

**THE REINTEGRATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA: POST PEACE  
PROCESS**

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**July 27, 2016**

**U.N. Internship**

**Colombia and the Peace Process:**

After more than 50 years of a conflict that claimed the lives of 220,000 persons and displaced nearly 6 million, the Colombian government and the country's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), finally reached a peace agreement following

more than 4 long years of negotiations. On June 23, 2016 the government of Colombia and leaders of the FARC signed a permanent ceasefire agreement to end the armed conflict or civil war that began in 1948. The agreement envisions a bilateral ceasefire and the cessation of hostilities. The major issues that have been negotiated have included land reform and rural development, political participation, illegal drugs and trafficking, victims rights, transitional justice, and reparation. In essence, the FARC has agreed to stop violence that for years has affected the civilian population in Colombia including drug trafficking, extortion, placing landmines, and recruiting youth to fight. Beyond the signing of the landmark agreement and the full turnover of the guerrilla weapons within 6 months after the peace treaty is signed, ensuring peace will require enormous efforts during the post conflict era. Members of an unarmed United Nations mission will verify compliance with the terms of the peace agreement making sure both FARC and the Colombian government are not violating the terms of the ceasefire.

Considering the FARC's historical "dependence" on the drug trade, the illicit drug market has been one of the most debated issues addressed throughout the peace deal. Clearly, the reintegration of child soldiers, even though a very important issue, was not prioritized as a major one. But yet the issue has been addressed and clearly ensuring peace will require incorporating into the process the youth that have been abducted into the long civil war and have not known anything else than violence during their life and as such have potentially been the hardest hit. Reintegration of child soldiers is a very complex, lengthy, and costly process that has serious impacts from the physical separation from the guerilla groups to the desired reunification with birth family.

### **Youth forced to fight in conflict:**

*"A child soldier is any person under eighteen years of age who is part of any regular or irregular armed force or group. This includes those who are forcibly recruited as well as those who join voluntarily. All child or adolescent participants regardless of function—cooks, porters, messengers, girls used as "wives," and other support functions—are included as well as those considered combatants"<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> "Release and Reintegration | United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict." United Nations Office of the

Child soldiers have been used extensively during conflicts. In fact, the involvement of child soldiers in armed conflicts has surprisingly increased in recent years worldwide. According to UNICEF, about 300,000 children<sup>2</sup> have been estimated to be actively involved in armed conflicts. Conflict coverage in several countries ravaged by civil wars have highlighted that the use of child soldiers is a global problem. The first question that comes to mind is how can boys and girls be abducted or coerced into joining the armed forces. Sadly, the United Nations in one of its reports addressing the roots or causes of child soldiering has concluded that “children are considered an economically efficient alternative to adult combatants.”<sup>3</sup> The indoctrination of the youth appears to be easier as children are not only easy to manipulate and intimidate but also are not so afraid of death, therefore becoming good soldiers. Also food, shelter, and survival are offered to children that do not have access to these basic necessities of survival. Many child soldiers virtually grow up within an armed movement, that is their way of life since a very young age. “They may have joined for protection, or face an environment where joining an armed group seemed the only choice in life.” Social factors are key in the recruitment process. Children who are poor, live in a war zone, are displaced from their families, have little to eat or have limited access to education are more likely to be recruited against their will.<sup>4</sup> Typically, children are recruited in a poor socio-economic environment where their parents are already directly or indirectly involved in the armed conflict and where external support is not present. Amongst the countries who have reported the use of child soldiers since 2011 are Afghanistan, Colombia, India, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Pakistan, Thailand, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>5</sup>

The case of Colombia illustrates the foregoing. As the conflict lasted more than 50 years, in most cases children have grown up in the context of conflict most often with no other choice than

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Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF. "Children as Soldiers." Children as Soldiers.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations. "Root Causes of Child Recruitment | United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict." United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Casey, "A Former Girl Soldier in Colombia Finds ‘Life Is Hard’ as a Civilian." The New York Times. April 27, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

participating in the conflict themselves. The recruitment strategies of the guerilla groups, the ignorance and lack of education of the youth and the economical situation of their families all favored the recruitment of children soldiers.

Not only youth are often forced to fight and commit atrocities in conflict zones, but sadly child soldiers have often been referred to as “future barbarians” and “killing machines.” As Ishmael Beah recounts in *A Long Way Home*, killing became “as easy as drinking water.”

### **Why are children often left out of the disarmament/reintegration process?**

The reintegration of former children soldiers has typically not been amongst the top priority debated during peace negotiations processes. In fact, research has shown that children are not only often left out of the formal disarmament and reintegration process but also are so afraid of being labeled by their own community as ex-soldiers or ex-killers, that they prefer, more than often, not to seek any outside help. The challenge is complicated and often viewed as hopeless. Children soldiers have suffered from the armed conflict or civil war and therefore should also be viewed as victims as not only have they typically been abused and their child rights violated, but at the same time youth forced to fight in conflicts have also committed atrocities themselves. How to balance and reconcile the fact that those child soldiers should be entitled to both seek justice in reparation of their rights that have been violated and also be accountable for their reprehensive acts is a difficult challenge. Even more difficult in the post conflict period is the transition to civilian life and reintegration in the community. The family reunification, reconciliation and reunification are all very complicated phases that necessitate time, efforts and resources to be successful.

Although difficult, research has shown that the reintegration of children soldiers can be successful as ex fighters have been found to reintegrate their own communities and ultimately becoming productive members for society. “Key factors are political will, including child soldiers in peace agreements, resources to meet their special needs, and community and family involvement.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> UNICEF Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit. Child Soldiers: Prevention, Demobilization and Reintegration. Report no. 3. May 2002.

“The rehabilitation and reintegration is critical for the well being of former child soldiers and to ensure that cycles of violence are not perpetuated, and should follow the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007)”<sup>7</sup>.

The case of the RDC: during the 10 year conflict in the RDC, armed guerrillas abducted kids and forced them to fight side by side with them. Boys and girls were forced to kill human beings. Girls were abused sexually and as a result babies were born. Post conflict, the situation of these children is not really improved as in most cases the return to a “normal life” is almost impossible as most are rejected by their own families and suffer resentment and distrust from their communities.

### **How to help Children Soldiers Reintegrate?**

Reintegration of child soldiers is considered to be one of the most difficult challenges in the peacebuilding process. Although difficult, has been shown by UNICEF through case studies that they can become productive members of society. Again, main factors to reach the successful outcome include political will, including child soldiers in peace agreements, dedicating resources to meet their needs, and community involvement.<sup>8</sup> Two major steps to reach a successful outcome, include the demobilization and then the reintegration. The demobilization process involves the phase where child soldiers must be separated from the military authority and protected to avoid intimidation. Formal programs and planning at that stage are essential.

### **The case of Colombia and the Peace Process: Agreement addresses demobilization (leaving of the arms)**

Demobilization which includes the exercise of formally returning the arms (including for child soldiers) usually follows a peace agreement. Colombian president, Juan Manuel Santos, and the FARC meet on June 23, 2016 and finally signed the permanent bilateral cease-fire agreement. This finality entails that the FARC will liberate all of their child soldiers in the next six months,

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<sup>7</sup> "Release and Reintegration | United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict." United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

and the government pledged to to reintegrate them using “special comprehensive program.”<sup>9</sup> This reintegration process is going to be supported and helped by the UNICEF<sup>10</sup>. This process is going to be a very a slow one as the number of child soldiers is not yet exactly determined, as their was never an official record of those who were members of the FARC.

### **The role of Sports in the Reintegration Phase:**

A UN study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children<sup>11</sup> states that “children need the intellectual and emotional stimulation that is provided by structured group activities such as play, participating in sports, drawing and storytelling.” Research has shown that sport helps children and young people who have been involved in armed conflict reintegrate in their communities “by drawing them out of violent routines and offering them socially-acceptable and structured patterns of behaviour.”<sup>12</sup> Participating in team sports has been shown to help break the cycle of violence. The impact of sports post civil war has been reported by the United Nations after the Liberian civil conflict ended: soccer tournaments were reported as having allowed lower the tension and aggressive behavior of child soldiers<sup>13</sup>.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Prevention is an urgent concern
2. Compliance with international law
3. DO not allow that The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Children which prohibits children under 18 to be fighting in a conflict zone, was signed by 159 countries, be violated

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Gill, "Colombia's Peace Deals in Depth: Child Soldiers." RSS. May 16, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Casey, "Colombia and FARC Rebels Reach a Deal to Free Child Soldiers."

The New

York Times. May 15, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> "Reintegration of Child Soldiers through Sport." : International Platform on Sport and Development.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Joe Hena, "Empowerment, Reintegration and Rehabilitation of War Affected Youths through the Use of Sports." Play the Game -. November 11, 2002.

4. Reintegration programs done at the community level and taking into account special needs of the child soldiers
5. Educational programs focusing on both prevention and reintegration into the community. Question of accountability and justice must be addressed
6. Raise awareness of child rights/monitoring child abuse
7. Local reporting mechanisms
8. Funding issues:
9. The case of the RDC and the USAID supported program: In DRC the USAID works to assist reintegrate youth forced to fight in conflict.
10. The USAID has focused on a comprehensive program includes education, counseling, activities , training and medical and financial assistance
11. Reintegration through sports (i.e. Bicy-Green)

**Conclusion:**

The long sought-after peace treaty between the FARC and the Colombian government has brought an end to a conflict that devastated the country for five decades. Now that it is on pen and paper the greatest difficulty is going to be the actual implementations of what is said on the treaty. Furthermore, the greatest challenge the Colombian people are going to have is that of overcoming their differences and very engraved out-dated social stigmas. Finally, Colombia is going to have to mold its near future so that all, no matter what race, gender or affiliation can prosper, and as such really achieve long term piece in route to the SDGs.

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