going to move out, I get ready very quickly. Sometimes I would get so upset that I would cry, then, I just keep quiet. Sometimes I would cry and tell them to stop because I can't bear it anymore. But sometimes they don't want to stop fooling around, so I cry.

The comrade who died was the one I would approach whenever I had a problem. He was very good and he knew how to get along with the comrades. He was the one who helped us to understand, I noticed that, but we were just friends, we were together a lot. My feelings developed but I didn't speak about it because I was embarrassed. When we were raided, I was asleep and he couldn't wake me up. Perhaps if he just left me behind, he wouldn't have died. I didn't hear the gunshots, so I didn't get up, he tried to wake me up, so he lifted me up and then he jumped and I jumped with him. I heard someone moan, but I had to go. I thought of running back but I couldn't do anything more because he was dead. So I thought if I go back, then I would probably die, too, and he wouldn't come back to life anyway. I didn't see whom they had killed. But I think that the soldiers who raided us knew we were there from the start. When they saw me then they got hold of me. I was so mad, I really would have killed, if only I had a gun, I might have killed them. But by the time we reached the detachment, there wasn't anything that I could do... I decided to surrender because I saw that none of my comrades had a gun and I didn't have a gun either. I didn't have a gun, so I decided to surrender. They asked me to crawl to their position, then, they caught me. Then they withdrew slowly towards their detachment. They were able to run. The only gun we had had been left behind. So that's

why they couldn't defend, because they had no arms to use in attacking. So the soldiers asked me if I was in the armed group and I said no, because I was afraid that they would hurt me. So I said that I was just one of the masses. They asked me why I was in that area, so I said that I went there because they had called for a meeting. So it was only when we arrived in the detachment that I admitted that I was in the armed group.

I would really want to finish school. It would really help me. I have cousins who talk about going back to the movement, but for me, the future is very dark if you go back. Even if there's so much hardship, you shouldn't mind it too much, just keep on persevering, then I can go back to school. I have many cousins who are in school. I would have stayed in the city to go to school and then to work, I would work and then study, but if you get fed up with work, then there's no alternative but to get married. It is necessary to work hard, in spite of the hardship we are going through now, for example now we are having all these problems, we need to buy rice. Through all these hardships, I am determined to strive, to persevere. My mother keeps on arguing with my stepfather, they keep on fighting. So I tell them, we need to stop bickering, because the rice will not just appear on the table, can you send us to school if you only use your mouth, if you just keep on fighting? We need to work, it doesn't matter if we don't own anything, as long as we understand each other. We really have to stand for ourselves. Even if I am still young, I am training myself to be strong, even when the going is difficult. We never know what might happen, what's important is that we stand for ourselves.

Amongst my friends when I was still in school, I had a teacher who used to tell us of the difficulties she had gone through. Then I thought that she has been through a worse

situation, even worse than our own situation, but she was able to graduate in spite of all the problems she faced. So I tell myself, we can look at the difficulties, but I will persevere, I won't allow myself to be weakened. Because if I let all these problems overwhelm me, then I stop going to school. Maybe I should just get married. So it's important to strive. For example, in going to school, if someone could help me to go school. In our poverty, nobody has enough. There is no one who can help, because the people have no drive, but at least they can give encouragement. I would be happy to accept some help...So I tell myself, just pray, just keep on striving, and somehow this can help in my studies. I want to graduate so that I can help them. My mother would like to see my younger brothers in school, to enroll them, if only my stepfather could provide the things they need for school, but he doesn't have a job. So it's already very difficult to buy food. So I'm thinking of going to the city to become a working student, but that's very difficult, and it would even be worse, because my elder brother is here and I would be there and the transportation costs to go back and forth would cost a lot, that I could just use for my studies. If I have any money, then I need to explain to them, that I have to hold on the money, because my elder brother would tell me not to give the money directly to my mother. My brother would tell me, Denise, here's some money but hide it and if you have money don't give it directly to mother, because our stepfather would just rely on that. It's not my obligation to provide for rice, soap. Those are not my children, those are their children. But when there's nothing left to eat, I would pity them, so I would spend my money. But for now, I will just study a two-year secretarial course. I want to get involved in actions that can be of help. They can help in fighting corruption, or to help those in difficulties. Even when I was in the mountains, I was thinking very

hard, even when I was very active, is it really necessary to kill? Then I would think at the time of the raid, can we shout and say let's just talk about this?

If only the enemy would listen, it would have been wonderful to shout, and the firing would stop and we would listen to each other. We would just talk and try not to use guns. I wish we could end all this violence and we can develop our country. Livelihood, that's what's really needed at the *baranggay* level, because many young people are jobless. They are just hanging around, that's why they get involved in many kinds of vices. Giving them attention, being concerned for them, to give them guidance.