

“YOU’LL LEARN NOT TO CRY”

Child Combatants in Colombia

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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Addresses for Human Rights Watch

350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor, New York, NY 10118-3299

Tel: (212) 290-4700, Fax: (212) 736-1300, E-mail: hrwnyc@hrw.org

1630 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 500, Washington, DC 20009

Tel: (202) 612-4321, Fax: (202) 612-4333, E-mail: hrwdc@hrw.org

33 Islington High Street, N1 9LH London, UK

Tel: (171) 713-1995, Fax: (171) 713-1800, E-mail: hrwatchuk@gn.apc.org

15 Rue Van Campenhout, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: (2) 732-2009, Fax: (2) 732-0471, E-mail: hrwatcheu@skynet.be

Web Site Address: <http://www.hrw.org>

Listserv address: To subscribe to the list, send an e-mail message to majordomo@igc.apc.org with “subscribe hrw-news” in the body of the message (leave the subject line blank).

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GLOSSARY

ACC	Casanare Self-Defense Group
ACCU	Peasant Self-Defense Groups of Córdoba and Uraba
AUC	United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia
BCB	Bolívar Central Block
<i>bacán, bacano</i>	slang for cool
CODA	Operative Committee for the Abandonment of Arms
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
FARC-EP	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army
ICBF	Colombian Family Welfare Institute
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
<i>paracos</i>	slang for paramilitaries
<i>pelados</i>	children, kids
<i>quiebrapatas</i>	foot-breaker land mines
UC-ELN	Camilist Union-Army of National Liberation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

**“YOU’LL LEARN NOT TO CRY”:
CHILD COMBATANTS IN COLOMBIA**



A fourteen-year-old member of the AUC in Medellin in 2002. © MARCELO SALINAS

SUMMARY

I escaped one day during the day. I had left all my weapons behind. I was on guard duty and I snuck away. They caught me after an hour. The militia recognized me, even though I had changed into civilian clothes. I cried when they caught me. I begged them to let me go. They chained me up with a metal chain. I couldn't move my arms. At the war council, I wasn't allowed to talk. But luckily, they voted not to kill me. Instead, they made me dig twenty meters of trenches, make twenty trips to get wood, and ordered me tied to a pole for two weeks. I had to give a talk in front of everyone explaining why I had tried to desert, why I had made this mistake.

Adriana the reluctant child guerrilla who told us this story, was lucky. The guerrilla war council chose not to order her execution. The paramilitaries who later caught her in combat spared her life and handed her over to the Colombian army. Adriana was given a place in a government rehabilitation program.

But apart from that good fortune, Adriana's story is typical. Her mother and brothers scratched out a living growing bananas and yucca, frequently falling sick. Adriana dropped out of school in first grade to work in the fields. Her parents fought constantly. Her mother often hit her. Friendly with the guerrillas, Adriana's grandmother persuaded her to join them. Adriana was twelve.

All of the irregular armed forces in Colombia's decades-old armed conflict—left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries—recruit children of Adriana's age, and even younger. Under the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children under the age of fifteen may not take part in warfare. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child raises the age limit to eighteen. It prohibits the compulsory military recruitment of children under the age of eighteen and establishes that "armed groups that are distinct from the armed forces of a State should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of

eighteen years." (Consistent with international legal standards, the word "children" in this report refers to persons under the age of eighteen.)

At least one of every four irregular combatants in Colombia's civil war is under eighteen years old. These children, mostly from poor families, fight an adult war. Often, child combatants have only the barest understanding of its purpose. They

At least one of every four irregular combatants in Colombia's civil war is under eighteen years old.

fight against other children whose background is very similar to their own, and whose economic situation and future prospects are equally bleak. With much in common in civilian life, children become the bitterest of enemies in war.

From the beginning of their training, both guerilla and paramilitary child recruits are taught to treat the other side's fighters or sympathizers without mercy. Adults order children to kill, mutilate, and torture, conditioning them to the cruelest abuses. Not only do children face the same treatment should they fall into the hands of the enemy, many fear it from fellow fighters. Children who fail in their military duties or try to desert can face summary execution by comrades sometimes no older than themselves.

Trained to use modern assault rifles from the age of eleven, young recruits march for days on end with little food, stung by insects and lashed by storms. Many die or are wounded in battles with government soldiers backed by helicopters and heavy artillery.

The recruitment of children by guerrillas and paramilitary forces has grown significantly in recent years. Neither side has made any serious effort to halt the practice. At times, both guerrillas and paramilitaries have offered to demobilize children to obtain favorable terms in negotiations with the government. This is not only a blatant attempt to trade for political advantage matters that should be beyond negotiation; none of the promises made to date have been honored. Each of the irregular forces in the conflict continues to flagrantly disregard its own regulations regarding the minimum age for recruitment. Moreover, the government has failed to protect children by enforcing Colombian law, which prohibits the military recruitment of children under the age of eighteen, and it has failed to bring to justice those responsible for this abhorrent practice.

In May and June 2002, Human Rights Watch conducted separate and private interviews for this report with 112 former child combatants, including seventy-nine former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo, FARC-EP), twenty former members of the Camilist Union-National

Liberation Army (Unión Camilista-Ejército de Liberación Nacional, UC-ELN), and thirteen former members of the paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC). We interviewed them in government refuges for former child combatants; in a school run by the Interior Ministry's Reinsertion Program; and in a school run by a private institution.

Speaking with these former child combatants weeks or months after they had been captured or had deserted, we saw nothing remarkable about them at first. Rather, we found ourselves looking at the faces of seemingly ordinary, poor Colombian children. One girl caressed a doll as she spoke. Some boys had still unbroken voices. Slightly older boys sported fashionable haircuts, silver earrings, tattoos, and woven wrist bands. Several of the children were assertive and boisterous. Others were impassive. While our interviewees recounted stories of horror and destruction, the shouts of other children playing nearby were distressingly normal.

This report provides the first comprehensive account of child combatants in Colombia, and covers their recruitment, training, life in the ranks, role in combat, and treatment after desertion, capture, or rescue. Its conclusions are urgent and unequivocal – all sides in Colombia's conflict must end the recruitment of children, demobilize children from the armies and militia forces under their control, and, for the children's well-being and safety, hand them over to an appropriate national agency or international humanitarian organization.

There are no precise data on the number of child combatants in Colombia. To formulate an estimate, Human Rights Watch collated information provided by the children we interviewed, along with figures contained in reliable studies.

These sources supported the conclusion that the number of children in Colombia's illegal armies has grown markedly in recent years, reflecting policies and recruiting efforts common to all irregular forces. In our view, the total number of child combatants in Colombia likely exceeds 11,000. And we note that this is a conservative estimate, which may significantly understate the actual total.

In part because it is the largest group, the FARC-EP has the majority of child combatants. Both the UC-ELN and the paramilitaries also recruit children on a significant scale. Children gave us specific and detailed

This report provides the first comprehensive account of child combatants in Colombia, and covers their recruitment, training, life in the ranks, role in combat, and treatment after desertion, capture, or rescue.

information about the high number of children who accompanied them in all three of these groups. Some children told us that child combatants made up the majority of fighters in the units in which they served.

Children are an especially vulnerable group in Colombia's triangular war between guerrillas, paramilitaries, and government security forces. Their lives and welfare are at risk even if they do not join an armed group. Children and their mothers make up the majority of the Colombian families forcibly displaced by war, and number in the hundreds of thousands. Children face reprisals, the destruction of their homes, and kidnapping. In Colombia's cities, stray bullets from guerrilla-paramilitary street wars and military clean-up operations claim the lives of dozens of children, even as they sit in their homes.

But the plight of Colombia's child fighters is dramatic even when viewed against this grim backdrop. Many choose to join an armed group because they feel safer under its protection. Most have little concept of what life as a combatant entails until it is too late to back out. In exchange for comradeship, food, and protection, children are exposed to disease, physical exhaustion, injury, sudden death, and torture at the hands of the enemy. Many lose all but the most tenuous family contact.

Human Rights Watch has interviewed children who were as young as eight when they started to fight. These children had special duties, like ferrying supplies and information, acting as advance early warning guards, or even carrying explosives.

By the time they are thirteen, most child recruits have been trained in the use of automatic weapons, grenades, mortars, and explosives. In the guerrilla forces, children learn how to assemble and launch gas cylinder bombs. In both the guerrillas and paramilitaries, they study the assembly of land mines, known as "foot-breakers" (*quiebrapatas*), then apply that knowledge by planting deadly killing fields. Usually, their first experience of combat comes soon after.

Children do not only risk their lives in combat. They are also expected to participate in the atrocities that have become a hallmark of the Colombian conflict. Human Rights Watch interviewed children who, as trainees, were forced to watch captives being tortured. Others were made to shoot captives as a test of valor. Some participated in assassinations of political figures and in "social cleansing" killings of drug abusers and petty thieves. Still others were ordered to execute comrades—even friends—captured while trying to run away.

In the debate over U.S. policy in Colombia, the recruitment of children by Colombia's illegal armed groups has been a secondary issue. Concern has focused

more intensely on the Colombian military's tolerance of and complicity in other grave violations, including support for or tolerance by some units in Colombia's military for serious human rights abuses committed by paramilitary forces, including massacres, political killings, "disappearances," kidnappings, torture, and other mistreatment. Indeed, former paramilitary child combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch suggest that Colombian military personnel continue to help train paramilitaries, are in close and permanent contact with their commanders, and in some cases fight alongside them. This is so despite U.S. legislation requiring, as a condition for the receipt of military aid, that Colombia break the links between military units and paramilitary groups, and suspend and prosecute the military officers who collude with them.

In 2003, Colombia will receive over \$750 million in U.S. aid, most of which is dedicated to military and police assistance. Given the continuing links between units of Colombia's military and paramilitary groups and their serious human rights violations, including the recruitment of children, the United States should apply more aggressively the conditions on military assistance.

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Child Combatants with the FARC-EP

The FARC-EP shows no leniency to children because of their age, assigning children the same duties as adults. Those who break minor disciplinary rules are sent off to dig trenches or latrines, clear forest, cut and carry firewood, or do kitchen duties. If they lose a weapon, they may be forced to enter combat without one until they are able to recover a replacement from the enemy. To deal with serious breaches, a "war council" is held. Combatants hear the charges and the defence. A death sentence may be passed by a show of hands.

Children who desert are often shot, especially if they take their weapons with them. The same fate awaits suspected informers, infiltrators, or children who fall asleep on guard duty. The commander handpicks a group to carry out the sentence. The child, hands tied by nylon cord, is taken beyond the camp's perimeter and made to wait while the squad digs a grave.

Several children told Human Rights Watch that they had been ordered to carry out an execution of another child. Some said they had been selected deliberately because the victim was a friend. After the execution, usually by revolver

shot, the body may be gutted before it is buried. The dead child's family is rarely, if ever, notified.

Children are also called upon to execute captured enemies. Several former FARC-EP child combatants described in detail to Human Rights Watch how guerrillas tortured captive paramilitaries by pushing needles under their nails, severing fingers and arms, and cutting their faces. Several children told us that their commanders made them watch these gruesome spectacles.

Internal FARC-EP regulations stipulate that fifteen is the minimum age for recruitment, which is in line with the norms of international humanitarian law. Yet the guerrillas have never respected the minimum age requirement, despite repeated promises to do so. More than two-thirds of the former FARC-EP combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch joined the group when they were age fourteen or younger, and most were recruited after the promulgation of these regulations in 1999.

Child Combatants with the UC-ELN

Like the FARC-EP, the smaller UC-ELN assigns children the same duties as adult guerrillas, including combat. The children we interviewed told us that the group captures and often executes suspected paramilitaries and informers, and carries out kidnappings for ransom. Its urban militias impose "street justice" in the neighborhoods they control, driving out or executing petty criminals and drug peddlers, and collect "taxes" from businesses.

The UC-ELN's rules permit children under the age of fifteen to take part in "revolutionary activities," but not in hostilities. In 1996, the UC-ELN raised the official minimum age for recruitment to its military force to sixteen. Yet more than half of the former UC-ELN members interviewed by Human Rights Watch joined the group when they were fourteen or younger.

The UC-ELN has entered into discussions with state agencies on international humanitarian law issues, including the demobilization of children, but has conditioned implementation on the opening of negotiations with the government. The negotiations have stalled. The UC-ELN retains hundreds of child combatants.

Child Combatants with Paramilitaries

For years, the paramilitaries grouped together in the AUC have committed massacres and atrocities against civilians in their efforts to drive guerrilla forces from disputed territories. Several of the former paramilitary child recruits Human Rights Watch interviewed for this report told us how they were forced to mutilate and kill captured guerrillas early in their training. Others described how they saw acid thrown in the faces of captives and how some captives were mutilated with chainsaws.

Most of the children who had fought with paramilitaries and were interviewed by Human Rights Watch had engaged in combat against the army and police. Notably, however, several described in detail counter-guerrilla operations in which paramilitaries had worked in close harness with military units, providing further confirmation of reports that some army units continue to lend support to paramilitary operations.

Unlike the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN, the paramilitaries regularly pay their recruits a salary, bankrolled by income from drug trafficking, extortion, and contributions. Although cases of forcible recruitment have been reported, the money seems to have been decisive in gaining new recruits. Once admitted into the ranks, if children attempt to desert, they risk capture and execution by their commanders as suspected infiltrators or informers.

The AUC is the only irregular armed group in Colombia that has established eighteen as the minimum age for recruitment. Nevertheless, the rule is not enforced. Like the guerrilla groups, the AUC recruits under fifteens into its ranks. Indeed, two-thirds of the former AUC members Human Rights Watch interviewed were younger than fifteen when they joined the group. The youngest two said that they joined when they were seven and eight.

Girl Combatants

Guerrilla units are from one-quarter to nearly one-half female, and may include girls as young as eight. The paramilitary forces have comparatively few female members and very few young girls.

Girls sometimes join to escape sexual abuse at home; in other respects, the reasons they join are similar to those of boys. Many told Human Rights Watch that in the guerrillas, they had roughly the same duties and possibilities of promotion as males.

Yet girls in the guerrilla forces still face gender-related pressures. Although rape and overt sexual harassment are not tolerated, many male commanders use their power to form sexual liaisons with under-age girls. Girls as young as twelve are required to use contraception, and must have abortions if they get pregnant.

Recruitment Methods

The great majority of child recruits to the irregular forces decide to join voluntarily. Yet forcible recruitment occurs in some parts of Colombia. Human Rights Watch interviewed thirteen former combatants, all of whom had belonged to either the FARC-EP or the UC-ELN, who described having been forced to join the ranks of the group unwillingly; they made up slightly more than 10 percent of the children we interviewed. Another two children said

Guerrilla units are from one-quarter to nearly one-half female, and may include girls as young as eight.

that they had been pressured to join a guerrilla group. And even the voluntary decision to join irregular forces is more a reflection of the dismal lack of opportunities open to children from the poorest sector of rural society than a real exercise of free will.

Irregular forces exploit children's vulnerability. They mount recruitment drives that glamorize the warrior life and tempt with promises of money and a brighter future. Some families send children to combat because they are unable to support them, and they know that membership in an armed group guarantees a square meal, clothing, and protection. Many children join to escape family violence and physical or sexual abuse, or to find the affection their families fail to give. Others crave the status of a gun or a cell phone. Camp life promises adventure, comradeship, and a chance to prove oneself.

The reality of life as a combatant is deeply frightening. But once incorporated, children cannot leave voluntarily. To the contrary, they know that the price of attempting to desert could be their lives.

Legal Standards

International humanitarian law applicable to civil wars prohibits combatants from recruiting children under the age of fifteen or allowing them

to take part in hostilities. Many of the actions child combatants are ordered to participate in—summary executions, torture, murders and other attacks on civilians, kidnappings, and the use of indiscriminate weapons that cause avoidable civilian casualties—are also serious violations of international humanitarian law.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by all U.N. member states except for the United States and Somalia, also establishes fifteen as the minimum permissible age for military recruitment. In all other respects, the CRC's general definition of a child is any person under the age of eighteen. The Optional Protocol to the Convention, which entered into force in February 2002, corrected this anomaly by prohibiting the compulsory military recruitment of children under the age of eighteen. It also establishes that "armed groups that are distinct from the armed forces of a State should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of eighteen years."

When it ratified the CRC in 1991, Colombia proposed that eighteen, rather than fifteen, be the minimum age for military recruitment. By abolishing even voluntary service for under-eighteen-year-olds, Colombia now complies with the requirements of the Optional Protocol, which it has signed, but has yet to ratify.

Colombian laws have prohibited the recruitment for military service of children under age eighteen since December 1999. That month, the Colombian army demobilized more than 800 under-eighteen-year-olds from government forces. A National Police regulation adopted in January 2000 barred children from being incorporated into the police. Civil or military authorities who disregard the prohibition of recruitment of under-eighteens are guilty under law of misconduct and may be discharged. Under article 162 of Colombia's new criminal code, introduced in 2000, anyone who recruits children under-eighteen years of age or obliges them to participate directly or indirectly in the armed conflict faces a penalty of six to ten years' imprisonment.

Human Rights Watch has received no credible reports since of children serving in the regular armed forces or the police. There have, however, been some reports of children who have been used as spies or informers by police or army units, or have been encouraged to work in this capacity. The use of children as informers by the security forces places these children's lives in immediate danger.



Sign posted on the outskirts of San Vicente del Caguán, the largest town within the FARC-controlled Zone, saying: “Don’t mistreat children; they are the future—FARC-EP.”

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Colombia is on the tragic list of countries where thousands of children fight and die in bloody conflicts. Yet all parties agree, at least on paper, that children should be shielded from war's horrors. The hardest task remains to make effective the laws that protect children and to stop the recruitment of children for war.

To achieve this end, all parties should implement fully the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol regarding child combatants. Additional steps are delineated below:

To the Guerrilla and Paramilitary Groups (FARC-EP, UC-ELN, AUC):

- Immediately end all recruitment of children under the age of eighteen, demobilize children under age eighteen from all armed forces under their control, and deliver child combatants to the appropriate national agency or international humanitarian organization;
- Develop and enforce clear policies and reliable systems to prohibit the recruitment of children under eighteen and ensure that recruits are at least eighteen years of age;
- Ensure that such policies are widely communicated to members of the armed group and to civilians within the group's areas of influence;
- Remove from command positions those found to have continued to recruit or employ children under eighteen to serve in any capacity;
- Ensure that children under eighteen who are captured or have deserted

from irregular forces are handed over promptly to the appropriate humanitarian organization;

- Seek international cooperation with relevant humanitarian agencies in order to verify recruitment practices;
- Provide information to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on all child combatants who have been killed in combat or out of combat;
- Release immediately all children held hostage or for ransom, and issue firm instructions prohibiting all kidnappings, especially those of children; and take appropriate disciplinary action against commanders and other group members who kidnap children.

As short-term measures until all children have been demobilized:

- Ensure that children leave without fear of reprisals for themselves or their families;
- Prohibit the forcible recruitment of children under any circumstances, and ensure that any commanders responsible for forcible recruitment are appropriately punished;
- Ensure that all combatants are instructed to abide by international humanitarian law, and specifically the protection of captured or incapacitated combatants and civilians, including children;
- Terminate immediately all executions of children for whatever offense, and deliver to the ICRC all children who are captured after trying to desert;
- Ensure that no children are deployed directly in hostilities, or are trained or take part in the use of explosives, including indiscriminate weapons such as landmines and gas cylinder bombs;
- Wherever possible, arrange for sick or wounded children to be taken to hospitals where they can receive appropriate medical care;

- Replace the practice of obligatory abortion and contraception for girl combatants, where it exists, with a voluntary system and make available contraceptives and sexual hygiene instruction to all combatants.

To the Government of Colombia:

- Establish clear rules prohibiting the recruitment or use of children under eighteen in any government programs involving civilian cooperation with the armed forces. Prompt and thorough investigations of cases in which children are used as informers, spies, or guides is essential in order to protect the lives of children caught up in Colombia's conflict. Military or police personnel responsible for using children in these ways should be held accountable;
- Include the demobilization of children from guerrilla and paramilitary forces and an end to their recruitment in the future as a priority item in any future negotiations with these forces;
- Ensure that all child combatants who turn themselves in to the authorities or are captured are returned to their families if it is in the child's best interest. Children should be protected, cared for appropriately, and provided with counseling and an education when family reunion is not in the child's best interest;
- Ensure that all officers and enlisted personnel are instructed to abide by international humanitarian law, and specifically the protection of captured or incapacitated combatants and civilians, including children;
- Continue and expand the Colombian Family Welfare Institute's program for the rehabilitation of former child combatants. Extend its geographical outreach so that children can be relocated as close to their home or place of origin as is in the best interests of the child;
- Ensure that all former child combatants, including those held in remote areas, receive adequate protection and treatment in accordance with Colombia's international commitments;

- Ensure that in all measures for their rehabilitation, the views of the children concerned are given due weight, in accordance with article 12 (1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- At all times, assure rights to defense and due process to children in any legal proceedings instituted against them for their actions while under arms;
- In sentencing child combatants convicted of serious abuses, judges should consider as mitigating factors the circumstances of the child’s recruitment, possible coercion, and relative lack of maturity. In such cases, sentencing should promote the child’s rehabilitation and reintegration, as provided in articles 39 and 40 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and article 14(4) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Juvenile courts should also consider as powerful mitigating circumstances the harsh penalties, including death, faced by children who disobey orders, and threats against them and their families;
- In accordance with article 37(b) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the arrest, detention, or imprisonment of a child must be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time;
- Any legislation to lower the age of criminal responsibility from the present eighteen years should be consistent with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (“The Beijing Rules”), which provide that “the beginning of that age shall not be fixed at too low an age level, bearing in mind the facts of emotional, mental and intellectual maturity”;
- Urge the Colombian Congress to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts;
- In accordance with article 4(2) of the Optional Protocol, take all feasible measures to prevent recruitment and use by armed groups of children under the age of eighteen, including the adoption of legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalize such practices;
- Ensure that those responsible for the recruitment of children are held accountable:

- (a) by not granting immunity from prosecution to members of guerrilla or paramilitary forces responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law, including the recruitment of children under the age of fifteen;
- (b) by withdrawing its decision not to accept for a period of seven years the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court over war crimes;
- In the Office of the Attorney General, carry out criminal investigations of those leaders of the FARC-EP, the UC-ELN, and the AUC responsible for recruiting children under fifteen into their forces.

To the United States Government:

- Express concern, on visits to Colombia and in meeting with Colombian officials, both publicly and privately, about the recruitment of children and continuing military-paramilitary ties and press for effective measures to sever them;
- Urge the president of Colombia to make the demobilization of child combatants a top priority in future negotiations with guerrillas and paramilitaries;
- Provide funds for programs aimed at rehabilitating child combatants through the office of the Public Advocate and ICBF;
- Firmly express to the Colombian government U.S. opposition to any amnesty or pardon for those responsible for grave human rights violations or serious violations of international humanitarian law, such as the recruitment of children.

To the European Union:

- Express concern, on visits to Colombia and in meeting with Colombian officials, both publicly and privately, about the recruitment of children and continuing military-paramilitary ties and press for effective measures to sever them;

- Urge the president of Colombia to make the demobilization of child combatants a top priority in future negotiations with guerrillas and paramilitaries;
- Provide funds for programs aimed at rehabilitating child combatants through the office of the Public Advocate and ICBF;
- Firmly express to the Colombian government the European Union's opposition to any amnesty or pardon for those responsible for grave human rights violations or serious violations of international humanitarian law, such as the recruitment of children.

To the United Nations:

The Secretary General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict should:

- Carry out another field visit to Colombia to investigate the progress made by parties to the armed conflict to demobilize child combatants and recommend steps to speed up the demobilization process.

The Representative in Colombia of the High Commissioner for Human Rights should:

- Submit to the high commissioner a report on the recruitment and use of child combatants by the parties to the armed conflict in Colombia. The report should be made available to the secretary general to enable him to inform the Security Council about the current situation regarding child combatants in his progress report, which is due by October 31, 2003.

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights should:

- Strongly condemn the practice of the recruitment and use of child combatants by parties to the armed conflict in any future resolution passed on Colombia.

CHILD COMBATANTS IN COLOMBIA

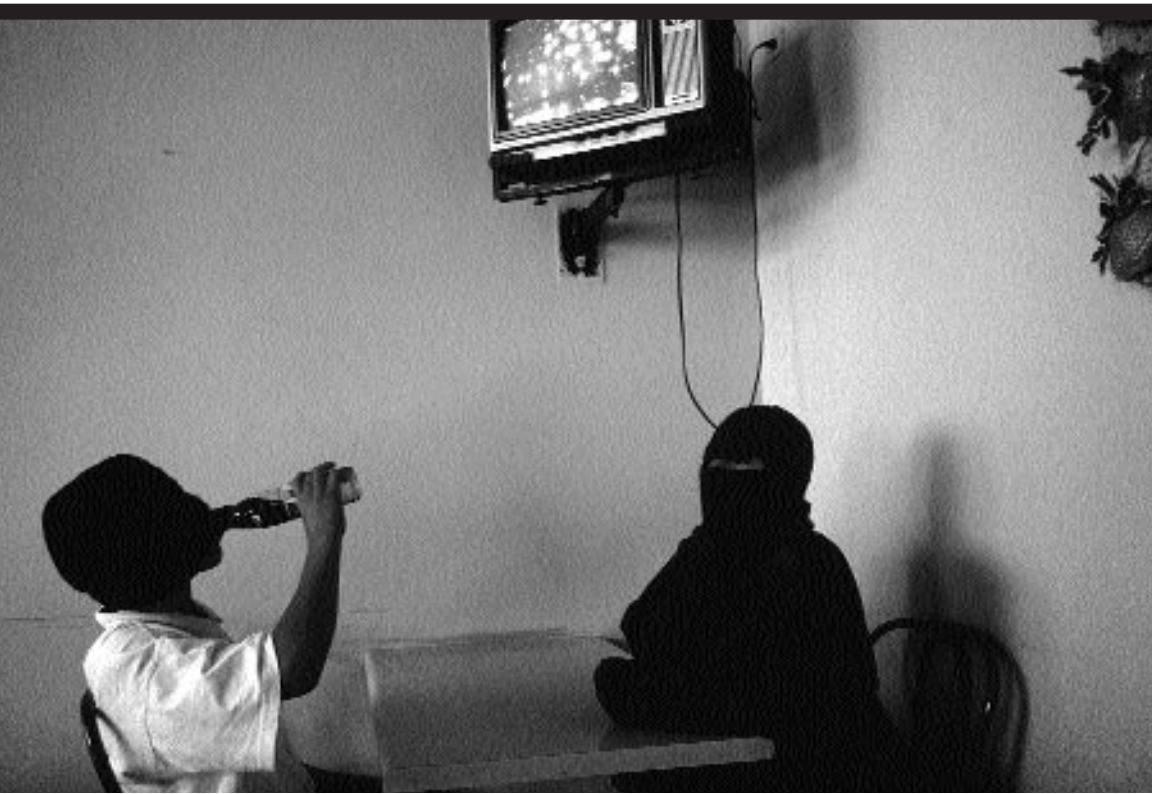
I had a friend, Juanita, who got into trouble for sleeping around. We had been friends in civilian life and we shared a tent together. The commander said that it didn't matter that she was my friend. She had committed an error and had to be killed. I closed my eyes and fired the gun, but I didn't hit her. So I shot again. The grave was right nearby. I had to bury her and put dirt on top of her. The commander said, "You did very well. Even though you started to cry, you did well. You'll have to do this again many more times, and you'll have to learn not to cry."¹

The roots of Colombia's armed conflict are deep. Modern historians mark La Violencia, a bloody civil war triggered by the 1948 assassination of presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, as a pivotal moment. In the 1960s, the influence of the Cuban revolution further engrained violence as a way of gaining political influence and control of territory.

Paramilitary forces, formed by the army, landowners, and business interests to combat guerrillas, emerged in the 1980s.² "Guerrillas can act outside the law, so this battle is not equal," Carlos Castaño, the founder of the contemporary paramilitary alliance, told Human Rights Watch in 1996. "We realized that we could use the same tactics as the guerrillas and adopt their methods of combat."³

The introduction of children to the ranks of fighters is a relatively new development.⁴ In the 1950s, children may have accompanied families who escaped attacks and lived in rebel encampments. But they rarely fought themselves. University students were a favored recruiting pool for some guerrillas while others looked to adult trade unionists, farmers, or the unemployed for converts.⁵

This changed in the 1990s, as guerrillas and paramilitaries began recruiting drives. In 1996, the office of the Public Advocate (Defensoría del Pueblo) released one of the first reports chronicling this development. The report con-



A masked fourteen-year-old boy (left) and a young woman wait in a Medellín police station to identify suspected guerrillas in 2002. The boy said that he works as an informant for the government to avenge abuses inflicted on his mother by guerrillas.

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cluded that up to 30 percent of some guerrilla units were made up of children. In urban militias, the majority of recruits, 85 percent, were believed to be under eighteen.⁶

In addition to recruitment drives, the increase in the use of child combatants might also be explained by worsening conditions for many of Colombia's children and the desperation this provoked among children old enough to wonder about their future. By 2001, according to government statistics, two out of three Colombian children lived below the poverty line. One out of ten was destitute.⁷ Many of the children joining illegal armed groups had broken off their schooling by the fifth grade.⁸

At the same time, armed groups see children as an attractive source of malleable recruits. "Children are particularly useful in the war, for they seldom calculate risks, adapt easily to a violent environment, eat less, earn less, and are always ready to obey," said Sen. Rafael Orduz Medina, who has proposed legislation to protect former child combatants.⁹

Human Rights Watch estimates that the number of child combatants in Colombia at this writing exceeds 11,000.¹⁰ We base that estimate on government and other research gathered for this report as well as our own interviews with 112 former child combatants.¹¹

- We interviewed seventy-nine children who belonged to nineteen rural fronts of Colombia's largest guerrilla force, the FARC-EP. (Of these, two had also served in the UC-ELN.) Based on our information, we estimate that children in the ranks of the FARC-EP number more than 4,100. Children in the FARC-EP's urban-based militias would add another 3,300 children, for a total of over 7,400, over one quarter of the group's total estimated strength.
- We interviewed twenty former members of the UC-ELN, eight of whom were members of urban militias for at least some part of their time with the group. We estimate that at least one third of the UC-ELN's fighters are children: in other words, at least 1,480 of them.
- We interviewed thirteen former members of the AUC. We estimate that 20 percent of the group's total troop strength, or 2,200 members, are children.¹²

These figures are obviously estimates. Other institutions that have studied

the issue have reached somewhat different figures.¹³ Whatever the precise numbers, it is beyond question that the use of child combatants is a serious problem in Colombia and is likely to remain so until these groups change their recruiting practices.

"I was shooting at posts with the AK-47 before I was eight."

Among the most disturbing results of our investigation was the high number of young children in the ranks. Of the 112 former child combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch, more than two-thirds said that they had been recruited before they reached the age of fifteen.¹⁴

A former child combatant in Puerto Berrío, Bernardo, told us he was seven when he began handling an AK-47 assault rifle. "The paramilitaries didn't let me fire it at first, just look after it and run errands," he explained. "They teach you bit by bit, first with a .38 [handgun] and then with a bigger weapon. I was shooting at posts with the AK-47 before I was eight."¹⁵

The recruitment of children by Colombia's illegal armed groups has been only a secondary issue in the debate over the human rights impact of U.S. policy in Colombia. Concern has focused more intensely on persistent ties between paramilitary forces and units within Colombia's military, as well as on the military's tolerance for and complicity in the paramilitaries' grave violations, such as massacres, political killings, "disappearances," kidnappings, and torture. Indeed, former paramilitary child combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch told us that some military units continue to help train paramilitaries, are in close and permanent contact with their commanders, and in some cases fight alongside them. This is despite U.S. legislation requiring that Colombia break links between its military and paramilitary groups in order to qualify for military aid.¹⁶

The U.S. State Department has reported that both paramilitaries and guerrillas recruit children into their forces. In its annual report on human rights practices for 2002, the department noted that Colombia's government was unable to protect children from this practice. It concluded that "[d]espite [a variety of] legal protections and programs, government commitments to the protection of children's rights were not fully implemented."¹⁷

In 2003, Colombia will receive over \$750 million in U.S. aid, most of which is dedicated to military and police assistance.¹⁸ In 2001, the United States Agency for International Development pledged an initial \$2.5 million to assist the Colombian government in maintaining halfway houses for former child combatants.¹⁹ That amount was doubled in 2003, and went to support the ICBF

rehabilitation program; training for employees of the juvenile justice system on the special treatment needed for child combatants; the implementation of a prevention strategy that seeks to diminish the participation of children in the armed conflict; and developing a contingency plan for an eventual demobilization.²⁰

The FARC-EP

The FARC-EP is Latin America's oldest guerrilla group. According to the U.S. State Department, FARC-EP guerrillas now count over 16,500 trained and armed fighters among their fighting force.²¹ That number is more than double the 1998 estimates of the group's size.²²

Not included in this figure are the FARC-EP urban militias: known as Bolivarian militias (*milicias bolivarianos*) and popular militias (*milicias populares*). The Bolivarians alternate between civilian and military attire and receive military training. Members of popular militias dress in civilian clothes, often live at home, and engage in civilian activities even as they gather intelligence, sabotage, assassinate, kidnap, collect "taxes," obtain supplies, and recruit. They do not normally receive military training, and are usually provided with handguns rather than combat weapons. Together, the FARC-EP's militias are believed to number about 10,000, bringing its total force to around 26,500.²³

In an interview with an unidentified journalist, FARC-EP Commander Manuel Marulanda Vélez stated that the two types of militia differed in their combat readiness. "The popular militias are made up of those whose age or physical condition prevents them from participating in direct combat with the enemy. For example, the elderly and children. The Bolivarian militias, on the other hand, have a military structure and are composed of people suited for direct physical combat"²⁴

The FARC-EP claims that its policies and actions are determined by its high command, not individual commanders, and it maintains a centralized, vertical command structure.²⁵ Ultimate authority is vested in a six-member general secretariat led by Marulanda, also known by the nickname "Sure Shot" (*Tirofijo*).²⁶ Now in his seventies, Marulanda has led the FARC-EP since its inception in 1966.²⁷ In June 2003, a Bogotá court announced that it had convicted Marulanda *in absentia* for the crime of recruiting minors. The case was based on charges brought by Colombia's military.²⁸

The Data Bank, a nongovernmental organization run by several human

rights groups and among the most reliable sources on human rights and international law violations in Colombia, reported that the FARC-EP was presumed responsible for at least 330 summary executions in 2002.²⁹ That same year, the FARC-EP was also implicated in the deaths of more than 100 civilians in indiscriminate attacks using gas cylinder bombs.³⁰

In 1999, Colombian President Andrés Pastrana initiated formal talks with guerrillas aimed at negotiating peace. Talks took place in a special zone of over 15,000 square miles in southern Colombia that was ceded to guerrilla control, an area the size of Switzerland (hereinafter referred to as the Zone). The Zone included four municipalities in the department of Meta—Mesetas, La Uribe, La Macarena, and Vista Hermosa—and the municipality of San Vicente del Caguán in the department of Caquetá. Guerrillas used this safe haven to recruit fighters, including children who lived in the Zone. The government abolished the Zone on February 20, 2002.³¹

Assuming that a third of the militias are children, the total number of child combatants currently in the ranks of the FARC-EP may exceed 7,400.

The number of child combatants presently in the FARC-EP can be gauged roughly from estimates given by the children for the units in which they fought, supplemented by estimates provided in other authoritative sources. Such estimates obviously must be treated with caution. Comparing the children's accounts, it is evident that the proportion of children in each unit of the guerrilla forces varies considerably, from a low of about 10 percent to a high of more than half. Most fronts have a significant minority of children under the age of fifteen.³²

Based on the interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch, a conservative estimate would put the proportion of children in the FARC-EP at between 20 and 30 percent. Twenty-five percent of the group's estimated regular force gives a figure of 4,125. To this number must be added the children in both of the urban militias, which by the FARC-EP's own admission recruit more heavily among those considered too young for regular combat. Assuming that a third of the militias are children, the total number of child combatants currently in the ranks of the FARC-EP may exceed 7,400.

Camilist Union-National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, UC-ELN)

The UC-ELN is a relatively small and regional group compared to the FARC-EP, yet its influence in areas where it maintains a military presence can be dramatic. A five-member Central Command consisting of the chiefs of the group's military forces is the ruling body of the UC-ELN. Although the Central Command takes political and military decisions, field commanders are believed to act with much greater autonomy than they do in the FARC-EP.³³ The UC-ELN's military leader is currently Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, alias "Gabino."³⁴

The UC-ELN has its stronghold in the Middle Magdalena region, and also operates in the departments of Bolívar, Nariño, Cauca, Antioquia, Valle, and the region bordering Venezuela. It has been under strong pressure in recent years from encroachments by paramilitaries into territory formerly under its influence.³⁵ Unlike the FARC-EP and the AUC, which continue to grow, the UC-ELN's membership peaked in the late 1990s at about 5,000 and has since reportedly shrunk to about 4,500.³⁶ In 2000, according to Antonio García, a top UC-ELN military commander, the group had forty-three fronts in rural areas, ten urban fronts, and twenty-two mobile companies deployed in various parts of the country.³⁷

Most analysts agree that the UC-ELN has profited less than other irregular groups from the trade in illegal narcotics, which the group claims to shun.³⁸ Instead, to obtain funds, the UC-ELN relies heavily on kidnappings and extortion, particularly from multinationals and oil companies. It has committed other violent abuses, as well. In 2002, the Data Bank recorded fifty-seven summary killings for which the group is believed responsible.³⁹

It is difficult to know precisely how many children the UC-ELN has in its ranks, since the number of children who have abandoned it or been captured is smaller than in the FARC-EP. Children's accounts suggest that some units are made up predominately of children whereas in other units the number of children is low. Overall, however, we estimate that at least one-third, or over 1,480, of the UC-ELN's fighters are children. This figure includes children from the UC-ELN's urban militias.

Although the UC-ELN is often believed to resort to press-gangling less than the FARC-EP, Human Rights Watch found that some fronts seem to resort to forcible recruitment on a significant scale. Of the twenty former UC-ELN com-

batants who described the circumstances of their recruitment to Human Rights Watch, six (or nearly one-third) said that they had been recruited against their will. Of the seventy-two former FARC-EP combatants who provided such information, seven (or 9 percent) said they had been forcibly recruited. (Two more said that they had joined the group under pressure.) These figures are not conclusive, but they suggest that forced recruitment is a greater problem in the UC-ELN than it is in the FARC-EP.

Paramilitary Forces

There are at least ten groups loosely allied under the name United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC).⁴⁰ In addition, there are several independent groups that never accepted AUC leadership or have split from the AUC publicly, among them the Medellín-based "Metro Block."⁴¹

AUC leaders claim that the group currently has 11,000 armed members.⁴² Its units operate throughout Colombia, including the major cities of Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali.⁴³ Within the paramilitary alliance, the largest single group is the ACCU, which emerged in northeastern Colombia in 1994.⁴⁴

Paramilitary "self defense" groups have a history in Colombia almost as long as the guerrilla groups they were formed to oppose. They have used and continue to use terror directed at what they perceive as the guerrilla's civilian support networks. Often, targets are civilians guilty of nothing more than inhabiting areas where guerrillas are active.⁴⁵

In a series of reports, Human Rights Watch has documented links between paramilitary groups and units of the Colombian armed forces, some of whose commanders have promoted, encouraged, and protected them, shared intelligence, coordinated military operations, and even shared fighters with them.⁴⁶ Although paramilitary groups were declared illegal in 1989, the government has failed to disband them or to bring to justice their leaders or the military officers who facilitate or tolerate paramilitary abuses.⁴⁷

For 2002, the Data Bank reported that paramilitaries were presumed responsible for at least 838 summary executions and 126 forced disappearances.⁴⁸

In 1996, Castaño told Human Rights Watch that he commanded 2,000 armed and trained fighters, an affirmation that was confirmed by Colombian government analysts.⁴⁹ By 2002, he claimed 11,200 fighters, more than a five-fold increase in just four years.⁵⁰

The AUC's spectacular growth is in part due to the recruitment of children tempted by AUC salaries, ranging between 900,000 and 1,200,000 pesos (approximately US \$366 to \$488) every three months, the frequency many children reported to Human Rights Watch that they were paid.

Some AUC affiliates have held aggressive recruiting drives that include forcible enlistment. In May 2000, for example, the Southern Casanare Peasant Self-Defense Group was reported to have distributed leaflets calling up young people for "compulsory military service." In October 2000, paramilitaries belonging to this group abducted several youths in Puerto Gaitán, Meta, for military training.⁵¹ The same group has been alleged responsible for abducting young women for sexual purposes.⁵² None of the former AUC child combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch claimed that they were forcibly recruited, however.

In September 2001, the U.S. State Department put the AUC on its official list of foreign terrorist organizations, where it joined the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN, which had been named previously.⁵³ (The designation requires, among other things, that U.S. banks freeze the accounts of the AUC and its agents.) What followed was a serious shakeup. Within the year, Carlos Castaño and at least two other paramilitaries were indicted in the United States on drug-trafficking charges.⁵⁴ Castaño announced the dissolution of the AUC, but then claimed the coalition had reunited, albeit prey to divisions over drug-trafficking, a practice that Castaño said he opposed.⁵⁵

As part of a *mea culpa*, Castaño has admitted publicly that profits from drug-trafficking have financed the AUC, a practice he has said he would end.⁵⁶ Some of the paramilitary groups most implicated in drug-trafficking, such as the Central Bolívar Block (Bloque Central Bolívar, BCB), initially rejected this offer, but later said they would honor Castaño's decision.⁵⁷

In an apparent effort to gain political respectability and status as a possible interlocutor in future peace negotiations, the new-style AUC said it would avoid not only involvement in drugs, but also massacres, "disappearances," kidnappings, and "cruel practices" in the future. It would "respect international humanitarian law to the extent possible in this kind of war."⁵⁸

On November 29, 2002, Castaño sent an open letter to President Uribe announcing that the AUC would cease hostilities unilaterally and indefinitely from December 1 and declaring his readiness to begin negotiations with the government about the terms of a future demobilization. The letter warned, however, that should the guerrillas enter paramilitary-controlled territory, the AUC would exercise its "right to legitimate defense." Castaño offered to hand

over immediately to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) representative child combatants who had been “liberated by the self-defense groups from the guerrilla forces.”⁵⁹

A day later, two of the dissident paramilitary groups, the BCB and the Conquerors of Arauca (Vencedores de Arauca), announced a ceasefire beginning December 5. That day, the BCB handed over nineteen child combatants, aged fifteen to seventeen, to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Public Advocate’s office, and the ICBF.⁶⁰ One of the BCB commanders announced that the group would cease to recruit children and would surrender others still in its ranks.⁶¹ In June 2003, the BCB followed up by releasing forty fighters—thirty-eight boys and two girls—to authorities.⁶²

That same month, a paramilitary group calling itself the Self-Defense Group of Meta and Vichada (Autodefensas de Meta y Vichada) claimed that soldiers belonging to the army’s Seventh Brigade attacked a unit preparing to release child combatants to UNICEF and the ICBF. Eleven paramilitaries reportedly died.⁶³ The office of Colombia’s High Commissioner for Peace confirmed that a release of child combatants had been discussed with the group and was imminent. The army denied, however, that its soldiers had killed children.⁶⁴ An investigation by the office of the coroner concluded that the dead were all adults, and the paramilitary group later acknowledged that its initial allegations were incorrect.⁶⁵

One of the longest-serving paramilitaries we interviewed, a lanky boy named Uriel, told Human Rights Watch that he had lived in a paramilitary camp in the Montes de María region of the department of Sucre. He said that there were about 200 people in the camp, some sixty of whom were children, including some as young as six.⁶⁶ Another former paramilitary, Óscar, who joined the AUC when he was twelve, said that nearly half of the 800 trainees at his camp were children.⁶⁷

Leonel, who was fourteen when he joined the paramilitaries, said that there were another fifty children at the training camp he attended in the department of Valle del Cauca, but he insisted that the paramilitaries didn’t train many children. “In fact, they didn’t want me because I was a minor,” he said. “They only accepted me as a favor to my contacts.”⁶⁸

The AUC has not released any data regarding the number of children in its ranks. However, based on the information available, Human Rights Watch believes that the proportion of children in the ranks of paramilitary forces is somewhat less than in guerrilla forces. Based on our research, we estimate that no more than 20 percent of AUC forces, including its urban cadres, are under eighteen, or 2,200 individuals.

RECRUITMENT: RULES AND PRACTICE

Over the last two months, [guerrillas] have recruited some twenty children between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. Their families weep for this situation but can find no solution; for this reason, too, the families are forced to move in search of safety. Another situation is how seven to fourteen-year-olds get drawn in as “informers” or spies in the towns where the other side are. [The armed groups] bribe them with money or promises to help their families. Some of them get drawn in easily because of a family link.⁶⁹

The FARC-EP

According to an official statute of the FARC-EP, “entry into the FARC-EP is by personal, voluntary, and conscious decision between the ages of fifteen and thirty.”⁷⁰

The FARC-EP first committed itself publicly to this policy in 1999, when Olara Otunnu, the U.N. Secretary General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, met with Raúl Reyes, a member of the FARC-EP’s General Secretariat and responsible for the group’s international outreach. After Otunnu expressed concern about under-age recruitment, Reyes reportedly promised that the FARC-EP would halt the recruitment of children younger than fifteen.⁷¹ However, our findings clearly indicate that guerrillas continue to recruit children under the age of fifteen.⁷²

Guerrillas have given various explanations over the years for the obvious discrepancy between rule and practice. According to one spokesperson, the children themselves often beg insistently to be allowed to join, or their mothers take them to the guerrillas in desperation because they cannot feed them.⁷³ Another argued that underage recruits are accepted more readily in cold, mountainous regions of the country where conditions are harsher and new recruits harder to gain than they are in the plains or jungle regions, where it is supposedly easier to adapt to guerrilla life.⁷⁴

The vast majority of former child combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch were recruited before reaching the stated minimum age of fifteen. Of the seventy-two former members of the FARC-EP who specified the age at which they joined the group, fifty-seven said that they had joined between the ages of seven and fourteen. Their recruitment could scarcely be explained as an error due to the difficulty of distinguishing visually between a fifteen and a fourteen-year-old. According to our interviews, the typical age at recruitment was between eleven and thirteen.

The issue of the child recruitment was discussed during peace talks between the government and the FARC-EP. In April 2000, Commander Jorge Briceño Suárez, known as "Mono Jojoy," gave a speech in San Vicente del Caguán in which he acknowledged that the FARC-EP had committed "errors," including the use of child combatants under age fifteen.⁷⁵ Briceño is the commander of the FARC-EP's powerful Southern Block and a member of the group's General Secretariat, its ruling body. According to residents who heard the speech, Briceño promised that the FARC-EP would take steps to remedy matters, such as returning under-age guerrillas to their families.⁷⁶ In a later interview with the Spanish television station TVE, Briceño said that "underage recruiting had to stop."⁷⁷

After these statements, San Vicente residents reported that guerrillas returned a number of child combatants to their families, including a girl of twelve.⁷⁸

In June 2000, Commander Carlos Antonio Lozada said in an interview with Human Rights Watch that the FARC-EP had set fifteen as its minimum recruitment age in 1996. He admitted, however, that "until recently, this norm was not enforced." But, as of April 2000, after what he described as Briceño's firm statements on the matter, he said it had become "a norm of obligatory force" and would, in the future, be followed.⁷⁹

It was not followed, however. Not long after Briceño's speech and Lozada's interview with Human Rights Watch, the FARC-EP dispatched the "Arturo Ruiz" column, a mobile unit of over 360 combatants, from the Zone to the department of Norte de Santander. Many members of this column were children. In the closing months of 2000, the army's Fifth Brigade and its Rapid Reaction Force engaged this unit in a series of bloody skirmishes known as Operation Berlin, described in greater detail later in this report.

Sixteen-year-old Ramón told Human Rights Watch that Briceño personally briefed him and other members of the unit before they embarked on their perilous journey. "He said that we were going to Norte de Santander, that we were going to fight and that we should be prepared for anything."⁸⁰

All five of the children interviewed by Human Rights Watch who were captured in the operation had joined the FARC-EP before they were thirteen, and they were far from unusual. Indeed, one of the consequences of Operation Berlin was to draw attention to the issue of child combatants in Colombia. Because such large numbers of children were captured or killed during the fighting, Operation Berlin alerted government authorities and international humanitarian agencies to the increasing deployment of child combatants in the country's armed conflict.⁸¹

The international concern provoked by images of child victims prompted guerrillas to hand over sixty-two child recruits from the municipality of La Uribe to government representatives and UNICEF in February 2001. A month later, Commander Briceño was reported to have promised once again to prohibit field commanders in the future from taking in recruits younger than fifteen.⁸²

To date, however, there has been no sign of any decline in child recruitment by the FARC-EP. The Colombian army reported that out of 327 combatants who reportedly deserted guerrilla ranks in 2001, a third were children between the ages of ten and seventeen. Of the 986 reported deserters in the first ten months of 2002, 42 percent were children. And of these, seventy-four were under the age of fifteen.⁸³

The Colombian press reports sporadically on forced recruitment by FARC-EP guerrillas in contested zones across the country. In July 2002, the 39th and 44th fronts of the FARC-EP were reported to have forcibly recruited at least thirty-five children in Puerto Alvira, Meta, before driving hundreds of townspeople from their homes. "The kids were scared, and no one said a thing. I recognized Marquitos among them, a town kid who helped to load the boats, but he kept his eyes down," an eyewitness told reporters.⁸⁴ In October 2002, the mayor of Juradó, Chocó, a town near the border with Panama, reported the recruitment of at least eight children by the FARC-EP's 27th front.⁸⁵

The UC-ELN

The UC-ELN's "code of war" states that "minors under sixteen years of age shall not be members of the permanent armed force. They may take part in revolutionary activities other than hostilities."⁸⁶

"He said that we were going to Norte de Santander, that we were going to fight and that we should be prepared for anything."

In recent years, UC-ELN commanders have been willing to discuss humanitarian law issues with government authorities within the context of proposals for wider peace negotiations. In July 1996, commanders Francisco Galán and Felipe Torres, then in prison in Itagüí, Medellín, issued a statement about child combatants in reply to a letter from the director of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute, Adelina Covo de Guerrero.⁸⁷ In the statement, they cited the UC-ELN code mentioned above, which also includes a rule prohibiting the execution of minors, pregnant women, or young mothers. Kidnapping of children under sixteen for political or economic motives would not be permitted under any circumstances, the document stated.⁸⁸

Galán and Torres rationalized child recruitment as a response to indiscriminate attacks by the state and paramilitary forces on the civilian population, including children. As they put it:

The reality and the conditions of the conflict have led us in the past to adopt the following practices in the face of indiscriminate attack by the enemy on the population, and particularly on women and children: to organize withdrawal zones for families and children so that they are not exposed to military and paramilitary attack; to keep our camps, our security zones and resources open, to protect children from the enveloping intelligence operations of the forces of the state; and to train and organize the sons of the militia in security techniques, taking refuge, and compartmentalization.⁸⁹

Since civilian families who sympathize with or merely live in close proximity to guerrilla forces are subject to physical attack, intimidation, and harassment by government or paramilitary forces, they contended, it is inevitable that children may seek or be sent by their parents to the guerrillas for their own physical protection. The guerrillas may feel obliged to provide such protection—to “keep our camps open” in the words of Galán and Torres.⁹⁰

Indiscriminate violence directed at civilians by the state, or by forces allied to it, probably facilitates the recruitment of children by guerrilla forces. Nevertheless, this argument should not be used to justify the practice of child recruitment. Once recruited and armed, children become combatants and targets in a military confrontation. The violence to which they are exposed multiplies, both from the enemy and from their own side should their loyalty be questioned. Moreover, the commanders' arguments are less altruistic than they at first appear; the guerrillas obviously benefit from the presence of young and malleable recruits in their camps.

In January 1998, the UC-ELN organized the public release of four children between fifteen and seventeen years of age who, it claimed, had given information to the army that led to a joint military-paramilitary offensive around the municipality of San Diego, Cesar. (Six civilians were killed and seven kidnapped in the attack.) During the long negotiations for the children's release, the UC-ELN expressed its willingness to discuss the demobilization of children and the prohibition of their future recruitment as an important initiative in a future humanitarian agreement with the Colombian government.⁹¹

Six months later, two UC-ELN commanders signed the "Heaven's Gate" agreement in the city of Mainz, Germany, in which the UC-ELN resolved not to recruit children under sixteen into its ranks, and in the future to raise the minimum age to eighteen. A deadly UC-ELN oil pipeline attack soon afterwards, in October 1998, poisoned the negotiating atmosphere, preventing implementation of the accord and the proposed holding of a peace convention between the UC-ELN, the government, and civil society leaders.⁹²

In April 2000, government and UC-ELN leaders announced the creation of an "encounter zone" comprising three municipalities in southern Bolívar and northeastern Antioquia as a venue for the proposed convention. However, paramilitary and local opposition prevented the holding of talks inside Colombia. Although peace discussions have continued, the UC-ELN has so far been unwilling to introduce humanitarian reforms unilaterally without concessions from the government.

The AUC

Article 9 of the AUC's statute sets out the organization's entry requirements. Aspirants must be over eighteen years of age, of good repute, and have no record of "undesirable or antisocial conduct."⁹³ Actual recruitment bears little relation to these requirements, however.⁹⁴ In cities across Colombia, for example, paramilitary groups have recruited youngsters hardened by years of service for the drug cartels as their shock troops in a push to drive out the guerrilla militias from the slums that guerrillas previously controlled.⁹⁵

Although the paramilitaries have failed to respect their own commitment to prohibiting the recruitment of children, the proportion of children in their ranks is generally thought to be lower than either the FARC-EP or the UC-ELN. This may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that the AUC pays its troops and for this reason has found it less difficult to gain adult recruits.

Of thirteen former paramilitary children interviewed by Human Rights Watch in June 2002, all but three were recruited after May 1998, when the AUC's Second National Conference approved the eighteen-year minimum age limit. The youngest two recruits joined at ages seven and eight; seven more joined before they were fifteen, and only four at age fifteen or more. Most of the children said that they had trained with other children. Some said that the majority of fellow-trainees were adults, but a few claimed that there were "lots" of children.

Bernardo, a former paramilitary, threw some light on AUC efforts to implement the 1998 statute. At seventeen, Bernardo is illiterate and suffers from memory loss he said is due to blows to the head he received when briefly captured by the FARC-EP. But he could clearly remember the introduction of a paramilitary policy, subsequently suspended, to demobilize child recruits:

They said that they were going to let all of the minors go, they were going to draw up a big list of all the minors and let them go because they had so many people without school studies. It was Castaño who gave the order. A lot of people left. But in the end, they didn't go through with it because they needed the people to fight the guerrillas, and they started to recruit minors again. That was about two years ago.⁹⁶

JOINING UP

My father was always fighting with my mother and with us, too. That's why I went off with the guerrillas, to get away from the fighting. It was mainly because I was fed up at home. I was studying and they didn't want to pay for my studies. It was Escalante, the deputy commander of the front, who invited me. "We'll pay you, and everything," he told me. It was in one of those meetings they held in all the communities in the area.⁹⁷

[The paramilitaries] have guys who do the recruiting, guys who come up and talk to you, like they say, "I just want to know that you can kill because we need some people to take back with us, and you'll earn such and such an amount." So you say yes, OK, to the guy and the guy gives you the money up front and tells you that he'll be back for you on such and such a day, or tomorrow at such an such an hour. You have to be there. If not, they'll kill you for sure.⁹⁸

Most Colombian child combatants join the guerrillas or the paramilitary forces of their own accord. They are not forced at gunpoint, nor are their families coerced or physically threatened. Of our group of 112 interviewees, only thirteen told us they had been physically forced to join an armed group.⁹⁹

Still, it is difficult to assert confidently that the others made a free decision. Rather, it appears molded by a lack of other opportunities.¹⁰⁰

Most of the children are from a desperately poor background, lacking any chance of an education, personal advancement, or status. Most stopped going to class well before completing elementary school. Many were abandoned by their parents or farmed out to relatives better able to support them. Many come from unstable unions and are victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse. Of those who worked before they joined up, most had only the most menial, poorly-paid jobs, and some were employed in the processing of cocaine, which apart from being illegal is dangerous.¹⁰¹

Every child has a somewhat different story for why he or she left home and joined the guerrillas or paramilitaries. There are, however, common denominators. In nearly all of the children's accounts, poverty, deprivation, underemployment, a truncated schooling, lack of affection and family support, parental ill-treatment, and insecurity intermingle as "push" factors. "Pull factors" include promises of money (usually broken in the case of the guerrillas), thoughts of an easier life, a thirst for adventure, the desire for a gun and a uniform, and simple curiosity.

Joining the Guerrillas

Many young children who join the guerrillas leave a broken or unhappy home behind. In some cases, they are victims of violence and sexual abuse. Osvaldo, fourteen, had never been to school and was illiterate. His mother put him in the care of an aunt and her husband, who he said whipped him with electric cords. He was twelve when he left home in the company of a FARC-EP militia member.¹⁰²

Many children abandon home without a word or a message to parents or kin. Diego left his parents when he was nine and went to work on a coffee farm. Lonely and insecure, he followed a friend into the FARC-EP:

Both of my parents used to beat me. My father drank a lot and when he was drunk he'd beat me with a stick. I was very small and was paid only 4,000 pesos [U.S. \$1.50] a day on the coffee farm, but it was enough to live on. The FARC-EP used to come by the farm sometimes. I had a friend who joined them. Then he helped me join. I was sick of working at the farm.¹⁰³

Peter, from the department of Chocó, joined the FARC-EP's "Aurelio Rodríguez" front when he was seven. He never knew his father, and shrugged off questions about him:

They say he was killed, but I never saw him. I hardly saw my mother, either. She did not have enough to feed me. I lived in the street and in homes. I was with my uncle and the FARC would go a lot to his house. He knew everyone, but he wasn't in any armed group. I went hungry most of the time. I thought that if I left home, my mother and my brothers would be fewer and would eat better.¹⁰⁴

Betty lived with her grandparents. She never knew her parents. When she

was thirteen, her grandmother died. Betty went to live with an aunt on a plot of land in the department of Caquetá.

The guerrillas used to come around a lot. They came to buy milk, chickens, and bananas. I left when I was thirteen and joined the 24th front of the FARC-EP. They brought me to their camp and gave me everything. I went with them because I was really sad and unhappy. They were like my family.¹⁰⁵

Humberto, a fragile seventeen-year-old with a treble voice, spent two years in the FARC-EP's 42nd front. He deserted when his uncle was transferred to the Zone and he was refused permission to accompany him.

I had an uncle who had been some time in the FARC. He would visit us at home and it was he who invited me, and I agreed. I was fed up at home. Before he left it was my uncle who helped me with my school. When he went, no one gave me any help. My father wasn't there because my parents had separated. I missed my uncle. He had helped me a lot. I left so that I could be with him.¹⁰⁶

“I thought that if I left home, my mother and my brothers would be fewer and would eat better.”

In many remote or recently populated areas, the army, the police, welfare, and education officials have only a tenuous presence. By contrast, the guerrillas or paramilitaries may be well-known and respected. “Roncesvalle doesn't have any police, its full of the FARC-EP,” said Saúl, who had worked at a Tolima cattle ranch before he joined the guerrillas. “They walk down the street in their uniforms. Seeing them so much gave me the idea of joining.”¹⁰⁷

Jorge, a serious youth and to this day an admirer of the FARC, was dazzled:

They move all around the countryside, and you see them in good spirits these people, with their guns and their uniforms. You get infected with the same spirit. That's what happened to me. I had some friends among the guerrillas who invited me to join. I didn't have a lot of contact with them, but they told me that the life was good, that there was plenty of food, clothing was provided, you wanted for nothing, so I got excited and off I went. It was my decision.¹⁰⁸

Guns, powerful vehicles, and walkie-talkies are symbols of power. Many of the boys and girls considered guns to be “*bacano*” (cool), and conversed about

the merits of different weapons with the same casual familiarity that other children reserve for music or soccer. "I liked guns. I knew about them, it was easy [to get access to them]," said Pedro, who also volunteered that he liked war films. "I had a pistol that a friend from the FARC-EP had given me and he let me use his AK-47. It was because of the *paracos* [paramilitaries], lots turned up at people's homes, and it was better to deal with them there than run away."¹⁰⁹

The withdrawal of government forces from the Zone during the aborted talks with the FARC-EP clearly facilitated the recruitment of children, since the guerrillas were able to operate openly in the towns. Severo, from Caquetá, told us he had hankered after a life with the guerrillas since he was small:

They were holding meetings all over town. Some were for recruitment, others were mainly to stop people getting drunk and fighting, to get the people back to work and to control the fights and get rid of the thieves. So that people could trust one another again, because there were people robbing civilians, stealing livestock. I met with the deputy commander and he invited me to join.¹¹⁰

Many children seek out the guerrillas, but the guerrillas also come looking for them. The urban militias, sometimes children themselves, do much of the recruiting. The FARC-EP trains promising youngsters especially for this task. Many new recruits enlist after specially convened public meetings. Others join after responding to casual contacts on the street corner or in soda fountains. Subtle pressure is applied.

Carolina, a confident eighteen-year-old from Putumayo, was trained as a recruiter by the 49th front:

I was placed in a three-month political formation course. We learned how to "educate the masses" and to recruit more kids. They chose pretty girls and handsome boys to do recruiting, because the kids would fancy them. We used to lie to potential recruits. We'd say that we'd pay them and that life was good. We'd announce a meeting in a school and people would turn up. Often, we'd have thirty to fifty people. I would give the welcome speech and there would be lots of other speeches. We'd talk a lot about the *paracos* [paramilitaries] because people were scared of them. We'd tell them they had to let us know if any strangers arrived, to keep us informed. We also trained peasants how to defend themselves. We gave them weapons and they did shooting practice.

At the end of a meeting, people would join up. Lots of kids, even as young as ten. Most were fourteen or fifteen. The commanders prefer minors because they

learn better and are healthier. The ideal recruit is about thirteen, because then they can get a full political education.¹¹¹

Once contact was established with a potential recruit, pressures would follow. “In Arauca, you can’t be neutral. You are either for the army or for us,” Marilín, an intelligent girl who joined the FARC-EP when she was twelve, told us. Like Carolina, Marilín was trained as a recruiter:

In Arauca, lots of towns belong to the FARC-EP. I’d enter wearing my uniform. We’d hold a big meeting and I’d give them a talk. We’d tell them to watch out for people, to look out for strangers and to tell us about them or capture them. I’d tell them to join us. If they didn’t want to, we’d have to investigate why they didn’t want to be involved.¹¹²

At age seventeen, Joseph was already a veteran of the FARC-EP. He joined when he was nine, quickly rose to be a militia chief, and later spent six years as a guerrilla. At age thirteen, he had a hundred fighters under his command:

My job in the militia was to go out and tell people about the meetings. There were six of us. Sometimes fifteen to twenty people would turn up. If they had children, they didn’t have to join us, but they had to organize themselves in our support. There was lots of pressure on them. I attended three or four of these meetings. In each one of them, we had people join up: usually fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen-year-olds.¹¹³

Ramiro, then fifteen and from the city of Barrancabermeja, was recruited in a bar. His father, whom he had scarcely seen, had recently been sentenced to death and executed by the FARC-EP. His relations with his mother soured. In comparison with his troubled existence, life in the guerrillas seemed a welcome escape:

We went into a bar there in Aguachica and ordered a beer and a man came in and started to talk to us: OK, where are you from? He asked us if we were paramilitaries. And we said, no, we’ve nothing to do with them. And he started to talk about the guerrillas, that they were great, that they paid you, they paid your family, the whole thing. I was fed up with going up and down from one place to another, with my mom, then with my uncles. So I let myself be convinced. They gave you clothes, anything you wanted. He said they were going to pay me

400,000 a month [approximately \$135]. And all I had to do was carry a rifle, mount guard duty, and help them on the road, nothing else. And I let myself be persuaded and went with them.¹¹⁴

Neither the FARC-EP nor the UC-ELN paid wages to the children we interviewed. Guerrillas covered the expenses of militia members when they were on missions for which money was needed for food or supplies. According to the UC-ELN's military commander, Antonio García:

In the urban field, there are members whose budget must be covered because they have to pay expenses like rent, etc. They are very busy in their political activities so we pay their expenses. They have a budget that allows them to perform their activities, but we do not consider it a salary. Our policy is to provide a subsidy to support the families of those who have not got a regular job and are 100 percent involved with the ELN. The rest of the families, except in special circumstances, do not receive economic support.¹¹⁵

Yet during recruitment meetings, guerrillas often promised salaries. Several former FARC-EP child combatants told us they had joined in order to earn money or send money home to their families. Nonetheless, they received no money beyond their upkeep.

“And all I had to do was carry a rifle, mount guard duty, and help them on the road, nothing else. And I let myself be persuaded and went with them.”

“I was fed up. I don't know why, but something crazy took hold of me,” said Giovanni, who lived in Bogotá with his mother and father. “I was working on the buses, but I wasn't earning enough to pay my keep with my family. When a friend told me that the guerrillas paid, I went for it. But it was a total lie.”¹¹⁶ He was fourteen at the time.

Some children join the guerrillas primarily for self-protection. Edgar had been in the UC-ELN and the paramilitaries were on his trail, so he switched to the FARC-EP for safety. What Edgar appreciated about life in the FARC-EP was that he felt respected for the first time and no one could insult him. “I felt like more of a man (*más hombrecito*), more to be taken seriously, than I ever did at home.”¹¹⁷

Joining the Paramilitaries

The paramilitary forces pay child recruits a wage monthly or every three months, ranging between 900,000 and 1,200,000 pesos (approximately U.S. \$300 to \$400), with bonuses for special missions. Most of the former paramilitary children we interviewed said that they joined primarily for the money, even though this attitude was frowned on by paramilitary leaders. Many entered the AUC in the company of friends or already had contacts within the group.

“After school I was a baker’s assistant. It was hard work and paid badly,” said Leonel, who joined when he was fourteen. “I went to work on a farm but the work was hard too, so finally I joined the paras. I had friends inside. It paid 300,000 [U.S. \$100] a month. It seemed like an easier life.”¹¹⁸

Adolfo, tall and dark, said that when he joined he was asked how much money he needed in order to leave his family. “The recruiting sergeants were army reservists. They ask you how much money you need. Once you accept the money, that’s it, you’re in. If you don’t turn up at the agreed time, you’re dead.”¹¹⁹

Óscar, who had one year’s schooling, had an older brother in the AUC, a commander who died in combat. Several friends invited him to join. “They said it was nice. I liked the military life, it was cool,” he told us with a grin. Óscar was captured ten days before our interview, after three years in the paramilitaries.¹²⁰

Jesús and his friend Rigoberto, from Antioquia, enlisted at the same time. They were from the same neighborhood and hung out together. Broke and hungry and with nothing to do, they decided to give it a try, “to see what it was like.” The experience lasted only two days. Early in the morning on March 2, 2002, the army entered the camp and took them both prisoner. Jesús was still in his civilian clothes.¹²¹

For some, like Laidy, a petite fourteen-year-old from Casanare, the decision to join the paramilitaries was still difficult to explain. “I don’t know why I joined. I knew nothing about them. I decided on the spur of the moment. I wanted to be different, and I wanted to learn how to defend myself.”¹²²

Uriel, a tough-looking boy, had a powerful motive to join the paramilitaries. At eight, he and his younger sister were the only survivors after the FARC-EP raided their farm in the department of Sucre in 1996. He told Human Rights Watch that guerrillas shot dead his father, mother, and three siblings. Rather than go to an orphanage, Uriel chose the paramilitaries:

Family Welfare wanted to put me in a children's home. I didn't want to go. I already had friends mixed up with the Self-Defense Forces. I was living in the street. I wanted to enter the AUC for vengeance. So the *compañeros* took me in, and put me to work cleaning rifles, washing uniforms. I was eight at the time.¹²³

Forcible Recruitment

Forcible recruitment in Colombia is the exception rather than the rule. It rarely takes the form of a military press-gang operation in which villagers are herded together at gun-point. More subtle pressures are usually involved. Often inducement and persuasion are backed by thinly veiled threats. Both the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN are credibly reported to resort on occasion to force to gain new recruits. The practice is far less common in the paramilitary forces, probably because they pay their fighters a wage and can recruit more easily.

Even though our sample sizes are not statistically significant, it was striking that out of the twenty children from the UC-ELN we interviewed, six told us that they were recruited by force. This suggests that the UC-ELN may resort to this practice with greater frequency than the FARC-EP.¹²⁴

Jenny, a small girl with indigenous features, was only thirteen when she was press-ganged into the UC-ELN militia in Boyacá:

The ELN forced me to join. It happened about three months ago, at the beginning of March [2002]. They used to come around people's houses, where I lived in [the department of] Boyacá telling us we should join either the FARC or the ELN. The two groups worked together. They told me that I would be good at it. The FARC was requiring kids older than fifteen to join, although they accepted children younger than that. The ELN was requiring anyone over eleven to join. Adults didn't have to, although they were invited to.

Eight days after they came by my house, they made me go with them to their camp. It was a twelve-hour walk. There were about five hundred people there, mostly minors, including a lot, maybe fifty, who had been forcibly recruited. There were only about two hundred adults there.¹²⁵

Jhony, the youngest of eight brothers from Casanare department, was hanging out in his old school (he finished studying in the fifth grade) when a group of UC-ELN members approached him and threatened to kill him if he did not

go with them. “I was forced to join,” Jhony said firmly. “They said it was only for three months and then they would let me go and take me back home. I don’t think they were looking for me especially, just any kid who happened to be there.” Jhony was captured by the army before the three months expired.¹²⁶

Xaviera’s experience of guerrilla life was an unwelcome gift from her father, a lifelong guerrilla with the UC-ELN. A black adolescent from Colombia’s west coast, Xaviera told us that her mother died when she was fourteen:

When that happened, my father sent me to the guerrillas. He said he was sending me off to work. He told me that he had a debt with them, and that he had to hand me over in exchange. I hated it, but they told me that I had to stay, that if I tried to leave they’d kill me.¹²⁷

Soria, a timid girl who looked younger than her sixteen years, told us she dropped out of school because her family could not pay the bills. She worked as a cook for a woman who scolded her constantly. Soria’s best friend fell in love with an UC-ELN commander and joined the guerrillas. The commander threatened to kill her if she did not join too.

I didn’t want to go. They forced me to work as a cook for them. Most of the kids there were happy. They liked having guns and fighting. I was crying and crying.¹²⁸

Margarita, a sixteen-year-old from Boyacá, told Human Rights Watch that two men from the “José David Suárez” front of the UC-ELN blindfolded and kidnapped her in a friend’s house. They said nothing to her, but took her by car to a place where there were about fifty guerrillas, some younger than her.¹²⁹

The most plausible explanation of forcible recruitment is the inability of guerrilla units to replenish their ranks by voluntary enlistment alone. We are unable to judge whether the use of force is authorized at higher levels or whether recruiters resort to force to meet their targets even though the official guerrilla policy prohibits the use of force.

The practice also occurs in the FARC-EP. Twelve-year-old Gilberto had been distilling cocaine from coca leaves in the department of Putumayo, but there was no more work in his village:

I was invited to go and work in another village where I wasn’t known at all. I had a .38 revolver for my own protection. Some guys from the FARC spotted me with

the gun and suspected that I was a paramilitary. They captured me and tied me up. They investigated me, but because I had never been with an armed group and they couldn’t kill me without proof, they didn’t do anything to me. I did not want to join, but I was convinced that if I did not go with them they would kill me. I felt I had no choice.¹³⁰

Juan José is a Sicuani from Colombia’s eastern department of Vichada, which borders with Venezuela and has a high number of indigenous communities.¹³¹ In November 2001, a FARC-EP squad passing through his village forcibly recruited him and several other members of the community, including women and children. The group was forced to march for three days to reach the guerrilla camp. After fifteen days training, the new recruits were taken by river on a three-week journey from Vichada to La Macarena, Meta, in the heart of the Zone:

**“I did not want to join,
but I was convinced that
if I did not go with them
they would kill me.”**

As they were passing through the village, they tried to persuade me. They said that no one suffers in the guerrilla movement, that you have everything you need, and you don’t kill anyone. But it was a lie, because once you are in, it’s all different and they order you to do all sorts of things. Then they told me that if I didn’t join, they would kill me. The same thing happened with several other indigenous recruits. It was a squad of five people that took me. There were other indigenous people with the guerrillas, women and children.¹³²

A seventh grader, Johana got on well with her parents. She was inducted by force into the FARC-EP in December 2000 in Putumayo:

Four men I did not know stopped me in the street, put me in a van, and took me to the camp. They were armed with Galils [weapons]. They said they were picking up street kids. Four other students were captured with me. They didn’t care that we were students. I told them I wanted to leave. I cried, but they didn’t let me go. For a couple of weeks, I was extremely homesick. Finally, I got used to it. About a month later, my family came to the camp. They had figured out that I had been taken by the guerrillas. I was allowed to speak to them but another guerrilla stayed with us as a guard. I wanted to go home but they wouldn’t let me. The commander said he would have let me go if my family had come to get me after five days, but not after a month.¹³³

Arlette's experience was similar. Also a seventh grade student, she spent four months in the FARC-EP before making her escape:

I was living with my parents and brothers in a town near Popayán, Cauca. I was in seventh grade. I liked school. It was a Friday. We went down to the river to go swimming and they caught us. They didn't give us a reason. There were four of them in uniforms. They had AK-47s and Galils. They drove us four girls: Sofia, fifteen, Juanita, fourteen, Margie, sixteen, and me up into the mountains, to the camp. At 8:00 a.m. the next morning, our families showed up because someone had told them what happened, but the FARC-EP didn't want to give us up. They said we had to stay with them because they needed people to help. They had already given us our uniforms and weapons. They said it's too late for them to leave. Then they separated the four of us, sending some of us to other fronts.¹³⁴

During her four years in the FARC-EP, Ángela worked as a nurse and a recruiter. From the other side of the fence, Ángela confirmed the children's accounts of the use of force and threats to gain new recruits.

Once in 1999, we forced some kids to join. We told them we were with the guerrillas, and they said they didn't want to join, that they wanted to keep studying. We said you're already with us; you can't leave. We were armed and we told them to come with us. There were ten or so of them, about sixteen to seventeen years old. They were terrified. But we needed people, so we brought them to camp in our truck. I felt really guilty.¹³⁵



FARC-EP member standing in front of large paintings of FARC-EP founders Jacobo Arenas and Manuel Marulanda, at a compound used for peace negotiations in the Zone.

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LIFE IN THE RANKS

Some things in the guerrillas were good. It was good when we were in the camp. We were happy there. We could go out to parties, drink liquor and all that, and dance. But the worst was when we had to go out and fight. That was really terrible.¹³⁶

That's what it was like in the guerrilla. I went off to the latrines and started to cry. My sister's death hit me really hard. I tried twice to run away after that but I never got the chance. I started to plan it, but I got scared that they'd kill me if I was caught.¹³⁷

Daily Routine in the Guerrilla Forces

The life of children in the guerrilla forces is very much like that of adults. Whether young or old, recruits sacrifice their freedom and autonomy upon joining the guerrillas. Entries and exits to the camp are controlled, and all daily activities strictly scheduled.

Special leave from superiors is required for activities that normally would belong to any adolescent's jealously guarded sphere of privacy. Unlike that of the militia member, who often lives at home, the typical daily round of the "interno," or trainee guerrilla, follows a highly structured routine. Wilson, a well-spoken youngster from Meta, described a typical day in the FARC-EP:

We'd get up at 4:30 a.m. and have coffee. We'd train from 5:00 to 6:00, run, and do exercises. Breakfast at 6:30: soup and potatoes, *arepas* (flat corn bread) and hot chocolate. 7:00 to 11:00 more training. 11:00 lunch: cold meat, rice, and lemonade. 12:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m., more training. A snack at 3:00 p.m.: oat-meal and cookies. At 3:30 p.m., bathing in the river. At 5:00, guard duty and services begin. The commander decides who does the services, cooking, etc.¹³⁸

By all accounts, the UC-ELN is run on less strict military lines and discipline

is less rigidly enforced. Political education seems to be given particular importance. Children may be allowed a period of adjustment after arrival at the camp. Some units of the UC-ELN, for example, reportedly give child recruits a three-month trial period, after which they can leave if they wish.¹³⁹

In the FARC-EP, recruits are given only a few days, at most, to adjust before training begins. On admittance, they are usually handed a uniform and kit, a *nom-de-guerre*, and, sometimes, given a mentor to watch over them. Some children report having to swear an oath of allegiance.¹⁴⁰

As Wilson recalled of his induction interview:

The commander asked us questions when we arrived: our names (they told us our new names, mine was Franklin), our ages. They asked about our families, where they were from; about school, how many years of school; and why we wanted to join. I told them I was bored. They told me if I didn’t like it, to tell them, because I had three days to think about it. After three days, they asked me if I wanted to go home, and I said no.¹⁴¹

Nearly all of the children commented that one of the toughest parts of guerrilla life was the long marches, when guerrillas would move camp and sometimes walk for several days and nights with little or no food. Children had to carry their full kit, including tents and cooking equipment, on their shoulders, as well as their assault rifle and munitions. Discipline was especially strict during these marches because of the fear of detection. Children had to guard for hours on end, fighting off sleep in the knowledge that if they were caught napping they could face a firing squad.

Contact with Family

Once admitted into the guerrillas, child recruits hardly ever see their parents, siblings, or other relatives. Many former FARC-EP child combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch were not allowed to visit or communicate with their families at all after their recruitment. While there was no blanket ban on family contact, permission had to be granted to visit home or send or receive messages.

Many children reported being refused permission repeatedly, and discouraged from trying to maintain family ties. Some, like seventeen-year-old Marta, simply lost all contact. “You’re not allowed to talk to your family. They probably thought that I was dead.”¹⁴²

Ómar, raised by his mother after his parents separated, told us:

They never gave me permission to see my mom. She lived close, about a day away in the Zone. I asked every day for permission. They never gave me a reason. They just said, “it’s better if you forget about your mom.” I felt sad because she’s the person in the world I most care about.¹⁴³

Serious illness, when the child becomes a burden on the camp’s limited medical resources, is an exception. Sick children who do not respond to treatment are sometimes sent home. The sickness of parents might also justify compassionate leave, but it was discretionary, not a right. As Mauricio, a plain-spoken boy, explained:

I went two years without seeing my family. I didn’t say goodbye to them when I left, but they found out where I was from others. Sometimes, my mother sent gifts to the camp. Finally, when I got sick [at age thirteen], they let me go home. I had malaria, and stayed home for a month. After that visit, I didn’t see my family again until I left the FARC.¹⁴⁴

“You’re not allowed to talk to your family. They probably thought that I was dead.”

Fifteen-year old Peter, who joined the FARC-EP when he was seven, was also allowed home when he got sick:

The camp was about five hours walk from my mother’s. I got permission to see her about once every four months. When I was about eleven, I got a bad ear infection. It was made worse by the flies and mosquitoes. They sent me home and I stayed for two months. I didn’t go back, but I joined the ELN.¹⁴⁵

Some children described being acutely homesick and depressed, especially those who had not joined freely. Compassion was in short supply in such cases. Children unable to pull out of a depression alone could face punishment.

As sixteen-year-old Vicente explained, “If children cry, they call them ‘demoralized.’ They have to put up with it, unless they are really sick. If the commanders think they are faking, they can be put before a war council.”¹⁴⁶ Juan Pedro reinforced the point. “Overwhelming demoralization is a crime. It’s when a person is sick of it, when he thinks about leaving.”¹⁴⁷

Sometimes, the forced separation affected parents as much, or more, than the children. Marcos, a seemingly middle-class eighteen-year-old, told the story

of a prodigal son reunion with his family after he had spent more than three years in the FARC-EP. After escaping from camp in a Toyota truck and running three police and army roadblocks as he headed home under cover of darkness, he finally pulled up outside his father's house:

I drove round the block and parked on the other side of the street opposite the house. I spotted my half-sister, Eliana, and called out, "Hi, Elianita, how are you doing?" She said, "Excuse me, who are you?" "Don't you remember me? It's Marcos." She must have thought I was dead, because she gasped and started to cry. Then she told me that my father had changed a lot and had suffered a great deal, that I had always been in his thoughts. I had left behind many mementos, my high school diploma, and the organ I used to play. There were photos of me dancing, competition photos, and he had had all of them enlarged. Everyone embraced me and I was crying. I had to borrow clothes from my stepbrother because the ones I had left behind were all too small for me to put on.¹⁴⁸

Rest and Recreation

None of the irregular armed groups devote resources to help children continue their truncated education. No former child combatant interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that he or she had received any reading or writing instruction, despite the fact that many are barely literate.¹⁴⁹

Guerrillas offered no non-military teaching other than political classes and briefings in rules and regulations. In June 2002, a journalist from *El Tiempo* waiting to interview a senior FARC-EP commander noticed "two guerrilla youths who could not have been eighteen taking notes in a notebook. They were sitting under the black plastic roof of their tent waiting out a downpour. 'Carlos Marx was born in 1818,' one read out to the other."¹⁵⁰

The time allotted in the camps to recreation is devoted mainly to swimming in the river, sport, games, and watching television and videos. Action, martial arts, and war movies are the staple fare. Parties are held around Christmas, the New Year, and the May 28 anniversary of the founding of the FARC-EP. At these events, alcohol is allowed, but those who drink at unscheduled hours without permission risk punishment. Drug use, including marijuana and cocaine, is strictly prohibited in all of Colombia's armed groups.

Even during rest time, recruits have to be on their guard. As Marilín, an intelligent fifteen-year-old from Arauca, explained:

Seven to 8:00 p.m. was the hour of TV news. At 8:00 to 9:00 p.m., we'd talk about what we had seen. But you had to take the correct line. If you didn't agree, you kept quiet. Because if not, they'd wonder why you were defending the government. They'd think you were an infiltrator. You said nothing. For example, if you saw on TV that the FARC-EP did something bad, like destroy a house with women and children inside, you'd keep quiet.¹⁵¹

At other times, children were able to relax and momentarily forget the conflict. "Once, on the commander's birthday, we organized a party. A band arrived with instruments and they brought lights to the camp. It was well organized. There was *aguardiente* [liquor]. The militias came. It was nice. We danced all night," recalled thirteen-year-old Darío.¹⁵²

Orlando, from the FARC-EP's 29th front, said, "Every week we had a 'recreational Wednesday' from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. There was singing, story-telling, and games like 'captain orders sailor' (*capitán manda marinero*)," a Colombian version of "Simon Says," where a child gives tasks to other children, who win the game by completing them correctly.¹⁵³

Religion

While religious practices, such as prayer, are not actually forbidden in the rebel forces, they are not allowed any public expression and can only take place in solitude and in private. In general, there is little tolerance of religion or understanding of spiritual needs. Neither of the two largest guerrilla forces supports religious practice in any form.

Despite the constant exposure of the troops to danger and physical suffering, there is no one at hand to provide spiritual solace. Although most guerrillas are at least nominally Christians, no religious services, such as mass, baptism, or the celebration of saint days, are practiced. There are no chaplains to hear confessions, to administer the last rites to the dying, or to conduct weddings or funerals.¹⁵⁴

As Pedro, a practicing Catholic, explained:

Religion was not mentioned in the talks, but religious services are explicitly prohibited in the rules. You have to forget about your religion, like your family. I kept a Bible hidden in my kit, so that no one would know. I was scared that if it was found, I would be punished with eighty trips to get wood, and

that they would burn the Bible. I also had a scapular, but I kept it hidden under my shirt. I used to pray on the quiet, very quickly. People never used to pray together. There was no chaplain. You had to find your spiritual strength inside you.¹⁵⁵

Teddy, who spent four years in the UC-ELN, told us about his friend, María, who was killed for going to Mass in town without permission:

She came from a very Catholic family. The commanders sent some combatants to take her away and shoot her. They took her uniform and rifle away beforehand, and shot her in civilian clothes. Because there was a big protest, the commanders called a meeting and told us that her behavior could not be permitted because she had not obtained permission to go to the Mass, and had disregarded warnings.¹⁵⁶

Life in Paramilitary Camps

Since we interviewed only thirteen former paramilitary children, it was more difficult to form a picture of life in the paramilitary ranks. As in the guerrilla camps, children were not treated differently from adult combatants. As fifteen-year-old Óscar described it,

Children and adults were treated the same, except that adults had to carry heavier stuff. But they slept in the same place, shared the same things, and ate the same food as the commanders. Sunday was a day of rest. We'd do the washing, buy things we needed. From Monday to Saturday, we would walk. We were always moving, we would change location every day.¹⁵⁷

Paramilitary children also had to request permission to visit their families:

I thought I'd serve for a while and make some money to buy a farm. Sometimes I'd work for seven months and make two million pesos [U.S. \$667], but I'd spend it. After serving for seven or eight months, you can ask permission for a visit home. I went home three times, for ten or fifteen days. Once when I was sick with malaria, I went home for a month.¹⁵⁸

GIRLS

When girls join the FARC, the commanders choose among them. There's pressure. The women have the final say, but they want to be with a commander to be protected. The commanders buy them. They give a girl money and presents. When you're with a commander, you don't have to do the hard work. So most of the prettiest girls are with commanders.¹⁵⁹

All of Colombia's irregular armed groups recruit women and girls to serve as combatants. Indeed, more than a quarter of the 112 former child combatants that Human Rights Watch interviewed were girls, most of them former members of the FARC-EP. According to the testimony of former guerrillas, FARC-EP units are usually from one-quarter to nearly one-half female, and may include girls as young as eight or nine years old.

Human Rights Watch interviewed a twelve-year-old girl named Juana who joined the FARC-EP at age seven, after her stepfather threw her out of the house. Like Juana, most girls join the guerrilla forces when they are under fifteen years old, the official recruitment age of both the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN.¹⁶⁰

Juana was the youngest girl in her unit, but she was not the only pre-adolescent. She told us about another young girl, age nine, who was always crying because she missed her family. Juana was unhappy, too. She said that the worst part of belonging to the FARC-EP was having to participate in combat, as she desperately feared being killed. She tried to escape the FARC-EP when she was eleven years old, but was caught and tied up.¹⁶¹

Eight of the girls we interviewed were former members of the UC-ELN. While Human Rights Watch did not find any former girl members of the UC-ELN who had entered the group when younger than twelve years old, we learned of several girls who joined at age twelve or thirteen. Overall, the UC-ELN appears to have similar proportions of women and girls as the FARC-EP.



A girl stands at attention in a UC-ELN unit in Arauca in 2002. © GETTY IMAGES

Paramilitary forces tend to have much lower relative numbers of women than do the guerrillas, and very few young girls. Human Rights Watch interviewed only one girl who had belonged to the paramilitaries; she joined when she was age twelve. In her group, there were only seven females, including her, among 100 men and boys.¹⁶²

Recruitment

Girls' reasons for joining illegal armed groups are remarkably similar to those of boys, except that several of the girls Human Rights Watch interviewed said that they left home because of sexual abuse or harassment. Jessica, who joined the FARC-EP when she was fifteen, told us:

My parents are divorced and my mother has another husband. I left home because I had problems with him. He tried to take advantage of me. My mother didn't believe me when I told her about it.¹⁶³

Another former guerrilla explained, "When I was twelve, a cousin raped me. I was so mad, I wanted vengeance. I wanted to hurt everyone who had hurt me." Spurred by this anger, she said, she decided to join the FARC-EP.¹⁶⁴

Notwithstanding stereotypes, many girls told us that they were attracted by the thought of carrying a weapon and wearing a uniform. A former paramilitary said that she joined because she wanted to learn to defend herself. The power signified by the groups' military trappings tempt many girls. As one girl told us, in explaining her reasons for entering the FARC-EP, "I joined the guerrilla to escape. . . . I thought I'd get some money and could be independent."¹⁶⁵

“When I was twelve, a cousin raped me. I was so mad, I wanted vengeance.”

Daily Life

Girls are spared none of the hardships of guerrilla or paramilitary life. Their role is the same as that of boys: to fight and to kill. Like their male counterparts, they are taught to handle weapons, to collect intelligence, and to take part in military operations. Like all combatants, they frequently end up getting injured or killed.

Many girls emphasized to Human Rights Watch that, compared to the civilian world, guerrilla life is egalitarian. Women and men receive the same training and are responsible for the same tasks. Although the top ranks of both the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN are male, women have roughly the same opportunity as men to become field commanders. Human Rights Watch interviewed several girls who had earned command positions in the guerrilla forces, with the power to give orders to men and boys much older than themselves.

"I was the best during training, so they gave me a command quickly," said María Claudia, a quick, intelligent girl who joined the UC-ELN when she was twelve. "First I was given a 'triad,' of three people, then a squad of ten." By the time she left the UC-ELN, at age fourteen, she was in charge of a group of thirty combatants.¹⁶⁶

Sexual Harassment and Abuse

Despite this relative egalitarianism, girls in the guerrilla forces still face gender-related pressures. Although Human Rights Watch's interviewees generally agreed rape and overt sexual harassment were not tolerated, they described how male commanders used their power to form sexual liaisons with under-age girls. (In Colombia, a girl is legally permitted to have sexual relations at age fourteen.)¹⁶⁷

"They take the prettiest girls," one girl noted, "and give them gifts and privileges." These relationships may not be forced, but they take place in a context in which the girls are distinctly powerless, and the commanders may have life-or-death authority.¹⁶⁸

Andrea, a sixteen-year-old, told us that her relationship with an older commander saved her from being killed when she was suspected of collaborating with the army. The commander, a high-level official in the FARC-EP's 71st front, had started a relationship with Andrea when he was thirty-five and she was twelve. "I liked him," Andrea told Human Rights Watch. "He protected me."¹⁶⁹

When she and another girl were implicated in a scheme to provide information to the army, her older boyfriend stood up for her. While the other girl was put to death for the offense of "robbing the movement," Andrea was sentenced to three months of digging trenches.

The combination of protection and privileges provides a powerful incentive for girls to accede to, or even seek out, sexual relationships with male com-

manders. Carolina, an assertive young woman from Puerto Guzmán, Putumayo, who joined the FARC-EP when she was thirteen, told us:

When girls join the FARC, the commanders choose among them. There's pressure. The women have the final say, but they want to be with a commander to be protected. The commanders buy them. They give a girl money and presents. When you're with a commander, you don't have to do the hard work. So most of the prettiest girls are with commanders.¹⁷⁰

Carolina's boyfriend was a much older, high-level commander who managed to keep her away from combat for more than a year, a rare privilege.

"The commanders are in charge of the money, of deciding who does guard duty, of making decisions," noted Marilín, who entered the FARC-EP when she was twelve. Given the possible advantages, she insisted, young girls have sexual relations with them "out of self-interest."¹⁷¹

Another former member of the FARC-EP explained:

Women can say no to men, but it's difficult not to have a boyfriend. There's a certain pressure. Most women who join want to be with a commander so they can get away with stuff, enjoy privileges. You see lots of commanders with really young girls. Commander Topo was fifty-two. He had a sixteen-year-old girlfriend. This is typical. They watch out for the young, pretty girls.¹⁷²

While this type of subtle or restrained sexual pressure is fairly common, in some instances more blatant forms of sexual abuse occur. Soria, who entered the UC-ELN when she was sixteen, was raped by a commander not long after joining. A small, timid girl, she clutched a doll as she spoke to a Human Rights Watch representative.

From the very beginning, Soria said she had a difficult time adjusting to life as a fighter. "I cried and cried and cried. . . . I was undisciplined," she explained. "I was very disobedient." Fifteen days after she arrived at the UC-ELN camp, a thirty-year-old commander raped her.¹⁷³

"He raped me as punishment," Soria said. As described:

He entered my tent one night. He grabbed my hair and started touching me. I cried and screamed and begged him to leave me alone. I was a virgin. It was painful. After he raped me, he left. I didn't say anything to anyone because he was part of the command Four days later he came back. He did it by force again.

And he did it again nearly two months later. Another commander told me they were going to kill me because I didn't obey them.¹⁷⁴

"After he raped me, he left. I didn't say anything to anyone because he was part of the command."

Soria managed to escape the camp one night while on guard duty. She walked for three days, took a bus to another city, and reached the home of an aunt. When the aunt took her to a doctor, she discovered she was pregnant. "I'm planning to keep the baby," she told Human Rights Watch. "Because having a child makes you choose the right path. It makes you work and be responsible."¹⁷⁵

Birth Control and Abortion

Girls in the guerrilla forces have little chance of choosing to have children. Even guerrillas as young as twelve are required to use contraception, often by having an intrauterine device (IUD) inserted by guerrilla nurses. FARC-EP girls, moreover, are almost invariably made to have abortions if they get pregnant. While the UC-ELN seems more willing to tolerate pregnancies, it is clear that the possibility is, at the very least, strongly discouraged.

Ángela, an ex-member of the FARC-EP, joined the group when she was twelve:

They put in an IUD the day after I arrived. That was the only birth control I ever used. If you get pregnant, you have to have an abortion. Lots of women get pregnant. I had two friends who got pregnant and had to have abortions. They cried and cried. They didn't want to lose the baby.¹⁷⁶

Marta entered the FARC-EP at fourteen. "You have to use birth control, even if you're young and not part of a couple," she told Human Rights Watch. "The nurse inserts an IUD. It's painful. Every eight days, they check it. Eight days after I arrived, they inserted one in me."¹⁷⁷ Autopsies performed on eleven female FARC-EP members killed in the army-led Operation Berlin in December 2000 provided macabre confirmation of this practice. According to press accounts, nine of the eleven were girls whose bodies were found with IUDs.¹⁷⁸

Besides IUDs, many girls described to Human Rights Watch being made to use Norplant contraceptive implants or contraceptive injections. Several mentioned getting birth control pills or condoms.

One of the girls we interviewed, who belonged to the FARC-EP, says she was forced to have an abortion when she got pregnant at age fifteen. Another girl tried to escape the FARC-EP when she realized she was pregnant. “I wanted to save the life of the baby,” she told Human Rights Watch. “I went home to my mother, but I had a miscarriage on my way there. Then the FARC came to my house and captured me.”¹⁷⁹

A third girl, also a former FARC-EP member, told us:

The worst thing is that you can't have a baby. Two years ago, in 2000, I got pregnant. They gave me an abortion, but they didn't tell me in advance that they were going to do it. They told me they were checking on it. I wanted to have the baby.¹⁸⁰

Two ex-members of the UC-ELN told us that pregnant UC-ELN members were also made to have abortions. Other girls, however, said that the UC-ELN was more flexible than the FARC-EP on this issue. According to them, when a woman becomes pregnant, the group will send her home to give birth. In some cases, she will return to the UC-ELN after six months, but she may be allowed to return permanently to civilian life.



The hand of “Danilo,” a former UC-ELN guerrilla who was fifteen years old when the explosive he was assembling detonated. He also lost an eye in the accident.

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TRAINING

The use of children and adolescents in armed conflicts places their lives, well-being, and education at great risk. They are forced to use high-caliber weapons. They are required to lay explosives, to kill other children who are considered “traitors” or change their minds, and to participate in kidnappings, surveillance, and bomb intelligence work. In some cases, children as young as eight are used for these perilous tasks. These illegal, perverse practices subject boys, girls, and youths to the inherent risks of combat, to sexual abuse, and to other forms of abusive, brutal, and humiliating treatment. They are drawn into a culture of violence, and their rights to education and to ordinary participation in society are curtailed.¹⁸¹

Training in the Guerrilla Forces

Child recruits in the guerrilla forces receive the same military training as adults. No special limited duties are reserved for children in recognition of their age.

Eleven or twelve-year-old recruits are often issued a pistol or revolver immediately on their arrival at the camp. During training, they are taught how to handle and use different types of automatic assault rifles, including AK-47s, Galils and FALs, and a variety of handguns, such as .38 revolvers and 9 mm pistols. Children, generally, seem to be treated as equals, sharing food and duties on an equal footing with older combatants.

Child recruits in the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN are also instructed in the use of hand grenades and mortars. They learn to assemble and fire homemade explosive devices, including gas cylinder bombs, and to make and lay anti-personnel mines, known in Colombia as “foot-breakers” (*quiebrapatas*). Former child paramilitaries told us they had laid foot-breaker mines, but the paramilitaries do not use gas cylinder bombs.

For most trainees the day begins at dawn with physical exercises and calis-

thenics. In the FARC-EP, training courses include what the group calls "closed order" and "open order" skills. The first include in-camp duties, such as defense, weapons training, arms assembly and cleaning, look-out duties, parade ground routines, formation, presenting arms, etc. The second involve in-combat training, including survival techniques and tactics for mounting ambushes and surprise attacks.

"My training was four-and-a-half months," said Ramiro, who joined the FARC-EP's 10th front at fifteen. "I learned how to use a compass, how to attack a police post, how to carry out an ambush, and the handling of weapons. By the end I was using an AK-47, a Galil, an R-15, mortars, pineapple grenades, M-26 grenades, and *tatucos* (multiple grenade launchers)."¹⁸²

Some children enjoyed the tough physical demands placed on them. "I felt happy," said Jon Freddy, who had raised his hand eagerly in a FARC-EP recruiting meeting in San José, Guaviare. "My training started four days after I arrived at the camp. We learned to march, to lie down and crawl, we jogged day and night with our all our kit, we learned to throw grenades and to shoot. The AK-47 was light. They showed how to fire it without being hurt by the recoil. I wasn't scared."

Jon Freddy's military career ended when he was captured barely alive in Operation Berlin. "I was ill, as thin as a rake, and my blood was black," he told Human Rights Watch.¹⁸³

Urban militias receive a shorter period of military training, dealing with intelligence gathering, infiltration, kidnappings, and the capture of suspected collaborators. Militias also receive training in the fabrication and use of home-made bombs.

In both the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN, compulsory training session talks include instruction on guerrilla rules and regulations and discipline; treatment of the civilian population; and political indoctrination. There are classes on Marxism and pep talks on revolutionary heroes and martyrs, both Colombian and international. Colombian history is portrayed as a struggle between the "people" and the oligarchy, the military, "Yankee imperialism," and Plan Colombia.¹⁸⁴ As seventeen-year-old Marta described it:

They teach us history: the history of Che Guevara or Jacobo Arenas or Marxism-Leninism every day from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. We read. There isn't any math or science taught, only politics, weaponry, and the FARC's rules. Before we go out to fight, there is a talk: "We are going out to defend Colombia, so that equality can come—to help the poor—so that the rich don't take from the poor."¹⁸⁵

Political education also features prominently in UC-ELN training courses. As fifteen-year-old Peter recalled his training:

They taught me how the government was oppressing and exploiting the peasants and confusing them with lies. They want to do like they did in Cuba, like in Cuba there is equality, there are no rich and poor, and everyone is equal. And they talked about politics, about Plan Colombia, which was a trap to provide weapons to finish off the guerrillas.¹⁸⁶

Jorge, a serious seventeen-year-old, remembered the focus on revolutionary ethics:

They taught us how to obtain the support of the civilian population and the right conduct, like not to go into the population and take their animals and behave badly and trick them with words. That's forbidden. There are rules for all of that. A guerrilla cannot give orders to the civilian population.¹⁸⁷

Children with the right aptitude may receive specialized training in marksmanship, explosives, the handling of cylinder bombs, use of heavy machine guns, or special operations, including undercover missions and assassinations. Marcos, a former mechanic who deserted from a FARC-EP camp in a pick-up truck, trained as a sniper:

They could see that I was able, that I was active and alert in doing things. I started to like guns and I was good at taking them apart and putting them together and even repairing them. In car mechanics, you learn to do that sort of thing. So I spent six months training and then went to work undercover. What they trained me to do was to shoot at 500, 600, or 700 meters with a rifle with a telescopic sight. Not everyone had access to a weapon like that. It impressed me and I began to like it. But it stopped being fun when I had to kill people.¹⁸⁸

Paramilitary Training

The training undergone by young recruits to the paramilitaries is physically demanding and often extremely brutal. Several former child paramilitaries told us how captured guerrillas were sometimes killed with machetes in front of them during training sessions, and how they themselves were ordered to participate in the killings.

Adolfo, a four-year veteran of the AUC, told us that Colombian army per-

sonnel were in the camps during training sessions and helped put the recruits through their paces:

We were trained by mercenaries, war vets. We knew they were military, guys that came in from the battalions: colonels, generals, and captains. They used to hang out in the camp, talking, drinking. They'd drive up in Toyota Prados, Land Cruisers, and Mazdas. The training was three months. There was a track, a training course with obstacles, bars, the famous spider's web [webbing over which recruits had to climb]. The guys that come in are professional soldiers, who bring information about the guerrillas. And they participate, they are there watching, they go onto the track and hit you with sticks and clubs while you're running. Sometimes there are accidents and people get killed. You regret you joined in those three months, because it's tough as a son-of-a-bitch. You only rest when they give you the uniform and the gun and you're ready for the counter-guerrilla.¹⁸⁹

Five former paramilitary children based in camps in different parts of the country told us they had been ordered to kill captives in front of the other recruits during their training. Óscar, an Afro-Colombian, recalled:

They bring the people they catch, guerrillas and robbers, to the training course. My squad had to kill three people. After the first one was killed, the commander

"They'd kill three or four people each day in the course. Different squads would take turns, would have to do it on different days."

told me that the next day I'd have to do the killing. I was stunned and appalled. I had to do it publicly, in front of the whole company, fifty people. I had to shoot him in the head. I was trembling. Afterwards, I couldn't eat. I'd see the person's blood. For weeks, I had a hard time sleeping. . . . They'd kill three or four people each day in the course. Different squads would take turns, would have to do it on different days. Some of the victims cried and screamed. The commanders told us we had to learn how to kill.¹⁹⁰

Fabio had previously been in the FARC-EP and was sent to infiltrate the AUC:

During the paramilitary training course, I killed someone. It was a friend who couldn't manage the course. It was a test. They passed me a machete to cut him up while he was alive. He was tied up. He begged me not to. The commander was

watching. He said, “Go on, do it, do it!” All the kids were watching. Finally, I did it. I cut his throat and his feet and arms. I felt very sad and I cried.¹⁹¹

Bernardo, who joined paramilitaries as a seven-year-old street child, told Human Rights Watch of a similar experience.

They give you a gun and you have to kill the best friend you have. They do it to see if they can trust you. If you don’t kill him, your friend will be ordered to kill you. I had to do it because otherwise I would have been killed. That’s why I got out. I couldn’t stand it any longer.

Asked for the name of his friend, Bernardo remained silent.¹⁹²

Fourteen-year-old Uriel, who joined the AUC at age eight, told an equally harrowing story:

They killed six people during the training: four friends of mine and two civilians who were spies for the FARC-EP. They tied them up with their hands behind their back and beat them with a stick. They cried for help and begged for forgiveness. Then the commanders shot them in front of everyone, to convince people never to be spies. I saw the whole thing. I couldn’t say anything because I knew they’d kill me, but I wanted to leave. They killed them in such a cruel way.¹⁹³

The torture and murder of captives has been a hallmark of paramilitary tactics for many years. In the cases described above, children were terrorized into participating in these practices.¹⁹⁴ They learn that readiness to carry out orders to commit atrocious crimes gains favor and prestige in the ranks, a perverse form of conditioning. “I shot him myself,” confessed fifteen-year-old former AUC member Leonel of the murder of a guerrilla suspect. “It was hard to do, but I did it for the money and also to gain the respect of the commanders.”¹⁹⁵

At thirteen, Laidy, a paramilitary, shot a policeman in the head. “I felt happy afterwards. I wanted to please the commanders. Because if you say no, they’ll kill you.”¹⁹⁶

Gas Cylinder Bombs

Gas cylinder bombs are regularly used by both the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN in assaults on military installations and police stations. They

have great destructive power, but are notoriously inaccurate. They often miss their target and strike civilian homes and shops as well as churches, health centers, and municipal offices, causing avoidable civilian casualties.¹⁹⁷

FARC-EP and UC-ELN boys told Human Rights Watch that they were trained in the fabrication and use of homemade gas cylinder bombs when they were between thirteen and fifteen years of age. According to the children's descriptions, the gas has first to be removed from an ordinary domestic propane cylinder. The top of the empty cylinder is sawn off while the bottom is lined with bags and packed with dynamite. The cylinder is used as a launch-tube for a smaller cylinder filled with explosives and shrapnel. The explosive in the tube is detonated by fuse, and launches the projectile. Typically, the tube is placed on the bed of a pickup truck positioned near the area that guerrillas intend to attack. The range of the missile was said by one child to be around eighty meters. The weapons were capable of destroying buildings entirely, spreading shrapnel over a wide area, he said. One child made a crude drawing of the weapon.¹⁹⁸

Former UC-ELN militiaman Jaime explained:

We had lessons in the use of explosives, and they gave us a manual on how to use them. Any type of cylinder can be used for the bombs, there are ones of 20 kilos, 45 kilos, and really big ones. We make the shrapnel from chains, iron, and nails and we put in *anfo* [ammonium nitrate and fuel oil] explosive. The biggest can wipe out a whole block. . . . Their accuracy depends on who is using them. The explosives experts know how to handle them. In Tame [Arauca], we fired a forty-five kilo bomb at a police station. It went over the roof and landed three houses away. Several civilians were killed. We were told off, but we were not punished.¹⁹⁹

Human Rights Watch has previously condemned the gas cylinder bombs as indiscriminate weapons, the use of which violates the fundamental humanitarian law principle that requires that military targets be distinguished from civilian objects. On May 8, 2002, Human Rights Watch wrote to Commander Marulanda, urging him to halt the use of gas cylinder bombs because of their indiscriminate nature.²⁰⁰ Commander Marulanda did not reply.

Landmines

Colombia is the only country in the Americas in which anti-personnel mines are still being laid. Child recruits in both the guerrilla and the

paramilitary forces are trained to assemble and install these lethal devices. They include booby traps or landmines buried in the ground and activated by pressure, known as foot-breakers (*quiebrapatas*). Colombia's National Planning Department estimated that in 2002, there were at least 100,000 foot-breaker mines in Colombia.²⁰¹

Landmines are in use by all parties in the Colombian conflict, and their use is believed to be increasing. According to the Colombian Ministry of Defense, between January and October of 2002, 141 members of the security forces were killed by landmines, five times more than died in 2001.²⁰²

UNICEF reported a comparable increase for civilian victims: the number rose by more than 100 percent, with 170 people dying in 2002. Adult victims of anti-personnel mines commonly suffer mutilation and loss of legs or arms. But children, because of their smaller stature, more often lose their lives or suffer catastrophic injury. Currently, 422 municipalities in thirty Colombian departments are affected by landmines.²⁰³

Most of the antipersonnel devices used by irregular armed groups in Colombia are made from cheap and easily available materials like PVC tubing, soda bottles, batteries, and wires. Uriel, fourteen, told Human Rights Watch that he had been taught by the AUC to plant booby-trap mines, and had done so about forty times. It normally took him two or three days to sow a minefield. On one occasion, he said, two of his companions were killed when mines accidentally exploded.²⁰⁴

Héctor, seventeen, did the same thing in the FARC-EP. It took him, on average, half an hour to lay a mine.²⁰⁵ Dagoberto, seven of whose seventeen years were spent in the FARC-EP, told Human Rights Watch that his unit had a mine-detector. "We also had Claymores. Some mines we made by hand; we put them in soda bottles. We made maps of where the mines were."²⁰⁶ Betty, fifteen, said her unit laid mines, but she never did. "It's dangerous. People lost their legs."²⁰⁷

On April 6, 2001, Víctor, a boy of sixteen, was severely injured when a landmine he was assembling on a hillside close to a UC-ELN camp exploded in his hands. He was fifteen at the time, and had been in the guerrillas almost two years. The blast took off the little finger and fourth finger of his left hand, and a piece of shrapnel lodged in his right eye. Dressed in civilian clothes, guerrillas took him to a private clinic in Bucaramanga, where doctors removed the shrapnel. They were unable to save his eye. When interviewed by Human Rights Watch, in June 2002, Víctor was in an ICBF home waiting for a prosthesis for his hand.²⁰⁸

DISCIPLINE AND PUNISHMENT

All of the irregular armed groups in the Colombian conflict impose harsh discipline. They frequently kill children for acts of disobedience and infractions of rules that are considered very serious.

Disciplinary procedures vary, however. The FARC-EP and the UC-ELN hold “war councils,” procedures in which each member of the front votes on whether the accused should be put to death or given a lesser punishment. Human Rights Watch found no evidence that guerrillas can guarantee the fair trials required by international humanitarian law. Indeed, neither group makes any serious attempt to argue that their trials satisfy these conditions. In fact, these are summary executions dressed up as judicial procedures and are abhorrent violations of international humanitarian law.²⁰⁹

The paramilitaries hold no such hearings. Decisions on punishments appear to be taken solely by commanders in consultation with their superiors.

Discipline in FARC-EP Camps

The whole front participates in the war councils. The person accused is given someone to defend them. You are allowed to speak up for your friends. But it can be dangerous. They had a saying in the camp: “the regulations have no friends.”²¹⁰

In FARC-EP camps, children receive instruction in guerrilla regulations as part of their basic training. Violating the rules can mean the application of a graded scale of punishment. Ultimately, children may face an ignominious execution at the hands of a comrade no older than they.

Discipline in the FARC-EP is particularly strict, suggesting strongly that the abuses committed by guerrillas, including children, are the result of specific orders that have been carried out and are not the product of misconduct. According to the children we interviewed, regulations affected almost every

aspect of their daily lives, including the most intimate feelings. A commander's permission is required to have sex with a fellow guerrilla or to establish a more permanent relationship. Doing these things without authorization is a punishable offense.

The FARC-EP prohibits unruly conduct by its fighters especially when they are among the civilian population. Robbery, extortion, threats, sexual abuse, and the irresponsible use of firearms can be capital offenses. Drugs are strictly forbidden. The children's accounts reinforce the impression that the FARC-EP is a highly vertical, organized, and disciplined military force.

Child combatants are obliged to perform arduous physical chores as punishment for disobedience or minor infractions of discipline. They dig garbage pits, latrines, or trenches for days on end; clear forest; carry piles of wood; and perform kitchen duties.

Ómar, from the FARC-EP's 26th front in Meta, had problems keeping awake on guard duty. Caught asleep the first time, he was made to dig a twenty-meter urinal. The second time he had to dig a fifty-meter-long trench. The third time, he was given twenty days of kitchen chores. Had this happened when the company was on the move or in combat, he would have faced a war council and a firing squad, he told Human Rights Watch.²¹¹

On occasion, a war council may order the confiscation of a combatant's weapon. The victim will be sent into battle without one, if lucky, under covering fire. Or he will be ordered to recover a weapon from the enemy. Ómar told Human Rights Watch that his friend, Esteban, was hauled up before his assembled comrades for laziness. Esteban had repeatedly avoided kitchen duties. Of his fellow fighters, Ómar recalled, 157 voted that he be killed and 143 voted that he be spared. Because the vote was close, Esteban escaped a firing squad. Instead, his gun was confiscated and not returned to him until he had captured a weapon from the enemy. Ómar told us that Esteban was killed the following day in a skirmish with the army, although he had managed to recover a gun before the battle.²¹²

Children are often required to do penance by making a public confession about their failings in front of the commanders and the assembled company. Others report being chained to trees for weeks, not allowed to speak or be spoken to.

War Councils

The most serious infractions of the FARC-EP military code are considered capital offenses, punishable by summary execution regardless of the age of the offender. Being caught asleep on guard duty (considered serious if the company is on the march or in combat at the time, and very serious if it leads to the death of fellow combatants); being caught while trying to run away or being absent without leave (execution is almost certain if deserters take a gun with them); surrender or loss of a weapon; being a police or army infiltrator or informer; using a weapon against a fellow combatant; firing rounds in populated areas; robbery, extortion, or violence against the civilian population; repeated drug or alcohol abuse; and rape.

Child combatants accused of these offenses are tried by a "war council," in which all the members of the company or front in question, other children included, have to participate. Children told us that the accused may name a fellow-combatant to defend them, while another is selected to lead the "prosecution." The procedure itself is conducted by several other members of the company. The defense pleads for clemency by asking for the accused combatant's service record to be considered. All present, bar the accused, may raise their hand for a chance to speak. Then a decision is made by a show of hands whether the accused should be executed or his or her life spared and a lesser punishment imposed.

Children facing a war council are usually bound with a nylon cord. The cord is used to tie the hands behind the back around a tree or a pole, and connected to another cord knotted at the back of the neck. If the child moves his arms, the cord round the windpipe tightens, cutting off air.

Seventeen-year-old Ramiro, from the FARC-EP's 10th front, told Human Rights Watch he was kept tied up for fifteen days after he made an unsuccessful bid to escape the camp. The cords were removed every four days to allow him to wash. Ramiro told Human Rights Watch that he thought he escaped a war council because he had been wounded in the shoulder by a bomb blast. Finally, the front's commander gave him ten days to dig a hundred meter trench, despite his injuries, threatening him with a war council if he failed to meet the target. He completed the task in eight days.²¹³

Alberto, a fragile child from Caquetá, joined the 25th front of the FARC-EP in January 2001, when he was twelve. During his first combat, he lost his revolver in a hurried retreat after his unit ran out of ammunition. As a punish-

ment, he was hung by his wrists from a tree all night. He told Human Rights Watch that his wrists bled and became infected.²¹⁴

Several children told us that they were frightened to defend friends brought before a war council, lest they be considered suspect, guilty by association, or have to explain the reasons for their vote of innocence or guilt. Marcos, the gun expert, told us how three adolescent girls—aged fourteen, sixteen, and nineteen—defended a girl accused of being a police infiltrator. The trio insisted that the accused be spared to respect her rights as a woman (the war council was held on International Women’s Day). The war council voted that she be killed. The girls who had defended her were selected to pull the trigger.²¹⁵

Once the war council has passed a death sentence, the company commander communicates the decision to his or her superior officers. The superior officers may order the penalty to be lifted or altered. If authorization is given, the commander gives orders for the execution to proceed, handpicking a few members of the company to carry it out. This review mechanism, although not used in every case, indicates that in most cases executions are carried out with express authorization of top commanders.

“We had lots of war councils,” recalled Ángela, the girlfriend of a FARC-EP commander:

I was judged by one in December 1999. It happened because my boyfriend and I had terrible problems. I was forced to have an abortion and it made me angry; it made us fight. I cut him and he hit me. They were afraid we’d kill each other. Because he was a commander, our council was made up of the five other commanders. The vote was three to two to let us live. It was terrifying. I was sure that they were going to kill us. But they punished us by chaining us to trees for a month and depriving my boyfriend of his rank. They’d unchain us only to eat and sleep. It was the silent treatment. We couldn’t talk to anyone and they couldn’t talk to us.²¹⁶

A bright eighteen-year-old, Carolina got pregnant by a forty-year-old commander. She wanted the baby, so she deserted and headed home to her mother’s house, but she had a miscarriage on the way. The FARC-EP captured her and brought her back to the camp.

They put me before a war council. I was chained up for a month. I got off with a punishment. As my defender, I chose the person who liked me least. It lasted about half a day. The accuser said I should be killed because I had committed so

many crimes: abandoning guard duty, abandoning my weapon, stealing from the movement (my clothes), treason, endangering the movement (because they were preparing an attack). I didn’t care. I was ready to die because I was so sick of it all. The punishments I received were to dig a fifty-meter trench (a meter deep and a meter wide – it took about three months) and to carry wood. Also, I had to do a self-criticism for about two hours as well as learn the regulations by heart and give a summary of them.²¹⁷

War councils in the FARC-EP camps occur frequently, and the children report that most of them result in a killing. Ómar said he participated in fifteen war councils during his eighteen months with the FARC-EP, and there were ten

“[T]hey punished us by chaining us to trees for a month and depriving my boyfriend of his rank.”

executions.²¹⁸ Sixteen-year-old Rodrigo, who was in the FARC-EP’s 32nd front for two years, said that there were ten war councils in that period. Six resulted in executions.²¹⁹ Marta, aged seventeen, thought that there had been fifty councils of war in the two-and-a-half years she spent in the FARC-EP. All but about twelve resulted in executions.²²⁰

On the basis of these accounts, some fifty-four people were murdered by the FARC-EP in less than three years, in three fronts alone.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to confirm this death toll on the basis of reports of summary executions published by governmental or non-governmental sources. The FARC-EP does not return the bodies of executed combatants, including children, to their families. The execution squad usually buries the body in an unmarked grave outside the camp perimeter so that their death is never officially recorded. Only rarely are bodies found.²²¹

According to Carolina, “Often the mother of the person comes to us to try to find them. We never tell her that her son or daughter is dead. We say they’re somewhere else.”²²²

Nor are the children to be found on lists of people “disappeared” after detention by the security forces or paramilitaries. Most parents probably assume that their children were killed in combat.

Our knowledge of in-camp executions comes almost entirely from child guerrilla deserters. For legal purposes, the child victims simply vanish. Of all the atrocities of the Colombian conflict, these are possibly the least known and the least documented, because of the secrecy in which they are shrouded.

Other Executions

In the FARC-EP, children are called on to execute captured paramilitaries as well as fellow cadres who are accused of breaking rules. The experience is searing and shapes children long after the actual event.²²³ Ángela, who joined the guerrillas at twelve, had a story that became disturbingly familiar as Human Rights Watch conducted its interviews:

I had a friend, Juanita, who got into trouble for sleeping around. We had been friends in civilian life and we shared a tent together. The commander said that it didn't matter that she was my friend. She had committed an error and had to be killed. I closed my eyes and fired the gun, but I didn't hit her. So I shot again. The grave was right nearby. I had to bury her and put dirt on top of her. The commander said, "You did very well. Even though you started to cry, you did well. You'll have to do this again many more times, and you'll have to learn not to cry."²²⁴

It is not unusual for children to be ordered to participate in executions, including the executions of other child combatants. Some FARC-EP children say that executioners are chosen only from seasoned combatants: "They pick those that have more confidence, so that they don't get upset" said one boy.²²⁵

Another insisted that age was not the important factor. "Even if someone is small, if he is capable and follows the rules, he will be accepted to do it," one child told us.²²⁶ Other children reported that all children were liable to be selected to carry out an execution as a test of valor at the beginning of their training.

Executions are carried out at some distance from the camp, after two or more members of the group of executioners have dug a grave. If the victim is not suspected of defection, spying, or infiltration, death is usually by pistol or revolver shot to the head. Suspected infiltrators or informers, however, are reportedly mutilated with knives or machetes while still alive.

Several of our young interviewees said guerrillas disemboweled the dead before burial. A social worker who works with former child combatants told us that this is to prevent the ground from rising and later sinking, a sign that could betray the presence of guerrillas to their enemies.²²⁷

Fifteen of the seventy-nine interviewees who had belonged to the FARC-EP admitted that they had participated in executions of fellow combatants following war councils. Most of them insisted that had they refused to comply with the order, they would themselves have been executed for disobedience.

Elizabeth, who got a command after one year, was chosen to kill her best friend because she had voted for him not to be killed:

"He closed his eyes, and I shot him in the head. I had never executed anyone before, but this time I had to do it."

I had been in the FARC for nine months when they ordered me to kill a friend, Edison. He was my best friend. He had killed someone by accident. I didn't have a choice. You have to do it because it's an order. There had been a war council and I had voted no. The commander told me, "Since you voted no, you will be the one to kill him." Almost everyone else had voted in favor of killing him. Only four of us had voted no.²²⁸

Mauricio had been in the FARC-EP for four years and had won a command without killing anybody. Then he was sent to find and bring back a deserter who had been spotted in town by the militia:

We went to his house and picked up him, then brought him back to the camp. There, they held a war council. He had a defender, but everyone knew what the verdict was going to be. It was automatic. There was no real possibility that he would escape shooting. His crimes were "theft from the movement and desertion," the most serious crimes of all. In the war council, no one voted to save him. After the council, we went and dug his grave. Then we brought him to the side of the grave. He closed his eyes, and I shot him in the head. I had never executed anyone before, but this time I had to do it. If you don't do it, they'll kill you.²²⁹

Raúl, a nervous sixteen-year-old from Vista Hermosa, Meta, refused to execute a deserter, ignoring jeers from the older boys. He was fortunate. The officer in charge of the company called his superior to complain about Raúl, but the commander supported him. "We had a good relationship. I used to call him uncle and he would give me a hug and ask how I was doing," he told Human Rights Watch.²³⁰

Discipline in the UC-ELN

The UC-ELN also holds war councils and executes combatants who break its rules, but it would appear with less frequency than the FARC-EP. Our data on this point is not conclusive, however. The number of interview-

wees with experience of UC-ELN camps (as opposed to its urban militias) was too small to draw firm conclusions.

Seventeen-year-old William, who spent three years in the UC-ELN's "Carlos Alirio Buitrago" front, reported that he never participated in a war council, and that only one combatant was executed during this period.²³¹ Sixteen-year-old Héctor claimed that the UC-ELN had a more flexible attitude to deserters than the FARC-EP. Three fugitives from his UC-ELN company were captured. After an investigation established that they had returned quietly to civilian occupations and had no links with the security forces or the paramilitaries, they were set free, Héctor claimed.²³²

Deserters who go over to the enemy, on the other hand, are shot. Héctor mentioned the case of a deserter who had been captured at a roadblock:

We knew who he was because he had deserted from the ELN. He was a guerrilla who had gone over to the *paracos*. Because of him, several comrades were killed. We knew that he was responsible. The thing about the guerrilla is that they are not brutes, they explore the facts before killing someone. So we captured him and killed him, myself and two other comrades. They had ordered us to find the deserter and if we found that he had done something bad against us, to kill him.²³³

Discipline in the AUC

*The organization has tough discipline. There are great commanders, but there are others who love to kill. Those guys are real assassins. If one of them catches you asleep on guard duty, he'll cut your throat there and then so that you never wake up.*²³⁴

In contrast to practice in the guerrillas, the AUC allows commanders to make decisions without the pretence of a group consultation, and sometime without even any consultation with their superiors.

Article 13 of the AUC's internal statutes, adopted in May 1998, envisages demotion and expulsion as the most serious sanctions that can be applied for violations of the statutes. Serious transgressions are supposedly dealt with by a Regional Disciplinary Tribunal (*Tribunal Disciplinario Regional*), composed of the commander of the block (*Bloque*), the commander of the front, the offender's immediate superior in the unit to which he or she belongs, and a representative of the AUC's regional political structure (articles 14 and 15).²³⁵

In practice, there is no evidence to suggest that this statute is actually applied.

As in the guerrilla groups, serious breaches of discipline are punished not by expulsion, but often by summary execution. The children we interviewed told us that no formal hearings are held before the maximum sanction is applied.

As in the guerrilla forces, deserters are hunted down and killed. Bernardo was lucky to narrowly miss a brutal death after he escaped from the ACCU. Visibly nervous in our interview, Bernardo told Human Rights Watch that he had hidden for a year with two other deserters. His former paramilitary comrades were on their trail.

One of the three was captured by paramilitaries in the house where they had been hiding. His body was found a few days later with his throat cut and a nylon cord around his neck. Bernardo turned himself over to the police. He could not say what had happened to the other fugitive, but suspected that he had been killed too. "They go after you until they find you," he told Human Rights Watch. "The only way of getting out is to be captured by the army or to turn yourself in."²³⁶

Cristián, who joined the ACCU when he was twelve, told Human Rights Watch that the ACCU sent unruly or undisciplined kids back home by helicopter with some money in their pocket. He agreed, however, that anyone who left without permission would be pursued and very possibly killed.²³⁷

None of our former paramilitary interviewees could confirm the existence of a disciplinary tribunal in which they had rights to present a defense or have legal representation. Nor did there appear to be any equivalent of the guerrilla war councils. In contrast, consultations on how to deal with transgressors appeared to be made, when they were made at all, by unit commanders in radio or mobile phone communications with superior officers.

Adolfo told Human Rights Watch that children who break minor rules, like consuming alcohol without permission, are tied by their hands and neck with nylon cord and secured to a pole. The procedure appears to be identical to that routinely used by the FARC-EP. They are held like this for five or six days or even longer, being untied only to wash, to eat, and to perform bodily functions.

"Often they tie them up like that, and then when the time comes to untie and release them, they just kill them," said Adolfo.²³⁸

Bernardo said that as a punishment for drug abuse he was held in a cell and doused with sweetened water so that the insects would bite him.²³⁹

A tall, aggressive boy, Adolfo spent three and a half years in the Bolívar Central Block. Once, when his unit was on the move, he saw a commander approach a boy who had fallen asleep on guard duty:

One day we were in a place called Brisas, we were on patrol and we arrived at a site and we set up camp there. We pitched the tents, it was about seven in the

evening that we got there, we did an inspection of the area, checked out the ground and the surrounding territory for mines. And one of the comrades, Genaro, was on night guard duty, it was the second watch, and at about two in the morning he fell asleep. The commander went over there and came back to where we were and said "I need two or three of you to come over here with me," and he called me and two others, and we went over to where Genaro was sleeping. And without warning the commander pulled out a knife and, shuiiii, cut Genaro's throat, right in front of our eyes.

Adolfo described how the decision to execute a combatant is made, and the minimal amount of reflection that may be involved:

There is no court. The commander of the counter-guerrilla takes the decision. The chief picks up the radio and calls the commander of the block back at the base. "I have a cowboy here who fell asleep. Should I waste him or cut his pay?" But there are some who kill the guy first and then make the call. "Hello . . . I had to kill such and such a person because he fell asleep," and then they just cut him up and bury him.

Adolfo finished by explaining how executions were carried out:

People are rarely shot. It's a privilege to kill someone by shooting them. Usually they cut off their head. They make a hole in the ground, small but deep. The person is tied with their hands behind the back. They make them put their head over the edge of the hole and put their boot here on top [demonstrating], grab their head and cut their throat with a knife."²⁴⁰



Boys with the FARC-EP captured on November 11, 2000, near the village of La Aguada, Santander, during Operation Berlin.

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COMBAT

*I was the most scared of all, because I was the newest and youngest. The bodies were lying on the ground and they cut pieces off them. The commander gave me the blood to drink.*²⁴¹

A child's first experience of real combat can be terrifying. Most children interviewed were reluctant to talk about their feelings, but the majority admitted being deeply afraid when they first faced enemy fire.

"I was scared, afraid of dying," said Mauricio, describing a FARC-EP gas cylinder attack on a police station in which he participated a couple of weeks after the end of his training. "I cried when I saw dead people covered with blood. They killed five of our men. Later, combat became less scary for me."²⁴²

**"I was scared,
afraid of dying."**

Combat in the FARC-EP

The first combat was five months after I arrived," recalled Diego, describing another bomb attack on a police station which he witnessed as a thirteen-year-old rookie:

Lots of guerrillas were killed. I was terrified. I cried during the attack. There were helicopters flying over us. I hid in a ditch. I fired a few shots without aiming. There was another attack on a police post when I had to go out in front shooting. I was scared. All fourteen of the police were killed. Seven of them died in the fight and seven gave themselves up and were executed. I saw it all.²⁴³

Elizabeth and Héctor had similar experiences of FARC-EP gas cylinder

attacks. "None of us were killed but fifteen police were," Elizabeth told us. "I was so scared when I fired my first shots that my hands were trembling. I was scared by the dead bodies. I had to take their guns from them."²⁴⁴ Héctor was put at the front in a similar attack in the department of Huila. "The attack lasted all night. I was scared. I saw people die."²⁴⁵

"There was combat the first day," Jessica remembered. "There were twenty-four of us guerrillas and four of us were killed, including a boy of sixteen. Two soldiers died too. I was afraid of death, but with the second combat you start being prepared for it."²⁴⁶

One of the purposes of the training the children receive is to condition them to the brutalities of war. A child inured to cruelty and the sight of blood is considered to be a more effective soldier. Adriana, whose story prefaces this chapter, described a barbaric practice she experienced in the FARC-EP during her very first combat at age twelve:

Seven weeks after I arrived there was combat. I was very scared. It was an attack on the paramilitaries. We killed about seven of them. They killed one of us. We had to drink their blood to conquer our fear. Only the scared ones had to do it. I was the most scared of all, because I was the newest and youngest.²⁴⁷

Like Adriana, former paramilitary Óscar was only twelve when he experienced combat for the first time. Brutal experiences in training helped him to conquer his fear, too:

My first battle was two months after finishing the training course. It was a land takeover, as we called it. There were 2,000 of us in the Metropolitan Block. The [guerrillas] had 3,000. The battle lasted about fifteen days, and in the end neither side won. I saw lots of blood and death. I was scared at first, but because I had already killed people in training, it was easier for me in combat.²⁴⁸

Of the eighty-five children who responded to Human Rights Watch's questions regarding combat experience, three-quarters said that they had been in combat at least once. Some of these children said they had seen combat more than ten times; a few spoke of dozens of battles. Still others were physically scarred from gunshot and shrapnel wounds.

Combat occurred with the police and the army, and between guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Most combat experiences occurred during assaults on police stations like those described above. Clashes between guerrillas and para-

militaries often led to casualties on both sides. Children also participated in pitched battles when whole guerrilla columns were attacked by the army or paramilitaries. In clashes with the army, the guerrillas usually faced superior firepower (including attack by helicopters, heavy artillery, rockets, and heavy machine guns) and better trained opponents.

Neither guerrilla force attempts to shield children from combat perils. In general, boys and girls are deployed without consideration of age or sex as soon as they have completed basic military training. On the whole, our interviewees did not indicate, however, that either guerrilla force deliberately placed children in the front line to draw enemy fire, as has sometimes been alleged.²⁴⁹

In fact, their testimonies did not suggest that the way children were deployed put their lives and physical integrity at greater risk than other combatants. Yet, given that up to 50 percent of some guerrilla units are children, they are exposed constantly to death or serious injury.

Operation Berlin

A clear example of the dangers that child combatants face can be seen in the fate that met some 150 children in the FARC-EP's "Arturo Ruiz" mobile column, a force of some 380 combatants. The children were mostly drafted in the Zone, many allegedly by false promises of money. Guerrillas sent them on a 1,100 kilometer expedition to win back territory from paramilitaries in the north east of the country. In the closing months of 2000, the Colombian army's Fifth Brigade and Rapid Reaction Force ambushed and defeated the unit in Santander department.²⁵⁰ The army named the ambush "Operation Berlin."²⁵¹

Sixteen-year-old Ramón, whose father and eight brothers were in the FARC-EP, was a member of this ill-fated expedition. As he told the story:

Some time before the Zone ended, "Mono" [Commander Suárez, known as "Mono Jojoy"] took 350 of us out of the 43rd, 44th, 67th, and 40th fronts and formed a unit called the "Arturo Ruiz" Column. Mono brought us to the Secretariat, headquarters of our commander-in-chief, comrade Manuel [Marulanda, commander-in-chief of the FARC-EP]. He told us that we were going to fight in Norte de Santander department. We should be prepared for anything, he said. We were put under the command of comrade Rogelio. When we got to La Macarena, Meta, about forty small canoes and a motor launch were waiting for

us. My father was there in charge of one of the canoes. They took us about six or seven hours downstream. From there, it was about a month and a half's march on foot until we reached the 16th front in Puerto Inírida in the department of Vichada.

When we got there, a comrade called El Negro Apache was waiting for us. We spent about ten days there. They gave us food, ice cream, a few things. One day, when comrade Rogelio was talking to us, they ordered a girl to stand guard. She was in love with a commander who paid no attention to her. She had a pistol with her. While she was standing guard, she blew her brains out. She was fourteen or fifteen.

We continued our march until we got to the Middle Magdalena. In the Middle Magdalena, a girl died of a sexually transmitted disease. She was exhausted, couldn't go on. She was in terrible pain and fell. So they buried her near a river and we went on. She was seventeen.

We were crossing a high, snow-covered plateau, when a boy, Jairo, got left behind. We didn't know what to do. There was no sign of him so we kept on, and we didn't realize that he had hidden in some bushes. He got away and turned himself over to the army. He told them everything he knew about our column. Later, comrade Rogelio told us that the army had us surrounded. He said that all we could do was face the soldiers and die fighting. We were attacked by machine gun fire from helicopters. Everyone is afraid when they feel death close, and I was feeling that tremendous fear.

Then our commander called together the kids he trusted most and who were the toughest in combat. His name was Demetrio, but they called him the Bull because of his heavy build. There must have been twenty-five of us kids, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen-year-olds.²⁵² We left and stopped up ahead on a hill. At that moment a really huge guy came at us from the army battalion. The Bull stood his ground. The man had a machinegun but the Bull shot him and took his machinegun.

The Bull stopped them coming up the hill with the machine gun as they kept climbing up and I too stopped them with my rifle. At that moment, the Bull's woman [girlfriend] was hit. She was pregnant. The bullet went through her abdomen killing her child but not her, only the child. The Bull charged at them with the machine gun. But his ammunition ran out. They captured him and beat him. They caught the rest of us who were with the Bull very quickly after that, and beat us with their rifle butts and kicked us, hit us in the stomach. . . . They captured a hundred of us. About half were kids.

A soldier said that they were going to burn us alive. They insulted us, called

us all sorts of names. Then the Red Cross arrived. The soldiers were saying that we didn't deserve to live, that we were nothing but garbage for the community. They threatened us because the Bull had been in the guerrillas for twenty-five years, he was a guerrilla commander and the fifth or sixth most wanted man in the eastern block. That was when the International Red Cross helicopter arrived and found us. That saved our lives. I had been shot here in the leg, see [shows scar], an open wound on both sides, the bone and the insides were showing . . .

The only thing I felt was this burning sensation. My boot was torn from top to bottom. When the Red Cross arrived they found me like that, all battered from the blows we had received. A girl came out to us, and the Red Cross treated us really well. They brought food, treated my wounds, and gave me some injections and something to eat, and clothes to wear. Then they took all us minors to Bucaramanga. A judge told us we would have to stay there until they had found a home for us to go to.²⁵³

Ángela, a former FARC-EP nurse, was also wounded in Operation Berlin:

The battle began on November 15, 2000. At the beginning lots of people died. The army was furious. Lots of us were killed, but five of us were captured together. After they captured me, they hit me on the head with a rifle, and then shot me in the leg. I thought they were going to kill me. Luckily, another soldier decided to save me. He told the others there that we weren't fighting, and they couldn't do it. He cut my pants and tied up my leg to stop the blood. I spent three months in the hospital in Bucaramanga. They said I was hurt in combat. I was afraid to contradict them.²⁵⁴

Darío, twelve, also remembered the helicopter attacks, the children lying dead, and his fear:

We were meeting to plan an attack on a battalion and the army surprised us. They attacked with helicopters. We were talking there when they killed the guard and they all entered the camp, and killed quite a lot of people. I escaped and climbed down a gully to the river. When I got back I changed into civilian clothes, and left by a road, but I was captured and they said that another comrade had given me away and said that I was a guerrilla. Nine were killed in the fight, some

“She had a bullet in the stomach, but she was still alive. A soldier shot her dead, finished her off.”

of them minors. They hit and kicked me until a commander ordered them to stop. There was a girl who was lying wounded on the ground. She had a bullet in the stomach, but she was still alive. A soldier shot her dead, finished her off. Her name was Juanita. She was about eighteen.²⁵⁵

The aftermath of Operation Berlin shocked even battle-hardened Colombian journalists. "The gaiety of the music coming from the windows of the vehicle contrasted with the strict sobriety of the funeral scene: small naked bodies, eleven in all, laid out on the tailboard of the truck that stood in for a hearse," wrote an *El Tiempo* correspondent of the casualties.²⁵⁶

Thirty-two of the seventy-seven rebel fighters reported captured by the army were children. Nineteen of those were fifteen and under. Of the forty-six casualties, twenty were children. Colombian military officials told reporters that they believed that as many as half the guerrillas who comprised the original unit were children.²⁵⁷

Reports of child guerrillas killed in combat have continued. On January 28, 2002, troops from the army's Ninth Brigade returned to a battlefield in northern Huila department to bring in the bodies of fifteen guerrillas killed in clashes during the previous days. To their surprise, they found that eight of the bodies belonged to children they judged to be between thirteen and seventeen. They had long hair and were heavily armed. "They're girls," the soldiers reportedly told their captain.²⁵⁸

On July 14, 2002, the *Miami Herald* reported on another battle in Huila department in which thirty FARC-EP guerrillas were killed. More than half of them were children under sixteen. "Some were burned, some bloody, some just boys. Although the ages of the unidentified dead are officially unknown, the limbs poking out from under the blue sheets gave it away. These were small and hairless legs of adolescents."²⁵⁹

The fate of children wounded in combat depends to a large extent on circumstances. Often wounded children are cared for in guerrilla camps using makeshift and precarious medical facilities. Drugs are often scarce or lacking.

Betty, a black teenager from Chocó department on Colombia's west coast, confessed that she always hid if she could during a fight. But one night she was hit in the stomach by a bullet fired by a paramilitary. It passed through her back. Her squad had no drugs or painkillers. Her wound became infected. Eighteen months had passed but Betty's scars still looked raw when Human Rights Watch interviewed her in May 2002.²⁶⁰

Other wounded child combatants are sent home, or admitted as civilians

to civilian hospitals. Some are captured, as happened to Mauricio in July 2000:

I was wounded in combat with the army. It was the first time I was ever wounded. I was shot in the left shoulder, and the bottom of my left ear was shot off. I was on the ground bleeding. I fainted, and when I woke up I was in a helicopter. They brought me to the hospital of the battalion.²⁶¹

Children with severe disabilities caused by war injuries sometimes receive some monetary compensation from the group in question. Some are returned to their families.²⁶²

The death of children in combat is not usually registered in any legal record. The guerrilla groups bury their dead in unmarked graves. If a body is recovered by the authorities, the family is often unwilling—or too frightened of reprisals by the other side—to claim it. The body is buried in a grave marked NN (no name).²⁶³

Putting children into combat turns them into killers as well as victims. In October 2002, a FARC-EP battalion said to include some 300 children ambushed a police post in San Bernardo, Tolima, using mortars, grenades, and cylinder bombs. The guerrillas reportedly surrounded the homes of some of the police, and ordered them to come out or their homes would be destroyed with the people inside. A neighbor described how “they shouted orders to the police to give themselves up and laughed like crazy, as if it were a game.” According to a police sergeant, “the police surrendered with their hands up and the guerrilla kids proceeded to shoot them in the street amid laughter and shouts of triumph.”²⁶⁴

If army reinforcements arrive in time, such attacks may develop into full-scale battles. Alberto, small even for his fourteen years, described one such incident:

Once we were on an operation in Puerto Rico to attack a police post. We were arriving in a truck full of cylinder bombs when an army helicopter spotted us as it flew past. We fired our guns at it and it fired back at us down below. Then it started firing rockets. We managed to hide under some trees out of sight. Later on, I was back in the camp and the helicopter flew overhead but did not see us because the camp was well hidden. But later on it spotted us and opened fire, killing one of my comrades. I was grazed by a bullet. They took me back to the camp and gave me first aid.²⁶⁵

Paramilitaries in Combat

Many of the former AUC combatants had been in combat with both the army and the guerrillas, but most of the fights had been with the guerrillas. Some army units, children told us, cooperated closely with paramilitary forces. Juan Carlos told Human Rights Watch that he had been in about eighteen battles in the AUC:

They could last five hours or a day. I was shot in the arm once near my right wrist. I went to a regular hospital and they took care of me. I also got shrapnel in my legs once. We had about seven fights with the army. It depends on the battalion: some support us, some fight us. But the real enemy is the guerrilla, not the army.²⁶⁶

Even though paramilitaries do not consider the army to be their enemy, some children suggested that they were more to be feared in an attack:

I was in about thirty battles during my time in the AUC. Some with the guerrillas, some with the *chulos* (army). About eleven of them were with the army. The army is much better trained than the guerrillas. In battles with the guerrillas, often there aren't any deaths, whereas with the army there usually are.²⁶⁷

But while some army units engaged the paramilitaries in combat, others treated them as allies in the fight against the guerrillas, coordinating their actions and sometimes fighting alongside them:

It was tough here in Antioquia because there were a lot of guerrillas. Sometimes the army would show up too, but we'd coordinate so as not to fight with them. We had no orders to fight with them. We go on patrols together: 1,000 soldiers plus 1,000 of us. We'd coordinate plans by radio or phone. We'd enter somewhere together, side-by-side. But some army units fight us, they don't coordinate their actions. In Cali, some battalions worked with us: Palacé Battalion, for example.²⁶⁸

"We call the army 'the Cousins,'" said Leonel, a former paramilitary from Cali. "Sometimes they pass us intelligence on the guerrillas."²⁶⁹

Seventeen-year-old Adolfo described being sent from the town of Sincelejo

to Caquetá department as part of a paramilitary spearhead into the Zone. Cooperation with the military, he said, was routine:

We would coordinate with the army. The guerrillas had a camp in a small town on the way out to Putumayo. My commander would go and talk to this guy and with the second commander of the block, and they would say there is going to be an operation like this, and the army is in that place and is going to move to this place, and they'd prepare their troops, five or six counter-guerrillas units, lets say 200 or 300 men, and we would attack the camp with the army. An ambush, or to take a camp or a base would take three or four days. We'd go to the camp and stay hidden, quiet. We'd get right into the grass and the undergrowth. Quiet as a mouse, you can't move a muscle, waiting to see how to go in, what's going on down there, watching them mount the night watch, waiting for the guards to fall asleep. We'd have two or three cans of food with us, tuna, ham. We'd eat one a day. We'd open them with a blade and eat one, quietly and without moving a hair. They'd order us to keep down, lying on the ground. The moment they give the order we go in, all of us.²⁷⁰

“We call the army ‘the Cousins,’” said Leonel, a former paramilitary from Cali. “Sometimes they pass us intelligence on the guerrillas.”

Severo, a guerrilla from the FARC-EP's 3rd front, described an incident in which his unit faced paramilitaries fighting alongside army soldiers. The paramilitaries executed two of his friends in the wake of a fierce firefight:

I was in about thirty fights. I was never wounded or sick, but both my friends were killed. One was called Lincoln, the other Hugo. Once, we went into a town and destroyed eleven houses belonging to the paramilitaries, and the army got involved. Since the army works with the paramilitaries, they went in to help them. There was a really hard gun battle between us and the army. We had been fighting for three hours, and we were not going to get out because two guerrillas had fallen and were lying there wounded. We always waited until the end to get out our wounded. But the paramilitaries got to them first and captured them. They shot both of them three times.²⁷¹

PARTICIPATION IN SUMMARY EXECUTIONS AND TORTURE

Each of the irregular forces in the Colombian conflict kill, maim, and torture prisoners and target civilians for abduction and murder. Atrocities like these cannot be considered to be “excesses.” They are not departures from normal behavior, but are an integral part of the strategy used by both sides to wage war over several decades. Within both guerrilla and paramilitary forces, everyday slang reflects this crude reality. Suspected enemy infiltrators are not killed, they are “attended to,” “peeled,” or “negotiated.”

In all irregular forces, a combatant worthy of respect is a *matón* (killer). The children have a deadpan manner of talking about murder and cruelty. After they abandon home and village to join the armed struggle, violent death quickly becomes part of their daily lives. Adolfo, a gangly extrovert who joined the AUC when he was thirteen, chuckled in wonder as he described his first experience of killing:

They caught a guerrilla alive in combat, handed him over to me, and told me I had to kill him. “But how?” I asked the commander. “I don’t know how to kill anybody.” The guy was tied up and the commander gave me his shotgun, put my hands round the stock, and he put the barrel against the guy’s head. Bang!²⁷²

More than a third of the former child combatants we interviewed (forty out of 112) said they had participated directly in out-of-combat killings. And of those who did not admit that they participated personally, over half volunteered information about killings by their own side or said that they knew about such killings. In many cases, they said they had witnessed them. Children from both guerrillas and paramilitaries told Human Rights Watch that they had seen captives being tortured and mutilated by their own side before they were executed.

Killing to Order: Summary Executions in the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN

The one thing I did that was wrong and I see now was bad for me was to have killed people and to have abused the civilian population. Because in those guerrilla incursions, there was a lot of abuse. If the region was full of paracos [paramilitaries], we knew that most of the civilians were their collaborators and we mistreated them. To abuse a civilian who is unarmed, to hold a rifle or a revolver to their head to humiliate them and then do nothing to them is cruel, because one has the power and the other is powerless. A guerrilla, a paraco, or a soldier with a gun feels he can do anything if the other is disarmed.²⁷³

Ramón was not yet thirteen when he was ordered to execute an army sergeant accused of infiltrating the 43rd front of the FARC-EP:

I had never been in combat and didn't know what it was to kill someone. They held a war council and sentenced him to be shot. I was chosen to kill him. My first shot missed because I was so scared and my hand was trembling so much I couldn't keep the revolver still. Another guy grabbed my hand to steady it, a big guy, maybe nineteen years old. With the second shot, I hit him in the leg and he fell over. They told me to shoot again. The next shot hit him in the chest and another one here. In the night, I couldn't sleep I was so scared. I sensed that he was standing at my feet. I tried to eat and couldn't. When I spoke to my older brother, he said, "Relax! Things like that are normal in the guerrillas."²⁷⁴

Milton was thirteen when he got his first commission:

I killed two informers in Medellín. They were aged thirty-eight and forty-two. I wasn't afraid to kill them because I had already been in combat. Our collaborators had seen them talking to paramilitaries. I had their address, and went to their house.

There were two of us, but I was the one who had to do the killing. It was a test for me. I was thirteen. It was the same year that I joined the FARC-EP. After doing

Children from both guerrillas and paramilitaries told Human Rights Watch that they had seen captives being tortured and mutilated by their own side before they were executed.

it, I felt really big, like a real killer (matón). But sometimes when I thought about it, I felt sad and I wanted to cry.²⁷⁵

FARC-EP children participate in capturing and executing combatants from the opposing side and suspected civilian collaborators or sympathizers. They also participate in ambushes in which civilians are the intended victims. Child combatants engage in these actions on the specific orders of their commanders. Both those who refuse to carry out a killing and those who are responsible for unauthorized killings are liable to be shot.

Both the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN say that they oppose violence directed at the civilian population and that they enforce discipline among their troops to minimize such attacks. For example, the FARC-EP considers "the murder of men and women from the civilian population, rape, and robbery" to be very serious offenses. For a killing to be authorized, a guerrilla investigation must first have established proof of the victim's "guilt." Both rebel groups distinguish such killings from the arbitrary and indiscriminate taking of civilian life. International humanitarian law permits no such distinction: the summary execution of any captured combatant or civilian is a grave violation of international law.

The FARC-EP regulations refer specifically to executions:

Commanders and combatants must take into account that executions can only be carried out for very grave crimes of the enemies of the people and with express authorization in each case by the higher levels of command in each organization. In every case, proof must be given and responsibility for decisions must be assumed collectively. The chiefs must leave written records documenting the evidence.²⁷⁶

Seventeen-year-old Jorge had a clear grasp of the issues involved:

Very often the principles [about treatment of the civilian population] are followed, but on other occasions specific orders are given to the guerrillas, which are regulated [by their commanders]. The other orders are general ones that must be observed. No one there is going to do anything that is not authorized.²⁷⁷

In our interviews with former child combatants, we found that few children questioned whether civilians known to be collaborating or sympathetic to the other side were legitimate targets. A former member of the FARC-EP's 14th front explained:

If the prisoners refuse to talk, they tie them up and send the militia to investigate what they have said. When the Zone ended, I had to guard some prisoners there. Most of them were paramilitary collaborators. They had sent a lot of information and with that information paramilitaries had killed lots of guerrillas. So the prisoners were killed. It wasn't hard to kill them. To let them go would have been worse.²⁷⁸

Other killings, however, trouble children greatly. After almost two years in the FARC-EP, Rodrigo tipped off some peasants who were about to drive into a guerrilla ambush. He managed to escape with them in their truck and later surrendered to the Colombian army:

I was in a commando group of six that was ordered to attack a patrol. There were four trucks with peasants on board. I was posted as a lookout. I had wanted to get out of the guerrilla force for some time, but we were moving around so much that I couldn't run because I thought that they would catch me and shoot me. When the trucks approached, I ran up to the first one and jumped aboard, warning the driver that there was a bomb. The truck accelerated and we escaped. Luckily, the bomb did not explode. I gave myself up to the army anti-narcotics battalion.²⁷⁹

Rodrigo had earlier participated in an execution of a deserter, but this troubled him much less than the planned murder of these peasants, who, he said, "owed nothing." Likewise, Alberto, an only child, was still haunted by his memory of shooting an elderly crack addict.²⁸⁰

Jorge participated in several shootings, but only one affected him deeply: the murder of a woman from his village who was reputed to cast spells on people:

They accused her of practicing witchcraft, of casting spells on people who she didn't like and stealing things from people in the neighborhood. So they gave the order that she be shot. It was in December 2001. That was the last execution I had to do. The first time I killed someone, I didn't feel that bad. The only time I felt bad was with this lady. The reason was that she lived very close to me and I had known her since I was very young. I felt bad because she and her family knew me.

She started to beg for mercy, and as the other guy who was in command of the mission was there with me, I said, "I've known you since I was young and I know what sort of person you are." And in that moment, he ordered me to shoot her.

She was quiet then, and the other person with me, my comrade, stepped back a bit, and I fired with my rifle, not with my pistol, so as not to risk hitting him. That was the only execution I felt bad about. Also because it was a woman and all the others were men.²⁸¹

Street Corner Justice: Killings by the Militias

The eyes and ears of the guerrillas in urban centers are the militias. Urban militias operate clandestinely, typically in civilian clothes, sometimes from their homes, sometimes from safe-houses. Unlike fully fledged and uniformed guerrilla combatants, who undergo extensive training in the camps, children told us that the militias receive a shorter period of training and visit the camps sporadically to receive orders, deliver supplies, and bring in captives for interrogation.

Operating in small commandos, their duties include tracking the movements of police and army troops, gathering intelligence on the paramilitaries and their collaborators and sympathizers, and recruitment. Militias collect "taxes" from drug-traffickers and businessmen, and carry out surprise attacks on police stations, ambushes, and kidnappings. They also carry out assassinations. Many of them, possibly a majority, are teenagers.

In recent years, FARC-EP and UC-ELN militias have waged vicious turf wars with paramilitary forces seeking to gain a toehold in urban centers in the southern departments that were traditional guerrilla strongholds, particularly Caquetá, Putumayo, and Guaviare. Paramilitaries have also made inroads in key cities in the departments of Arauca and Santander. In 2000, Barrancabermeja, Santander, had a homicide rate of 227 per 100,000, among the world's highest. Most of the killings were attributed to a turf war between paramilitaries and the guerrillas.²⁸²

Those caught by either side in this war of attrition are in grave peril. Guerrilla children captured by the paramilitaries face brutal torture. Several teenagers who had been in the militias told Human Rights Watch that they surrendered to the government after discovering that they were on paramilitary hit lists. But after doing so, they also feared reprisals from their own side, as deserters or suspected informers.

Others, like Wilmer, Rodolfo, and Jaime, members of a seven-person UC-ELN militia commando in a large urban center, were captured by the army. They told Human Rights Watch that they believed that they had been named by

one of the two leaders of the commando, a man who had been captured and apparently interrogated under torture by paramilitaries. The man's burned body was later found. All three told Human Rights Watch that they had participated themselves in the killing of captured paramilitaries.²⁸³

Héctor, from the poor Buenos Aires sector of Medellín, joined the UC-ELN militia when he was fourteen. It had struggled to keep the AUC from entering the neighborhood. "Their graffiti were everywhere, up in the barrios in the hills. 'Self-Defense Groups are Here,' (*Auto-Defensas Presentes*) they said. The *paracos* made people get off the bus and killed them. We were not going to allow that, so we responded to prevent them getting into the neighborhood."²⁸⁴

Suspected paramilitaries were "investigated." If suspicions were confirmed, Héctor killed them. Silence was taken as an assumption of guilt:

First, we would investigate. For example, occasionally strangers would hang around the neighborhood. We would capture them and take them to a place where we could talk to them. We asked them what they were doing, etc, etc. We investigated thoroughly, really thoroughly. And if we found that they could explain what they were doing, fine, we would let them go. But if we found that they were from one of the self-defense groups, we would kill them. If the guy refused to talk, we would know that he was an informer, that he was a member of an armed group. He was killed.²⁸⁵

Peter was twelve when he joined the UC-ELN militia in Chocó. He gave a similar account:

They tie up suspicious strangers who hang around in those parts and have no papers or family. They investigate them, note their behavior and what they say. If they wander into one of those areas and don't have any one to back them, no family or acquaintances, if they can't prove their innocence, they are executed on the spot.²⁸⁶

"If the guy refused to talk, we would know that he was an informer, that he was a member of an armed group. He was killed."

Jenny, a part-indigenous girl who played with a doll throughout her interview, had been in the UC-ELN militia for only one month when she was ordered to kill a young man suspected of being an army informer. "I was supposed to bring him to an agreed spot and kill him myself. I had to think fast. I knew that I had to do something

to escape the test. Luckily, it was Holy Week and the town was full of soldiers. I turned myself in."²⁸⁷

Seeing themselves as the self-appointed protectors of local residents, the militia also meted out summary street justice for petty thieves, pimps, drug peddlers, or persistent wife-beaters. Marijuana dealers were a particular target, said Andalecio:

They would sell marijuana around and bother people, and people would complain that they were scum, dissolute. So many children seeing marijuana get bad habits and that's no good. We told them that if they went on selling marijuana there . . . that they had better sell it elsewhere, in the center of Medellín, but not in the neighborhood. We would warn them three times and if they paid no attention, knowing that it was bad for the neighborhood, there was a solution, we would kill them . . . And when a husband beat his wife, fights between couples, well, we would talk to the brother, tell him not to hit his wife. "Look brother, if you really can't live together, split up, or do what you have to do, but we will not allow that." We always gave them three warnings.²⁸⁸

Torture in the FARC-EP

In the FARC-EP camps, children are sometimes made to watch the brutal torture of captured paramilitaries or suspected infiltrators, who may well be children themselves. This was how Humberto, who joined the FARC-EP when he was thirteen, described what he saw:

They summon you along with everyone else who is there and they torture [the captive] there. When a comrade deserts and steals a gun, they consider him an infiltrator. They hit him hard and insult him, and more so if its an infiltrator, because he has to tell them what he knows and where he has been. They kick him, they hit him with their rifle butts, and sometimes they cut him. Or they dig needles or pins under his fingernails. I have seen it. And they chop off his fingers, they cut one off and if he refuses to talk, they chop off another. Above all with infiltrators. I didn't participate. I could hardly watch.²⁸⁹

Days after his arrival at a FARC-EP camp, twelve-year-old Darío was forced to learn how to torture an enemy prisoner. It is not uncommon, the children say, for raw recruits to be made to endure such gruesome ordeals to prove their toughness:

In my first combat, they captured eighteen AUC members. They tortured and killed all of them. First they tied them up and took them back to the camp. And the company commander called all of us recent arrivals who were still in training over to see how they killed. All of us who didn't know yet how to kill or torture to obtain information. They cut off their fingers, first they removed their nails, their nose, and they cut off the ears. They cut open their stomachs and removed their intestines with a knife, while they were still alive, and afterwards they shot them. And we watched, and some of the kids left because they got sick and were vomiting. The commander said that it was easy, that one day we would have to do it. It was ugly, terrible. For a long time after I thought of death.²⁹⁰

“And they chop off his fingers, they cut one off and if he refuses to talk, they chop off another. Above all with infiltrators. I didn't participate. I could hardly watch.”

Ómar was fifteen when he joined the 29th Front of the FARC-EP. He witnessed a similar scene on three occasions. He was uncomfortable talking about the experience:

They held seven paramilitaries for a day in the camp and they killed them all. The intelligence service officers did the interrogation. They specialize in that. They were all adults. I was there and I saw it. They chose a person to kill them. They beat them and chopped them with knives, used needles . . . they tortured them a lot. Those same people had to dig their own graves beforehand.²⁹¹

Although no children said they had participated directly in these atrocities, many witnessed them directly and some were forced to watch.

Paid Killers: Child Paramilitaries

If you join the paramilitaries, your first duty is to kill. They tell you, “Here, you are going to kill.” From the very beginning, they teach you how to kill. I mean when you arrive at the camp, the first thing they do is kill a guy, and if you are a recruit they call you over to prick at him, to chop off his hands and arms.²⁹²

Paramilitary forces operating in some cases with the cooperation or tolerance of some army units have been responsible for many of the grave

human rights abuses of the Colombian conflict.²⁹³ Inevitably, children are caught up in the abuses, both as victims and perpetrators.

"They told us that we were not to harm the civilian population," said Jónatan, a black teenager who fished the Magdalena River to feed himself before he joined the AUC. "They said that we had to search for the guerrillas. But anyone working for the guerrillas was involved as well. They had to be captured and killed."²⁹⁴

"After you have done it a few times, you lose your fear," said Cristián, a former paramilitary:

One day we were on patrol and we entered a school on the roadside while the children were studying and went right into the classroom. We already had a photo of a guy we were looking for, a teacher. We waited for the class to finish and he was left on his own. We questioned him, but he refused to answer. We looked in a cupboard and found some clothes, a radio, and a pistol. And since he refused to talk, we killed him. I was the one who did it. He was a guerrilla commander. Some local people had told us. We had a photo of him in uniform with a rifle. I was fifteen then.²⁹⁵

"It's easier the second time. You become indifferent," fifteen-year-old Leonel told Human Rights Watch:

I myself had to kill people when I was in the *urbanos*. I killed a young guerrilla, a kid who was fourteen years old, and a thirty-year-old woman. The paras had investigated them and knew what they were doing. When you're told to kill someone, they give you a photo of the person, their personal data, and their address. They give you a "folder" with all the necessary intelligence. The first time was in October 2001. Eight of us (five adults, me, and two other minors, aged sixteen and seventeen) went together to the guy's house. We grabbed the guy and tied him up. His family was crying. We put a pistol to his head to make him talk. He sang. He informed on the woman, said she was an informer for the guerrillas, that she gave them information. After he talked, we killed him. We couldn't let him go because he knew us. I shot him myself. It was hard to do, but I did it for

"I shot him myself. It was hard to do, but I did it for the money and also to gain the respect of the commanders."

the money and also to gain the respect of the commanders. I was paid a bonus of 500,000 pesos [U.S. \$167].²⁹⁶

Laidy, who joined paramilitaries as a fourteen-year-old girl, said that she was the only female and the only child in a special unit devoted to assassinations. “We received 500,000 pesos [U.S. \$167] a month every six months. They paid us a bonus of 200,000 to 300,000 pesos [U.S. \$67 to U.S. \$100] to kill someone. I was with the specials for sixteen months.” She explained:

I killed a policeman a year after I joined. He was the chief of police in my town. He didn’t allow his men to be bought by the paras. They showed me who he was and gave me three days. I called him as if to seduce him. I was with another paramilitary girl of fourteen. We took a paramilitary taxi; many taxi-drivers support us. The man said: why are you going to kill me? I told him that he had problems with us. I shot him in the head with a .38 revolver. It wasn’t hard for me because I had already been in combat and had already killed guerrillas.²⁹⁷

Children are witnesses, and even participants, in gruesome atrocities committed by paramilitaries against their guerrilla captives. Óscar, who joined the AUC at age twelve, said that deep resentment and fear fueled this cruelty:

I saw several commanders torture captured guerrillas. It can last a whole day. Anything is possible: they burn them, cut their bodies up with knives or with chainsaws. I saw that happen once. Some of the commanders are full of resentment toward guerrillas, and are capable of anything. Especially those who’ve lost family members to the guerrillas.²⁹⁸

Picking at the casing of a camera battery lying on the table, seventeen-year-old Adolfo described the details of torture:

How do they torture? They pull out their nails, they throw hydrochloric acid in their face and body, and they burn them with fire.²⁹⁹ For example, I make a fire and I leave a rod in it to heat up. When it’s red hot, I hold the rod to his chest and put it out in his chest, just like that . . . [Adolfo laughed nervously.] I often used to play with a revolver. Once there was a man next to me with a .38. I was in uniform and I put the rifle here by my side and took the revolver from his belt and removed all the shells but one. And I held it to [the prisoner’s] head and pulled the trigger continuously until I got to the last chamber, and I shot him in the head. The bullet hit him here and removed a piece [of his skull], it wasn’t intended to kill him. I wasn’t supposed to kill him. I could burn him with acid but I couldn’t kill him, that’s the orders they give you. Go and shoot him but

don't kill him, shoot him in the leg, in the arm, but you don't do it with a rifle, because that would blow him in half. . . . I was really scared at first. The first test they give you is to kill a man, a guerrilla. Bring me so and so, they say, so that he can learn. And they bring you and tell you to kill the man. If you don't kill him, they will kill you. They used to bring guerrillas captured in Caquetá to the camp, and tie them up by the hands and legs and a man would come up with a chain-saw, and slice them piece by piece. Everybody could watch. I must have seen it ten times. It's part of the training.³⁰⁰

KIDNAPPINGS

*Taking care of the hostages was the saddest part for me.*³⁰¹

The duties of child combatants often include guarding police or army captives or civilian kidnap victims held for ransom or a prisoner exchange. Several of the children Human Rights Watch interviewed said that the responsibility for guarding prisoners rotated among combatants, including children. Some had acted as guards themselves.

A good number of kidnap victims are elderly people and city dwellers, for whom the anxiety caused by loss of contact with friends and kin and the constant discomforts of life in a remote rural camp are extremely difficult to bear. Several children who had guarded hostages said that they felt sad and upset about the captives' plight.

Both guerrilla and paramilitary forces resort to kidnappings, either to extort money, negotiate the release of prisoners, disrupt travel, exert political influence, or impede the electoral process.

Most kidnappings are carried out by guerrillas. According to Fundación País Libre, an independent nongovernmental organization that studies kidnapping in Colombia, the FARC-EP carried out 936 kidnappings in 2002.³⁰² The vast majority are perpetrated against non-combatants who are not political figures. These have become so prevalent that ordinary, daily travel within many regions of Colombia has become extremely dangerous.³⁰³

Children in the FARC-EP camps reported that they would take turns guarding hostages, their AK-47s at hand, working in two or three hour shifts. As Ángela, who served four years in the FARC-EP, explained:

Kidnapped people are guarded in shifts, for example from nine until midday. I had to do it sometimes. We usually had some kidnapped people; it was rare to

have none. They'd come and they'd go. Their families would come and pay for them, or sometimes pay part of the ransom and we'd let them go, and the family would continue paying in installments. The family always finds some way to pay. They get loans. Altogether, I saw more than thirty kidnapped people.³⁰⁴

"We had lots and lots of kidnapped people: four or five per month."

Dagoberto, who joined the militia at age nine and was a full-blown guerrilla commander at age thirteen, reported that some victims were kidnapped in their homes:

We had lots and lots of kidnapped people: four or five per month. We'd pick them up at roadblocks sometimes. Or in Cali, we'd enter the houses of rich people. We'd bring the people back to camp. Each was guarded by two people at a time, for a two-hour shift. Their families would pay forty to fifty million pesos (U.S. \$17,000- U.S. \$22,000) per person. One person had a hundred million peso (U.S. \$44,000) ransom.³⁰⁵

Darío was aware of how long some of the hostages had been held:

There were five of them in the camp, all men, between the age of twenty and forty. One was a school headmaster. Others were company men. One guy had already been there for three years when I arrived. He was still there when I left. During the day, they could walk around, but always accompanied by a guard. At night, they were tied up in a hammock, in a tent eight meters by eight meters. A guard shift lasted two hours.³⁰⁶

Most of the children who had guarded hostages told us that they had been allowed to talk to them freely, and some got to know their captives and came to consider them friends. "We could talk to them about anything," Darío told us.³⁰⁷ As sixteen-year-old Lenny recalled:

I had to take care of two kidnapped people in the zone for six months in 2000. I was allowed to talk to them, and I ended up being friends with them. The man was a fifty-six-year-old diabetic, and the woman was his mother. She was eighty-four, and had lots of health problems, she was diabetic. They were picked up driving in their car. He was rich. I heard that the FARC-EP wanted a ransom of a billion [U.S. \$353,000]. A whole team took care of them. There were twelve of us. I was the only child. We treated them well. They had a TV. They could walk around.³⁰⁸

None of the children we interviewed reported that hostages were deliberately ill-treated. In fact, they were often given the best quarters and facilities the camp could provide. Nevertheless, their suffering upset many of the children.

Sixteen-year-old Severo, from Caquetá, was present when the FARC-EP abducted presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt on February 23, 2002, a few days after the breakdown of the peace negotiations.³⁰⁹

The one thing that troubled me was when they kidnapped the candidate Ingrid Betancourt. I was present when they captured her. It was the 15th front that took her, but my unit was there, too. I felt very sorry for her. She was traveling without a bodyguard. There were three of us at the roadblock, but I was further back, in hiding at the roadside, keeping an eye out for the army. When they said they were going to take her, she got out of the car calmly and they captured her and took her away. They brought her to the camp. She was in the camp for three days and then they moved her, where I don't know.

They didn't mistreat her. It's prohibited to harm kidnapped people. They have to be given the best treatment. But I felt sorry for the lady because she is not used to conditions out in the countryside. The mountains are rough. You have to be trained for it. It rains a lot and you have to dry your clothes constantly. It must be really tough for her.³¹⁰

The UC-ELN raises money from ransoms and has kidnapped many business people, especially oil executives and pipeline workers. In 2002, País Libre counted at least 776 kidnappings of individuals for ransom or to exert political pressure by the UC-ELN.³¹¹

Although Carlos Castaño has stated repeatedly that he does not condone the practice, the AUC has kidnapped people as well. País Libre recorded 180 kidnappings carried out by groups allied with the AUC in 2002.³¹²

THE GOVERNMENT FORCES

*I wanted to help the poor people. I have two cousins in the army. If I had been old enough I would have joined the army too.*³¹³

Since 1997, Colombian law has not allowed the recruitment of children into the armed forces or police until they have reached the age of eighteen (the “straight-eighteen” rule).

Recruitment for military service of under eighteen-year-olds is prohibited by Law 548 of December 23, 1999, which extended for three years (until December 23, 2002) the provisions of Law 418 of December 26, 1997. Law 548 abolished the only exception to the straight-eighteen rule contemplated in Law 418, namely that which permitted eleventh grade students to join up before reaching eighteen if they had parental consent.

Law 418 provides that civil or military authorities who disregard the prohibition of recruitment of under-eighteens are guilty of misconduct and may be discharged. Whereas members of armed groups are subject to criminal penalties for recruiting children, the law fails to consider underage recruitment by military or police officers to be subject to criminal prosecution.

On December 20, 1999, 618 persons under the age of eighteen were discharged from the army, and more than two hundred other from other government forces.³¹⁴ Human Rights Watch has received no credible reports that children continue to serve in the regular armed forces or the police.

However, we have received testimonies indicating that individual children have been used as informants by army units. In *The Ties That Bind*, a Human Rights Watch report published on February 23, 2000, we detailed the record of the Colombian Army’s Third Brigade, which government investigators had linked to the formation of paramilitary groups in the department of Valle. During its January 2001 mission to Colombia, Human Rights Watch interviewed Felipe, an adolescent who worked for Third Brigade intelligence when the

AUC's Calima front was formed. At the time of our interview, Felipe was in protective custody ordered by the Attorney General's Office because of threats to his life.³¹⁵

Felipe told Human Rights Watch that he began working for the Third Brigade when he was fourteen, collecting intelligence on guerrillas in return for money. He also worked for the Palacé Battalion, part of the Third Brigade, and accompanied army units on operations. "The first meeting I attended that was between paramilitaries and the army was about March 1999, in the headquarters of the Third Brigade in Cali," Felipe said. "They were gathering together all of the details about the rich people in the area so that they could contribute money to bring the paramilitaries into the region."³¹⁶

Fernando, a fifteen-year-old from Cazucá, a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Bogotá, told Human Rights Watch that in early 2002 he was approached by an army officer, who offered him more than five million pesos [U.S. \$1,670] to work as an army informer. The officer told him that any information he provided would be passed to the Gaula, the joint army and police specialized anti-kidnapping unit. "He asked me if I wanted to help him and earn some money. He said he would give me money for clothes, a room, and to continue my studies. He said he would send me somewhere else where nobody knew me."³¹⁷

Col. Luis Alfonso Novoa Díaz, coordinator of the Human Rights Unit of the National Police, told Human Rights Watch that the police do not permit the recruitment of children as informers. He admitted, however, that isolated cases may occur, particularly since the police receive information volunteered by the public, including children. He said he did not know of any case in which a police officer had been disciplined for using children as informers.³¹⁸

The use of children as informers by the security forces places these children's lives in immediate danger. Indeed, they place at risk any child who might be suspected of being an informer. In an irregular war like Colombia's, the risk such children run of capture or execution may be as great as if they were regular combatants. Since informers are not uniformed and work under cover, their recruitment is difficult to prove and easily deniable by the armed force responsible.



A thirteen-year-old girl is held captive by the military in La Plata, Colombia, in July 2002.

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DESERTION, CAPTURE, AND AFTER

I left in order to be with my family, because I saw how much they had suffered because of what I had done when I was younger. The guerrilla took me very far from the land I am from. After a long time on the move, they gave me permission to return to see my family. After a couple of weeks with them, I returned to the guerrillas, but I missed them. I felt so bad having had them close again and talking to them again after two years of not seeing them; having shared with them all that I had learned during the time I had been gone. I thought I wouldn't be able to bear being without them again, not knowing if I would ever come back. So the second time, I left without permission.³¹⁹

The attrition rate among Colombia's child combatants is high. At least 40 percent of the 112 children we interviewed gave themselves up to the police or army. Many of those who deserted had been looking for opportunities to escape for months, if not years. Among the others, there were some children, especially paramilitaries, who did not want to leave. Only a handful said that they wanted to return.

But very few of the children are able to go back to their families. Those who deserted from the guerrilla or the paramilitaries are at risk of being re-captured and killed, and, by returning home, of placing their families at risk also. Some children do not want to return home, and in some cases the parents are themselves with the guerrillas or paramilitaries. Most children give themselves up for personal protection, even though some told us they were afraid that they would be beaten or ill-treated.

Those who are captured are normally handed over by the army or the police to juvenile judges. Many of the children we spoke with were initially locked up in detention centers for juvenile offenders. They were eventually transferred to a reception center run by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF).

For example, Elías and Jhon Freddy were held for three and four months

respectively in the Ibagué correctional facility in the department of Tolima; William was in La Pola in Medellín for three months; others were admitted to the ICBF program after shorter periods in detention; and a few were admitted almost immediately. Juvenile correctional facilities do not provide adequate security for former combatants, who are at risk of reprisals either from their adversaries or their former comrades. Putting them in jail with urban toughs and drug users is also inappropriate given their special circumstances.

It is the juvenile judge who decides to whom the child is referred after capture.³²⁰ The criteria judges apply vary widely across the country, legal experts say.³²¹ According to ICBF statistics, about two-thirds of the children who desert or are captured pass through a juvenile court as young offenders. The remaining one third are treated as children at risk and are located in a specialized ICBF institution for former child combatants.³²²

In practice, nonetheless, most children in both categories end up in the care of the ICBF. Still, no ICBF or public advocate official was able to give Human Rights Watch a clear idea of how many former child combatants were being held in correctional facilities for children or where these children were held, making it impossible for us to visit any. Despite recent attention to the question of former child combatants, there remains some concern that judges in remote areas where there is no local ICBF office continue to send such children to prison, a problem that government officials acknowledged.³²³

The welfare of these children is a worry, since apart from the security risk of being in prison, they lack access to psychological counseling and other support available in the ICBF centers. The public advocate and ICBF have urged judges to put the welfare and interests of the children before any other consideration, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.³²⁴

In April 2002, the ICBF sent judges across the country a booklet establishing guidelines on former combatants to be followed by the armed forces, police, judges, and family welfare officials. The booklet asserts that all children who have left armed groups "have a right to specialized protection from the state, regardless of the circumstances in which they left them." As noted below, until recently children had different legal rights, depending on whether they deserted or were captured, or what irregular armed group they belonged to. The point stressed in the guidelines is that whatever the child's legal situation, none should be held in police or army custody after their surrender or capture, or in detention centers for young offenders. All must be referred at once to the ICBF and admitted immediately into its program.³²⁵

Treatment at Capture

Most of the children Human Rights Watch interviewed said that they had been well treated by the security forces after capture. Many former child combatants said this without hesitation.

There were important exceptions, however. Some children said that they had been beaten, kicked, threatened, and insulted. In several cases, children told Human Rights Watch that senior officers intervened to stop their subordinates from beating children.³²⁶

An example was sixteen-year-old Efrain, a member of the FARC-EP militia from Putumayo. Efrain was captured with a fellow militia member in January 2002.

They had us both on the ground. A soldier said, "Search them." They began to frisk me and a soldier took out my revolver. Straight away they knew I was from the militia. A civilian, a woman, had told them. I said that we were farmers, hired hands, and that the guerrillas took our taxes. I said I'd bought the gun. But my friend told them another story. They insisted: tell us the truth, who are you really?

They made us sleep outside that night, tied up. It rained, and we froze. I thought the night was never going to end. They gave me breakfast, then they separated me from my friend. Now you're going to tell me the truth; you are a collaborator of the guerrillas, or a guerrilla, aren't you? I said no. They had tied my hands behind my back and my feet, and they were hitting me in the face, all over my body. One of them started digging needles in my back, the kind they use to sew sacks shut. He was going to work on my front, but the other one told him not to abuse me any more. The others said, so what, that I was a militia man, a guerrilla. At that moment, my friend, who was listening to my screams, confessed everything. He said that I'd been five years in the guerrilla and had been on a mission. He was scared that they would torture him too. I didn't talk because I didn't want to involve my family. The army would go interrogate them. That's why I didn't want to tell the truth. So they came back and kept hitting me. My throat was dry with thirst and they gave me some water.

"One of them started digging needles in my back, the kind they use to sew sacks shut. . . . At that moment, my friend, who was listening to my screams, confessed everything."

Then they made me remove my shirt and tied me to a pole and whipped me with the sheath of a machete which has leather thongs. The guy hit me real hard and it burned like hell. In the end I told them the truth. I was scared they were going to dig the needle under my fingernails, like the paramilitaries do.³²⁷

Rodolfo, Wilmer, and Jaime, all age seventeen and members of an UC-ELN urban militia commando in Arauca, were arrested by the police acting on a tip-off while they were asleep at Wilmer's home in March 2002. All three told Human Rights Watch that they were beaten and kicked after their arrest. Rodolfo told Human Rights Watch that a policeman kicked him and punched him in the stomach, then hit him over the head with a handcuff and a leather belt.³²⁸ He said he was held overnight with his wrists chained to a bar of the window so that he could not lie down. Jaime said that a policeman told them: "I wish to God that a cylinder bomb would fall on you so that you suffer like you have made others suffer."³²⁹

The three were taken from the police station to a juvenile detention center in the city of Arauca, where they were detained for a month with young offenders held for ordinary criminal offenses. From Arauca, they were brought to the ICBF in Bogotá.³³⁰

Troops allegedly beat and ill-treated children captured during Operation Berlin until senior officers intervened to protect them. Thirteen-year-old

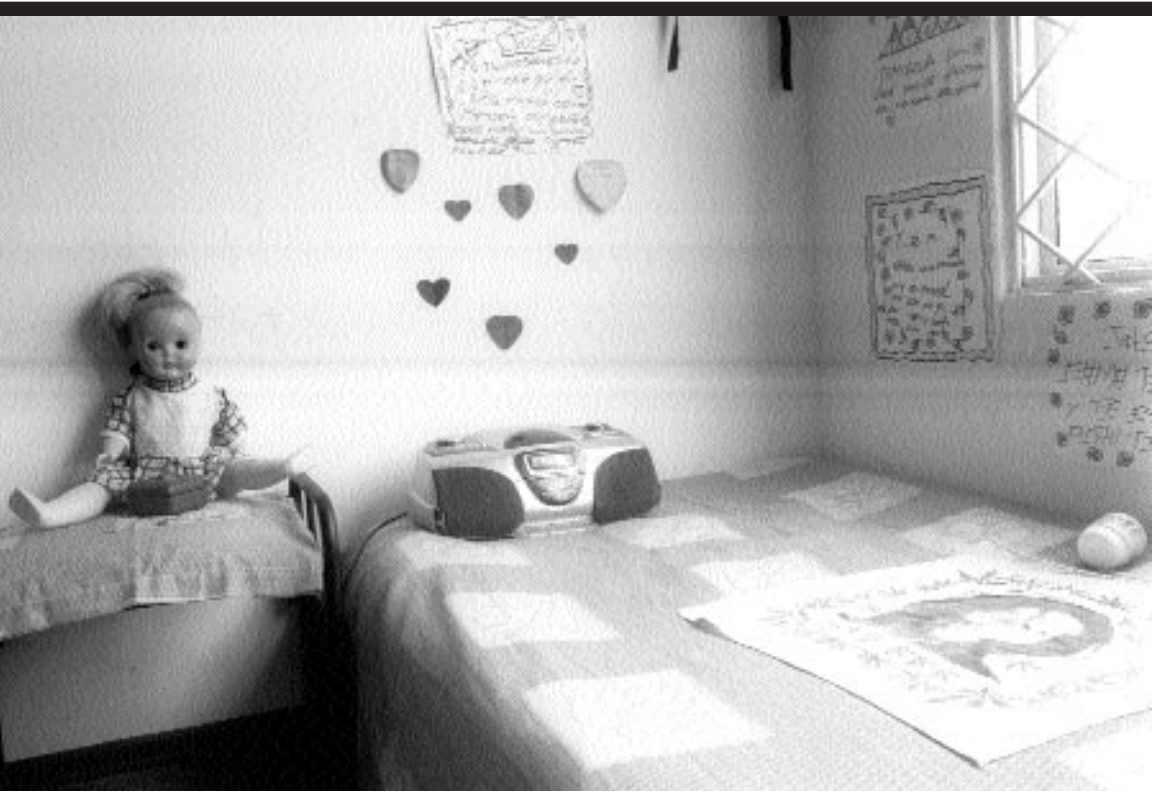
Darío, who at age twelve had had to pester the FARC-EP's 33rd front commander to let him join, told Human Rights Watch:

"When they captured us, they told us they'd kill us if we did not talk, or that they'd leave me on a mountain alone. They hit me and kicked me in the stomach."

When they captured us, they told us they'd kill us if we did not talk, or that they'd leave me on a mountain alone. They hit me and kicked me in the stomach. They treated the adults worse than me. I refused to answer the questions. But then a sergeant told the others not to hit me. He called the battalion in Bucaramanga and the battalion commander ordered them to bring me to the battalion. I was not hit any more. I was in the battalion for a day and they brought me to Family Welfare in Bogotá.³³¹

From other accounts of Operation Berlin, it appears that senior commanders halted the ill-treatment of guerrilla prisoners, both adults and children. Ramón, also age twelve when he joined guerrillas, told Human Rights Watch that the arrival of the ICRC probably saved his life. Sol-

diers had threatened to burn him alive.³³² An official of the public advocate's office, who was directly involved in the handover of some sixty-five FARC-EP child deserters in Suratá, Santander, described the conduct of the Fifth Brigade as "impeccable and respectful."³³³



Bedroom of a former child combatant in a home run by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF).

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15

RESCUED FROM WAR: GOVERNMENT REHABILITATION PROGRAMS FOR CHILD COMBATANTS

*Being captured gave me back my freedom.*³³⁴

*It was wrong to give myself up to the group. Sometimes, my conscience troubles me. Now I hope to be with my family again and share things with them, to rethink, to think of a better tomorrow and to see the world with open eyes.*³³⁵

*I grew tired of seeing so many friends killed. It was four lost years, four years without a family.*³³⁶

*I want a family. I'll never tell my children about being in the ACC.*³³⁷

Even children who have lived through the cruelest experiences yearn for normality: to return to their family, to have a family of their own, or just to get on with the lives they left behind. The Colombian government runs two programs that help former child combatants regain their footing. Since 1999, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute has provided assistance to more than 750 former child combatants, of whom 660 were referred to the ICBF after their capture by the police or the army. Ninety-two deserted and gave themselves up to the authorities.³³⁸

In addition, the Ministry of the Interior runs a Reinsertion Program to assist deserters, including children, from the guerrilla groups that are recognized as belligerents by the government. In practice, this means the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN. This program, which dates from a 1990 peace agreement with guerrillas, excludes paramilitary deserters and children from any armed group who do not give themselves up but are captured. After the Colombian army's Operation Berlin, the ministry opened up a new program for children. It currently assists about 150 children.³³⁹

There are differences in the philosophy and methods underlying the

approach of these state organizations. While the ICBF provides stronger institutional support, protection and specialized care, the Reinsertion Program gives the children greater independence and more money.³⁴⁰

The ICBF initiative dates to 1996, the year in which the United Nations published a landmark report by the secretary general's expert on children and armed conflict, Graça Machel, about the effects of war on children. In April that year, the U.N. team held a regional consultation in Bogotá whose recommendations included "to develop programs for the psychosocial recuperation of children, their rehabilitation and care. Access to these services should be seen as a basic right of all children, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child."³⁴¹

During the same month, then-President Andrés Pastrana's ministers signed a declaration of intent to rescue children from the destructive effects of the conflict. In May 1996, ICBF director Adelina Covo sent a letter to guerrilla and paramilitary commanders urging them to reach agreement with the government "at least on one thing: to stop Colombian children from taking up arms."³⁴² Although the letter was unsuccessful (the responses of the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN were noted in this report), all the actors in the conflict have at least allowed the ICBF rehabilitation program to function without attack, threats, or harassment.³⁴³

Spurring on the ICBF's efforts, the Public Advocate's Office published a series of timely reports about the impact of the conflict on children. It urged the adoption of a rehabilitation program geared to their special needs. The key difference with existing state programs for children in custody was that former child combatants would be treated with respect for their dignity as victims of the conflict and without any stigma of criminality.³⁴⁴

The ICBF program is divided into three stages. Initially, children receive medical attention, counseling, and psychological help for a few weeks in a discreetly anonymous "entry home" in Bogotá (security is a permanent concern in all of the facilities). When Human Rights Watch visited in May 2002, the two entry homes in the capital were full to capacity with more than forty boys and girls. After screening and evaluation, the children are moved to one of several "specialized care centers," at this writing located on the outskirts of Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and Bucaramanga.

Unlike the cramped entry homes, the care centers we visited were spacious villas with large kitchens, patios, and gardens with space for pets, chickens, pigs, fruit and vegetable patches, even a swimming pool. The children's quarters were segregated by gender. Each child had a bunk with space to lay out his or her personal possessions.

The centers were run by local NGOs contracted by the ICBF. Young social workers, psychologists, and teachers were at hand. The atmosphere in each of the homes was cheerful, informal, and boisterous, quite reminiscent of summer camp. The children, scared and mistrustful at first, particularly if they had been captured, gradually began to let down their guard, social workers told us. Despite the ferocity of the conflict they have left behind them, fights between children from the opposing sides are said to be rare.³⁴⁵

While a child is in the center, the ICBF tries to establish contact with the family. In many cases, reunions are impossible to arrange. Sometimes, the parents or child expresses no interest. Other times, both fear reprisals either from the guerrillas or the paramilitaries. In some cases, the parents remain in an armed group.

In the third stage of the ICBF program, a minority among the children may be reunited with their parents or go to live with a close relative. More commonly, the children leave the centers to live with four or so other former combatants in a “youth house,” typically an apartment in an urban center. They are supervised by a mentor chosen by the institution. When the children reach the age of eighteen, they are free to leave.³⁴⁶

Since it began in 1999, the ICBF rehabilitation program has expanded rapidly. During 2002, the number of deserters from guerrilla ranks increased dramatically, as did the proportion of children among them. According to government figures, in 1999, 102 guerrilla combatants, including five children, deserted; in 2001, 327 fighters deserted, including 102 children. During the first ten months of 2002, the number of deserters approached one thousand, of whom 413 were children. The number of children captured also increased significantly.³⁴⁷ When Human Rights Watch visited the ICBF’s reception centers in Bogotá in May 2002, extra bunks had been crammed into the available space to accommodate the dozens of youngsters arriving.

The Reinsertion Program, organized by the Interior Ministry to cater for the needs of demobilized child combatants, began in earnest in December 2000, spurred by the large influx of FARC-EP child deserters during Operation Berlin. The program currently assists about 150 children, who either live with members of their families or, more commonly, with a surrogate family selected by the program. The children in Bogotá attend the program’s special school. But apart from that requirement, they are not institutionalized at all. They may

Despite the ferocity of the conflict they have left behind them, fights between children from the opposing sides are said to be rare.

also receive economic benefits, such as a seed grant of eight million Colombian pesos (about U.S. \$2,660) to set up a business, and receive training in small business administration.

The Legal Framework of Government Assistance Programs

No specific national law regulates humanitarian assistance for former child combatants. The legal framework of the government’s demobilization program was provided by a law devised for political rather than humanitarian purposes—to establish conditions for the opening of the peace talks with the FARC-EP. The first chapter of Law 418, approved on December 26, 1997, contained “provisions to facilitate dialogue and the signing of agreements with illegal armed organizations that the National Government recognizes as being of a political nature, with a view to their demobilization, to reconciliation between Colombians, and peaceful coexistence.”³⁴⁸

Articles 50 and 60, respectively, allowed the government to grant pardons or dismiss charges in the case of those convicted, indicted, or accused of belonging to an illegal armed group recognized by the government, or of related criminal acts, provided that the group, or the individual concerned, had abandoned armed struggle and opted to return to legal political activity and civilian life. The provision was not applicable to “atrocious acts of ferocity and barbarism, terrorism, kidnapping, genocide, and killings committed out-of-combat or when the victim is defenseless.”³⁴⁹

Article 50 included a special provision for children, requiring prosecutors and judges to refer their cases to a technical body, the Operative Committee for the Abandonment of Arms (*Comité Operativo para la Dejación de Armas*, CODA), which had to decide if they were eligible to benefit from the law. Decisions made by CODA gave criminal immunity and economic benefits only to children belonging to the FARC-EP, the UC-ELN, and members of smaller guerrilla groups who surrender. The law denied both immunity and benefits to members of the AUC or combatants from any other armed group who were captured.

When Congress enacted Law 782, voted to renewing Law 418, on December 23, 2002, three important changes affecting children were introduced. The reference in article 50 to groups “recognized by the government” was eliminated, so that in the future children from paramilitary groups could also benefit from the law. Second, children “taking part in hostilities” were to be considered

henceforth as “victims of political violence” and would be eligible for government humanitarian assistance.³⁵⁰ Finally, a new provision was introduced requiring the ICBF to implement a special program benefiting *all* children who had taken part in the conflict or had been victims of political violence. This was the first law to establish a specific legal mandate for the ICBF program for former child combatants.³⁵¹

In 2002, the government introduced a bill in the congress that would hold child combatants over the age of twelve criminally responsible for certain crimes of “special gravity,” including forced disappearance, extortion, torture, kidnapping, genocide, aggravated homicide, simple homicide, conspiracy to commit such crimes, violent sexual abuse when the victim is under eighteen, sexual abuse of children less than fourteen, and sexual abuse against a defenseless person.³⁵²

The issue of suitable treatment of children found liable for atrocities committed while under arms remains a difficult issue. As current research on child combatants has shown, a significant proportion of former child combatants admit participating as agents or accessories in one or another of these very serious crimes.³⁵³

Children cannot be tasked with the same decisions as adults and thus cannot be punished like adults even if found guilty of heinous crimes. While most adults are capable of seeing that cold-blooded murder is wrong, a child is less able to make that determination. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (“The Beijing Rules”) point out the importance of recognizing whether the “child can live up to the moral and psychological components of criminal responsibility; that is, whether a child, by virtue of her or his individual discernment and understanding, can be held responsible for essentially antisocial behavior.”³⁵⁴

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights calls for governments “to take severe legislative, judicial, or other measures to identify, prosecute, and punish state agents or civilians who carry out, authorize, assist in, or facilitate the recruitment of children or their use in armed conflicts.” With regard to the children, the Commission recommends that governments establish “special policies, mechanisms, and institutions for the recovery, reeducation, and social rehabilitation of children and youths who have participated in armed organizations, whether state or nongovernmental.”³⁵⁵

Children cannot be tasked with the same decisions as adults and thus cannot be punished like adults even if found guilty of heinous crimes.

Where children are held to be criminally responsible for grave abuses, the circumstances of their recruitment, possible coercion, and relative lack of maturity should be considered as mitigating factors in determining the nature of their sentence. In such cases, sentencing should promote the child's rehabilitation and reintegration, as provided in articles 39 and 40 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and article 14(4) of the ICCPR. As in all cases in which children are accused of having infringed the law, the state should observe all international standards relating to children in the justice system.³⁵⁶

The Uribe government has stated its intention to introduce legislation to establish a new system of juvenile criminal justice.³⁵⁷ As of this writing, however, there have been no legislative or policy innovations apart from Law 782 that strengthen the rights of former child combatants or are specifically aimed at preventing the recruitment of children. As the office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights noted in its March 2003 report, "No provisions have been added to [Colombia's] Children's Code to make it compatible with the Convention on the Rights of the Child."³⁵⁸

Indeed, some of the policies introduced by Uribe to combat armed violence could potentially reverse gradual gains made in recent years. Of particular concern to Human Rights Watch is the failure of the government to specify the minimum age at which young people may be recruited as members of the network of civilian informers established by the government in 2002. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court includes as a war crime using children under fifteen "to participate actively in hostilities," which the *travaux préparatoires* has defined to include scouting and spying.³⁵⁹

It is likely that children tempted by promises of money to join the guerrilla or the paramilitary forces would be equally tempted by the opportunity to gain money working undercover for the government. So far, the government has failed to explicitly prohibit the use of children as informers in its plan for a Network of Citizens' Cooperation (*Red de Cooperación Ciudadana*). Moreover, children could themselves be victims of anonymous and malicious accusations of membership in, or collaboration with, armed groups made by informers whose identity is kept secret under the government program.

Also, the protection of children's rights by means of prompt and effective appeals might be affected by a draft constitutional reform concerning the administration of justice, submitted in October 2002, which called for the right of *amparo*, the enforcement of constitutional rights, known in Colombia as an *acción de tutela*, to be excluded from children's rights.³⁶⁰

LEGAL STANDARDS

There are encouraging signs that states are beginning to treat the issue of child soldiers with the seriousness it deserves. On January 30, 2003, following an all-day debate on children and armed conflict held on January 14, the U.N. Security Council adopted a resolution requesting the secretary-general to report by October 31, 2003, on progress to end child recruitment made by parties to armed conflicts that currently recruit or use child soldiers in violation of their international obligations. The progress report applies to all those states, including Colombia, that were mentioned in a report on child soldiers submitted by the secretary-general at the end of 2002. The resolution stated that the Security Council would consider additional measures if progress was deemed insufficient. Although the measures were not specified, it was a promising indication that the agreements in the Security Council would have teeth and would not end with mere good intentions.³⁶¹

International Humanitarian Law

Colombia has been a party to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 since 1963 and to the Second Additional Protocol (Protocol II) to the Geneva Conventions since 1996. Common article 3 to the 1949 Geneva Conventions applies during non-international (internal) armed conflicts. It requires all parties to the conflict to treat captured combatants and civilians humanely. It prohibits violence to life and person of those detained, including murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture; the taking of hostages; outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment. Common article 3 also requires the passing of sentences be carried out by a regularly constituted court meeting due process standards.

All parties to the conflict in Colombia have been responsible for serious violations of common article 3. Child combatants have frequently been the victims of these abuses. Particularly egregious and common has been the summary

execution of children who have disobeyed orders or deserted. To date, no irregular armed groups has halted this practice or announced any intention to do so.

Protocol II is applicable when opposing forces in an internal conflict are under a responsible command, exercise enough control over territory to mount sustained and coordinated military actions, and are able to implement Protocol II, all of which Colombia satisfies.³⁶² It is applicable not only to those forces that the Colombian government recognizes as adversaries, in particular the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN, but also to unrecognized groups, such as the paramilitaries.

Protocol II provides fundamental guarantees along the lines of those provided under common article 3. In addition, under article 4(3)(c) of Protocol II, all parties to an internal armed conflict are prohibited from recruiting children under the age of fifteen or allowing them to take part in hostilities.³⁶³

All of the armed groups in Colombia have commented on Protocol II. While at times they have expressed willingness to comply with its requirements, at other moments they have expressed reservations about the applicability to Colombia’s irregular war of several of its prohibitions, including the one barring the recruitment of children. Secondly, they have tied their own application of the rules to the negotiation of concessions by other parties, a stance not sanctioned by international humanitarian law, whose application is not discretionary.

Human Rights Law

In addressing child soldier issues, the government of Colombia must comply with international human rights law as well as international humanitarian law. Apart from adhering itself to recruitment age limits, the government must also enforce them and take measures to hold those who violate them accountable. It must also protect children affected by armed conflict and take positive steps to promote their welfare. Under Colombia’s 1991 constitution, its international human rights treaty obligations have the status of constitutional law.³⁶⁴ The basic standard on the recruitment of children for the armed forces is set by Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Colombia in 1991. It restates the ban on the recruitment of under-fifteens established in Protocol II:

States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.

States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavor to give priority to those who are oldest.³⁶⁵

The Convention's article 38 is an anomaly in using a fifteen-year age minimum; in all other respects, the Convention's general definition of a child is any person under the age of eighteen. The Convention states that none of its provisions should affect laws that are more conducive to the rights of the child. Since Colombia's national law prohibits recruitment below age eighteen, this standard therefore prevails.

Since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, other international standards have been adopted that strengthen protections for children affected by armed conflict. These standards reflect a growing international consensus that children under the age of eighteen should not participate in armed conflict—a principle reflected in Colombia's own national law.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (hereinafter, the Child Soldiers Protocol), adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly on May 25, 2000, establishes eighteen as the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities, for compulsory recruitment, and for any recruitment or use in hostilities by irregular armed groups. By May 2003, 111 countries, including Colombia, had signed it and fifty-two countries had ratified it. Colombia's ratification of the protocol still awaits approval by its Congress.

As a signatory of the Child Soldiers Protocol, Colombia is "obliged to refrain from acts which would defeat the object and purpose" of the treaty.³⁶⁶ Colombia must not only halt the conscription of under-eighteens but must also seek to ban their recruitment or use in hostilities by any armed group on its territory. According to Article 4(2):

States Parties shall take all feasible measures to prevent such recruitment and use, including the adoption of legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalize such practices.

The obligation of states to protect children under the age of eighteen in armed conflict situations is also reflected in the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (No. 182), which member states of the International Labor Organization adopted unanimously in 1999, and Colombia ratified in 2001.³⁶⁷ Con-

vention No. 182 commits ratifying member states to "take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor as a matter of urgency." It defines a child as any person under the age of eighteen and includes in its definition of the worst forms of child labor:

All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labor, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict."³⁶⁸

Convention No.182 also requires each member state to "take all necessary measures to ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of the provisions giving effect to this Convention including the provision and application of penal sanctions or, as appropriate, other sanctions."³⁶⁹ Recommendation 190 accompanying Convention 182 encourages states to make recruitment of children under the age of eighteen a criminal offense.³⁷⁰

Although the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention refers only to children who are recruited by force, Human Rights Watch believes that ILO Convention No. 182 is applicable in Colombia to all child combatants, not just to victims of forcible recruitment. Even where recruitment is voluntary, children are not free to abandon the armed groups without risk of harsh reprisals, including execution.

The state also may be considered responsible, by omission, if it fails to take adequate steps to prevent the abuse by non-state actors of other rights that children enjoy under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These include, among others:

The right to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development;³⁷¹

Protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation;³⁷²

And the right not to be separated from their parents against their will.³⁷³

To comply with the Convention, the state must not only have laws in force

that punish the crime of child military recruitment with penalties appropriate to its gravity; it must also actively enforce them to the limit of its ability.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, ratified by Colombia on August 5, 2002, provides a backstop when a party to the statute is unable or unwilling to bring to justice those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The statute explicitly considers “conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into armed forces or groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities” to be a war crime under its jurisdiction.³⁷⁴ Such crimes committed by a member of any armed group on its territory fall under the court’s jurisdiction. Regrettably, at the moment of ratification, Colombia introduced a declaration under article 124 of the statute, a transitional provision that allows state parties to reject the court’s jurisdiction for a seven-year period for crimes covered under article 8 of the statute. Unless Colombia reverses it, this dispensation might make it impossible until August 2009 for the ICC to try those responsible for child recruitment, were the government to fail in its duty to hold them accountable.

The statute also includes other important measures to protect children in armed conflict: it recognizes intentional attacks on educational institutions as a war crime, provides special arrangements for children as victims and witnesses, and exempts children below the age of eighteen from prosecution by the court.

The obligation of the state to protect and promote the welfare of child victims of armed conflict derives from its general duties under the Convention on the Rights of the Child to protect children as the most vulnerable sector of society. According to article 39 of the Convention:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

In addition, article 6(3) of the Child Soldiers Protocol provides that:

States Party shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons within their jurisdiction recruited or used in hostilities contrary to the present Protocol are demobilized or otherwise released from service. States Parties shall, when necessary, accord to such persons all appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration.

Article 7(1) requires that states party:

Cooperate in the implementation of the present Protocol, including in the prevention of any activity contrary thereto and in the rehabilitation and social reintegration of persons who are victims of acts contrary thereto, including through technical cooperation and financial assistance. Such assistance and cooperation will be undertaken in consultation with the States Parties concerned and the relevant international organizations.

The U.N. Security Council has called on states to devote special efforts to provide the fullest possible care to children in armed conflict.³⁷⁵

NOTES

3. CHILD COMBATANTS IN COLOMBIA

1. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ángela,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002. “Ángela” and “Juanita” are not real names. All of the names of children given in this report, as well as individuals they refer to in interviews, have been invented for the safety of the children involved.
2. Carlos Medina Gallego, *Autodefensas, Paramilitares y Narcotráfico en Colombia*. Santafé de Bogotá: Documentos Periodísticos, 1990.
3. Human Rights Watch interview with Carlos Castaño, July 9, 1996, cited in Human Rights Watch, *War without Quarter: Colombia and International Humanitarian Law* (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 1998), p. 102. The report is available online at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/colombia/>.
4. In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, this report defines as a child “every human being under the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” CRC, Article 1, G.A. Res. 44/25, U.N. Doc. A/RES/44/25 (adopted November 20, 1989; entered into force September 2, 1990).
5. The group most identified with the recruitment of young people—though not children—was the April 19 Movement, or M-19. For an insider history of the M-19, see Vera Grabe, *Razones de vida* (Santafé de Bogotá: Planeta, 2000).
6. Defensoría del Pueblo, “El Conflicto Armado en Colombia y los menores de edad,” Boletín No. 2, Santafé de Bogotá, May 1996.
7. Defensoría del Pueblo, “Informe Sobre los Derechos Humanos de la Niñez en Colombia durante el año 2001,” p. 2 [online], http://www.defensoria.org.co/espanol/informes/pdfs/informe_5.pdf (retrieved on May 27, 2003).
8. Defensoría del Pueblo, “La Niñez y sus Derechos,” Boletín No. 8, 2002, p. 3 [online], http://www.defensoria.org.co/espanol/informes/pdfs/informe_9.pdf (retrieved on May 27, 2003).
9. Rafael Orduz Medina, “Preventing boys, girls and children from taking part in the war, a priority for all of us,” cited in Symposium I, “Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia,” August 24, 2000 [online] http://www.derechoshumanos.gov.co/observatorio/04_publicaciones/04_02_temas/04_02_indicetemas.htm# (retrieved on June 5, 2003).
10. In other reports on children in armed conflicts, Human Rights Watch has used the term “child soldiers” to refer both to children serving in the state’s armed forces and in

forces opposed to the government. To avoid confusion, however, we use the term “child combatants” in this report, since the term “soldiers” is used in Colombia only to refer to government forces. Combatants, as we use the term, includes both those engaged directly in fighting and those supporting combat actions.

11. Of the 112 children Human Rights Watch interviewed, one belonged to a minor insurgency group known as the Revolutionary Army of the People (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo, ERP), and another did not provide the name of the group to which he had belonged. A small number of the children belonged to more than one group. In addition, three children we interviewed, whom we do not include in the figure of 112, either declined to talk about their past in detail or gave questionable information that was contradicted by other former combatants. A complete log of interviews is available as an appendix.
12. The rationale used to obtain estimates for the three irregular groups is explained later in the report.
13. For instance, the office of the Public Advocate estimates that there are at least 6,000 child combatants in Colombia. “En Colombia, 6.000 menores hacen parte de los grupos armados,” *El Colombiano*, September 26, 2002 [online], <http://www.elcolombiano.com/martes/ndh001.asp> (retrieved on September 26, 2002). The ICBF has a slightly higher estimate of 7,000 child combatants. Neither the Public Advocate nor the ICBF, however, include the urban militias in their estimates (e-mail communication from Julián Aguirre, coordinator of the ICBF’s Program of Attention to Victims of Violence, May 12, 2003). The estimate of one-third is generally accepted to be accurate by groups dealing with child combatants in Colombia. Inclusion of the militias would bring the ICBF’s estimate total close to Human Rights Watch’s estimate of 11,000. The Colombia office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights gives a higher estimate than Human Rights Watch: 14,000 child combatants, of which 7,000 belong to the regular forces and 7,000 to the urban militias. The UNHCHR noted an increase in recruitment of children into urban militias, reflecting an intensification of the conflict in Colombia’s cities during 2002. See Informe Anual del Alto Comisionado sobre Derechos Humanos en Colombia, February 24, 2003, Doc. E/CN.4/2003/13. Available at <http://www.hchr.org.co/documentoseinformes/informes/altocomisionado/informe2002.html> (retrieved on May 19, 2003).
14. The recruitment of young children remains a current practice, judging from children’s testimonies, since the majority of these children entered the ranks of guerrillas or paramilitaries between 1998 and 2002. Moreover, our findings regarding the high number of young combatants are confirmed by a study conducted by the Public Advocate. That study, based on a sample of eighty-six former child combatants, found similar proportions (61 percent). Bernardo Bejarano González, “Se disparan deserciones en guerrilla,” *El Tiempo*, August 26, 2002.
15. Human Rights Watch interview with “Bernardo,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
16. Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Year 2003 (Public Law 107-228).
17. U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2002, Colombia chapter, March 31, 2003 [online], <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/18325.htm> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
18. For a breakdown of amounts, see Colombia Project, “U.S. Aid to Colombia Since 1997:

- Summary Tables,” Center for International Policy [online], <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aidtable.htm> (retrieved on May 7, 2003).
19. U.S. Agency for International Development, “Colombia \$119.5 million for Economic, Social and Institutional Development” [online], <http://www.usaid.gov/press/releases/2001/fs010330.html> (retrieved on May 7, 2003).
 20. U.S. Agency for International Development, Latin America and the Caribbean Overview, FY 2004 Congressional Budget Justification [online], <http://www.usaid.gov/country/lac/colombia.pdf> (retrieved May 7, 2003).
 21. U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2002, Colombia chapter, March 31, 2003.
 22. Human Rights Watch, *War without Quarter*, p. 131.
 23. E-mail message from Stewart Tuttle, Political Section, U.S. Embassy-Bogotá, May 9, 2003; and “Pastrana queda en deuda con el país, según balance de expertos,” *El Tiempo*, August, 4, 2002.
 24. http://www.contrast.org/mirrors/FARC-EP/Entrevistas/Entrevista_manuel_marulanda.htm (retrieved October 15, 2000).
 25. Human Rights Watch, *War without Quarter*, pp. 131-91.
 26. Along with Marulanda, the members of the General Secretariat are Timoleón “Timochenko” Jiménez, Raúl Reyes, Iván Márquez, Alfonso Cano, Efraín Guzmán, and Jorge Briceño Suárez, known as “Mono Jojoy.” (The name Mono Jojoy can be roughly translated as light-skinned jungle animal.) With the exception of Suárez, all use “war names” in place of their given names. A list is available at <http://www.farcep.org/documentos/pleno/> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
 27. For a history of the FARC-EP’s early years, see Arturo Alape, *Las Vidas de Pedro Antonio Marín Manuel Marulanda Vélez Tirofijo* (Santafé de Bogotá: Planeta, 1989).
 28. “Condena a ‘Tirofijo’ por menores,” *El Tiempo*, June 4, 2003.
 29. Banco de Datos, Cifras de la Violencia 2002 [online], <http://www.nocheyniebla.org/26/pdf/cifras02.pdf> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
 30. See Human Rights Watch, “Colombia: FARC Responsible for Atrocities,” May 8, 2002. For more information on the FARC-EP’s use of gas cylinder bombs, see Human Rights Watch, “Beyond Negotiation: International Humanitarian Law and its Application to the Conduct of the FARC-EP,” Vol. 13, No. 3 (B), August 2001. The report is available online at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/farc/>.
 31. For more on the Zone and human rights concerns, see Human Rights Watch, “Beyond Negotiation.”
 32. In the unit designations used by the FARC-EP, a “bloque,” or block, is an alliance of fronts and exists in a defined region of the country. Among the largest and most active FARC-EP units is the Southern Block, which operates in southeastern Colombia. Each block roughly corresponds to an army division. A front corresponds roughly to an army brigade and can contain hundreds of fighters.
 33. Human Rights Watch, *War without Quarter*, pp. 161-84.
 34. Bautista is one of the original members of the UC-ELN. The UC-ELN maintains a web site with interviews held with its leaders at <http://www.eln-voces.com/> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
 35. In areas like the department of Arauca, for instance, formerly a UC-ELN stronghold,

- its units have either been absorbed by or allied with the stronger FARC-EP. "Le reconquista de Arauca," *Semana*, February 1, 2003 [online], <http://www.semana.com/archivo/articulosView.jsp?id=67913> (retrieved on May 6, 2003).
36. U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2002, Colombia chapter, March 31, 2003.
 37. Liam Craig Best, "An interview with ELN commander Antonio García," Information Network of the Americas, Colombia Report, August 27, 2000, <http://www.colombiareport.org/colombia25.htm> (retrieved September 5, 2002).
 38. *Ibid.*
 39. Banco de Datos, Cifras de la Violencia 2002, <http://www.nocheyniebla.org/26/pdf/cifras02.pdf> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
 40. They include the Peasant Self-Defense Group of Córdoba y Urabá (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba and Urabá, ACCU), the largest and most public group; the Mountain Self-Defense Group (Autodefensas de la Sierra), based on the north coast; the Southern Cesar Self-Defense Group (Autodefensas del Sur del Cesar); the Tolima Self-Defense Group (Autodefensas del Tolima); the Puerto Boyacá Self-Defense Group (Autodefensas de Puerto Boyacá); Ramón Isaza's Self-Defense Group (Autodefensas de Ramón Isaza), in the Middle Magdalena region; and the Cundinamarca Self-Defense Group (Autodefensas de Cundinamarca). The ACCU is further subdivided into seventeen "fronts" and "blocks" that include units in southern Colombia, Bogotá, Antioquia, Casanare, and the Pacific Coast. The AUC maintains a web site at <http://colombia-libre.org/colombialibre/pp.asp> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
 41. Although using the same terminology of "block" and "front" as guerrillas, paramilitaries in similarly named units number far fewer. "Disidencia de los paramilitares acusa a Carlos Castaño de haber permitido los vínculos con el narcotráfico," *El Tiempo*, September 30, 2003.
 42. Interview with Salvatore Mancuso, Newsweek, reproduced on the official AUC website, <http://colombia-libre.org/colombialibre/pp.asp> (retrieved on October 20, 2002).
 43. The AUC's units and their geographical locations are available at <http://colombia-libre.org/colombialibre/organigrama.asp> (retrieved on May 6, 2003).
 44. For a history of the ACCU, see Mauricio Aranguren Molina, *Mi Confesión: Carlos Castaño revela sus secretos* (Santafé de Bogotá: Editorial Oveja Negra, 2001).
 45. Human Rights Watch, *War without Quarter*, pp. 100-31.
 46. See especially Human Rights Watch, *The "Sixth Division": Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001) [online], <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/colombia/>; and *The Ties that Bind: Colombia and Military-Paramilitary Links* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2000) [online], <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/colombia/>.
 47. In a 2002 report, Human Rights Watch demonstrated how the attorney general appointed in July 2001, Luis Camilo Osorio, has undermined criminal investigations of these abuses, reversing much of the progress made by his predecessors. Human Rights Watch, "A Wrong Turn: A Record of the Colombia Attorney General's Office," Vol. 14, No. 2 (B), November 2002. The report is available online at <http://hrw.org/reports/2002/colombia/>.

48. Banco de Datos, <http://www.nocheyniebla.org/26/pdf/cifras02.pdf> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
49. Human Rights Watch interview with Carlos Castaño, July 9, 1996; and Colombian government intelligence analyst, Bogotá, December 2, 1997.
50. Interview with Carlos Castaño, September 5, 2002 [online], <http://colombialibre.org/colombialibre/comunicados.asp?offset=30&id=615> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
51. Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Colombia, Commission on Human Rights, 57th session, March 20, 2001, 6:110
52. In April 2003, the group, which claims a force of 3,500 fighters, announced a break with the AUC on the issue of talks with the government, though its status as an ally remained unclear. Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Colombia, Commission on Human Rights, 58th session, February 28, 2002, 6:172; 7:B:208; and "Autodefensas del Casanare afirman que silencio del Gobierno indica rompimiento unilateral de acercamientos," *El Tiempo*, April 20, 2003 [online], http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/coar/noticias/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR-1063314.html (retrieved on April 21, 2003).
53. The designation expires automatically after for two years, unless the group is redesignated. See U.S. Department of State, "Fact Sheet: Foreign Terrorist Organizations," May 23, 2003 [online], <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/fs/2003/12389.htm> (retrieved on June 10, 2003).
54. The three that have been publicly indicted are Castaño; ACCU chief Salvatore Mancuso; and Juan Carlos Sierra Ramírez. The U.S. Justice Department accused the three of importing over seventeen tons of cocaine into the United States and Europe since 1997. According to the indictment, Carlos Castaño directed cocaine production and distribution activities in AUC-controlled regions of Colombia, including protecting coca processing laboratories, setting quality and price controls for cocaine, and arranging for and protecting cocaine shipments both within and outside of Colombia. U.S. Department of Justice, "Attorney General remarks on indictment in AUC drug trafficking case," September 24, 2002.
55. Scott Wilson, "Cocaine Trade Causes Rifts in Colombian War," *Washington Post*, September 17, 2002.
56. Aranguren, *Mi Confesión: Carlos Castaño revela sus secretos*, pp. 205-19.
57. "'Cumbre' de 2.000 paramilitares reunificó a las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (Auc)," *El Tiempo*, September 7, 2002.
58. Cecilia Orozco, "No soy un trofeo de Guerra," interview with Carlos Castaño, September 5, 2002 [online], <http://colombialibre.org/colombialibre/comunicados.asp?offset=10&id=899> (retrieved on December 8, 2002).
59. Letter from Carlos Castaño to President Álvaro Uribe, November 29, 2002; and "Autodefensas de Colombia silencian sus fusiles con miras a la paz," *El Colombiano*, December 1, 2002 [online], <http://colombia-libre.org/colombialibre/guerraypaz.asp?offset=300&id=1467> (retrieved on May 2, 2002).
60. U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2002, Colombia chapter, March 31, 2003 [online], <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/18325.htm> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).

61. In a joint statement published on the BCB's website, these two blocks claimed to have conducted a census which numbered their combatants at 5,670. It stated "categorically" that the two blocks had no children in their ranks and that "exceptional cases" would be handed over to the ICBF or the Public Advocate's office. <http://www.bloquecentralbolivar.org/bcb-esp/detalle.asp?tipo=Editorial&Id=398>, undated statement, (retrieved on December 7, 2002).
62. "Bloque Central Bolívar de los paramilitares entregó a Bienestar Familiar a 40 combatientes menores de edad," *El Tiempo*, June 12, 2003 [online] http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/coar/noticias/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR-1126241 (retrieved on June 12, 2003).
63. "Paras' del Meta suspenden contactos con el Gobierno," *El Tiempo*, June 7, 2003 [online], http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/hist_imp/HISTORICO_IMPRESO/NACION_HISTORICO/2003-06-07/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR_HIST-1119938.html (retrieved on June 7, 2003).
64. "Muertos en combate doce terroristas de las autodefensas ilegales," Agencia de Noticias del Ejército Nacional de Colombia, June 6, 2003; and "COMUNICADO DE LA OFICINA DEL ALTO COMISIONADO PARA LA PAZ," June 6, 2003 [online], <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/detalleResultado.asp?numDocumento=3215> (retrieved on June 9, 2003).
65. "Autodefensas de Meta y Vichada reanudarían contactos con el Gobierno Nacional," *El Tiempo*, June 10, 2003 [online], http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/coar/noticias/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR-1123091.html (retrieved on June 10, 2003).
66. Human Rights Watch interview with "Uriel," Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
67. Human Rights Watch interview with "Óscar," Medellín, June 5, 2002.
68. Human Rights Watch interview with "Leonel," Bogotá, June 1, 2002.

4. RECRUITMENT: RULES AND PRACTICE

69. E-mail message from a Protestant pastor, Puerto Guzmán, Putumayo, August 27, 2002. For his safety, we are not naming him.
70. Comisión Internacional, "Comunicado de las FARC-EP," June 8, 1999.
71. "Special Representative of the Secretary-General For Children and Armed Conflict concludes Humanitarian Mission to Colombia," United Nations press release, June 8, 1999.
72. The Public Advocate, the ICBF, UNICEF, and respected human rights and humanitarian NGOs in Colombia have all provided abundant evidence that the FARC-EP still fails to observe its own stated minimum age for recruitment.
73. Dick Emanuelson, "Interview with Olga, comandante guerrillera de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP)," *Rebelión*, October 14, 1996.
74. Unnamed source, cited in UNICEF-Colombia, "El Dolor Oculto de la Infancia," Santafé de Bogotá, May 1999.
75. Human Rights Watch interviews, San Vicente del Caguán, Caquetá, June 2-3, 2000.

76. Ibid.; “Volvimos a ser niños,” *Cambio*, February 1, 2001.
77. Andres Cala, “Trading in rifles for schoolbooks,” *The Gazette* [Montreal], March 8, 2001.
78. Human Rights Watch, “Beyond Negotiation: International Humanitarian Law and its Application to the Conduct of the FARC-EP,” p. 8.
79. Ibid.
80. Human Rights Watch interview, Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
81. Michael Easterbrook, “What are we fighting for? Colombia’s civil war puts children on the front lines” [online], <http://www.salon.com> (retrieved on January 13, 2001).
82. Karl Penhaul, “Colombia’s force of child warriors,” *Boston Globe*, March 4, 2001.
83. “Entre 6,000 y 8,000 menores integran grupos armados ilegales (Ejército),” *El Colombiano*, October 31, 2002.
84. “Crisis humanitaria en el sur de Colombia por luchas entre FARC-EP y autodefensas,” *El Colombiano*, August 2, 2002.
85. “Denuncian bloqueos y reclutamientos en Chocó,” *El Colombiano*, October 9, 2002.
86. In earlier documents, the minimum age was stated as fifteen. “Los Niños en el Conflicto Político Social y Armado en Colombia,” unsigned document sent by Galán and Torres to ICBF Director Adelina Covo in July 1996, provided by the ICBF to Human Rights Watch in June, 2002.
87. As in the FARC-EP, UC-ELN commanders like Galán and Torres use “war names” to identify themselves.
88. “Los Niños en el Conflicto Político Social y Armado en Colombia,” unsigned document sent by Galán and Torres to ICBF Director Adelina Covo in July 1996, provided by the ICBF to Human Rights Watch in June, 2002.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. The attack and the children’s release are described in Human Rights Watch, *War without Quarter*, pp. 214-15.
92. On October 18, 1998, the UC-ELN militants bombed a pipeline near Machuca, Antioquia. According to official investigations, the resulting spilled oil and gases took six minutes to descend a slope, cross the Pocuné River, and reach the population on the opposite bank. There, many residents depended on open flames for light and cooking. The mixture ignited, engulfing sixty-four dwellings and the sleeping families inside them. Seventy-three people, among them thirty-six children, ultimately perished. An additional sixty-four people were seriously wounded. Weeks after the spill, the UC-ELN admitted its responsibility via a press interview with Bautista, who claimed without providing evidence that the UC-ELN had investigated the case and “punished” those responsible. However, several months later, UC-ELN leader Antonio García claimed it was sufficient to simply “acknowledge” the error and insist that units be more careful. Human Rights Watch, *World Report 1999* (New York: Human Rights Watch 1999) [online], <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k/americas-03.htm> (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
93. “Estatuto de Constitución y Régimen Disciplinario,” available on the AUC’s website at <http://colombia-libre.org/colombialibre/estatutos.asp> (retrieved on December 6, 2002).

94. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported in February 2002 that it had “received numerous complaints that the different guerrilla and paramilitary groups have continued to recruit children under fifteen years of age.” Human Rights Watch interview, Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002; and Report of the United Nation High Commissioner on Human Rights on the human rights situation in Colombia, 168. Available at <http://www.hchr.org.co/documentoseinformes/informes/altocomisionado/informe2002.html> (retrieved on May 19, 2003).
95. See Steven Ambrus, “Taking aim at the city,” *Newsweek*, February 18, 2002, for a vivid account of paramilitary advances in Medellín and other cities.
96. Human Rights Watch interview with “Bernardo,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.

5. JOINING UP

97. Human Rights Watch interview with “Severo,” Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.
98. Human Rights Watch interview with “Adolfo,” Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
99. Two more children told us they were pressured to join; ninety said they joined voluntarily, and the remaining children did not provide information on the subject. See also E. Miguel Alvarez-Correa and Julián Aguirre, *Guerreros sin sombra: Niños y jóvenes desvinculados al conflicto armado*, Procuraduría General de la Nación y Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, Bogotá, 2001 (unpublished). This comprehensive study gives similar percentages (78 percent voluntary; 10 percent forced).
100. In her landmark report, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, the U.N Secretary General’s Expert on Armed Conflict and Children, Graça Machel, wrote: “In addition to being forcibly recruited, youth also present themselves for service. It is misleading, however, to consider this voluntary. While young people may appear to choose military service, the choice is not exercised freely. They may be driven by any of several forces, including cultural, social, economic or political pressures.” Report of the Expert of the Secretary General submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 48/157, A/ 51/306, August 26, 1996, para. 38.
101. According to the Public Advocate’s office, nearly half of a sample of eighty-six former child combatants they interviewed had been beaten by their parents. Forty percent had left school in the third grade. Fifteen percent had worked in cocaine processing. Boletín No. 8, *La Niñez y sus Derechos: Caracterización Psicosocial de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Desvinculados del Conflicto Armado*, 2002, pp. 1-10.
102. Human Rights Watch interview with “Osvaldo,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
103. Human Rights Watch interview with “Diego,” Bogotá, June 3, 2002.
104. Human Rights Watch interview with “Peter,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
105. Human Rights Watch interview with “Betty,” Medellín, June 6, 2002.
106. Human Rights Watch interview with “Humberto,” Bogotá, June 4, 2002.
107. Human Rights Watch interview with “Saúl,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
108. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jorge,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
109. Human Rights Watch interview with “Pedro,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
110. Human Rights Watch interview with “Severo,” Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.

111. Human Rights Watch interview with “Carolina,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
112. Human Rights Watch interview with “Marilín,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
113. Human Rights Watch interview with “Joseph,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
114. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ramiro,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002
115. Liam Craig Best, “Interview with Antonio García,” <http://www.colombiareport.org/colombia25.htm> (retrieved on September 5, 2002).
116. Human Rights Watch interview with “Giovanni,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
117. Human Rights Watch interview with “Édgar,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
118. Human Rights Watch interview with “Leonel,” Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
119. Human Rights Watch interview with “Adolfo,” Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
120. Human Rights Watch interview with “Óscar,” Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
121. Human Rights Watch interviews with “Jesús” and “Rigoberto,” June 1, 2002 and June 10, 2002.
122. Human Rights Watch interview with “Laidy,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
123. Human Rights Watch interview with “Uriel,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
124. The Colombian Family Welfare Institute noted, however, that the proportion of forcible recruits was particularly high in FARC-EP controlled areas. *Guerreros sin Sombra*, p. 72.
125. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jenny,” Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
126. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jhony,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002
127. Human Rights Watch interview with “Xaviera,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
128. Human Rights Watch interview with “Soria,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
129. Human Rights Watch interview with “Margarita,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
130. Human Rights Watch interview with “Gilberto,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
131. Some 15,000 Sicuanis and Guahibos live in the departments of Casanare, Meta, Vichada, and Guaviare, and are among Colombia’s population of close to one million indigenous people, according to the latest census published by Colombia’s National Planning Department. See http://www.dnp.gov.co/ArchivosWeb/Direccion_Desarrollo_Territorial/divers_etnica/indigenas/doc_interes/Pueblos_Indigenas/Capitulo_1.pdf (retrieved on May 27, 2003).
132. Human Rights Watch interview with “Juan José,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
133. Human Rights Watch interview with “Johana,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
134. Human Rights Watch interview with “Arlette,” Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
135. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ángela,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002.

6. LIFE IN THE RANKS

136. Human Rights Watch interview with “Darío,” Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.
137. Human Rights Watch interview, Bogotá, June 2, 2002. “Ramón,” the speaker, described to Human Rights Watch how his sister Mariana, also in the FARC-EP, had been captured by paramilitaries in combat, gang-raped and left for dead with a metal rod in her vagina. When the guerrillas captured the paramilitary responsible, Ramón’s elder brother stabbed him to death with a butcher’s knife in a fit of fury. Ramón was thirteen at the time.

138. Human Rights Watch interview with "Wilson," Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
139. *Guerreros sin sombra*, p. 6.
140. See *Guerreros sin sombra*, p. 87. According to that source, recruits may be given a "compañero or compañera, whose official function is to teach them the mechanics of the group and bond with them."
141. Human Rights Watch interview with "Wilson," Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
142. Human Rights Watch interview with "Marta," Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
143. Human Rights Watch interview with "Ómar," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
144. Human Rights Watch interview with "Mauricio," Bogotá, June 3, 2002.
145. Human Rights Watch interview with "Peter," Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
146. Human Rights Watch interview with "Vicente," Bogotá, June 1, 2002
147. Human Rights Watch interview with "Juan Pedro," Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
148. Human Rights Watch interview with "Marcos," Bogotá, June 2, 2002
149. In some fronts of the UC-ELN in eastern Antioquia, made up mostly of children, informal classes are given by guerrilla instructors to the less educated, but this appears to be exceptional. *Guerreros sin sombra*, pp. 90-91.
150. Jorge Enrique Botero, "Las Farc ante el nuevo gobierno: Entrevista a Alfonso Cano," *El Tiempo*, June 8, 2002 [online], <http://www.stormpages.com/marting/lasfarc.htm> (retrieved on May 27, 2003).
151. Human Rights Watch interview with "Marilín," Medellín, June 5, 2002.
152. Human Rights Watch interview with "Darío," Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.
153. Human Rights Watch interview with "Orlando," Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.
154. Referring to the FARC-EP and the UC-ELN, one Catholic priest and sociologist explained: "In general, neither of the two groups contemplates [religion] ... the FARC-EP in particular underestimates and despises religion. In both guerrilla organizations religion does not count, even if it is not actually forbidden. But in the day-to-day life of the groups, it does flourish from time to time." *Guerreros sin sombra*, pp. 90-91.
155. Human Rights Watch interview with "Pedro," Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
156. Human Rights Watch interview with "Teddy," Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
157. Human Rights Watch interview with "Óscar," Medellín, June 5, 2002.
158. *Ibid.*

7. GIRLS

159. Human Rights Watch interview with "Carolina," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
160. Human Rights Watch interview with "Juana," Bogotá, June 10, 2002. For another informative account of the situation of girl combatants, see Erika Páez, *Las Niñas en el Conflicto Armado en Colombia: Un Diagnóstico* (Bogotá: Terre des hommes, 2001). The book is based on information collected from eight former child combatants and six professionals that have worked closely with them.
161. Human Rights Watch interview with "Juana," Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
162. This chapter will, accordingly, focus on guerrillas. Human Rights Watch interview with "Laidy," Bogotá, May 31, 2002.

163. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jessica,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
164. Human Rights Watch interview with “Carolina,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
165. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ángela,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
166. Human Rights Watch interview with “María Claudia,” Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.
167. Colombia’s Law 599 de 2000 states that anyone who engages in a sexual act with a child younger than fourteen is punishable with between three to five years in prison. Nuevo Código Penal, Article 209. The law is available at <http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/colombia/doc/penal.html> (retrieved on May 27, 2003).
168. For another account of an older commander successfully pressuring a thirteen-year-old girl to have sexual relations with him, see Human Rights Watch, “Beyond Negotiation,” pp. 16-17. A compelling first-hand description of the problem is found in Guillermo González Uribe’s book *Los niños de la guerra*. Made up of eleven long testimonies from former child combatants, the book includes the story of a young girl who joined the FARC-EP at age thirteen, and quickly become involved with a forty-year-old commander. After that relationship ended, she was pressured by another commander for sex. When she refused, she was given hardship duty. When she realized that she was pregnant, in addition, she decided to escape so that she could keep the baby. She fell and hurt herself during the escape, however, and ended up having a miscarriage. Guillermo González Uribe, *Los niños de la guerra* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2002), pp. 35-42.
169. Human Rights Watch interview with “Andrea,” Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.
170. Human Rights Watch interview with “Carolina,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
171. Human Rights Watch interview with “Marilín,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
172. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ángela,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
173. Human Rights Watch interview with “Soria,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
174. *Ibid.*
175. *Ibid.*
176. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ángela,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
177. Human Rights Watch interview with “Marta,” Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
178. “‘Censuramos la explotación sexual’: Defensor,” *El Tiempo*, December 15, 2000.
179. Human Rights Watch interview with “Carolina,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
180. Human Rights Watch interview with “Andrea,” Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.

8. TRAINING

181. Annual Report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 1999, Chapter 6, Recommendation for eradicating the recruitment of children and their participation in armed conflicts, OEA/Ser.L/V/II.106 Doc. 6, April 13, 1999 [online], <http://www.cidh.oas.org/annualrep/99eng/Chapter6a.htm> (retrieved on June 9, 2003).
182. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ramiro,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002
183. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jon Freddy,” Bogotá, June 3, 2002
184. Plan Colombia was the first large increase of U.S. military aid to Colombia in 1999, meant to bolster the fight against narcotics trafficking.

185. Arenas was an early leader of the FARC-EP. Human Rights Watch interview with "Marta," Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
186. Human Rights Watch interview with "Peter," Bogotá, June 2, 2002
187. Human Rights Watch interview with "Jorge," Medellín, June 5, 2002
188. Human Rights Watch interview with "Marcos," Bogotá, June 2, 2002
189. Human Rights Watch interview with "Adolfo," Bogotá, June 10, 2002
190. Human Rights Watch interview with "Óscar," Medellín, June 5, 2002.
191. Human Rights Watch interview with "Humberto," Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
192. Human Rights Watch interview with "Bernardo," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
193. Human Rights Watch interview with "Uriel," Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
194. In December 2002, the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* interviewed a child recently demobilized from the AUC. "A wooden rifle and a piece of a corpse are the first pieces of kit the kids receive in the AUC training camps," the newspaper reported. "The first is for everyone; the second only for those who have never killed any one in their lives. 'They gave me a man's hand so that I would get used to the smell of death. We had to carry it in our backpack for days until it rotted,' Pedro recalled." "Las autodefensas de Colombia entregaron a trece menores de edad en Santander," *El Tiempo*, December 14, 2002.
195. Human Rights Watch interview with "Leonel," Bogotá, June 1, 2002
196. Human Rights Watch interview with "Laidy," Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
197. The paramilitary forces do not use gas cylinder bombs. For more on their use see Human Rights Watch, Letter to Commander Manuel Marulanda, FARC-EP, May 8, 2002. The letter is available online at <http://www.hrw.org/press/2002/05/colombia0508.pdf>.
198. Human Rights Watch interviews with former child combatants, Bogotá, May 31, June 1, June 3; and Medellín, June 6.
199. Human Rights Watch interview with "Jaime," Medellín, June 5, 2002.
200. The letter highlighted an attack that occurred on May 2, 2002, in Bojayá, Chocó, when a gas cylinder bomb fired by the FARC-EP struck a church, killing at least 117 civilians, including at least forty-eight children, who had taken refuge there. Letter to Commander Manuel Marulanda, FARC-EP, May 8, 2002.
201. Caracol radio broadcast, "Cien mil minas quiebrapatatas están sembradas en Colombia," March 6, 2003 [online], <http://www.caracol.com.co/titular.asp?ID=69429> (retrieved on March 6, 2002).
202. "Campo minado," *Semana*, December 9, 2002.
203. UNICEF-Colombia, Newsletter, November 2002 [online], <http://www.unicef.org/co/news-nov-eng.htm#> (retrieved on May 7, 2003).
204. Human Rights Watch interview with "Uriel," Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
205. Human Rights Watch interview with "Héctor," Bogotá, June 3, 2002
206. Claymores are manually activated landmines. Human Rights Watch interview with "Dagoberto," Medellín, May 31, 2002
207. Human Rights Watch interview with "Betty," Bogotá, May 30, 2002
208. Human Rights Watch interview with "Victor," Bogotá, June 10, 2002

9. DISCIPLINE AND PUNISHMENT

209. Common article 3 to the 1949 Geneva Conventions concerning non-international armed conflicts prohibits “[t]he passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.” Article 6 of Protocol II sets out these requirements in detail. To qualify as fair trials, they must guarantee due process rights, including ensuring that the accused is informed of the charge against him or her as well as the trial procedure; allowing the accused a proper defense, including competent counsel; charging defendants based only on individual responsibility for a crime, not group responsibility; affording the accused the presumption of innocence; and avoiding *in absentia* trials. Moreover, Protocol II requires a clear appeals process. If these guarantees are not assured, no sentence may be carried out.
210. Human Rights Watch interview with “Vicente,” Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
211. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ómar,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
212. *Ibid.*
213. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ramiro,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
214. Human Rights Watch interview with “Alberto,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002
215. Human Rights Watch interview with “Marcos,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002
216. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ángela,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002
217. Human Rights Watch interview with “Carolina,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
218. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ómar,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
219. Human Rights Watch interview with “Rodrigo,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
220. Human Rights Watch interview with “Marta,” Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
221. In January, 2002, the police of Huila province found the bodies of three children in an unmarked grave near Suaza, some 350 kilometers south-east of Bogotá. According to the police, the bodies belonged to three child combatants known as “Old Man,” “Elder,” and “Colombia.” According to one press account, after deserting, the children hid with the help of some peasants, but were discovered by rebels, who shot them. “Guerrilleros asesinan a niños desertores,” *El Universal* (Caracas), January 28, 2002.
222. Human Rights Watch interview with “Carolina,” Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
223. Sibylla Brodzinsky, “A government program aims to take former guerrilla fighters and give them back their childhood,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 7, 2002.
224. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ángela,” June 2, 2002.
225. Human Rights Watch interview, Medellín, June 5, 2002
226. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jorge,” Medellín, June 5, 2002
227. Human Rights Watch e-mail correspondence with an ICBF social worker, November 9, 2002.
228. Human Rights Watch interview with “Elizabeth,” Bogotá, June 3, 2002
229. Human Rights Watch interview with “Mauricio,” Bogotá, June 3, 2002
230. Human Rights Watch interview with “Raúl,” Bogotá, June 3, 2002.
231. The combatant was his elder brother, Henry, aged twenty. Henry was executed for

- falling asleep on guard duty. His body was returned to his family in Granada. According to William, the army entered the camp when Henry should have been on guard. Although he had served five years in the ranks and had an unblemished record, Henry was blamed for the death of eight guerrillas who were killed in the ensuing firefight. No war council was held. Human Rights Watch interview with "William," Medellín, June 6, 2002.
232. Human Rights Watch interview with "Héctor," Medellín, June 6, 2002.
233. Ibid.
234. Human Rights Watch interview with "Adolfo," Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
235. See <http://colombia-libre.org/colombialibre/estatutos.asp> (retrieved on August 8, 2002).
236. Human Rights Watch interview with "Bernardo," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
237. The ACCU, established by Carlos Castaño in 1994, was one of the first paramilitary groups now represented in the umbrella group AUC.
238. Human Rights Watch interview with "Adolfo," Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
239. Human Rights Watch interview with "Bernardo," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
240. Human Rights Watch interview with "Adolfo," Bogotá, June 10, 2002.

10. COMBAT

241. Human Rights Watch interview with "Adriana," Medellín, June 6, 2002.
242. Human Rights Watch interview with "Mauricio," Bogotá, June 3, 2002.
243. Human Rights Watch interview with "Diego," Bogotá, June 3, 2002.
244. Human Rights Watch interview with "Elizabeth," Bogotá, June 3, 2002.
245. Human Rights Watch interview with "Héctor," Bogotá, June 3, 2002.
246. Human Rights Watch interview with "Jessica," Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
247. Human Rights Watch interview with "Adriana," Medellín, June 6, 2002.
248. Human Rights Watch interview with "Óscar," Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
249. One former paramilitary combatant told us that the guerrillas had a "system of throwing one group up front and after this first group they send up another. If they see that quite a lot of the first group have been killed, they send the 'red band' guerrillas up against us. That's a special group. Those guys have five, six, even ten years experience of fighting in the mountains." According to the ICBF study *Guerreros sin sombra*, "The front-line guerrillas are often children whom they send up front in combat so that us soldiers and police use up our ammunition and men; in the second line go the more experienced fighters." Unnamed army official cited in *Guerreros sin sombra*, p. 113.
250. Claudia Rocío Vásquez R., "Niños, entrenados durante un año en la Zona de Despeje," *El Tiempo*, December 4, 2000.
251. Colombia's military selects names for major operations
252. Some interviewers referred loosely to eighteen-year-olds as kids (*pelados*). In asking the interviewees for estimates of the numbers of child combatants in their units, we explained carefully that by children we referred to under eighteen-year-olds.
253. Human Rights Watch interview with "Ramón," Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
254. Human Rights Watch interview with "Ángela," Bogotá, June 2, 2002.

255. Human Rights Watch interview with “Darío,” Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002
256. Félix Quintero Pino, “Nadie lloró a los niños de Surata,” *El Tiempo*, December 9, 2000.
257. Juan Forero, “A Child’s Vision of War: Boy Guerrillas in Colombia,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2000.
258. Elizabeth Yarce, “El dolor de los niños combatientes,” *El Colombiano*, January 31, 2002.
259. Frances Robles, “The new face of Colombian leftist guerrillas: children,” *Miami Herald*, July 14, 2002.
260. Human Rights Watch interview with “Betty,” Bogotá, June 6, 2002.
261. Human Rights Watch interview with “Mauricio,” June 3, 2002.
262. *Guerreros Sin Sombra*, p. 115.
263. *Ibid.*
264. Gonzalo Guillén, “Niños de las FARC-EP siembran terror en Colombia,” *El Nuevo Herald*, (Miami), October 19, 2001 (online), <http://colombia.analitica.com/cpi/4448575.asp> (retrieved on May 22, 2002).
265. Human Rights Watch interview with “Alberto,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
266. Human Rights Watch interview with “Juan Carlos,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
267. Human Rights Watch interview with “Uriel,” Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
268. Human Rights Watch interview with “Óscar,” Bogotá, June 5, 2002.
269. Human Rights Watch interview with “Leonel,” Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
270. Human Rights Watch interview with “Adolfo,” Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
271. Human Rights Watch interview with “Severo,” Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.

11. PARTICIPATION IN SUMMARY EXECUTIONS AND TORTURE

272. Human Rights Watch interview with “Adolfo,” Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
273. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jorge,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
274. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ramón,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
275. Human Rights Watch interview with “Milton,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
276. From a document entitled “Beligerancia” published by the FARC-EP on its website <http://www.FARC-EP.org/> (retrieved on August 11, 2002). This document gives details of the FARC-EP’s internal regulations, and is described as having been written to support the organization’s claims to be treated as a belligerent under international law in the Colombian armed conflict.
277. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jorge,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
278. Human Rights Watch interview with “Pedro,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
279. Human Rights Watch interview with “Rodrigo,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
280. Human Rights Watch interview with “Alberto,” Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
281. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jorge,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
282. Human Rights Watch, *The Sixth Division: Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia*, p. 51-61.
283. Human Rights Watch interviews with former child combatants, Bogotá, May 31 and June 1; and Medellín, June 5, 2002.
284. Human Rights Watch interview with “Héctor,” Medellín, June 6, 2002.

285. Ibid.
286. Human Rights Watch interview with "Peter," Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
287. Human Rights Watch interview with "Jenny," Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
288. Human Rights Watch interview with "Andalecio," Medellín, June 6, 2002.
289. Human Rights Watch interview with "Humberto," Bogotá, June 2, 2002
290. Human Rights Watch interview with "Darío," Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002
291. Human Rights Watch interview with "Ómar," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002
292. Human Rights Watch interview with "Adolfo," Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
293. Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2003* (New York: Human Rights Watch 2003) [online], <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k3/americas4.html> (retrieved on May 21, 2003).
294. Human Rights Watch interview with "Jónatan," Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
295. Human Rights Watch interview with "Cristin," Bogotá, May 30, 2002.
296. Human Rights Watch interview with "Leonel," Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
297. Human Rights Watch interview with "Laidy," Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
298. Human Rights Watch interview with "Óscar," Medellín, June 5, 2002.
299. Household hydrochloric acid (*ácido muriático*) can cause severe burns.
300. Human Rights Watch interview with "Adolfo," Bogotá, June 10, 2002.

12. KIDNAPPINGS

301. Human Rights Watch interview with "Lenny," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
302. País Libre, "Autor Secuestro 2002" [online], http://www.paislibre.org:8080/secuestros_2002.pdf (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
303. "Por buen camino," *Semana*, January 13, 2003.
304. Human Rights Watch interview with "Ángela," Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
305. Human Rights Watch interview with "Dagoberto," Medellín, June 5, 2002
306. Human Rights Watch interview with "Darío," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
307. Ibid.
308. Human Rights Watch interview with "Lenny," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.
309. The FARC-EP kidnapped the former senator and presidential candidate for the Oxygen Party on February, 23, 2002. Betancourt was stopped at a roadblock as she was driving to San Vicente del Caguán in the Zone. She was attempting to visit the region following the Colombian government's decision to reenter. "Pastrana rechazó secuestro de Betancourt y pidió respaldo internacional," *El Tiempo*, February 26, 2002.
310. As of this writing, Betancourt remains a FARC-EP hostage. Human Rights Watch interview with "Severo," Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002.
311. País Libre, "Autor Secuestros 2002" [online], http://www.paislibre.org:8080/secuestros_2002.pdf (retrieved on May 1, 2003).
312. Ibid.

13. THE GOVERNMENT FORCES

313. Human Rights Watch interview with "Darío," Bucaramanga, June 7, 2002.

314. Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, "1379 Report," November 7, 2002.
315. Felipe's testimony was part of the case prepared by the Attorney General's Office against Palacé Battalion commander Col. Rafael Hani Jimeno. The case is summarized in the decision ordering Hani's arrest, filed under Case Number 835 and dated December 21, 2000. Human Rights Watch interviewed Felipe on January 19, 2000. Prosecutors later closed the case against Hani without filing formal charges.
316. Ibid.
317. Human Rights Watch interview with "Fernando," Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
318. Human Rights Watch interview with Lt. Col. Luis Alfonso Novoa Díaz, Coordinador Grupo Derechos Humanos, Policía Nacional, Santafé de Bogotá, May 27, 2002.

14. DESERTION, CAPTURE, AND AFTER

319. Human Rights Watch interview with "Édgar," Medellín, June 5, 2002.
320. Human Rights Watch interview with Jairo González, Public Advocate's Office, Medellín, Antioquia, June 4, 2002.
321. Congressional debate convened by Sen. Rafael Orduz Medina in May 2002. See Rafael Orduz, "Niños, niñas y adolescentes víctimas del conflicto armado: una prioridad para el Estado," in Martha Nubia Bello y Sandra Ruiz Cevallos (eds.) *Conflicto Armado, Niñez y Juventud: una Perspectiva Psicosocial*, (Santafé de Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2002), p. 133; Human Rights Watch interview with Mario Suescún, Public Advocate's Office, June 12, 2002.
322. *Guerreros sin Sombra*, pp. 174-175.
323. Human Rights Watch interview with Mario Suescún, Public Advocate's Office, June 12, 2002.
324. "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration." Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 3 (1).
325. Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, Organización Internacional para la Migración, Save the Children U.K., Defensoría del Pueblo, "Ruta Jurídica y Fundamentos Normativos de los Niños, Niñas y Jóvenes Desvinculados del Conflicto Armado," Bogotá, April, 2002.
326. In the most complete study published so far on Colombian child combatants, based on a sample of 119 children, the Attorney General's Office and the ICBF concluded that "a product of the new policy of human rights promotion followed by the Army and the Police is that complaints of ill-treatment, although representative, were infrequent, although this should be treated with caution since minors do not necessarily report abuses for fear of possible reprisals." *Guerreros Sin Sombra*, p. 179.
327. Human Rights Watch interview with "Efraín," Bogotá, May 31 2002.
328. Human Rights Watch interview with "Rodolfo," Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
329. Human Rights Watch interview with "Jaime," Medellín, June 5, 2002.
330. Human Rights Watch interview with "Rodolfo," Bogotá, June 1, 2002.
331. Human Rights Watch interview with "Darío," Bucaramanga, June 8, 2002

332. Human Rights Watch interview with “Ramón,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
333. “Niñez y conflicto armado: vacíos legales sin resolver,” *El Tiempo*, September 30, 2002.

15. RESCUED FROM WAR: GOVERNMENT REHABILITATION PROGRAMS FOR CHILD COMBATANTS

334. Human Rights Watch interview with “Hernán,” Bogotá, June 3, 2002.
335. Human Rights Watch interview with “Jaime,” Medellín, June 5, 2002.
336. Human Rights Watch interview with “Estéban,” Bogotá, June 2, 2002.
337. Human Rights Watch interview with “Laidy,” Bogotá, May 31, 2002.
338. UNICEF Colombia, “Situación de la niñez víctima del conflicto armado,” press release, Bogotá, October 10, 2002.
339. Human Rights Watch interview with Marta Ballesteros, Ministry of the Interior, Bogotá, June 10, 2002.
340. Human Rights Watch interview with Marta Ballesteros, official in charge of the Ministry of the Interior’s reinsertion program for child deserters, Bogotá, June 10, 2002. Human Rights Watch talked to several children in the program’s school in Bogotá.
341. United Nations General Assembly, Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children, Impact of armed conflict on children, Note by the Secretary-General, Addendum, A/51/306/Add.1., September 9, 1996. Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states, “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.”
342. Ministerio de Salud, Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, “Documento de Evaluación Gestión ICBF, Actores Armados, Tema: Niñez y Conflicto Armado,” June 1998 (anexo 2)
343. The ICBF rehabilitation program is funded in part by the Colombian government, and also receives financial assistance from the International Organization for Migration, Save the Children (U.K.) and the United States Agency for International Development.
344. Beatriz Linares, “Reto de la Defensoría del Pueblo frente a la niñez y juventud colombiana víctimas del conflicto armado,” in Martha Bello and Sandra Ruiz (eds.), *Conflicto Armado, Niñez y Juventud* (Santafé de Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2002) pp. 157-168.
345. Human Rights Watch interview with a social worker from the ICBF center in Medellín, June 5, 2002. One of the rare serious clashes between former paramilitary and guerrilla children occurred in this center shortly after it was opened. The former paramilitaries had to be separated and relocated to other centers.
346. Human Rights Watch interview with Blanca Cecilia Gómez, Save the Children (UK), Bogotá, May 28, 2002.

347. Figures from the Program of Humanitarian Assistance to the Demobilized (Programa Para la Atención Humanitaria al Desmovilizado) of the Presidency; and “Los niños llevan el peso de la guerra en Colombia,” *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami), November 8, 2002
348. Chapter 1 (title), Ley 418 de 26 de diciembre de 1997, available on the Internet at <http://www.red.gov.co/LaInstitucion/Normatividad/Ley418-1997/ley418-1997.html> (retrieved on November 26, 2002).
349. *Ibid.*, article 50 (3).
350. Articles 15 and 16 of Law No. 782, of December 23, 2002. Law 782 is available online at <http://bib.minjusticia.gov.co/normas/leyes/2002/l7822002.htm> (retrieved on June 2, 2003).
351. Article 17 of Law No. 782.
352. The bill did not advance in 2002, due to an effective lobby by children’s rights groups. Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Colombian Commission of Jurists, May 12, 2003.
353. See for example, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers Global Report 2001* (London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2001) and Brett, Rachel and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers* (Stockholm: Radda Barnen, 1998), pp 93-99.
354. United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (“The Beijing Rules”), G.A. res. 40/33, annex, 40 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 53) at 207, U.N. Doc. A/40/53 (1985) [online], <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/j3unsmr.htm> (retrieved on June 9, 2003).
355. Annual Report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 1999, Chapter 6, Recommendation for eradicating the recruitment of children and their participation in armed conflicts, OEA/Ser.L/V/II.106 Doc. 6 April 13, 1999 [online], <http://www.cidh.oas.org/annualrep/99eng/Chapter6a.htm> (retrieved on June 9, 2003).
356. Convention on the Rights of the Child, arts. 39, 40, adopted November 20, 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, U.N. Doc. A/RES/44/25 (entered into force September 2, 1990); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 14 (4), opened for signature December 19, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171 (entered into force March 23, 1976).
357. Proyecto de Ley, “Plan Nacional de Desarrollo, 2002-2006: Hacia un Estado Comunitario,” Departamento Nacional de Planeación [online], http://www.dnp.gov.co/01_CONT/POLITICA/PLAN.HTM (retrieved on June 3, 2003).
358. As of this writing, that remains true. Informe Anual del Alto Comisionado sobre Derechos Humanos en Colombia, February 24, 2003, E/CN.4/2003/13. Available at <http://www.hchr.org.co/documentoseinformes/informes/altocomisionado/informe2002.html> (retrieved on May 19, 2003).
359. Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, art. 8 (2)(e)(vii); and Report of the Preparatory Committee 1998, Add. 1, fn. 12 to article 5, War Crimes, B(t) Option 2, p. 25.
360. Informe Anual del Alto Comisionado sobre Derechos Humanos en Colombia, February 24, 2003, E/CN.4/2003/13. Available at <http://www.hchr.org.co/documentoseinformes/informes/altocomisionado/informe2002.html> (retrieved on May 19, 2003).

16. LEGAL STANDARDS

361. In his statement to the Security Council at the January 14 debate, Special Representative for the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict Olara Otunnu proposed the following as possible measures: “imposition of travel restrictions on leaders and their exclusion from any governance structures and amnesty provisions, a ban on the export or supply of arms, and restriction on the flow of financial resources to the parties concerned.” See <http://www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict/> (retrieved on April 6, 2003).
362. Protocol II, art. 1(1).
363. Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), 8 June 1977, Article 4 (3) (c) .
364. According to Article 93 of the Constitution: “the international treaties and agreements ratified by Congress that recognize human rights and prohibit their limitation in states of emergency prevail in the national law.” Constitución Política de Colombia de 1991, actualizada hasta Reforma de 2001, Article 93.
365. Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 2,3.
366. Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, UN Doc A/Conf 39/28, UKTS 58 (1980), art. 18.
367. Law No. 704.
368. International Labor Organization, Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (Convention 182), Article 3 (a).
369. Article 7(1) .
370. Worst Forms of Child Labor Recommendation 190, ILO General Conference, 87th Session, adopted June 17, 1999, art. 12.
371. Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 32 (1).
372. Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 19 (1).
373. Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 9.
374. Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, art. 8(2)(e)(vii).
375. United Nations Security Council Resolution No. 1379, of November 20, 2001.

APPENDIX

Log of Human Rights Watch Interviews of Former Child Combatants

Note: Pseudonyms listed in **bold** refer to girls.

	Pseudonym	Age (Entry)	Armed Group	Age (Int.)	School
1	Bernardo	6-7 years	AUC	17 years	None
2	Jon Freddy	6 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 1
3	Brandon	7 years	FARC-EP	12 years	Grade 5
4	Peter	7 years	FARC-EP/ UC-ELN	15 years	
5	Juana	7 years	FARC-EP	12 years	None
6	Pedro	8 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 5
7	Uriel	8 years	AUC	14 years	
8	Flor	8 years	FARC-EP	14 years	Grade 2
9	Dagoberto	9 years	FARC-EP	17 years	None
10	Mauricio	11 years	FARC-EP	17 years	None
11	León	11 years	FARC-EP	17 years	
12	Andrea	11 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 3
13	Oswaldo	12 years	FARC-EP	14 years	None
14	José Antonio	12 years	FARC-EP	13 years	
15	Cristián	12 years	AUC	17 years	Grade 1
16	Alberto	12 years	FARC-EP	14 years	Grade 5
17	Mariluz	12 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 5
18	Laidy	12 years	AUC	14 years	Grade 6
19	Tancredo	12 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 8
20	Percy	12 years	FARC-EP militia	14 years	
21	Angela	12 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 4
22	Estéban	12 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 6
23	Ramón	12 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 2
24	Diego	12 years	FARC-EP	16 years	
25	Héctor	12 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 2
26	Raúl	12 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 2
27	Óscar	12 years	AUC	15 years	Grade 3
28	Marilín	12 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 7
29	Adriana	12 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 1
30	Darío	12 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 4
31	María Claudia	12 years	UC-ELN	16 years	Grade 4
32	Leonardo	12 years	FARC-EP	16 years	
33	Marcos	13.5 years	FARC-EP	18 years	
34	Máximo	13-14 years	FARC-EP	14 years	Grade 8
35	Rogelio	13-14 years	FARC-EP militia	15 years	Grade 5
36	Nelson	13-14 years	FARC-EP	16 years	
37	Fernando	13-14 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 8
38	Ignacio	13 years	UC-ELN/ FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 4
39	William	13 years	UC-ELN	14 years	
40	Dani	13 years	unclear	16 years	Grade 5
41	Milton	13 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 6
42	Jenny	13 years	UC-ELN	14 years	Grade 6
43	Juan Pedro	13 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 5

Entry	Served	In combat	Serious Injuries	Exit
Voluntary	8 years	Many times	Shot	Deserted
Voluntary	8 years	Many times	Beaten	Captured
Voluntary	5 years			
Voluntary	18 months	Several times	No	
Voluntary	5 years	1+ times		
Voluntary	7 years	18+ times		
Voluntary	6 years	30 times		Captured
Voluntary	4.5 years	3 times		Deserted
Voluntary	7 years	100+ times	Shot	Captured
Voluntary	5 years	Many times	Yes	Captured
Voluntary	4 or 5 years	Many times		Captured
Voluntary	4 years		Forced abortion	Deserted
Voluntary	2 years	5 times	Shot	Captured
Pressured	Never	No		Deserted
Voluntary	3 years	Several times		Captured
Forced	Over 1 year	3 times		Captured
Voluntary	2.5 years	Several times		Deserted
Voluntary	2 years	Many times		Captured
Voluntary	5 years	30 times		Captured
Voluntary				Deserted
Voluntary	4 years	Many times	Shot	Captured
Voluntary	4 years	8 times		Deserted
Voluntary	3 years	Many times	Shot in leg, beaten	Captured
Voluntary	3 years	Many times		Captured
Voluntary	4 years	3 times		Captured
Voluntary	3 years	Many times	Shot	Captured
Voluntary	2 years	Many times		Captured
Voluntary	2 years	Never		Deserted
Pressured		Shot		Captured
Voluntary	15 months	3 times		Captured
Forced	2 years	~10 times		Deserted
Voluntary	3 years	Many times		Deserted
Voluntary	4 years	1 time	Shot	Deserted
Voluntary	2 months			Permission
Voluntary	5 months	Never	No	Deserted
Voluntary	2 years	4 times	No	Captured
	11 months			
Voluntary	6+6 months	8 times		Captured
Voluntary	1 year	Several times		Captured
unclear	unclear			
Voluntary	2 years	5 times		Captured
Forced	1 month	Never	No	Deserted
Voluntary	2 years	1+ times	No	Deserted

	Pseudonym	Age (Entry)	Armed Group	Age (Int.)	School
44	Humberto	13 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 3
45	Elizabeth	13 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 3
46	Betty	13 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 3
47	Rafael	13 years	UC-ELN	17 years	
48	Lenny	13 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 5
49	Carolina	13 years	FARC-EP	18 years	Grade 4
50	Yelva	13 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 6
51	Marianela	13 years	FARC-EP	18 years	Grade 7
52	Mayda	13 years	FARC-EP	14 years	Grade 5
53	Carmela	13 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 6
54	Adolfo	13 years	AUC	17 years	
55	Victor	13 years	UC-ELN	16 years	
56	Rosita	13 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 4
57	Teddy	13 years	UC-ELN	18 years	
58	Xaviera	14 years	UC-ELN	16 years	
59	Wilson	14 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 7
60	Jónatan	14 years	AUC	17 years	Grade 1
61	Juan Carlos	14 years	AUC	16 years	Grade 5
62	Johana	14 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 7
63	Rodrigo	14 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 5
64	Leonel	14 years	AUC	15 years	Grade 5
65	Marta	14 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 4
66	Vicente	14 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 8
67	Joseph	14 years	FARC-EP	15 years	Grade 6
68	Jorge	14 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 3
69	Giovanni	14 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 7
70	Andalecio	14 years	UC-ELN	16 years	
71	Luisa	14 years	FARC-EP	16 years	None
72	Candelaria	14 years	UC-ELN	17 years	Grade 5
73	Severo	14 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 6
74	Orlando	14 years	FARC-EP	16 years	
75	Daniela	14 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 10
76	César	14 years	FARC-EP	16 years	
77	Jaime	15-16 years	UC-ELN militia	17 years	
78	Patrick	15-16 years	FARC-EP	16 years	
79	Jesús	15-16 years	AUC	16 years	
80	Margarita	15-16 years	UC-ELN	16 years	Grade 7
81	Jhony	15-16 years	UC-ELN	15 years	Grade 5
82	Carlos	15 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 1
83	Jessica	15 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 9
84	Wilmer	15 years	UC-ELN militia	17 years	Grade 4
85	Arlette	15 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 7
86	Genaro	15 years	ERP	17 years	Grade 5

Entry	Served	In combat	Serious Injuries	Exit
Voluntary	~2 years			Deserted
Voluntary	2 years	3 times		Deserted
Voluntary	1.5 years	1+ times		Captured
Voluntary	3 years	Many times		Deserted
Voluntary	2 years	A few times		Deserted
Voluntary				Captured
Voluntary	1.5-2 years	3 times		Captured
Voluntary	4 years	Several times		Deserted
Forced				
Voluntary	15 months	4 times		
Voluntary	3.6 years	Many times		Captured
	1 year		Mine injuries	Hospital
Voluntary	1.5 years	2 times		Captured
	4 years			
Forced	1.5 years	Several times	Shot	Deserted
Voluntary	2.5 years	~20 times	Burned by shrapnel	Captured
Voluntary	1.5 years			Captured
Voluntary	10 months	~18 times	Shot (arm), shrapnel	Captured
Forced	6 months	Never	No	Deserted
Voluntary	2 years	Several times		Deserted
Voluntary	4 months	Never		Captured
Voluntary	3 years	5 times	Shot	Captured
Voluntary	1-2 years			Deserted
Voluntary	10 months	Never		Captured
Voluntary	1 year			Deserted
Voluntary		3 times		Captured
Voluntary	2 years	21 times		Captured
Voluntary	1 year	1+ times		Deserted
Voluntary	2 years	1+ times		Deserted
Voluntary	3 years	30 times	No	Captured
Voluntary	1+ year			Captured
Voluntary	2 years	1 time		Deserted
Voluntary	2 years			Captured
Voluntary	18 months	1 time	No	Captured
Voluntary	6 months	2 times	No	Deserted
Voluntary	2 days	Never	No	Captured
Forced	1 year			Captured
Forced	2 months	Never	No	Captured
Voluntary	3 years	Several times		Deserted
Voluntary	1.5 years	4 times		Captured
Voluntary	2 years		No	Captured
Forced	5 months	Never		Deserted
Voluntary	6 months	1 time		Deserted

	Pseudonym	Age (Entry)	Armed Group	Age (Int.)	School
87	Jon	15 years	FARC-EP, Militia	16 years	Grade 1
88	Eréndira	15 years	UC-ELN	16 years	Grade 5
89	Edgar	15 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 9
90	Ómar	15 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 5
91	Ramiro	15 years	FARC-EP	17 years	
92	Lucy	15 years	FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 8
93	Julio	15 years	UC-ELN	17 years	Grade 3
94	Giovana	15 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 9
95	Otto	16-17 years	FARC-EP militia	17 years	Grade 4
96	Soria	16 years	UC-ELN	16 years	Grade 3
97	Saúl	16 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 3
98	Efraín	16 years	FARC-EP militia	16 years	Grade 5
99	Fabio	16 years	FARC-EP(brief)/AUC	17 years	Grade 6
100	Rodolfo	16 years	UC-ELN militia	17 years	Grade 3
101	Angelica	16 years	FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 5
102	Bronson	16 years	UC-ELN	18 years	Grade 7
103	Juan José	17-18 years	FARC-EP	18 years	Grade 5
104	Francisco	17 years	AUC	17 years	Grade 4
105	Rigoberto	17 years	AUC	18 years	Grade 5
106	Jon Jairo		FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 6
107	Gilberto		FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 3
108	Zenón		FARC-EP	16 years	Grade 2
109	Mario		FARC-EP	15 years	None
110	Elías		FARC-EP	17 years	
111	Danilo		FARC-EP	17 years	Grade 11
112	James		FARC-EP	17 years	

Entry	Served	In combat	Serious Injuries	Exit
Voluntary	5 months	Never	No	Deserted
Voluntary	1 year			Captured
Voluntary	2 years	5 times		Deserted
Voluntary	1 year	Several times		Deserted
Voluntary	18 months		Bomb injury	Deserted
Voluntary	8 months	Never		Captured
Voluntary	20 months	4 times		Deserted
Voluntary	5 months	Never	No	Deserted
Voluntary	2 months	Never	No	Deserted
Forced	2 months		Raped	Deserted
Voluntary	3 months	Never		Deserted
	2 months	Never	No	Captured
Voluntary	1 year	3 times		Deserted
Voluntary	3 months	Never	No	Captured
Voluntary	6 months	Never		Captured
Voluntary	1 year	1+ times		Captured
Forced	3 months	Never	No	Deserted
Voluntary	5 months	Never	No	Deserted
Voluntary	2 days	Never	No	Captured
Voluntary				Deserted
Forced	1 year	Several times		
Forced	Months			Deserted
Voluntary		1 time		Deserted
Voluntary			No	Captured
	1 month			Deserted

