

Youth and the Colombian Conflict

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### Introduction

This report examines the history and the current status of Colombia's political conflict. Specifically, it investigates the role that children, defined as those under the age of 18, have played in this conflict. Insight into the daily lives of child soldiers, including their participation in training, armed forces' camps, and fighting, is given. Furthermore, the report looks at the population displacement crisis in Colombia, particularly as it affects children. Finally, this report describes the country's efforts towards peace, demobilization, and the rehabilitation of former child soldiers.

### History of the Conflict

Colombia is one of South America's oldest and more enduring democracies, yet the armed conflict is the longest-running in all the Americas, earning Colombia a reputation as one of the most violent nations in the world. For more than 100 years, Colombian political culture has often led to conflict. A turning point happened April 9, 1948, when presidential candidate Jorge Gaitán, popular leader for the Colombian Liberal Party, was murdered in the streets of Bogotá. Fury then erupted across the country: riots occurred in the cities, and across the country liberals and conservatives took up arms against each other. This led to an undeclared civil war known as *La Violencia* that killed over 200,000 people in ten years (e.g., Watchlist, 2004; Cameron, n.d.).

The impact of *La Violencia* was both profound and enduring. It resulted in the displacement of over 2 million peasants and farmers from rural areas who built up slums and shantytowns in the major cities and migrated to "marginal lands" along the country's border. A truce was signed in 1958 between Conservative and Liberal parties that banned all other political

parties who had fought for the liberals during civil war. The communist party resented the withdrawal of power and hence held on to territory it had gained during war (mainly in poor areas of south and east) and began forming “self-protection units” amongst peasant farmers. Colombia’s army and air force launched massive attacks against these rebels in 1964, and, in response, the communists formed the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo*; FARC-EP), and the guerrilla war began. In 1965, the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*; ELN) began as a pro-Havana revolutionary group, and later, regional paramilitary groups funded largely by cattle ranchers allied with local military forces against the Marxist guerrillas (e.g., Watchlist, 2004; Cameron, n.d; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2003).

In the 1970s, kidnappings became a key source of funding for revolutionaries, and in the 1980s, illegal drugs also became a factor in the civil war. Wealthy citizens financed paramilitary forces to protect their land (often with money from drug trafficking). With this large financial backing, paramilitaries began attacking those suspected of supporting guerrillas and became responsible for the most violence against citizens. The army sometimes collaborated with paramilitaries until 1989 when paramilitary groups were declared illegal, although some army units still support them “clandestinely” (e.g., Watchlist, 2004).

The armed groups expanded both numerically and territorially through the 1990s. In 1997, Colombia had 132 guerrilla groups that were mainly divided into FARC and ELN forces. There were approximately 100 paramilitary organizations, with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*; AUC) as the most well-known (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004).

Children serving as fighters in this conflict is a relatively new phenomenon. In 1996, the Office of Public Advocate (*Defensoría del Pueblo*) released its first report stating that up to 30% of some guerrilla units were composed of children; in urban militias, 85% were reported to be under 18 (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

At this same point in time, peace initiatives were launched, beginning with the Children's Movement for Peace campaign. This movement began as young people throughout the country began working towards peace in their own communities and continued evolving when Graça Machel visited Colombia while compiling her United Nations Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. The children came together in their efforts, resulting in an election known as the Children's Mandate for the rights to life and peace (e.g., Cameron, 2001). In 1997, a nation-wide vote, inspired by the 1996 Children's Mandate, occurred in which 10 million Colombians voiced their support for an end to the conflict. As a result, peace became one of the central issues in that year's presidential election, and a year later, newly elected President Pastrana launched another call for peace—largely motivated by the Children's Mandate and the Children's Movement for Peace. Throughout 1999 - 2002, peace talks between Pastrana and guerilla groups were on-and-off. Still, conditions worsened and desperation provoked enlistment of children in armed groups (e.g., Turner Learning, 1999; Center for International Policy, n.d).

Nonetheless, violence appears to have decreased since approximately 2002, when Alvaro Uribe Vélez became President. Insurgents lack the military or popular support to overthrow the government, yet they continue attacks against civilians, and the guerrillas still have influence in much of the rural areas. By the end of 2006, more than 32,000 former paramilitaries had demobilized and the AUC had largely ceased to function as a formal organization, though some renegades continue in criminal activity. The Colombian government has increased efforts to

exert control and now has a presence in every one of the municipalities. (CIA World Factbook, 2007).

Even though the government claims it is working towards peace, human rights violations still go unpunished. The government has failed to follow through on its responsibilities to demobilize, and laws and regulations that do exist are often contradictory. Peace negotiations have continued to fail with FARC and the ELN (Coalition, 2007).

### **Child Combatants**

The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (2004) states: “The war in Colombia is a war on children. Young people have been lured and forced into the ranks of combatants, used as informants, marked as targets and driven from their homes. ‘In the context of the Colombian armed conflict, children and youth are constant victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity.’”

Children (persons under the age of 18) face many challenges because of the Colombian conflict: displacement, reprisals, destruction of homes, kidnappings, retribution from street wars, and military clean-up operations. One of the largest threats is their involvement as child combatants. Obtaining accurate estimates of children involved in armed groups is extremely difficult, especially since demobilization efforts and peace negotiations have been so sporadic in recent years. An estimated 11,000 to 14,000 children have been involved as soldiers in Colombia, the fourth highest level of child involvement worldwide, following Myanmar, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. ( Watchlist, 2004) Numbers from 2004 estimated that 7,000 children were involved with illegal armed groups, and 7,000 involved with urban militias (Watchlist, 2004). Human Rights Watch [HRW] (2003) noted that at least one in four irregular combatants is under age 18. Most come from poor families, have little understanding of the

war's purpose, and yet are taught to fight without mercy, to kill, to mutilate, and to torture.

(HRW, 2003). Operation Berlin, an army ambush upon FARC troops in the year 2000, shocked the world when nearly half of the captured fighters and half of those killed were reported to be children (HRW, 2003).

### *Voluntary Involvement*

Although some children are forcibly recruited by armed groups, apparently many join of their own accord albeit likely because of a lack of other opportunities. Children's reasons for joining the conflict vary. Desperate poverty, lack of education or employment opportunities, lack of family support, and domestic or sexual abuse seem to push some children towards armed groups. Additionally, (often false) assurances of money, hopes of an easier life, desire for the adventure and the status associated with guns, and curiosity are other incentives for enrollment (HRW, 2003). Once they join an armed group, members cannot leave voluntarily. One village mayor noted that children will continue to volunteer for the war until real alternatives are present: "The government says it doesn't want children going off to join the guerrillas, but what are they supposed to do?" he asked. "Nobody has any vision of a different future. We finish educating them and they continue being poor." (Penhaul, 2001).

### *Coerced Involvement*

While children often choose to join revolutionaries, sometimes recruitment is forced. Indigenous (e.g., list one or two groups) and Afro-Colombian children are often the targets of recruitment efforts by armed groups. These children are amongst Colombia's poorest and most vulnerable citizens, and they are often forcibly recruited to serve as guides in remote areas or to serve in urban militias (Watchlist, 2004). At times, quotas are imposed on families and towns for them to send children to fight (Brodzinsky, 2002), and some armed groups even recruit children

from neighboring countries (especially Ecuador and Venezuela), or recruit children who have crossed into Colombia to work as *raspachines* (people who harvest coca leaves) (Coalition, 2007).

All of the armed groups have formal statements against the recruitment of children into the conflict, yet the practice continues (e.g., HRW, 2003). FARC has the largest number of child soldiers, partly because it is the largest armed group. Some fronts of the ELN appear to have significant numbers of children in their ranks. Even the government uses children as information gatherers and informers in part by recruiting them into the “peasant soldiers” military program or the “Soldiers for a Day” (*Soldados por un día*) program, where children are taken to military facilities, dressed in uniform, and pressed to inform upon friends and relatives who are involved in armed opposition groups (Coalition, 2007). The paramilitaries, while they seem to have fewer number of youth than the guerrillas, sometimes offer money or clothes as incentives for joining (Coalition, n.d.). Additionally, paramilitary groups often provide salaries ranging from 9 thousand to 12 thousand pesos (around \$300-\$500 USD) every three months, with bonuses for special missions (HRW, 2003).

#### The Daily Life and Training of Child Combatants

Life for children in the guerrilla and paramilitary camps usually involves strict schedules and intense training. Once they join, children have minimal, if any, contact with their families; they are provided minimal academic education; they receive little tolerance of religion; and they are virtually treated the same as adults, regardless of their actual age. Children in armed groups receive comprehensive military training in which they learn how to use small arms, make bombs, lay landmines and explosives, participate in kidnappings, and understand military strategy. One former child combatant explained, “They teach you bit by bit, first with a .38 [handgun] and then

with a bigger weapon. I was shooting at posts with the AK-47 before I was eight” (HRW, 2003). Watchlist (2004) reports of a Colombian television clip from a FARC training video in which children as young as eleven were making missiles and digging mass graves. One boy, who had been trained as a sniper, said, “...not everyone had access to a weapon like that. It impressed me and I began to like it. But it stopped being fun when I had to kill people” (HRW, 2003).

Military training for the armed groups is intense and brutal, and both intentional killings and unintentional deaths from explosions or other accidents occur as a result. Indeed one intended purpose of training is to condition children to the brutalities of war because children who are hardened to cruelty and the sight of blood are considered more effective soldier (HRW, 2003).

#### Discipline of Child Combatants

All of the armed groups have harsh discipline for disobedience and infractions of the rules (infractions range from falling asleep on guard duty and mere “laziness” to trying to run away). FARC and ELN hold “war councils” where each member of a front votes on whether the accused should be put to death or given a lesser punishment. There is no evidence that these trials are fair as required by international humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch (2003) notes that the trials that compel a death sentence are “summary executions dressed up as judicial procedures and are abhorrent violations of international humanitarian law.” Paramilitaries, on the other hand, have no hearings. Decisions about punishment are made by commanders and their superiors and often result in summary executions as well. Deaths are usually hard to verify, since an execution squad often buries them in unmarked graves. “For legal purposes, the child victims simply vanish. Of all the atrocities of the Colombian conflict, these are probably the least known and the least documented, because of the secrecy in which they are shrouded.” (HRW, 2003)

From October 1996 to September 1999, 49 children were reported executed: four by government employees, 24 by paramilitaries, 21 by guerrillas; 14 children were reported to have been tortured and left alive, while 38 children were killed in massacres, and many more executions, torture incidents, and massacres go unreported (Watchlist, 2004). Some of the deaths, however, are highly reported because of their visible atrocity. For example, FARC is reported to have used a 10-year-old boy to deliver a bomb by offering him a bicycle to ride through a military checkpoint; the bomb exploded and the boy was killed (Coalition, 2004).

All of the armed groups' punishments may include arduous physical tasks such as digging garbage pits, latrines, or trenches for numerous days; clearing forests; carrying stacks of wood; or performing kitchen duties. Children may also be tied to trees or poles for days on end without being spoken to; held in cells (one boy was even doused with sweet liquid while he was held so that the insects would bite him); or be forced to kill a fellow combatant.

Additionally, children are forced to watch captives be tortured, to shoot captives as a test of valor, participate in assassinations or political killings, in social cleansings, and to execute comrades (even friends) who have tried to run away (HRW, 2003). One former child combatant recollected:

And the company commander called all of us recent arrivals who were still in training over to see how they killed. All of us who didn't know yet how to kill or torture to obtain information. They cut off their fingers, first they removed their nails, their nose, and they cut off the ears. They cut open their stomachs and removed their intestines with a knife, while they were still alive, and afterwards they shot them. And we watched, and some of the kids left because they got sick and were vomiting. The commander said that it was easy, that one day we would have to do it. It was ugly, terrible. For a long time after I thought of death. (HRW, 2003)

### Female Involvement

An estimated one half to one third of children involved in the armed conflict are female (Briggs et al., 2001; HRW, 2003). The paramilitaries tend to have fewer females than guerrilla

groups, while the guerrilla units may have up to 50% females and may have girls as young as eight or nine years of age (HRW, 2003). The girls serve the same role as boys in terms of fighting, killing, and performing daily duties, yet they also face sexual harassment, sexual abuse, forced use of contraceptive devices, forced abortion, and rape (Watchlist, 2004). Officially, rape and overt sexual harassment are not tolerated amongst the armed groups, but commanders use their power to form liaisons with under-aged girls, so that girls consent to or even seek out sexual relationships with commanders in exchange for protection and privileges (HRW, 2003).

### Leaving Combat

Attrition rates amongst child combatants, not surprisingly, are high. Many children interviewed by Human Rights Watch had given themselves up to the army or police and others had been captured by the army. Only a handful of those interviewed wanted to return. Very few children are actually able to return to their families. Those who have deserted risk being recaptured and killed. Also, they may put families at risk if they return home. Other children don't want to return home, and some cannot return home because they have parents that are in still active in paramilitary or guerrilla groups (HRW, 2003).

Most of the former combatants who have been captured by the army or police are handed over to juvenile judges. Many were initially locked up in detention centers for juvenile offenders and eventually transferred to reception centers run by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF). Juvenile judges decide to whom children are referred after capture with criteria for placement varying widely across the country. The ICBF reports that 2/3 of deserters or captured youth pass through juvenile court as young offenders with the remaining 1/3 being seen as children at risk who are put in ICBF specialized institutions for former child combatants. In some remote areas, children are sent to prisons, where they lack security measures, psychological

counseling, and other supports available at ICBF. In April 2002, the ICBF sent judges a booklet with guidelines on former combatants that asserts that all children who have left armed groups “have a right to specialized protection from the state, regardless of the circumstances in which they left them.” Formerly, children had different legal rights depending on whether they were deserted or captured and which irregular armed group they belonged to. Now, none are supposed to be held by the army, police, or juvenile detention centers, but rather should immediately be referred to ICBF for admittance into their program (HRW, 2003).

### Displacement

The conflict in Colombia has not only implicated children as combatants in the war, but it has also caused substantial displacement. After Sudan, Colombia has the greatest displacement crisis in the world (Coalition, 2007). Of the 3.7 million Colombians that have been forcibly displaced, and of the hundreds of thousands to seek refuge outside of Colombia, an estimated 48-55% are children and youth. A European Non-Government Organization (NGO) employee reported that many families state that one reason for displacement is the threat of their children becoming involved in armed groups (Coalition, 2007). Many families who are displaced try to move to other agrarian areas to try to find work, although they often end up often working in coca or opium fields and are forced to move many times within a few months. Hundred of thousands of others migrate into the cities, which already have a scarcity of housing, schooling, healthcare, and jobs and a rising rate of violent crime (Bagley, 2001). Additionally, the combination of early exposure to violence, lack of education, and uprooting to a difficult environment may make easy recruits for guerrilla or paramilitary forces (Watchlist, 2004). Internally displaced persons (IDPs), are greatly affected by the lack of school. Over 75% of displaced youth who previously attended school do not return to school after leaving their

original homes (Briggs et al., 2001) . School provides *cotidianidad* (connection to daily life), and the routine of going to school regularly aids children psychologically (e.g., against depression). Also, schools often provide food programs that help prevent malnutrition (Women's Commission, 2002).

Displacement from the Colombian conflict also includes persons who have fled to other countries as refugees or asylum-seekers. Estimates of such displaced persons range to 500,000 65% of whom are women and children (Coalition, 2007). Most Colombians do not have formal refugee status because they fear they will not satisfy criteria guaranteeing protection, or they fear they will be killed by armed groups in border areas. The border areas also hinder young people, who experience a lack of opportunity to participate in society and feel like they are criminalized for being young because of the way children are portrayed in the media in these countries. "The conflict turns us all into suspects," states one youth. (Coalition, 2007). Over 200,000 Colombian children and youth have sought refuge in Ecuador, but 60% of them have not been able to get a place in an educational establishment due to bureaucratic problems or lack of suitability (Coalition, 2007).

#### Rehabilitation, Demobilization, and Peace Efforts

Children who have been involved in the Colombian conflict yearn for a return to normality, including being re-connected to their own families and friends. The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process in Colombia has involved both "collective" demobilization, which is the result of official negotiations with armed groups, and "individual" demobilization, which is the voluntary return of men, women, and children to civilian life. An estimated 31,000 people have been collectively demobilized, while 10,000 are estimated to have done so individually (Schwitalla & Dietrich, 2007).

The government has two programs to help former child combatants, although these were established for political, rather than humanitarian reasons (HRW, 2003). The Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) is the larger of the two programs. It calls for the treatment of children as victims who deserve dignity, rather than as criminals. Over 1,200 former child soldiers (about 10% of the estimated total number of child soldiers) have participated in ICBF programs since November 1999. They receive medical attention and counseling at an “entry home” before they are transferred to NGO-run care centers. Attempts are made to contact participants’ families, but if youth are unable to return to their families they live in “youth houses” supervised by a monitor until they reach age 18. (Coalition, n.d.) After they reach the age of 18, youth are no longer cared for by the ICBF, and, in theory, they pass to the care of the reintegration program run by the Ministry of the Interior. In reality, there is no mechanism to ensure their transition between programs, and there is no systematic monitoring of youth who have left ICBF programs (Coalition, 2007).

The Reinsertion Program, run by Ministry of Interior, is a program for deserters. It dates from a 1990 peace agreement with the guerrillas and hence excludes paramilitaries and those who are captured (as opposed to giving themselves up). In 2003, it served around 150 children. The ICBF gives stronger institutional support, protection, and specialized care, whereas the Reinsertion Program provides more independence and more money. Though armed groups have ignored the government call to stop children from taking up arms, they have let rehabilitation programs function without harassment, threats, or attack (HRW, 2003).

Other peace initiatives include the creation of peace communities – that is, communities that commit to remain neutral and not to engage with any of the armed groups (American Friends Service Committee, n.d.); religious organizations, such as the Jesuit Mobile School for Peace and

Co-Existence (Catholic Relief Services, n.d.); and the Return of Happiness (*Retorno de la Alegria*) program, which is supported mainly by UNICEF. The Return of Happiness program seeks to engage children, adolescents, parents, communities, teachers and social science professionals in mental health recuperation strategies. Quiroz (2002) notes that it “offered adolescents visibility and identification, gave them the tools for helping psychologically affected children, trained them, gave them status in the community, supported them so they could organise in groups and provided transportation subsidies when they travelled to help distant displaced populations.”

#### Child Involvement in Peace Efforts

One of the most notable peace efforts in Colombia may be the Children’s Peace Movement referred to at the beginning of this report. In October 1996, children staged an election called the Children’s Mandate for Peace and Rights. Over 2.7 million children participated in the movement, an overwhelming majority of whom voted for the rights to life and to peace (e.g., Turner Learning, 1999). Often, elections in Colombia are targeted by armed groups, and although many feared the same would happen with the children’s election, the day proceeded peaceably as guerrilla troops agreed to a cease-fire on election day for the first time. One year later, 10 million Colombian adults pledged their support for peace—a very large turnout for a country that usually has little voter support (Cable News Network, 1999). Five of the teenage leaders of the movement presented their message of peace in 1999 at The Hague Appeal for Peace Congress, and, as a result of the movement’s success, it was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1998, 1999, and 2000 (Cameron, n.d.). The stories of these five teenagers and other children provide an intriguing insight into their perspective of the conflict (Cameron, 2001; Cameron, n.d.).

With their direct involvement, children have been exposed to and have participated in unimaginable brutalities. They have experienced torture, displacement, and death. Violence surrounds them—in their country, in their own communities, and sometimes even in their own families. How do these young minds deal with such atrocities? Sometimes they are enthralled by the schemes of the revolutionaries and decide to take up arms. Other youth, however, have sought to overcome the hardships their country provides and have tried to fight for peace. Juan Elias, one of the leaders in the Children's Movement for Peace, worked for peace for three years before his father was murdered. He wrote of his feelings soon after his father's murder:

I was frightened for myself and my family. I had only ever thought of how to make peace, not how to fight, but I was so afraid that I got a gun. I told myself that I would only use this gun as an absolute last resort, if I was in danger. But I was also angry. I thought, 'If they try to kill me at least I will take some of them with me.' ...I realized that I could get my gun and kill this man. I could shoot him before he knew what had hit him. It would be revenge for my father's death. I would be protecting my family. And almost no one in Colombia would blame me for shooting him—violent revenge is the expected reaction of any young man who loses his father the way I lost mine. Yet while all of this was true, I did nothing. My father had always wanted me to work for peace. How could I become violent now? The only way I could show respect and love for my father, the only way I could help to save my family, was by trying to make peace (Cameron, 2001, p. 28-29).

Though the violence in Colombia continues, advancements toward peace continue. The government continues its negotiations with the guerrillas, and demobilization of armed groups occurs. The goals of the Children's Movement, however, go beyond the efforts of the government because they seek to not only end the violence of the nation, but also build unity amongst the next generation of Colombia's leaders.

Despite the success of some of these rehabilitation efforts, problems and abuses sometimes arise. Some re-education centers are overcrowded, and some mistreat boys and girls, including: beating them with a board, "spinning" (making children spin around until they vomit with all their companions watching), or isolation in a "reflection room" that is small and damp

with no bathroom and no beds (World Organization Against Torture, 2004). Other times demobilized children are not immediately handed over to the ICBF but are instead used by the military as informers or to help with ground operations (Coalition, 2007). One demobilized youth tells of an approach he received from the army: “[they had] promised that if I worked with them I would get a million pesos for every guerrilla I killed. I’m an expert in explosives, so I can work laying mines and other explosives” (Coalition, n.d.) Even when youth are handed over to the ICBF, as many as 25% fail to complete the program, and children face hundreds of legal proceedings against them in youth courts. Often youth leave the ICBF without a sense of self-sufficiency, expecting to continue receiving aid from others. Many, therefore, re-join the armed conflict. Despite large amounts of international funding, there is little evidence of concrete results from the efforts of the ICBF. Moreover, they care for fewer than 20% of total number of children believed to be in armed groups. Accordingly, the government, has mainly focused on providing welfare for youth, not on providing new opportunities or ways of living (Coalition, 2007).

### Summary

Conflict in Colombia has taken place for centuries, creating an atmosphere where civic unrest and conflict are interwoven into daily existence. The direct involvement of children in the conflict, however, is relatively new. Their involvement, however, is an incongruous violation of international human rights’ standards. Because children are active participants in armed forces and suffer the results of displacement, efforts by the Colombian government and the international community must be made to end these abuses.

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