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Street children and other youths in Colombia face an extraordinary level of danger from both uniformed members of the security forces and police-tolerated private vigilantes, according to "Generation Under Fire: Children and Violence in Colombia," released today by Human Rights Watch. A significant portion of the murders of Colombian children are carried out by agents of the state; police have reportedly taken part in hundreds of killings of children since 1980, including the so-called "social cleansing" murders of street children. Still other murders of children are committed by private groups whose members are not held accountable for the killings.

While the killing of street children cannot be called a policy of the Colombian government, Human Rights Watch charges that at the local level, police agents are involved in a wide range of abuses against minors including torture, beatings and killings, as well as providing weapons

to "social cleansing" vigilantes and to street gangs that promote violence among competing groups of street children.

The climate of violence in Colombia is not restricted to attacks against children, nor does the killing always have a political motivation. But it is clear that the same government forces that are pledged to maintain order in Colombia tolerate the killings of children, failing to investigate many murders and failing to intervene when the law is broken. This failure to protect the lives of Colombian citizens, and especially those of the very young, is a grave breach of international human rights law. Of the 2,190 murders of children in 1993, only twelve cases have resulted in trials. Police officers continue to be implicated in the murders of children, and investigations rarely result in more than dismissal for the implicated officers. Government promises to restrain the police have yet to produce results.

In a case documented by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, three teenage boys were forced into cars by heavily-armed men in Bogot in October 1993. One of the, "Andres," fifteen, worked at a downtown mall. According to his friends, Andres was forced from the mall by armed men wearing police uniforms. His body was later found on the highway to Choachi, in a well-known body-dumping ground.

In February 1994, a "trooper" stopped at Bogot 's Plazoleta de la Macarena long enough for passengers to fire on five boys sleeping under a pile of rage next to the church. Three were killed. The youngest, known as "Asprilla" after a Colombian soccer star, was ten years old. All were enrolled in a program aimed at rescuing children from the street. That same night, Javier Castaño, a seventeen-year-old street child, was killed nearby with a shot through the mouth. Human Rights Watch finds that no one has been charged with any of these killings.

Human Rights Watch offers a very detailed set of recommendations to protect the rights of children to the Colombian government, armed insurgents, and the international community. Among the most important recommendations:

- Human Rights Watch urges the Colombian government to amend the constitutional provision granting military court jurisdiction in cases involving crimes by military personnel against civilians, and to extend this exception to the police. Members of the security forces should be tried by civilian courts and punished according to civilian law when they violate the rights of civilians. Equally important is an end to support for the concept of "due obedience" to higher orders, allowing subordinates to claim innocence on the grounds that they were operating on orders of a superior officer.

- Human Rights Watch calls on the Colombian government to make public its rejection of paramilitary groups and "private justice" as a way to resolve social ills. This public rejection must be paired, however, with investigations of and sanctions against civilians and security forces who abet, deploy, or participate in paramilitary groups.

- There must be a meaningful penalty for both child murderers and murderers who are children. Otherwise, the impunity currently enjoyed by children who commit acts of violence will contribute to vigilantism.

- It would be important for the Public Ombudsman, in cooperation with children's groups and human rights groups, to mount a national educational campaign in defense of the lives of children.

- Human Rights Watch calls on the armed opposition to respect international humanitarian law. Specifically, Human Rights Watch urges that guerrillas and their associates in urban militias should expressly prohibit the killing of prisoners or noncombatants, including the so-called "popular trials" of accused criminals or drug addicts. Human Rights Watch also calls for a total ban on the use of quiebrapatas mines.

- To the international community, Human Rights Watch recommends speedy action to bring this

epidemic to greater attention by tasking the U.N. and the Organization of American States with investigating human rights violations against children and issuing special reports. This could be done through the office of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Summary or Arbitrary Executions and/or the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

-It is long past time for the United States, long Colombia's most important political ally and trading partner, to speak out strongly in support of human rights in Colombia Regular statements would underscore the U.S. commitment to an improvement in human rights in Colombia for all, including children.

"Generation Under Fire" is based largely on a fact-finding mission carried out in Bogot and Medellin in June 1994. Human Rights Watch/Americas interviewed children who had been abused in police custody, human rights activists, lawyers and others who work with children.

Generation Under Fire is available from the Publications Department, Human Rights Watch,  
485 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY  
10017-6104 for \$12.00 (domestic) and \$15.00 (international).  
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