

# Case Study on the Impact of Small Arms on War-affected Children

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# Colombia: No Safe Haven from War

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## Introduction

Small arms are devastating the lives of children in Colombia. Throughout the country, children find themselves at both ends of the weapon – some as perpetrators of conflict, crime and violence, and many more as the victims of constant brutality. Raging conflict between government forces, paramilitary groups, leftist guerrillas, and ordinary civilians have created an environment where no child is safe. Conditions of conflict and violence have perpetuated the use of children in conflict, and the perception that any child could be an actor in the armed violence.

## Background to the Colombian Conflict

Colombia is a nation as diverse as it is rich with abundant natural resources, predominately fertile terrain and a multi-ethnic population, but Colombia has suffered political instability and violence throughout the 20th century. Although Colombia has the longest-running democracy in Latin America, the state and corresponding civilian institutions including the presidency and the judiciary are weak and relatively ineffective. The absence of a viable central authority has given way to the rise

of many illegal armed actors including leftist guerrillas and rightist paramilitaries, and it has allowed legally armed actors such as the military to often operate outside the law.<sup>1</sup> According to intelligence sources, criminal syndicates led by narcotics traffickers have deeply infiltrated many Colombian institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Colombia has been at war virtually since it gained independence from Spain in 1810, affecting each succeeding generation. Colombia's current conflict stems from the period known as La Violencia, beginning with 1948 assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, a populist Liberal candidate for president, that initially cost the lives of up to 200,000 Colombians. In 1964, the conflict continued when guerrillas from La Violencia who hadn't reintegrated into Colombian society resumed fighting. Communists who had fought with the Liberal party formed the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) as a pro-Moscow revolutionary organization. One year later, the National Liberation Army (ELN) was formed as a pro-Havana revolutionary organization. Funded largely by cattle ranchers, regional paramilitary groups allied with local military forces against all Marxist guerrilla organizations, becoming an integral player in the hostilities. Starting in the 1980s, illegal drugs became a factor in Colombia's civil war. By the 1990s the entire conflict in Colombia had mushroomed, as proceeds from illegal drug

sales allowed each side to become better armed and more powerful. Today, war in Colombia affects each region, known as departments, of the country.

### **Small Arms in Colombia**

Small arms are insidious throughout Colombia. While the exact number of small arms in circulation in Colombia is unknown, the widespread availability and use of these weapons is clear. The majority of violence in Colombia is conducted with small arms, and the Galil, AK-47 and M-16 serve as the weapons of choice for the warring parties in Colombia.<sup>3</sup>

The most common weapon in use in Colombia is a Galil automatic rifle,<sup>4</sup> carried by the majority of Colombian soldiers. Colombian military and police forces also carry many U.S.-manufactured weapons that have been transferred to Colombia under a variety of military aid programs and legitimate government transfers. Among the most common are: 9mm pistols, M4 carbines, M14 and M16 automatic rifles, fragmentation grenades, 40mm (launching) grenades, M60E3 machine guns, and both anti-personnel landmines and Claymore directional mines.<sup>5</sup> Colombian military forces also are equipped with Belgian arms including the FN-MAG machine gun and the G-3 automatic rifle.<sup>6</sup>

The most common weapon in use by Colombian guerrillas, including both ELN and FARC combatants, is the AKM or the Kalashnikov automatic rifle.<sup>7</sup> (The AKM is almost identical to the AK-47 automatic rifle and most Kalashnikov rifles in circulation throughout the world are frequently misidentified as AK-47 rifles when they are, in fact, AKM rifles.) Many ELN and FARC guerrillas also carry Galil rifles. Guerrillas also carry Belgian FN-FAL automatic rifles, FN-CAL or carbine rifles as well as U.S.-made M-60 machine guns and M-14 and M-16 automatic rifles.<sup>8</sup>

The most common weapon in use by Colombian paramilitary forces of the United Self-Defense Forces (AUC) is the same weapon

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commonly carried by the Colombian military, the Galil.<sup>9</sup> Some paramilitary forces also carry AKM automatic rifles. Paramilitaries also have carried Belgian G-3 automatic rifles, 9mm Uzi automatic sub-machine guns and U.S.-manufactured AR-15 semi-automatic rifles. Paramilitary forces have carried a variety of .38 calibre revolvers and 9mm semi-automatic pistols as well.<sup>10</sup>

The warring parties acquire small arms in a variety of ways. Galil rifles have been given to paramilitary forces by members of the Colombian military; others have been stolen from the military by guerrilla forces. The AKM or Kalashnikov rifles are available throughout Latin America, as Cold War remnants. AK-47s are readily traded through illicit channels to groups and individuals with the resources to pay for them.

Colombia doesn't only rely on recycled weapons from other Latin American countries; it also acquires new weapons from international sources. Many former Warsaw Pact nations along with corrupt officials within those nations have flooded both legal and illegal markets with former Soviet bloc arms.<sup>11</sup> Colombia has legally purchased AR-15 rifles along with other arms from U.S. firms, which have been licensed to sell them to Colombia by the U.S. State Department.<sup>12</sup> Continuing the supply of arms to Colombia's national military remains a hotly contested issue, especially given the murky relationship between official military and paramilitary troops.<sup>13</sup>

### **Small Arms, Children and the Political Conflict**

The easy availability of weapons in Colombia ensures that small arms are regularly are

used by and against children. Children are involved in attacks by guerrillas, paramilitaries, government army forces, urban militias, drug cartels and their affiliated gangs as well as common criminals.

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All of Colombia's armed combatants, including guerrillas, paramilitaries and military forces have committed massacres in which children have been orphaned or murdered. Approximately 200 children were killed because of the civil war in 2000, according to the Colombian Defense Ministry.<sup>14</sup> UNICEF reported in 2000 that 460 Colombian children had been killed due to the conflict over the previous four years.<sup>15</sup> The impact of the politically motivated violence on children is not measured in deaths alone, however. As part of their conflict strategy,

Colombia's guerrilla groups and paramilitary groups have routinely kidnapped civilians, including children. Small arms are often the means in which these kidnappings are conducted. In the first six months of 2000, 1,750 Colombians were reported kidnapped and 126 reported cases were child abductions.<sup>16</sup> But even that number may be an underestimate, given that many families fear endangering their relatives lives by publicizing kidnappings. Ransoms range from several hundred dollars into the millions.

Children from wealthy and poor families are kidnapped because they usually bring the armed groups prompt payments from their anxious families.<sup>17</sup> The mother of a 3-year-old kidnapped by armed FARC guerrillas said, "I think that the life of a child has no price. But we can't leave the boy there, or let them hurt him in

any way. We will do anything to get him back. Unfortunately, in this country, the life of a child does have a price.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Displacement**

Approximately two million people have been displaced from their homes and communities in Colombia since 1985. In 2000 alone, 228,000 people were displaced in Colombia, 93,000 of which were forced to leave their homes between July and September.<sup>19</sup> Most of the displaced have been forced from rural areas where the guerrillas and paramilitary factions grapple over control of drug crops and land.<sup>20</sup> Since 1985, hundreds of thousands of the displaced are estimated to be under the age of 18.<sup>21</sup>

Children and their families are forcibly displaced in Colombia by direct violence or the threat of violence. A common tactic of guerrillas and paramilitaries is to kill a small number of villagers and then force others out in order to gain territory. Most often these massacres are conducted publicly with small arms and light weapons.<sup>22</sup> Civilians are fearful of the armed violence and almost every rural family that can afford to have one has a gun in their home.<sup>23</sup> Fleeing civilians often end up in larger urban areas such as Bogotá, Medellín, or Cali. The services available to the displaced often are not sufficient to meet their needs for drinkable water, sanitation and electricity.<sup>24</sup> The lack of assistance available to displaced civilians is compounded by the fact that many of the displaced fear being identified by the armed factions and prefer to remain anonymous.

Once in a displacement camp or shantytown, the external forces on a displaced

family can place tremendous pressures on the family unit. In single-parent homes, children and adolescents often are left alone for long periods of time. Approximately, 20 percent of Colombian children between the ages of 6 and 11 are not in school, and according to UNICEF, over 75 percent of displaced youths who previously attended school do not go back after leaving their original homes.<sup>25</sup>

Teachers also often don't want to remain in conflict zones, which further reduces children's access to education in Colombia. An estimated 66

percent of Colombian children living in conflict zones don't have access to secondary education.<sup>26</sup> Government officials in the region have recognized the issues surrounding displaced children have made it difficult for teachers to do their jobs safely.<sup>27</sup> In the Chalán, Coloso, Ouejas, and Camito municipalities, schoolteachers have received frequent death threats from guerrillas and paramilitaries.<sup>28</sup>

### **Child Soldiers in Colombia**

All parties in the Colombian conflict have used children as child soldiers.<sup>29</sup> Children are used as armed combatants, as sources of forced labor, to guard hostages and to gather information for the armed groups.<sup>30</sup> Colombian child soldiers are trained, threatened and coerced to carry out violent acts on military targets and on civilians.

Although most child soldiers are adolescents, children under age 10 have been reported to be among the armed combatants of several groups.<sup>31</sup> Child soldiers in Colombia sometimes are abducted or forcibly conscripted by armed groups and sometimes are encouraged to join armed groups for ideological reasons by family and

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community members.<sup>32</sup> Displaced children, particularly those who have lost contact with their families, are at particular risk of abduction by armed groups to serve as child soldiers.

Estimates of the number of child soldiers used in Colombia vary. In 1996, the Colombian government's Human Rights Ombudsman reported that about 6,000 children under the age of 18 were armed and fighting in Colombia.<sup>33</sup> However, in 1998 Human Rights Watch reported that 15,000 children were being used by Colombia's national security forces.<sup>34</sup> Since November 1999, the Colombian government has prohibited children under age 18 from serving in official government forces,<sup>35</sup> and the current number of children believed to be serving as combatants for the national security forces has decreased dramatically.

Although all parties in the Colombian conflict have used children to further their military objectives, most of the child combatants in Colombia have been recruited by the two largest guerrilla organizations.<sup>36</sup> The ELN and the FARC have separately each pledged not to recruit combatants under 18, yet they continue to do so.<sup>37</sup> It is estimated that at least 4,000 children were serving with the various guerrilla forces in 2000.<sup>38</sup> FARC has as many as 16,000 combatants spread throughout Colombia,<sup>39</sup> approximately 20 percent of which are believed to be under age 18.<sup>40</sup> The ELN has approximately 3,500 combatants,<sup>41</sup> and proportion of children in the ELN could be higher than 20 percent.<sup>42</sup>

Colombia's umbrella group of paramilitary organizations, the AUC, also have employed child combatants, although not as regularly as the guerrillas. The AUC paramilitaries have as many as 8,000 combatants.<sup>43</sup> Among them, the AUC had at least 180 children under age 18 deployed with arms as of April 2000.<sup>44</sup> In 1998, organizations within Colombia estimated that 15 percent of the members of the AUC were children.<sup>45</sup> Another 7,000 children were believed to be involved with the urban militias linked to various groups in the conflict in 2000.<sup>46</sup>

## **Girl Soldiers in Colombia**

About one third of the children fighting for Colombia's irregular armed groups are girls.<sup>47</sup> Up to 40 percent of the FARC's soldiers are women and girls.<sup>48</sup> The issue of whether girl children are forcibly or voluntarily recruited, along with the conditions under which they are held and treated, has been debated, but experts believe that the majority of girl child soldiers, up to 80 percent, join voluntarily.<sup>49</sup> Some accounts indicate that girl child soldiers are deliberately sexually abused,<sup>50</sup> but experts have not found any indication of widespread sexual abuse of girls,<sup>51</sup> rather a "clear abuse of power" exists between the commanders and the girl soldiers.<sup>52</sup> Both main guerrilla groups actively encourage girls to use birth control.<sup>53</sup> Girls also are encouraged to couple with male combatants. Some become involved with field commanders, who, in many cases, are much older than the girls with whom they are having sexual relations.

## **Demobilization**

Colombian child soldiers who try to leave armed groups are in particular danger. The International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has reported that children who attempt to escape guerrilla groups are considered deserters and may be executed immediately.<sup>54</sup> Child soldiers who are captured by the authorities and placed in juvenile detention centres are at risk of violence. The Office of the People's Advocate, an office of the Colombian government charged with safeguarding and promoting human rights and overseeing the official conduct of the agents of the state, estimated that between 1994 and 1996, 13 percent of children who were placed in detention centres were killed.<sup>55</sup> In some cases, child soldiers who have wanted to leave an armed group have been instructed that if the child soldier "manages to kill a 'subversive', he will be demobilized and returned to civilian life, 'as a form of payment'."<sup>56</sup>

## **Rehabilitation of Child Soldiers**

Reintegration of former child soldiers is possible in Colombia. Some children who were once enemies fighting for different armed groups now live, learn, and socialize together in a new environment. Julian Aguirre runs a program for the government organization, Bienestar Familiar, which provides foster homes for former child combatants. About 80 percent of the former child combatants he has worked with are illiterate, and the rehabilitation program provides for basic needs along with community support and education. Although the program is small, it is nonetheless successful. Since 1996, at least 416 former child combatants have returned to civilian life.<sup>57</sup> “We try to construct a life for them away from the war,” said Aguirre. “It gives them a chance to be young again.”<sup>58</sup>

## **Small Arms and Children: Beyond the Political Conflict**

The availability and prevalence of small arms and light weapons have impacted Colombian children in many aspects of life outside conflict areas. The loss of distinction between armed violence carried out in the context of the political conflict and armed violence carried out for personal or criminal reasons has directly impacted children and is shaping their perceptions of society. More Colombians are murdered each year for reasons other than politics or drugs.<sup>59</sup> The annual homicide rate is nearly 100 per 100,000 people.<sup>60</sup> Children are involved in the armed violence, both as perpetrators and as victims.

## **Youth Gangs and Sicarios**

Colombia has witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of youth gangs involved in criminal activities on the streets of its major cities since the mid 1970s. The growth of the drug trade in Colombia appears to have been the primary source of arms for members of youth gangs.<sup>61</sup> Drug lords created armies of adolescents to safeguard their territories and to carry out the violent confrontations

with other drug lords and with public officials and law enforcement.<sup>62</sup> Youth gang members have been arrested for armed violence carried out for reasons not related to the drug trade as well. The youth who become paid assassins for drug lords and other criminals are called sicarios.<sup>63</sup>

The young boys who had been involved with the drug cartels have participated in the assassinations of policemen, judges and other identifiable leaders for decades. A 16-year-old boy killed Colombia’s Minister of Justice, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, in 1983<sup>64</sup> in a barrage of sub-machine gunfire. Another youth killed a former guerrilla who joined the electoral process and was running for president in 1990.<sup>65</sup> A few minutes after take-off on a flight from Bogotá, the youth killed the candidate with a small uzi.

## **Street Children as Targets**

During the 1980s officials and law enforcement officers were regularly called upon by the public to do something about the youth gangs and the sicarios. The public’s outrage may, in fact, have escalated young people’s involvement in the violence. Several instances of the organized murders of youth gang members and street children were carried out, unofficially and illegally, by local law enforcement, urban militias and private citizens in response to the threat posed by armed youth.<sup>66</sup>

## **Small Arms Impact All Children**

Every child in Colombia, even those with no association with armed groups, youth gangs or street culture, is vulnerable to small arms violence. In addition to the potential for kidnapping by armed groups, many children are direct victims of the armed violence. An 11-year-old whose family was displaced from their village in northern Colombia due to a paramilitary attack, explains the situation he faces in a his new, and violent, neighborhood. “You can’t stay out on the streets for long,” he said. “You never know when a shooting will break out and someone could fall over dead.”<sup>67</sup>

## Children's Responses to Conflict and Guns in Colombia

While arguably being the most vulnerable of the war's victims, young people in Colombia also have become the most ardent and loudest opponents. Nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize every year since 1998, the Children's Movement for Peace<sup>68</sup> has emerged as the most visible and lauded effort among many working to end the war. The movement grew out of a UNICEF-sponsored workshop in 1996, which brought together youth leaders and children's groups from around Colombia to raise awareness of the Convention on the International Rights of the Child and gives Colombian children a greater voice in the sometimes risky peace process. As a result, nearly 100,000 Colombian children and youth are leaders of the movement. A Colombian teenager who participates in the movement said, "If we are only a small group who talks about peace we can be killed. But no one can kill ten million Colombians who want peace."<sup>69</sup>

In addition to the Children's Movement for Peace, other projects dealing with youth and peace have been undertaken. In 1995, the Peace and Co-Existence Project was created to negotiate peace agreements between opposing gang factions. After the gang leaders sign peace pacts, the Peace and Co-Existence Project offers small business support in order for gang members to create legitimate businesses. The World Bank Youth Development Project funds community services to prevent school drop out, as well as promoting conflict resolution and mediation education programs.

The children's movement and youth-focused programs have been a source of hope for children throughout Colombia. But the majority of Colombian children do not have the luxury to participate in such programs. A much larger number of children are directly impacted by small arms on a daily basis, either through direct violence or the threat of such violence.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

The impact of small arms on children in Colombia is tragic. Colombian children remain targeted by small arms and used as armed actors throughout the country. And it appears that Colombia's arms' arsenal will only grow in the near future. The relative weakness of state authority all but guarantees that many of these arms will either be misused or wind up in unintended hands, and be used against and by children. Without concerted domestic and international action, the outlook for Colombia's children remains bleak.❖

## Endnotes

1 Human Rights Watch, *Colombia's Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States*, 1996, [article on-line]; available from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/killertoc.htm>; accessed 12 April 2001.

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3 Adam Isacson, senior associate with Centre for International Policy, interview by Rachel Stohl, Washington, DC, 14 May 2001.

4 The commonality of weapons is based on observations by author Frank Smyth along with other journalists who have covered armed groups in Colombia.

5 *Colombia's Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States*, 1996, [article on-line]; available from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/killertoc.htm>; accessed 12 April 2001.

6 *Colombia's Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States*, 1996, [article on-line].

7 This assessment is based on observations by author Frank Smyth along with other journalists who have covered armed groups in Colombia.

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- 11 Stephen D. Goose and Frank Smyth, "Arming Genocide in Rwanda," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1994.
- 12 From 1989 to 1993, the U.S. State Department issued 39 licenses to U.S. firms to export small arms to Colombia, for a total value of \$643,785. See *Colombia's Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States*, 1996, [article on-line].
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- 24 Patricia Forner, *Colombia's Double Bind: The Guerrilla Conflict and the War on Drugs*, World Vision/US, 2000.
- 25 Jehane Sedky-Lavandero, division of communications for UNICEF, interview by Jimmie Briggs, New York, April 2001.
- 26 *El País*, "Conflicto afecta a la educación," 14 May 2001 (translated by Adam Isacson, Centre for International Policy).
- 27 Laura Cardona Muñoz, "Exodo de docentes rurales en Sucre," *El Tiempo*, 8 May 2001 (translated by Hugo Saenz, Centre for Defense Information).
- 28 Laura Cardona Muñoz, "Exodo de docentes rurales en Sucre," *El Tiempo*, 8 May 2001 (translated by Hugo Saenz, Centre for Defense Information).
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- 38 Interview with staff of The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, email interview by Rachel Stohl, 12 March 2001
- 39 The figure of as many as 16,000 FARC guerrillas is a relatively high estimate, although it is the one used by UNICEF representative



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- 41 The Centre for International Policy's Colombia Project, "Information about the Combatants," updated 26 April 2001, [article on-line]; available from <http://sss.ciponline.org/colombia/infocombat.htm>; accessed 21 May 2001.
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- 57 Julian Fernando Aguirre B., interview 26 April 2001.
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