

## [Liberating Child Soldiers in the Philippines](#)

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“Sometimes I wondered whether my bullet really hit somebody. When the shots are fired, you get the hang of it and killing people seems exciting.”

At a time when she should've been in high school, Aida (not her real name) was learning how to fire an M16 rifle and move quickly to avoid military raids. She was recruited as a child soldier into the New Peoples' Army (NPA), the armed group of the local communist movement in the Philippines. She was first tasked with relaying messages from the commander to the field groups and vice versa. She then became a radio operator while also acting as a squad leader.



*Photo A child soldier among the rubble. (Photo Credit: Creative Commons)*

“Being responsible for other people was distressing. It's either they die or I die in the crossfire because I am the one leading them,” Aida said. She was one of the five women aged 15-17 who were interviewed by the Quaker United Nations Office for a [report](#) on girl child soldiers in 2003.

She seemed to be a brave, strong and intelligent young woman but even then, assuming responsibility for her comrades' lives was too heavy of a burden for a teenager to carry. Her squad members were actually older than her. She was very familiar, however, with taking on adult duties. While still in second grade, she was already thinking about how to help her mother in providing food for the family. After getting the highest marks in her class, she dropped out of school and worked as a house helper.

Poverty and lack of access to education make children and young people like Aida more vulnerable to recruitment of armed groups like the NPA, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a rebel group in southern Philippines, and even the government-sponsored paramilitary group Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGU). Faced with no foreseeable opportunities to improve their lot in life, they tend to find a sense of purpose and adventure in being a part of these groups.

Aida learned to read and write while in the NPA. She gained confidence and a stronger self-esteem as she worked on community organizing and recruitment in rural areas. She also found security and belongingness in living closely with her comrades. These are crucial needs that a well-functioning community and a stable and economically secure family life are supposed to provide.

She was captured by government forces when a former comrade surrendered and identified her as an NPA member. She was scared of being raped by military men but she said that she got lucky to have humane captors. Others who were caught were reportedly tortured and killed. While in government custody, Aida admitted that she was still interested in the communist movement and strongly attached to life in the NPA. What she would really want, however, is to go back home and see her mother again.

“I really want to rest and be with my mother... The best is to go home. I have this feeling that I’d be able to forget about the movement... I just want to laugh. I was always crying [when I was in the movement],” she said. In the battlefield, Aida was forced to be an adult but she was very much still just a young girl who wants a piece of her childhood back.

Eight years after Aida’s story was told, the NPA and MILF have finally agreed to develop action plans to remove minors from their ranks. Radhika Coomaraswamy, United Nations envoy for children and armed conflict, announced last April that she has met with Philippine government officials and the communist and Islamist rebel groups to secure commitments on stopping the recruitment of child soldiers.

Armed insurgencies in the Philippines have been running for four decades now. There have been peace talks, all-out wars and skirmishes in between. Amidst all the violence, children have been involved as combatants, refugees and collateral damage. If it took about forty years to get the government and rebel groups to try and do something about child soldiers, how many more decades then will it take to ensure that children will be completely safe from the wars that adults wage?