



CHILD RECRUITMENT IN COLOMBIA

Bogotá, Colombia

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Background

It is no secret that children become associated with armed forces to escape from poverty, to defend their communities and sometimes risk everything they have in the hopes of a better future. There are many forces at play in regards to why children become associated with armed forces. Yet, child recruitment should be understood in two ways: the children who are forced into armed groups and those who join voluntarily due to their economic, social and cultural life circumstances. Regardless, children are passive victims of a series of adult actions that do not belong to them.

According to the last United Nations Report from the Secretary-General about children and armed conflict released on June 9, 2020, the United Nations expressed there have been many efforts from States to monitor and report children in armed conflict. With the implementation of action plans and commitments, many children are no longer related with any kind of armed groups. However, such practices continue to exist and it is our duty to eliminate forced recruitment against children of any kind.

The UN has advocated to protect child rights and introduced the “Act to Protect children affected by conflict” campaign on April 2019, connecting national political talks and peace processes. The goal is to reduce conflict and it was shown that some of the situations proved beneficial to the protection of children in armed conflict. The UN has expressed that “While a general decrease in the number of verified child casualties was observed, the number of incidents of the killing and maiming of children remains the highest verified violation, which underlines the serious concerns about the violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, about the lack of capacity and of measures to mitigate harm, and about warfare in densely populated areas. Causes of casualties include crossfire, small arms and light weapons, ground engagement between parties, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and the excessive use of force by State actors.”



**JOINING AN
ARMED GROUP,
A LIFELONG
COMMITMENT.**

Construction of a peace sign in collaboration with the Japanese government at the Hogar Juvenil Sol de Esperanza. File sent by Cecilia Cordoba

A WAY FORWARD

According to the UN, a total of 13,200 children were separated from non-State actors and armed forces globally in 2019. Reintegration programmes for children, and various action plans, had mitigated the risk of children to be recruited by armed groups. However, something that causes concern is that these programmes lack prerequisites that are needed in order to operate sufficiently and productively. To begin with, reintegration programmes should be gender-responsive, include mental health and psychosocial support, education and vocational training, and provide access to civil registry, identification documents and justice. Consequently, if programmes aren’t comprehensive ones, the social sphere, poverty and lack of opportunities may result in the recruitment and re-recruitment of children according to the UN.



Nonetheless, peace between State parties and non-state actors would ultimately be the best way to mitigate violence against children. The UN urges both States parties and non-state actors to engage in efforts for peace processes to be implemented integrally for the protection and prevention of violence against children.



In the Colombian case, studies of Child Soldiers in Colombia, conducted by the Human Rights Watch, reports that “the majority of children in Colombia were voluntarily recruited into irregular armed forces, although there is some evidence that forcible recruitment has also taken place.”

The two major child recruiters in Colombia are paramilitary and guerilla groups that exploit children under vulnerable situations with false promises of money and opportunities. As the social breach rises, recruitments in minors increases simultaneously. In a context of indifference and fear, along with domestic and sexual violence, weapons seem like the best option. Whether or not children decide to join themselves or they are forced to, responds to an unequal country where the information and education is limited for many.

Violence against children and forced recruitment has been a problem in Colombia for more than 60 years. Nevertheless, in order to understand this issue, it is necessary to recognize the State’s efforts to manage the conflict since the 2016 peace process.

In 2016, the National Government signed a peace accord with the biggest armed group in the country: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP).

The agreement is known as the:

"GENERAL AGREEMENT FOR THE TERMINATION OF THE CONFLICT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A STABLE AND LASTING PEACE"

Below are the key points outlined in the agreement:



1. **Integrated agricultural development policy** - To boost regional integration and the equitable social and economic development of the country.
2. **Political participation** - Rights and guarantees for exercising political opposition in general and support of new movements that may emerge after the signing of the Final Agreement.
3. **End of the conflict** - Comprehensive and simultaneous process that implies: 1) bilateral and definitive ceasefire; 2) an end of hostilities; 3) the handing over of weapons; 4) and Reintegration of FARC- EP members into civilian life, among others.
4. **Solution to the problem of illicit drugs** - Illicit-crop substitution programs; integral development plans with participation of communities involved in the design; substitution programs and environmental recovery of the areas affected by these crops; and consumption prevention and public health programs.
5. **Victims** - Compensating the victims addressing the human rights violations and providing justice for the victims.
6. **Implementation, verification and ratification** - The signing of the Final Agreement initiates the implementation of all of the agreed points.

According to the peace accord, if FARC commanders confess to crimes and acknowledge their responsibility, they can avoid prison time and access alternative judgments such as community-service tasks. Still, the deal requires that commanders tell the whole truth. Those who took part in the peace accord were subjected to a specialized jurisdiction, referred to as the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). The special Jurisdiction for Peace is a component of the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition (SIVJRNR), created in the Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace, signed between the National Government of Colombia and the FARC. The JEP, as a transitional justice mechanism, is tasked to investigate, clarify, persecute and punish the most serious crimes in Colombia during more than 50 years of armed conflict, and until 1 December 2016. The deal endorsed approximately 13,000 former rebels to rejoin society; yet, reports confirm that there remains many dissident FARC groups who reject the accord and continue to recruit children.

DEMOBILIZATION

Child demobilization policies understand kids cannot voluntarily join armed groups due to their inability to make conscious choices as minors. Thus, the government recognizes all child combats as victims of the armed conflict. According to the defense minister, 20% of the demobilized members are children. The process of rescuing children begins with the reinsertion program, through the Colombian Family Welfare Institute, which satisfies their basic needs and provides psychological orientation, training for development and a stable environment. For example, psychosocial assistance is provided to those families where one of their children has been recruited. They support them financially to implement entrepreneurship programmes, promoting human and children's rights. Laying down arms is a trade-off States concede to for those who want to re-join civil society; and, in the case of children, there is a special psychological and educational accompaniment.



**WE’VE HAD A
DIM PEACE, DIM,
BUT IS PEACE.**

-CECILIA CORDOBA

Local women painting a field at the Hogar Juvenil Sol de Esperanza. File sent by Cecilia Cordoba



WHAT IS HAPPENING NOWADAYS?

In the last Secretary General report, the United Nations verified:

- 176 grave violations against 168 children (88 boys, 68 girls, 12 sex unknown)
- Recruitment and use of children affecting 107 children (54 boys, 41 girls, 12 sex unknown) between the ages of 12 and 17.
- A total of 46 children (33 boys, 13 girls), between the ages of 5 and 17, were killed (23) and maimed (23).
- Casualties were attributed to ELN (9), the Colombian armed forces (8), AGC and dissident FARC-EP groups (6 each), EPL and Los Caparrapos (1 each), and unidentified armed groups (15). Children were mostly affected by anti-personnel mines and improvised explosive devices, crossfire and air strikes
- Rape and other forms of sexual violence affected 11 girls, between the ages of 13 and 16, with responsibility attributed to AGC, ELN and the Colombian armed forces (3 each), and dissident FARC-EP groups (2). The three cases attributed to the Armed Forces remain under investigation.
- Four children, between the ages of 2 and 15, were abducted (1 boy, 3 girls), with responsibility attributed to ELN (3) and dissident FARC-EP groups (1). All children were released from captivity, including one girl rescued by the Colombian armed forces.
- Three attacks affected schools and related protected personnel. Two were attributed to unidentified armed groups and one occurred during crossfire between AGC and the Colombian armed forces, after the school was attacked by AGC.
- There were five unattributed incidents of the denial of humanitarian access. The incidents involved restrictions to freedom of movement due to the control of territory by armed groups and armed confrontations in Chocó, Cauca and Antioquia Departments. Several indigenous communities were confined, thereby restricting their access to crops, health and education services.

However, monitoring and reporting these human rights violations remains challenging due to security conditions in Chocó, Arauca, Norte de Santander and Putumayo Departments. Communities and victims also fear reporting violations.

The Minister of Defense says it is very hard to estimate the exact number, particularly because the terrorists do not acknowledge they are using children as soldiers. However, Human Rights Watch estimates that over eleven thousand children are fighting in the armed conflict in Colombia. In addition, there are many who were forcibly recruited as minors who are now adults.

THE PERPETRATORS

- **Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)**
- **Dissident groups of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP)**
- **Unidentified armed groups**
- **Los Caparrapos and Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC)**
- **Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL)**
- **Colombian armed forces, who used a girl as an informant.**

According to the Government, 180 children (112 boys, 68 girls) were separated from armed groups and entered the protection programme of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute.

INTERNATIONAL ACTIONS FOR COLOMBIA



Thousands of child soldiers have been released and reintegrated with the assistance of UNICEF, peacekeeping, political missions, and other UN and NGO partners. All Governments concerned by the campaign are engaged in an Action Plan process with the United Nations.

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989 to protect the rights of children, is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history.
- UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency and the Middle Magdalena Development and Peace Programme, PDPMM, are now completing a process of accompaniment to the communities of victims of internal armed conflict in the Middle Magdalena region.
- Recommendations from the Secretary-General report on children and armed conflict in Colombia (S/2019/1017).
- "A policy to prevent the recruitment, use and sexual violence against children issued" in November 2019 introduced by the Presidential Council for Human Rights and International Affairs.
- UN Children's Rights Convention - On January 28, 1991, Colombia ratified the UN's Children's Rights Convention, which commits States to do everything within their capacity to guarantee that children under 15 years of age do not participate directly in the hostilities. In addition, Colombian law designates eighteen as the minimum age for joining the Armed Forces.
- Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict - In 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict to protect children from recruitment and use in hostilities. A Special Representative of UNICEF launched the campaign "Children, Not Soldiers" to bring about a global consensus that child soldiers should not be used in conflict.
- UNODC launched a Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist Groups.
- The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees submitted a report for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report in regards to the Universal Periodic Review: 3rd Cycle, 30th Session.
- Colombia's ratification to the 1951 Convention relating the Status of Refugees in 1961 and acceded to its 1967 Protocol in 1980.



Commemoration of the construction donated by the Japanese government at the Hogar Juvenil Sol de Esperanza. Left: Colombian Vice-President Martha Lucía Ramírez. Right: Japanese delegate. File sent by Cecilia Cordoba



GICJ POSITION

The Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) calls on the international community to stop all forms of participation of children in armed conflict. GICJ recognizes children continue to be recruited into government armed forces, paramilitaries, civil militia and a variety of other armed groups, and condemns all organizations which partake in child recruitment. Often, children are abducted at school, on the streets or at home. Others enlist “voluntarily”, usually because they see few alternatives. Too often, girls and boys who participate in combat become injured or killed. International law prohibits the participation in armed conflict of children aged under 18. Steps must be taken not only to prevent child recruitment, but to help rehabilitate those affected and provide them with adequate education, justice, and stability. GICJ remains mindful and conscious of the millions of children around the globe who do not have the opportunity or possibility to enjoy childhood and urges the safety and well-being of children at all levels of society to be prioritized. All children deserve a healthy upbringing, and as an international community, we must do our utmost to ensure that children have the opportunities for a prosperous future.

A story to tell

The south of Bolívar has always been a place where war has done its havocs. For its strategic importance, armed actors have settled there, satisfied with enough resources and connections with tactical territories. As discussed within this report, armed groups such as FARC, ELN and paramilitaries recruit children by showcasing the lack of opportunities and poverty, and providing them with an alternative path. In an investigation presented by Juliana Salazar, a political science student, guerilla activities within this territory deal with coca crops, extortion and gold exploitation which serves as a motivation to venture on a war over this territory. Salazar comments that the highest rates of violence over civilian population are when groups begin to enter a territory and take control over it. Both guerrillas and paramilitaries were settling down in Simití, and the absence of State forces quickly transformed the social dynamics. Authority, instead of controlled by the State, was established by the population, guerrillas and paramilitaries. Thus, obtaining political, economic and social power was only attained through violence.

As violence continued, human rights violations persisted as well as forced recruitment. Having children in the middle of a warfare meant a clear limitation for children to access education and peace spaces. According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to education directed at the full development of the human personality and with respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Education should promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. Likewise, the Colombian Constitution recognizes the right to education within Article 67 by stating education is a right of any persons and a public service that has a social function; it seeks access to knowledge, science, technology, and other cultural goods and values. Even though these rights have been vulnerated for the civilian population by state and non-state actors, the current COVID-19 pandemic has further interrupted the access to education at a greater scale.

THIS IS CECILIA CORDOBA, the woman who traded guns for toys.



Cecilia Cordoba, owner and administrator of the Hogar Juvenil Sol de Esperanza. File: Glenia Torres video (2019)

The boarding school, Internado Sol de Esperanza, in the territory of Monterrey, Simití, south of Bolívar, Colombia is the clear example of a story that everyone should know. This boarding school is recognized as one of the most important communitarian places against child recruitment in Colombia. Cecilia Cordoba, who founded this initiative, intends to save children's life's by offering them a new future.





Girls house at the Hogar Juvenil Sol de Esperanza. File sent by Cecilia Cordoba

In an exclusive interview with Cecilia Cordoba, owner and administrator of the Juvenile Rural Residence. She gave a heartfelt account of her project and journey trading guns for toys with children.

Interviewed by Laura Calderón Pachón/ GICJ



Cecilia, tell us about your project. What do you do and what led you to do this?

My name is Cecilia Cordoba and I've been involved with this cause for 24 years. I realized there are many children who lack the opportunity to continue their studies as there are many limitations that do not allow kids to have a clear horizon. It became easy for armed groups to call children and recruit them from a very young age. I saw the need to open an academic space for them and started this boarding school. I thought this space could be an option for children who didn't have a teacher or for those whose schools were really far from home.

For many, the distance to school is so far that they became unmotivated to continue going. Walking for more than two to three hours is tiring for children in rural areas. This is really common here. I saw this space as a way for children to access the education system and offer them two basic things every kid should have: education and happiness. Sadly, this is not the reality of all the Colombian children because many of them continue to suffer from forced recruitment; there is no other option in rural areas. Some of them study up to a certain point, but they only have one option available to them.

In 2006, I began with three kids. I personally gave them food and some basic stuff, and little by little my project started growing and people started joining somehow. At the time, I called it "La Casita Campesina," meaning "the peasant cottage," but because of a bullying issue, I began to search for another name. We all started thinking of another name until a kid said: "Ma'am, we could name it "Hogar Juvenil Sol de Esperanza" (Sun of Hope Youth Home) because kids shine bright like the sun". I thought it was interesting, so we named it that.

As time passed, people followed us, and they start believing in the mission to protect children in a place where they can study, be happy, join sports activities and participate in different activities. If I'm honest with you, children in rural areas don't enjoy life as they should; they spend most of their time working rather than playing, and can't afford to play, enjoy sports, dress up in costumes or go to school. Doing these activities is a motivator for them.

We've received a lot of help from many organizations, including the development program here. First of all, we received help from God, then, from the development program of peace in the Magdalena region, the Unity of Victims, universities and even the aid of the mayoralty during their last three administrative periods. They've been helping with some house remediations and more. We also were recognized by the Unity of Victims as a subject of collective reparation of boys, girls and adolescents. Children in rural areas have truly lived a violent life. They lived through violence without boundaries and without anybody who cared about them. They lived through moments in which they didn't even know what country they belonged to. Violence was so cruel and so prevalent that there were many orphans, widows, etc. Violence was so immense that it destroyed all the organizations. Everyone feared leadership and children lived in a cruel world. We've had a dim peace, but peace nonetheless. Throughout the years, our home has become bigger in size. How we treat them is the best way to help these creatures God sent us. We want to raise them as human beings. Our home is requested by many parents now, and they ask for vacancies. Unfortunately, the lack of infrastructure and costs do not allow us to have them all. We are still working for our Colombian kids, so they are no longer recruited for the war as we want their wounds to heal.

I have, for example, three siblings that are thankful our home because they literally escaped from war. As soon as I found out that specific situation, I called them to let them know I had an opportunity for them to continue their studies. Their mom brought them, and the youngest girl (thirteen at that time) was able to finish high school here. She is now 18 and she is finishing a professional career in one of the best universities in the country. There are many examples of high school students that made it to college which is very satisfying for us. In place of a paramilitary formation school, under the glory of God, today we have a youth home that instills values for children living in the countryside. It's a great blessing what God allows us to do in this world. I pray that he helps humanity. I think life is too short for us to do nothing.

I have four caregivers, two for boys and two for girls, who are in charge of kids for 24 hours of the day and only rest when the kids go to school. When the children come back, they receive their food, they play, they do their homework and when they get ill, we take all the measures to help them.

Cultural activities at the Hogar Juvenil Sol de Esperanza. File sent by: Cecilia Cordoba



"This place has been a light in the way for many countryside kids"
- Cecilia Cordoba



Boys soccer team at the Hogar Juvenil Sol de Esperanza. File sent by: Cecilia Cordoba

In the Colombian case, how has the perception of the armed recruitment changed over the years? Have the peace accords changed something about it?

In the Colombian case, how has the perception of the armed recruitment changed over the years? Have the peace accords changed something about it? That's why I'm telling you about a dim peace. It's a peace that's always with you, but at the same, it isn't. You live simply, but not confident. The peace accords has worked better because now we can speak with more freedom, and we can visit other neighboring territories nearby.

Formerly, we couldn't; they called us paramilitaries or guerrilla members and we feared for our lives. Nowadays, we don't have the whole commercial monopoly in the hands of armed groups. In earlier times, they sold everything and dominated the entry and the exit of food and commercial stuff. We've advanced a lot, and there are now four padded roads and a soccer field. Peace programmes have been aligning us with human rights, and they help in the process of healing victims of the armed conflict and violence in many ways. Saying to them: "they can", "they're capable" is great. Actually, resilience is now a crucial word. We are instilling our kids with values and respect for others. Since 2009 we have seen many more students finishing high school; we've even had 12 proms. It's really great to see.

What has been your biggest difficulty and how did you overcome it?

Food cost. Giving out 240 meals a day is a daily challenge as well as a threat. However, we have always come out ahead. The ministry of education helps us, but sometimes that's not enough. I mean, everything helps, but it's a concerning issue because it's a daily thing.

In this moment, how do you think the international community can help you? Is there any need you want people to help you?

Sponsoring children and assisting the most needed children directly. I wish that people who have resources can help my kids and say to them: "Look, here's some hope, here's a light to help you."

In a phrase, what would your legacy be?

Keep fighting for children and never abandon them. As long as we have our children, we have a chance in our country. Taking care of our children and not abandoning them is a legacy of love, peace, hope and values.

**"Taking care of our children and not abandoning them is a legacy of love, peace, hope and values."
-Cecilia Cordoba**



Cultural activities at the Hogar Juvenil Sol de Esperanza. File sent by: Cecilia Cordoba

