

The peacemaker

# Pútschipu

bulletin 10



Coalition against the involvement of boys, girls and youth to the armed conflict in Colombia

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## Listening to the voices of the excombatant young women

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...The use of children in war has only been seen as something regrettable for too long. We are here to assure that this is recognized as something intolerable.

(Kofi Annan, ONU, 2002)

*A research by Ivonne Kearings, Ph. D., published by the Quaker's United Nations Office, that will soon appear in Spanish thanks to the Comité Andino de Servicios, formulates recommendations for the prevention of the direct and indirect involvement of girls and young women to the armed conflict, based on the testimonies of six girls demobilized on year 2001, that, besides are incorporated to the text of the book with small modifications. Following we reproduce the summary and some parts of this document.*

The present document gives the opportunity to listen to the voices of excombatant young women in Colombia, besides fully understanding why this sentence of the General Secretary of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, on may 2002, deserves all our attention.

This report about combatant girls and young women in Colombia makes part of a wider study, in which deep interviews were

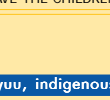
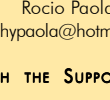
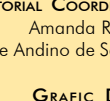
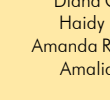
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COLOMBIA



With feelings of solidarity and complacency, the Coalition noticed how the national community reacted touched by the tragedy occurred in Bogotá on the last week of April, in which 21 children of an important catholic school died on an accident, crushed by a heavy machinery that constructs the capital city's transportation system. Nevertheless, that same public opinion, reacts not so strongly to another tragedy that takes around 7 lives of Colombian children and young men and women every day : the internal armed conflict.

The launching and divulgation of the report: "Colombia's War on children" of the alliance *Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict* made clear once again the true dimension of the violations of childhood and youth's rights on the country. In the same way, it contributes to the recent report of Human Rights Watch and to the recent statement of different instances of the UN about impacts of violence on a population under age 18, that reaches 16 million people, almost two thirds of Colombian population.

But the decision of the Constitutional Court, on the decision C-172, 2004 that declares constitutional Lay 833, 2003, is a light of hope. By this law the Optional Protocol of the Convention on the rights of the Child on Children and armed conflict is approved and adopted by the Colombian State. This decision supports one of the Coalition's most important flags.

The serious situation of boys, girls and young men and women that are the target of armed attacks, as the deplorable events that occurred on Cajamarca, department of Tolima, in which 4 people, 3 of them under 18, including a baby, died on an apparent mistake of the National Army, give sense to what the Constitutional Court said about the "Necessity of adopting efficient policies and instruments to guarantee the assistance and protection of the infant population and to attend to international instruments such us the Optional Protocol which results in accord to the constitutional precepts".

The Coalition Against the involvement of Boys, Girls and Youth to the Armed Conflict expects the National government to complete the needed transactions to formally deposit the instruments of ratification of the Protocol to the instances on the United Nations.

Meanwhile, we will maintain valid this invitation to the social organizations, the churches, the youth groups, the non governmental organizations, the academics and the associations concerned about the rights of the childhood and youth to incorporate in their demands the respect for our children and youth, making the authorities accountable for their actions when they use children and youth in their strategic military actions, and that the guerrillas and the paramilitary groups finally stop using in a direct or indirect way children who suffer of multiple discriminations and serious, massive and systematic violations of their human rights.

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# I support myself on things that are useful for my future



*Interview with Miguel, a young man that was forced to displace, and now works in favor of other young in the same situation (interview by Fundación Dos Mundos in Quibdó Chocó)*



**Interviewer:** Where are you from?

**Miguel:** I am from Apartadó, Antioquia. Right now I am living here in Quibdó.

**I.** Why did you come to Quibdó?

**M.** Well. First of all I had a very hard case of displacement because an uncle was killed, my mother was very frightened, my uncle's wife was told that she was going to be killed and that was the cause for us to displace, because we thought that they were also going to take actions against us.

**I.** Did you come directly to Quibdó?

**M.** No, from Chigorodó we went to the Valle de Aburrá and there we decided to come here.

**I.** And right now who do you live with?

**M.** I live with some friends.

**I.** And your family?

**M.** My mother went with my younger siblings, she decided to go back to Urabá and I stayed here with my younger brother, he lives with a little sister of mine, and I live here with some mates.

**I.** How have you felt here in Quibdó?

**M.** Well, I have felt two emotions, because when one just arrives to a place, when things don't work for one, they don't appear easy, one starts to feel with worries, bad thoughts and that makes one having very difficult times, but as time goes by one changes because one starts meeting people that help one to go out from many problems and well right now I feel good, I feel kind of established.

**I.** During that process from passing thru hard times to end up feeling alright, in what things have you supported?

**M.** Well, I support myself on things that are useful for me in the future, meaning things that I can do and that help me and that thru them, I may help other people, that is what is motivating me on these moments, how to help other

people that had the same problem that I have had.

**I.** How do you do it?

**M.** Some months ago, I did it with a child movement called Peace Sowers (Sembradores de Paz), I have done it in youth groups on the neighborhood Villa España, I have supported other youth groups from parishes, such as the one from the Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, and in this moments I am doing it from the Cultural Center "Mamá O", that gave me the opportunity of being there and of sharing with many of them.

**I.** From your experience what things do you rescue in order to work with this other young men and women?

**M.** I rescue the desire of all of us of having a margin to fight for, trying to help people so that they have a better wellbeing or find a support on me.





I. And from your experience, what teachings remain?

M. What has remained the most, in spite of all the problems, I didn't remain stagnant, I tried to overcome myself, I proposed things and accomplished them, and right now I am trying to direct myself to other things and I hope to accomplish them. Those are the things that remain the most: the courage to keep on fighting.

I. When you had to displace yourself what did you feel?

M. When I displaced and arrived here, I felt mostly rejected, in the way in which people looked

the displaced : "Ah, you are this and that", that made me feel really bad, but at the same time, one realizes with time that one has to make people notice that things are not the way they see them, make them see that one doesn't make things because one wants to, but because one was obliged to it, and in the future, the turn might be for them.

I. How do you think that youth groups help young men and women to face these situations?

M. Well, thru youth groups a mechanism with a workshop is given, where emotional parts are worked, meaning, we are not experimented but we work thru workshops, we give them brochures or we look up for books that talk about violence, drug addiction etc. and thru that we push them to change those ways of thinking.

I. What things have to change in the way young men and women think?

M. At least I as a young man would say that more than anything else: the lifestyle, the way of thinking for example the violent way, drug addictions, aggressivity etc. Meaning, the

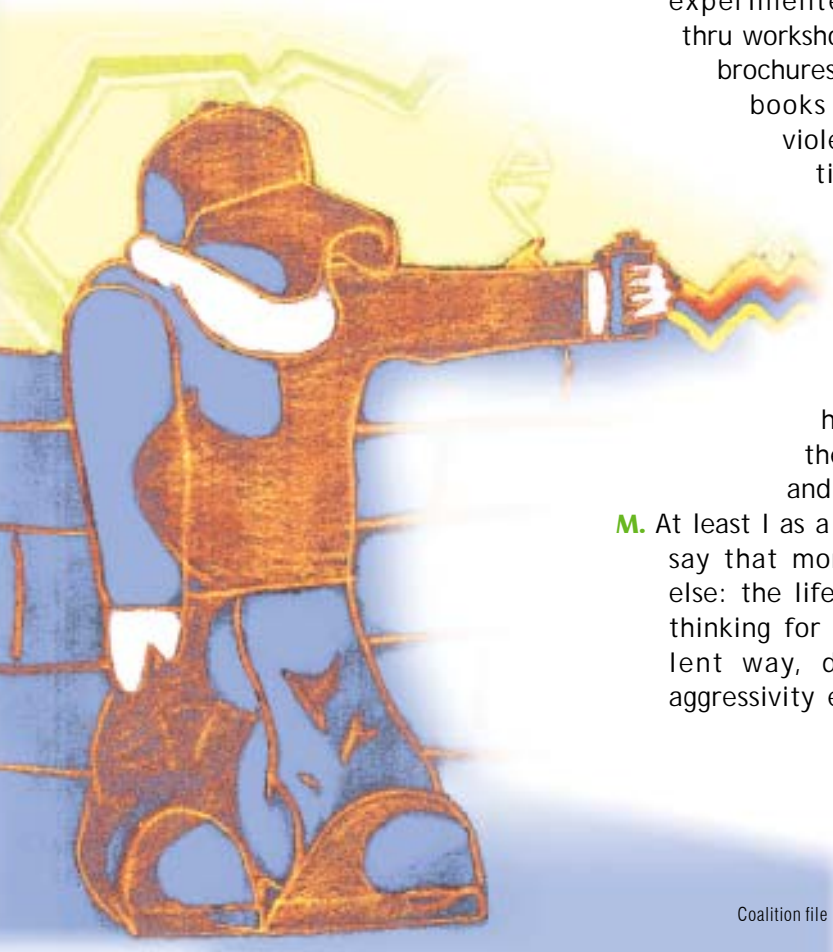
have too much aggressivity in mind; they go for what is fashionable now and that makes them do things that are not inside them.

I. At some point did you also live that?

M. Yes, I lived that. That happened to me, but thank God and the people that helped me - that right now are not present any more, just one is still present- I have changed that way of thinking and acting.

I. What things can be changed to make young men and women live the conflict in a different way?

M. For me, if people don't discriminate them, one of the priorities would be that. The other would be not to criticize the young men or women because of the way they dress, because today we are used that if a young man wears plaits they say that he smokes marihuana, that he steels, that he belongs to bands or that if a youngster is too "gomelito"<sup>1</sup> Ah, he is involved with something and he is going to be killed...Such as something that happened this days that came a "cleansing"<sup>2</sup> wave and most of the young men and women noticed that they are killing those who look this way or the other; I was one of the persons who told himself : "If they are going to kill me, they kill me; but no one is going to change the way I dress and I live. Even if they have to kill me because of that; but no one has to impose to me what I want to do".



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<sup>1</sup> Young men or women belonging to a middle-high class pretentious in the way he/she dresses and speaks.

<sup>2</sup> "Cleansing" alludes to a "social cleansing", term that indicates killings for ethnical, political or intolerant motives with marginal groups, such as drug consumers, persons who prostitute or with a different sexual orientation.

- I. What things could young people do towards social cleansing?
- M. Even social cleansing has occurred with young people belonging to gangs, because many young people belong to them... That makes other people think the wrong way about those who dress similar to them, but they are not like them; it would be kind of like the bad part being conscious of what they are doing, valuing their life, and valuing those who surround them and trying to change. Meaning to take the initiative from them or looking for help, mechanisms as a lot of people have done nowadays to change what they are, to be good persons.
- I. What mechanisms do you know that those kids have used, for example, those in gangs?
- M. There was a guy here, I don't know where he is now, but he looked for a rehab center, the police helped him. Last year there was a program (about) gangs that socialized a lot. They work and thru the church there have also been mechanisms for young people. The *Mama O* center has also worked that part. It is just to look for the right place and doors will open there, here there are already many places that help young men and women.
- I. Why do you think young people end up choosing the gang option?
- M. Well, there like two contradictions because there are some that maybe do it because of the mistreatment they had at home during their childhood, that nowadays is really mortal, meaning seeing a child growing up where mother and father fight, the father drinks alcohol, the mother goes in and out, that pushes the kid to grow up with a cloudy mind and that makes

the kid throw himself to the streets really early to look for something and from that initial search to stealing, consuming drugs, where he is taken by some other eldest kids or perhaps they do it to bluff as "gomelitos" they start trying drugs, from the parties and from that party they start seeing things done out of context, and when they realize that it is too late.

- I. Do you think that the gang problem has any relation with the socio-political conflict of the department, the region or the country?
- M. Yes I do think it has something to do, because nowadays the big legislative functionaries talk about micro-industries, but they had never had the chance like "man, lets assign this for the marginal youth population of this sector, lets do this with young people with drug troubles"... They talk and talk but when it is time to execute, everything goes void. That is the case here in Quibdó were the Governor and the Major say "man there is a problem with young people here, many robberies in this neighborhood and towards 10:00 p.m. people can not go over there because they wait the to steel them". But they have never given themselves the task to say "Well why are these kids doing that, lets see what do they want, what do they need, if t is because they have no job, lets make a painting or a handcraft micro-industry. That task has not been done, there are few organizations that nowadays are here and work with young people.
- I. Besides the state support, which are the options the young people may use?

- M. Maybe the bigger options that we have are the willingness and the desire of being someone and to fight for what we want, because if we don't have self interest it wouldn't be worth that someone came and said: "Man, Miguel I have this for you" and me not having interest on receiving that support, that help that he is giving to me. That is what I think: willingness and motivation that we all have to change the bad things and keep on the good things that we are in. 🖐️



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Coalition file



## Listening to the voices of the excombatant young women

carried out with twenty three excombatant of four different areas of armed conflict in the world. The opinions of these young women offer an important opportunity to see the process that they followed to convert themselves in combatants, their experiences and their visions of the future.

Among the bluntest conclusions there are:

- Turning into a young combatant depends a lot on a combination of the local environment and the personal circumstances that surround the life of the young person.

*That is to say, I kept the legs like green and purple due to the whip blows that she (mother) gave me. And then my mother knew and turned back and they turned back to look for me, an then was when they went to look for me, and told the guerrilla to hand me because I was under the age 18 and that how could they think of taking me, and everything, so I talk to them and told them that I wouldn't go back home because I was very mistreated there and I didn't want to go back home and since then I didn't see them any more until who knows when.*

- Living in poverty conditions was an important fact for young people to get involved with a movement or to be kidnapped for that purpose.
- Young women didn't look for revenge, or harming those who had used or abused them. They were looking a way of contributing something to life, doing something useful and productive with their lives and compensating the harm done to other persons.



In order to participate in the study, each young woman, must have been combatant before turning 18 years old and being out of the conflict for a time interval no minor than two years. Because of the methodology of in-depth interviews, the goal was to obtain the testimonies of four to six girls in each of the four world areas in conflict. The young women were selected by teams in each country with the criteria of accessibility, willingness to participate and the

capacity of each team to assure the confidentiality and the security of the young women. Twenty two girls accomplished these criteria: five in Angola, six in Colombia, five in Philippines, and six in Sri Lanka. A seventh young woman in Sri Lanka was later included. The excombatant young women made part of the same armed group in each country, but this doesn't mean that there wouldn't be other armed groups or the State Armed Groups that employed combatant children in these countries.

The interviews were textually transcript and translated to English. In the transcript interviews fake names were employed in order to keep confidentiality and safety to the young women. Other personal information was also changed in order to protect the interviewed young women. Common topics were identified to articulate and synthesize them. Such topics were also used to develop conclusions and recommendations. Nine





topics that are the basis of this report were selected. The topics are grouped in three areas:

**Characteristics of the interviewed young women and their experiences**

- Family Relationships
- Parties and Religion
- Education
- Games

**Evolution and experience as young combatant**

- Reasons for involvement
- Entertainment and life as young combatant
- Reconsideration of the decision of involvement.

**Vision of who they are and how do they see future**

- Self Sense
- Temporality and future

The clue risk factors that affected on the decision of involving to an armed group were identified based on the interviews. Two of the most important risks, apart from the principal risk of living in a conflict zone, are being poor, marginal and being away from the family. The risks were present in the young women from the study and played an important roll on the decision of getting involved with an armed group.

*I was like 10 years old, and I told her, one day I caught them, I caught my father when I was at school and we had recess, and I went home and went in very silent, and noticed that he wanted to force my sister. And then my father looked at me and knew I had looked at him and told me he was going to give me five hundred pesos so that I wouldn't tell my mother. At that moment I said yes, because I was very angry and then when my mother arrived, I told her. My mother was really furious and took a knife and all that, and didn't know what to do and we took off and left my father.*

Although there are topics in common, it is important to recognize that young excombatant can not be treated as if they all had the same characteristics - even if they come from the same conflict zone. The voices of these excombatant young women reveal their terrible memories and their anger feelings, but also show their desire of taking care of other people and doing something positive with their lives.



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Among the most relevant **recommendations** for demobilization and rehabilitation based on the interviews we find:

**L**istening to the young women and their experiences and needs; satisfying their basic needs and giving safe discussion spaces when they need help.

**T**rying to find a relative or grown up person important in their lives so that a level of reconciliation can be generated.

**O**ffering new expectatives that change their combatant identity in order to rescue their real identity and recovering their decision capacity.

**P**roviding opportunities for education and training; the young women recognized the value of education and the need of having abilities in order to be able to work.



## INTRODUCTION

CENTRAL  
THEME

Violence against children is not acceptable. To work this problem a united labor between governments, agencies of the UN, non governmental organizations (NGO), the private sector and individual persons is needed in order to understand their stories. This is an important aspect in any prevention, demobilization and reinsertion program. (...) This report presents the voices of young excombatant in Colombia.

February 12, 2002 represents a landmark on the efforts to end with the use of children on war. That day the Optional Protocol of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on children and armed conflicts entered into force. Making

accomplish this international agreement will be important for actions directed to prevention of children's use in war and of them having to live the tragic experiences described by the young women in this study.

According to this Optional Protocol, the responsibility of rehabilitating and reintegrating excombatant children relapses on governments, that besides, have the responsibility of protecting and not punishing them. The 12 February 2002, Mary Robinson, who at that moment was the High Commissioner of the United Nations for Human Rights declared:

*"we are urging all governments and armed groups to end the military recruitment of young people under the age 18 and to liberate the young men and women recruited now. There is no excuse for arming children to fight in an adult war."*

The General Secretary of the United Nations, Koffi Annan, in his speech in the presence of Special Session of the United Nations on May 2002 posed that " The use of children combatants is a practice vile and harmful, practice that must end". He added that

*Those who employ this way of abuse against children have to respond for it. The use of children in war have been seen as something simply regrettable. We are here to assure it is seen as something intolerable.*

### Why to listen to the voices of young excombatant?

There exists a lot of documentation to face the problematic of violence against children. Documenting this topic is a necessary activity to reach understanding and agreements between the international community with the goal of preventing the use of boys and girls as combatants, as well as for collaborating with their rehabilitation. A characteristic of much of this activities are the calls to "give resources" or to "establish mechanisms to facilitate activities for children" or to "assure that the conditions for their disenfranchisement and reinsertions stay defined". To accomplish these objectives we have to know what resources to provide, which activities accomplish the necessities of the children or what conditions have to be defined. We can base on typically occidental theories and concepts for the right treatment, or we can also listen to boys and girls and try to understand what might have a bigger effectively satisfying their needs.

During a long time, combatant children were classified under a common category as if they had the same characteristics and needs. Frequently individual characteristics and features were ignored. Until



Young ex combatants can not be treated as if they all had the same characteristics - even if they come from the same conflict zone.





recently, the dominant opinion was that all combatant children were boys, but now we know that they are from both sexes and that the disentanglement and reinsertion programs must have in mind the exclusive necessities of the young women.

The fundamental needs of this young excombatants have not been well documented, understood or elaborated; nevertheless, lately it has been recognized that girls and young women are object of a very wide utilization among armed groups.

Their requirements for disentanglement and reinsertion are therefore directly related to the specific roles that they had to develop inside the armed group. For example, most or even all girls are supposed to have been raped or sexually abused during their stay in the armed group, this study reveals that not all armed groups rape young women.

The position planted by some armed groups forbids sexual relations between men and women without the women and the commandant's permission. In some armed groups, contraceptive injections were used and abortions were practiced without the young women consent.

In all of the armed groups there were power differences between men and young women; in fact, many young women accepted to have intimate sexual relations when they realized this would bring benefits such as more food, better life conditions and opportunities to ride a car instead of walking long distances, among other privileges. None of the young women interviewed received information about prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.



Autor: Vincent Delbrouck, Archivo FUNDACIÓN DOS MUNDOS

## METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to get culturally important information with which it is able to construct disentanglement and reinsertion programs, as well as to develop strategies to prevent the vinculation of young women into war. The project was designed and dedicated to listening the voices of young excombatants and allowing their voices to sound.

Due to the fact that there are limited data about the real experience of young excombatants, the qualitative format was used to pick up this information based on the detailed experiences given by the young women who have lived this experience.

A qualitative poll (self-administrated or by interviewer) with answer categories, wouldn't arrive with the proposed information, to answer the nucleus question of this study; what was the experience lived by this young excombatants? The objective was listening to their voices, knowing the ideas and thoughts of the interviewed young women, which was accomplished by the means of the process of an opened interview. Guba and Lincon (1994) suggest that the process of a dialogue allows the arise and ripeness of ideas starting from the interaction between persons which turns to be fundamental for the information understanding and recompilation.

Because of the specific gender and culture nature of the desired information, it is probable that during the interviews new material arises, towards which the flexibility capacity is critic for picking up the information and arising ideas (Patton 1990). Although the nucleus question is still the basis of the present study (Janesick 1994), the theoretical frame of the project is found inside phenomenological and ethnographic constructs.

The methodology of in depth interview in this study is based on the Irving Seidman work, described in his book "Interviewing as Qualitative Research" (1998). This method allows the arise of new thoughts and in-



formation during the interviews. The opportunity of important information that wouldn't have been considered in function of the direct answer and question presenting exists. The wide and in depth questions proceed from general to specific and from less personal to more personal. The sample is small and therefore the need of obtaining exhaustive information is considerable.

## CRITERIA FOR THE SELECTION OF YOUNG EXCOMBATANTS

In order to participate in the study, each young woman, must had been combatant before turning 18 years old and being out of the conflict for a time interval no minor than two years

## DECLARATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

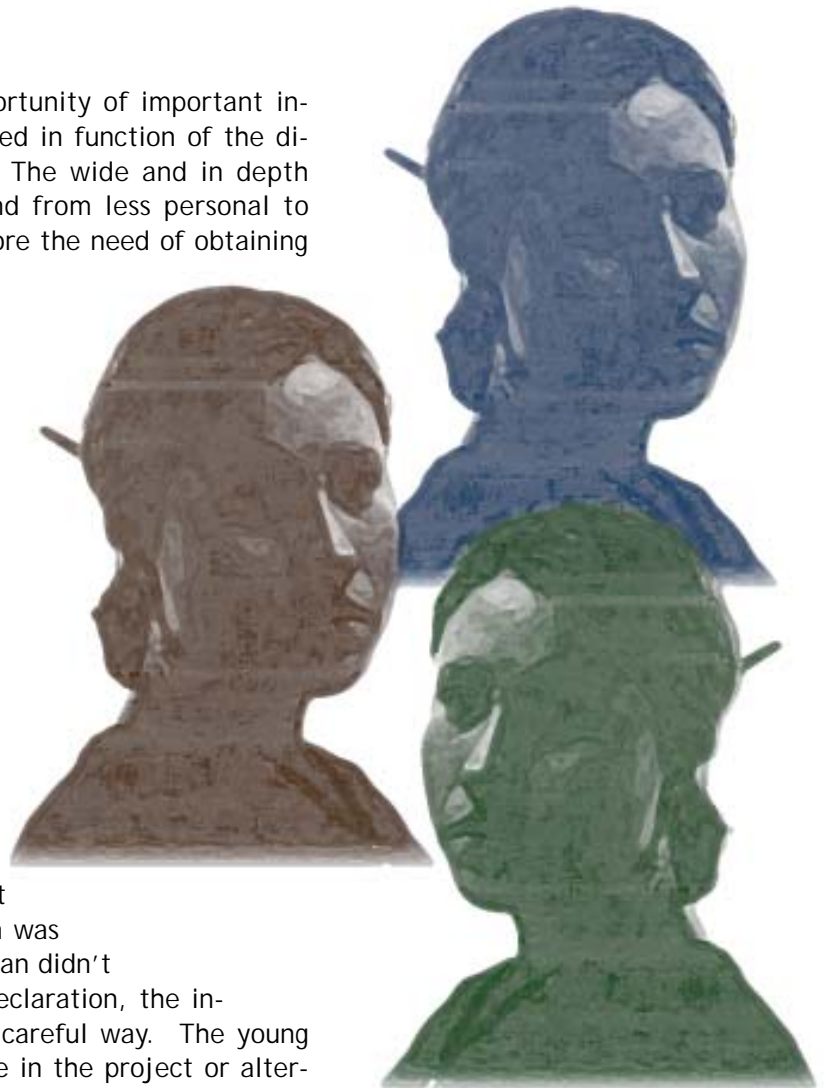
A declaration of informed consent which was signed by each of the young women before each interview was designed; the declaration was presented and reviewed between each young women and the interviewer so that the last one would know that the young woman was really agree with the process. If the young woman didn't have enough reading level to understand the declaration, the interviewer read it to her and explained it in a careful way. The young woman always had the choice not to participate in the project or alternatively not to tape the interviews but to write it by hand.

## THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

The methodology included doing three in depth interviews with each young excombatant; each one shouldn't pass three hours, and a period between three and seven days was left between each one, in order to be able to think about the treated topics. In some cases the duration of the interview was changed because of availability or safety of the young women reasons. If by any cause the interviewer noticed that the young woman was too uncomfortable remembering or thinking about painful experiences, the interview was stopped and even the girl could stop it at any moment and because of any reason, such as the Consent Declaration proposed.

The first interview researched about the life of the young woman before she joined the armed group that embraced topics of her childhood including memories of her town, her parents, her siblings and other relatives, parties, religion, school and activities that she enjoyed being a girl.

The second interview was focused on the life of the young woman as a combatant. In this area there is limited information. In their answers they described the circumstances that lead them to join an armed group; for example, if they were obliged to entailment by kidnapping or if they "voluntarily" entailed; in that case they were questioned if they had been induced by friends or known people and what type of pressure did they



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feel. They also described in detail their time inside the armed group, the daily routine, what they were obliged to do and the consequences of not obeying.

The third interview was centered on how they perceived their future. Here, feelings of no future, and absence of useful options for life, guilty for what they had to do in order to survive together with encountered feelings about going back to the group, studying or living in family arise. They would also talk about their perceptions about their needs to go on and reconstruct their life, besides thinking about the meaning of their experience as a young combatant. 🖐️



# Making visible Colombian boys and girls affected by the armed conflict



Step by step, the subject of the serious impacts of social and political violence, just as the one directly related to the intern armed conflict, in boys and girls in Colombia, occupies the attention of the instances of the United Nations.

The 60th session of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) of the UN in Geneva was witness of a small but significant advance in matter of analysis and recommendations to the Colombian State about the state of childhood and youth harmed in their fundamental rights by specific facts such as the prevalence of war and by structural causes such as divers ways of discrimination, oppression and social, political and cultural exclusion that faces over 60% of the population who lives in poverty.

In 2003, two special Rapporteurs with mandate of the Commission on Human Rights visited Colombia, by invitation of the national government : The Special Rapporteur on Racial Discrimina-

tion, Racism, Xenophobia, and connected ways of intolerance, (E/CN.4/2002/18/Add.3) and the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education (E/CN-4/2004/45/Add.2). In their reports to the CHR, these two experts made clear their concern about the country's situation.

While the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education did a detailed analysis on the serious crisis students, teachers and educative institutions are going thru not only because of the regressive measures that don't develop international parameters for the State to guarantee the education right, but also because of the negative impacts of the armed conflict, the Rapporteur about Racism pointed the urgency of attacking the causes that originate the racial discrimination and ending the victimization of indigenous, Romaní and afro descendent population, by the parts in the armed conflict, in special when they are forced to internal displacement.

"The Special Rapporteur suggests the separation of school from the conflict and its definition and protection as a "peace space" and for the construction of a project of life for childhood and youth victimized by violence and forced displacement"

"The Special Rapporteur suggests an educative strategy with gender focus destined to the analysis of educative processes from the optic of both sexes and the design of an education against the conflict and the violence, that educates for the idea of a society in peace, based on all human rights equal for all"

*Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, mission to Colombia.*





Coalition file

The Special Representative of the Secretary General on children and armed conflicts included in his annual Report to the CHR (E/CN.2/2004/70) his concerns about kidnapping, mutilations and murders of Colombian boys and girls. The Representative stood out the murder of than 150 young men and women in Cazucá during the first 9 months of 2003.

Parts that recruit or use children in armed conflicts in Colombia.

1. Self-defense Groups, Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)
  - a) United Self-defense Groups of South Casanare (AUSC)
  - b) Countryside Self-defense Groups of Cordoba and Ura bá (ACCU)
  - c) Self-defense Groups of the Magdalena Medio (ACMM)
  - d) Self-defense Groups of Meta
2. Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)
3. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)

[Annual Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on children and Armed Conflict Annex II](#)

Additional to these Reports the correspondent to 2003 was presented by the Office in Colombia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, directed by Mr. Michael Frühling. In at least seven paragraphs, the Report picks up concerns relative to rights of children and youth.

"Wide sectors of children are still victims of violations to the right to life, affected by abandon, and child labor, sexual abuse and exploitation, physical maltreatment and home violence. In matter of economical, social and cultural rights childhood and youth are the most unassisted. In the same way the armed conflict strongly and negatively impacts on children, especially by the taken of hostages, recruitment, displacement and consequences of the infractions to the International Humanitarian Law against their communities and their families" (96).

"The High Commissioner presses FARC-EP, ELN , AUC and other guerrilla and paramilitary groups to respect the right to life of all civilians. It presses them specially to abstain in every moment of attacks against civilian population and indiscriminate attacks of the unacceptable practice of kidnapping and of recruitment of people under the age 18 and terrorism acts.

"Children kept on being victims of hostage's takes, recruitment, use of antipersonnel mines, displacements, indiscriminate attacks and terrorism acts by illegal armed groups. The Foundation "Pais Libre" (Free Country) registered until September 243 kidnapped minors. The office in Colombia received reports on various cases of recruitment of indigenous minors in Cauca by FARC-EP and in Cesar by ELN. Paramilitary groups have also recruited youth in many cases, in exchange to a remuneration or they have used them to investigate or follow some persons in exchange of money or clothes, like in Barrancabermeja (Santander). The office in Colombia received denounces on the use of minors by the Army as Informers or in the frame of intelligence operatives as in the case of minors belonging to the humanitarian zone "Esperanza de Dios", Bajo Atrato (Choco), in May".

[Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights about the situation of Human Rights in Colombia \(E/CN.4/2004/13\)](#)



Nosotros somos  
niños  
queremos ir a  
casa



Coalition file

Due to the importance of the pursuit of the 27 Recommendations identified in the meeting maintained by the Colombian government in London with 24 countries about the validity of human rights in Colombia, this Report provoked a defensive reaction from the director of the Vice-presidency's program who is taken charge of the topic. Nevertheless, the conclusions of the deliberations of the Commission, contained on the Chairman's statements of the 60<sup>th</sup> period of sessions of the CHR are categorical about Human Rights not being renounceable for the international community that vigilantly observes the events of a country in which authorities are determined in showing that everything is going better, but the crude reality shows the opposite:

"The Commission (...) encourages the government to consider the possibility of ratifying the Facultative Protocol of the CRC relative to the participation of children in armed conflicts".

" The Commission also condemns the recruitment of a large number of children by illegal armed groups and urges those groups to stop recruitment and to demobilize immediately those children currently in their ranks, in accordance with Security Council resolution 1460 (2003) of 30 January 2003".

"The Commission deploras violations of the right to life of large numbers of children. The Commission deploras the fact that vulnerable sectors of the population, in particular women and children, are especially affected by the ongoing violence. The Commission is concerned that abandonment, child labour sexual exploitation and abuse, physical ill-treatment and familial violence continue to occur. The Commission also deploras continuing violations and abuses of the economic, social and cultural rights of children and women".

*Chairman Statement on Colombia, 60<sup>th</sup> period of sessions of the Commission of Human Rights (E/CN.4/2004/Future.5)*

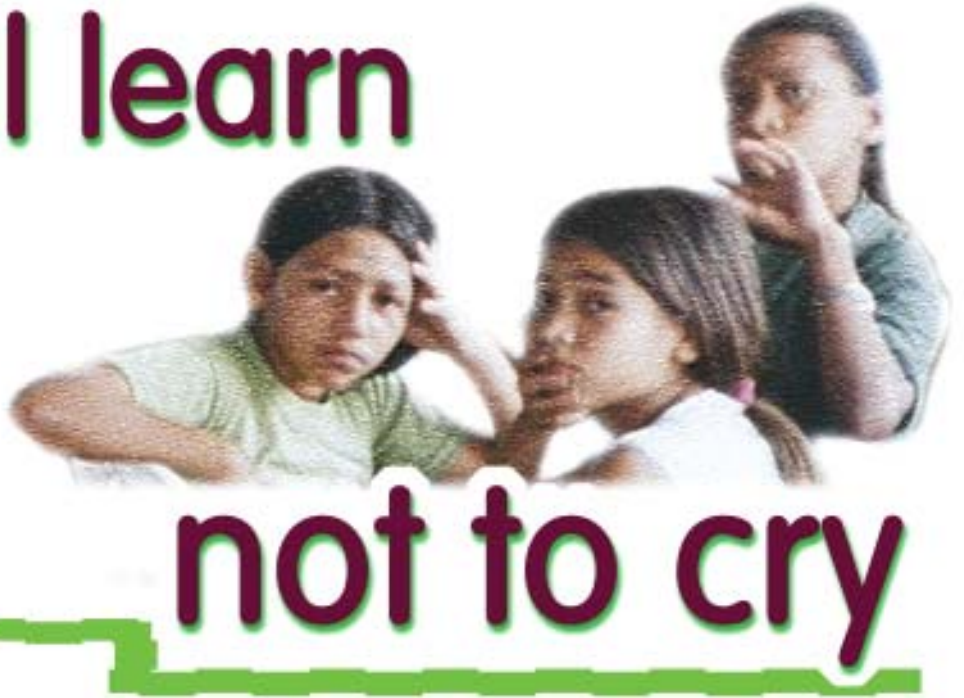


Coalition file



# You'll learn

*Jiovani Arias, Director of Fundación Dos Mundos, represented the Coalition in the presentation of the Spanish edition of the report "You'll learn not to cry: Child combatants in Colombia", done by the Director of Human Rights Watch Americas, Jose Miguel Vivanco.*



# not to cry

The National and International organizations that integrate the Coalition Against the Involvement of Boys, Girls and Youth to the Armed Conflict in Colombia welcome with approval the report by Human Rights Watch that is presented today, about the situation of combatant boys and girls in Colombia.

The report points out the worsening of the situation of people under the age 18 in the context of the Colombian armed conflict and we, as Coalition highlight at least the following aspects:

In first instance, the richness of the commentaries on the voice of children and youth that mention the deplorable and frequently inhuman conditions into which they are subjected by different armed groups. In observations done in different regions of the country, we have noted that the fake belief in better life conditions by enrolling as an armed actor determines the involvement in many cases. The report clarifies

this illusion, and reiterates in many of its pages that the idea of a better life in the rows of this groups is pure illusion. It would be worth in that sense, to convert the report in to a work document that allows contributing in prevention of involvement by letting children and youth in the regions read it.

The report may warn in the use of children and youth in the Colombian war. Neither for the illegal armed actors nor for the Colombian State childhood is a goal by itself that is worthy of protection, care and respect in all the circumstances. In various ways children and youth are used in military activities and besides transporting weapons they accomplish logistic and intelligence labors and fabricate explosives among others. Childhood has become another subject, that has allowed for example, to gain force and status in recent dialogue processes, so that not having people under the age 18 on the rows obeys not to the conviction of the necessity of maintaining childhood out of the armed conflict but it is motivated in facts where such decision may be linked to obtaining a political benefit.

The report insists on clear and precise public policies around the topic of demobilization and sketches some inconsistencies on adopted policies and the lack of unity of criteria among the instances responsible of the topic, nevertheless it recognizes and validates the effort of the last years.

Another important aspect is that the report dedicates a chapter to combatant girls. It is necessary that the analysis done about childhood in the middle of the armed conflict involve in a clear way gender perspective. The situations of abuse around sexuality are clear in the involvement of girls with armed groups, but unfortunately, it does not start or end there. Running away from sexual harassment or abuse in the



interior of families, is in many cases a cause of enrolment in the rows of this armies. There is not better luck and the search for conditions that surpass historical discrimination associated to gender, is resolved in adjective terms such as, the equality they have to young men to act in war rolls.

We reiterate the importance of this report and the possibilities that it opens to the analysis and the rigorous debate of this serious situation that affects a sector of Colombian childhood. We share the recommendations formulated by the European Union and diverse instances of the System of the United Nations to illegal armed actors and to the Colombian and United States government.

Nevertheless as Coalition we consider that the problem of the exploitation of children and youth in the armed conflict widely exceeds their direct involvement as combatants this, although is dramatic and unacceptable, is just the point of the iceberg of a much complex problem.

In the Colombian armed conflict, besides children and youth that see themselves obliged to hold a weapon and whose number is not yet easy to precise, are involved the close to one million children who are direct victims of different violent events associated to the armed conflict as forced displacement, the almost 10 million that are situated under the poverty line and that include five hundred thousand on misery situation, just as the undetermined number of people under the age 18 exposed to logics and imaginaries of war in their every day ambits.

In Colombia it exist structural poverty, inequality, lack of opportunities of education, discrimination and exclusion problems that in spite of discourses that try to affirm the opposite, keep a certain degree of relation to the social-political and armed conflict and from there, with the participation of children and youth in it. It is hard to conceive a policy oriented to keep childhood out side the reaches of war that does not involve a clear and unmistakable commitment by the State around these problems.

As we pointed on a communication directed to the President on year 2002, more than firm authority exercises, a policy that considers the economical, familiar, psychosocial and exclusion facts that lead to involvement is needed. There we insist on the necessity of getting rid of the idea of a "voluntary recruitment" because on none of the cases children and youth count on the conditions to freely elect and decide. They are always restrained by an external situation as those pointed. There must not be distinctions in the treatment of these people, supported on the wrong argument that establishes differences starting from a supposed voluntary involvement. The duty of the State is to promote the reintegration of all children victims of recruitment. As previewed by the current Colombian Criminal code and by the Rome Statute in its eighth article, children and youth involved to the armed conflict must be considered victim of an adult crime, therefore the possibility of establishing a criminal responsibility age under 18 is clearly opposite to the CRC.

In relation to the demobilization policies, there must be pointed that in four years of execution, the attention program of the ICBF has

only reached 1200 children, which is equivalent to just 10% of the total number of involved children. The State has not defined clear and coherent public policies to attend demobilized children and rules are dispersed in divers public order regulations, among which there are various contradictions. For example, it is forbidden its use in intelligence, but there are economical bonuses for giving out information.

In the same way, we see concerned that a militarist conception has been gaining its way in the interior of the Colombian society that in some way is in the backstage of imaginaries about childhood. To quote just an example, governmental programs as "soldiers for a day" are oriented to promote integration to the army and a culture in favor of war among children. We have asked to eliminate this program in agreement to the petition done by the Nation's General Attorney in its report on the Rehabilitation zone of Arauca because it jeopardizes children's life, it is opposite to their development and it does not correspond to the functions of the Army, among which there is not the education of childhood.

To end up, we want to make a call to the International Community so that it adopts a more decided roll in the idea of promoting a wide conception of problems that affect childhood in the frame of Colombian armed conflict, including the topic of child combatants. On the other hand, we insist on the necessity of looking, even on the middle of confrontation, for humanitarian agreements that include the commitment of maintaining childhood out of the reaches of different war expressions.





## COLOMBIAN COALITION ACTIVITIES

**B**etween March and April, the Coalition participated on the 60<sup>th</sup> period of sessions of the Commission of Human Rights of the United Nations in Geneva, and the conference “Voices out of the conflict: youth affected by forced migration and political crisis”, organized by Cumberland Lodge, the Refugees Studies Center of Oxford University, the Woman’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children and the International Rescue Committee in England. In the same way, developed raising awareness and lobby activities in Germany.

## INTERNATIONAL COALITION ACTIVITIES

**B**etween February and March officials of the International Secretariat participated on the Annual Meetings of the Regional Coalitions of the Great Lakes and Southeast Asia. They also presented recommendations on DDR programs on the Inter-Agencies Meeting of Center and West Africa, in Nairobi, Kenya and an international meeting on DDR in Bangkok, Thailand.

**T**he Coalition dissented about the situation of childhood affected by the armed conflict in the special act that the International Federation of Human Rights programmed with the current Peace Nobel Prize, Shirin Ebadi, and the president of the International Federation of Human Rights (IFHR), the 28<sup>th</sup> February in Bogotá.

**O**n February the report: “Colombia’s War on Children” was launched simultaneously in New York and Bogotá. The Coalition has also developed workshops on the report with youth groups, social organizations and local authorities in: Barrancabermeja (Santander), Mocoa (Putumayo), Altos de Cazuca (Cundinamarca) and Medellín (Antioquia).

Coalition file



**T**he International Secretariat has continued preparing the 2004 Global Report that includes a detailed analysis by country on standards and practices of recruitment in more than 180 countries and constitutes a critic tool to watch on governments and political armed groups accomplishment of the international standards about recruitment of child sol-

**T**he European Coalitions had their annual meeting in March and the Coordinator of the International Secretariat had meetings with governments, agencies and organizations in New York and Scandinavia.