Children and armed conflict in Colombia

Brief historic outline

The internal armed conflict in Colombia dates back to the period of “La Violencia” that followed the assassination of popular leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on 9 April 1948. La Violencia lasted around 10 years during which the two official parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives fought against each other. The violence is estimated to have cost the lives of at least 200,000 people. The conflict ended in 1958 through a power-sharing agreement known as the “National Front” (1958 to 1974) that eliminated political competition. This resulted in repression and attacks on any political activity outside that of the two official parties, with communists suffering the most.

Attacks on communist enclaves led to a surge of about a dozen left-wing guerrilla movements between the 1960s and 1970s, throwing the government into a protracted military campaign. The most significant actors here have been the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the M-19 movement.

The activities of the guerrillas prompted the emergence of right-wing paramilitary organisations, primarily the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). Whilst denied by the government, there are accusations of links between these paramilitary organisations and the State waging war against guerrillas and protecting landowners, drug lords and local businessmen from attacks and kidnapping by guerrilla forces.

In reality, many of those involved, from left-wing rebels to right-wing paramilitaries are believed to be on the payroll of drug cartels and landowners – both of whom often receive support from the Colombia’s police or army. Ironically, the United States provides aid to the Colombian Government with the proclaimed aim of strengthening democracy and combating drug trafficking and terrorism.

Peace negotiations led the M-19 to sign an initial ceasefire agreement with the government in 1990, and again later in 2006 that resulted in the demobilisation of over 32,000 AUC members. But the government never verified whether all AUC members actually demobilised and was unable to dismantle the group’s criminal networks and support system. As a result, some groups or sections never demobilised and others re-armed after the process allowing them to form new groups.

Despite the overall decline in violent incidents since 2002, FARC retains strongholds in parts of the countryside and the capacity to launch sporadic attacks against civilians and human rights workers.

The government war against the cartels and close ties with the United States have often generated tensions in its relations with neighbouring countries. For instance, diplomatic tensions with Ecuador started since the Colombian airstrike in 2008 on a FARC camp in Ecuadorian territory. Venezuela broke off diplomatic and commercial relations after the Colombian government claimed that the

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2 300 cases of recruitment and use of children were reported in 29 of the 32 departments in the country. See: Children and armed conflict: report of the Secretary-General, UN General Assembly, A/66/782–5/2012/261, 26
FARC had camps inside Venezuela allegedly tolerated by the Chávez government. Diplomatic ties with both countries officially reinstated in 2010.

In May 2011, the Colombian Congress passed a Victims and Land Restitution law which provides for reparations for about four million victims of violence by guerrillas, paramilitary groups and state agents dating back to 1985. It also aims to return some 2,000,000 acres of land to those who lost it as a result of the conflict since 1991.

In June 2012, Colombia’s Constitutional Court approved a government proposal to decriminalise the possession of small amounts of cocaine and marijuana for personal use.

Peace negotiations have finally begun between the FARC and the government. On the first day of the much-anticipated peace talks in November 2012, the FARC announced a unilateral ceasefire. But since the start of the talks, the FARC have admitted to breaking the truce in late November and the Colombian government has repeatedly insisted that it will not halt military operations.

**Human rights abuses**

The internal armed conflict in Colombia resulted in a series of serious human rights abuses by all parties involved. All armed actors continue to threaten and attack human rights defenders, journalists, and minorities including indigenous and Afro Colombian communities. Human rights violations committed by guerrillas, paramilitaries and their successors include extra judicial executions, enforced disappearances, rape and sexual violence and the recruitment and use of children into the armed groups.

In his 2012 report on the situation of human rights in Colombia, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights "registered a disturbingly high number of crimes committed against children" in many areas of Colombia, mostly cases of "recruitment and threats of recruitment, deaths and injuries caused by explosive artefacts, occupation of and attacks against schools, displacement, homicide, and injuries" attributed to the FARC and the ELN.

**Forces displacement**

With tens of thousands of Colombians forcibly displaced every year, the country has one of the world’s largest populations of internally displaced people (between 3.9 and 5.3 million people, and more than 50 per cent of them are under the age of 18). Many of them have disappeared.

**Antipersonnel mines and explosives remnants of war**

Colombia also has one of the highest numbers of victims of antipersonnel mines and explosives remnants of war in the world, according to the 2011 landmine monitor. Contributing to this situation is the frequent use by the FARC and ELN of antipersonnel landmines and other indiscriminate weapons. Read a report by UNICEF on the impacts of landmines on children.

**Child Recruitment**

Children are recruited and used by armed groups, particularly the FARC and ELN; although the ELN pledged in 1998 to stop child recruitment and signed the Puerto del Cielo agreement in Germany.
The report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council issued on 26 April 2012 reported "widespread and systematic recruitment and use of children by non-State armed groups" in 2011.²

A new study, "Like Lambs Among Wolves" by Natalia Springer, the dean of the law school at Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano in Bogota, has found that in the last four years alone 18,000 children in Colombia have been forced to join guerrilla groups and paramilitaries.

Government security forces were not reported to have recruited children, but it appears that they use children for intelligence gathering despite the legal prohibition against the practice. The report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council has confirmed receiving reports regarding the use of children for intelligence purposes by the Colombian National Army.

Following the demobilisation process, children could benefit from the Disarmament, the Demobilisation and Reintegration programme run by the government. However, since child soldiers were required to identify themselves as members of an armed group, those who escaped or were discharged, and those afraid to reveal their identity, were unable to receive assistance.

The report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council also reported:

"[G]irls continued to be victims of sexual violence attributed to members of non-State armed groups. Girls associated with non-State armed groups were often required to have sexual relations with adults at an early age and forced to abort if they became pregnant" and that "[s]chools were damaged as a result of hostilities as well as by anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war."

Further information on persistent violations against children in Colombia:

- Extrajudicial executions
- Enforced disappearances of children
- Children continue to be victims of torture, cruel and degrading treatment
- Sexual violence
- Recruitment of children in the armed conflict by FARC-EP and ELN and lack of demobilisation measures
- High rates of malnutrition, particularly among women and children in internally displaced communities
- Trafficking of children
- Lack of sufficient protection for children, particularly Afro-Colombian and indigenous children, in the general climate of insecurity and displacement
- Environmental health problems caused by aerial fumigation of coca plantations
- High number of child victims of extrajudicial killings, homicides and massacres as a consequence of the armed conflict and high rate of drug use among children
- Education - The quality of education remains low in the public system and disadvantages vulnerable groups in society. The inclusion of human rights education in school curricula remains insufficient. The recurrent usage of schools by State armed forces and

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establishment of military bases near schools creates military targets for illegal armed groups, making it impossible for children to receive education

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