

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

10 April 2013

### COL104331.E

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Colombia: Recruitment methods of armed groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) (2011-March 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. Overview

Several sources indicate that both guerrillas and paramilitary groups have been involved in forced recruitment (UN 7 Feb. 2013a, Sec. 43; US 24 May 2012, 1; Verdadabierta.com 21 Dec. 2011).

#### 1.1 Recruitment of Minors

According to Verdadabierta.com, a website created by the Ideas for Peace Foundation (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, FIP), an academic think-tank, and *Semana*, a Bogotá-based news magazine, which work together to monitor the armed conflict in Colombia (ibid. n.d.), a [translation] "high" percentage of combatants of illegal groups were recruited when they were children (ibid. 21 Dec. 2011). Sources indicate that the exact number of children participating in the armed conflict is unknown (ibid.; US 24 May 2012, 18). The US *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011* indicates that, according to UNICEF statistics for 2010, between 10,000 and 13,000 children in Colombia are currently participating in illegal armed groups (ibid.). Natalia Springer, a consultant on transitional justice and conflict resolution (Colombia 26 Jan. 2009; *Semana* 2 May 2004), who has provided services to NATO and the UN (ibid.), conducted a study on the recruitment of minors in Colombia, with a sample of 491 children and seven recruiters from illegal armed groups with the rank of [translation] "commander" (Springer 2012, 15). She found that at least 18,000 minors belong to illegal armed groups, and at least 100,000 are linked to the [translation] "illegal economy" that is controlled by these groups (ibid., 67). The study, carried out with the support of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, also indicates that 69 percent of children recruited are under 15 years of age, and there are cases of children having been recruited at eight years of age (ibid., 22). Verdadabierta.com reports that children are recruited starting at age 11 or 12 (21 Dec. 2011). The International Crisis Group indicates that FARC recruits minors under the age of 15, particularly in zones under military pressure (25 Sept. 2012, 26).

Several organizations, including the Society for Threatened Peoples of Germany, Caritas Norway, the Swedish Foundation for Human Rights, the Washington Office on Latin America, and Peace Brigades International state that women who fear the forced recruitment of their children tend to flee their places of residence as an option for survival (UN 7 Feb. 2013b, Sec. 75). Verdadabierta.com also corroborates the above (21 Dec. 2011). A compilation prepared by the UNHRC for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for Colombia indicates that "displacement was the only option for families to avoid the recruitment of children by non-State armed groups" (UN 7 Feb. 2013a, Sec. 44).

Sources report that the problem of child recruitment is underreported (International Crisis Group 25 Sept. 2012, 13; Verdadabierta.com 21 Dec. 2011), because families do not consider it a [translation] "serious" problem (ibid.). Verdadabierta.com quotes a human rights advisor with the Office of the Vice-President as saying that [translation] "the problem [of forced recruitment] persists and occurs 'completely anonymous[ly] and under the silent watch of families, communities and institutions'" (21 Dec. 2011).

Springer indicates that forced recruitment of children is more active in 22 of the 32 departments (2012, 64) although she also notes that this phenomenon is present throughout the country (Springer 2012, 22). She further notes that the forced recruitment of children has been increasing in cities such as Medellín, Bogotá, Florencia, Valledupar, Montería, San José del Guaviare, Riohacha, Santa Marta, Cúcuta, Bucaramanga, Sincelejo, and Cali (ibid., 65). A report produced by the Office of the Vice-President of Colombia on the recruitment of children found that close to 13 million children in 530 municipalities [out of the 1,122 municipalities in Colombia (Colombia 4 July 2012)] are at risk of being forcibly recruited (ibid.).

19 Sept. 2012). Additional information on the report produced by the Office of the Vice-resident of Colombia could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 1.2 Indigenous Groups and Afro-Colombians

Sources also report the recruitment of indigenous and Afro-Colombian children (Verdadabierta.com 21 Dec. 2011; UN 7 Feb. 2013b, Sec. 37) in their territories and on the outskirts of cities (ibid.). According to Verdadabierta.com, the forced recruitment is especially prevalent in the departments of Cauca, Chocó, and Nariño (21 Dec. 2011). The US *Country Reports for 2011* indicates that illegal armed groups "forcibly recruited indigenous people or forced them to collaborate" (24 May 2012, 19). Verdadabierta.com cites the president of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia, ONIC) as saying that, even though they do not have exact numbers, recruitment levels of indigenous minors are [translation] "'very high'" (21 Dec. 2011). The International Crisis Group indicates that indigenous groups are at "significantly higher recruitment risk" due to the intensification of armed confrontations in the marginal zones of the country (25 Sept. 2012, 8). Springer notes that an indigenous minor is 674 times more likely to be recruited by an illegal armed group than a minor in any other part of the country (2012, 23).

## 1.3 Women

A joint submission to the UN UPR for Colombia by the City University of New York, MADRE-Taller de Derechos Internacionales de la Mujer, and the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights among others, found that "women recruited by illegal armed groups were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and were obliged to use inadequate and harmful contraceptive methods ... and were forced to have an abortion if they fell pregnant" (UN 7 Feb. 2013b, Sec. 30). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 2. Forced Recruitment

### 2.1 Government Forces

According to the International Crisis Group, security forces use civilians, including children, for "intelligence tasks" (25 Sept. 2012, 2). Verdadabierta.com also indicates that the army uses minors as informants and indicates that the UN has denounced putting minors in uniform during civic-military programs, thereby exposing them to the conflict (21 Dec. 2011).

### 2.2 Guerrillas

Sources indicate that FARC and the National Liberation Army (Ejército Nacional de Liberación, ELN) have been forcibly recruiting minors (US 24 May 2012, 20; UN 3 Feb. 2011, Sec. 77). Human Rights Watch also indicates in its *World Report 2012* for Colombia that FARC is "often" involved in forced displacement and recruitment of children (Jan. 2012). Amnesty International (AI) says it has documented "hundreds" of cases involving the recruitment of minors by FARC and ELN (27 Feb. 2012).

According to Springer, minors constitute 42 percent of FARC combatants, and 44 percent of the ELN's (2012, 30). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The International Crisis Group reports that, in the case of FARC, recruited minors are invited on "short holiday trips" to learn how to handle weapons and as the "trips" intensify, they are given "intelligence" tasks (25 Sept. 2012, 13). Corroborating information could not be obtained among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

### 2.3 Other Criminal Groups

The US *Country Reports 2011* indicates that criminal gangs [bandas criminales or BACRIM] have recruited children by force or have made threats to do so (24 May 2012, 23). Human Rights Watch also indicates that paramilitary organizations "actively recruit members, including children" (Jan. 2012). Freedom House indicates in its *Freedom in the World* report for 2012 that illegal armed groups recruit and sexually abuse children (2012).

The International Crisis Group reports that paramilitary groups recruit minors for "sexual exploitation, criminal activities or military training and operations ... to conduct intelligence, traffic drugs, and conduct lower-level criminal activities in schools and impoverished neighbourhoods" (8 June 2012, 8).

Springer indicates that the percentage of minors within paramilitary groups is 40 percent, and 50 percent within criminal gangs (2012, 30).

## 3. Methods of Recruitment

According to the president of ONIC, minors are recruited by [translation] "making them fall in love, by offering them money, and by promising them a better life within their ranks" (Verdadabierta.com 21 Dec. 2011). Springer notes that girls, for example, are offered things that they do not have at home such as new underwear, body creams, and makeup, whereas boys are more interested in "respect and visibility" (2012, 35). The International Crisis Group indicates, for example, that FARC takes advantage of poverty and marginalization in rural areas to recruit new members (25 Sept. 2012, 13). It also indicates that potential recruits are promised that "they would be fighting for the oppressed, the prospect of exerting power

through arms or the attraction of a supposedly more thrilling lifestyle" (International Crisis Group 25 Sept. 2012). Another report indicates that paramilitaries recruit children by promising them jobs at palm plantations or by explicitly offering them money for joining (ibid. 8 June 2012, 8).

The International Crisis Group indicates that the recruitment of FARC members often takes place in schools (25 Sept. 2012, 13). Sources report that the Ombudsperson issued an [translation] "early warning" in August 2012 indicating that fronts 16 and 44 of the FARC took over some schools in 23 municipalities of the departments of Guainía and Vichada to recruit minors by offering them money (*El Tiempo* 9 Sept. 2012; WRadio 10 Sept. 2012).

Springer notes that there are [translation] "numerous cases" in which minors are recruited by armed groups as a "tax of war" that is imposed on communities (2012, 8). The International Crisis Group indicates that FARC, in some cases, obligated families to send one child, but that, in other cases, children join "voluntarily" (25 Sept. 2012, 13).

Springer also cites a recruiter as saying that recruited children are [translation] "abandoned children for whom we are doing a favour" (2012, 34). Springer notes that recruiters prefer children because they are [translation] "out of the reach of authorities" either because the armed forces can not infiltrate them or use them as witnesses or informants, or because minors are not subject to the same judicial procedures as adults (Springer 2012, 38). She quotes recruiters as saying that they prefer minors for planting mines and going in the front line of combat to [translation] "protect the life and integrity of adult combatants" (ibid., 39).

Springer also indicates that desertion is punished by death, and points out that many children die when they try to escape, either because [translation] "conditions to escape are insurmountable or because they are captured and executed for 'treason'" (ibid., 26). The International Crisis Group also indicates that, once minors join FARC, the penalty for desertion is death (25 Sept. 2012, 13). Another report by the International Crisis Group indicates that paramilitaries kill minors who refuse the offer of joining, under-perform in training, or try to escape (ibid. 8 June 2012, 8).

#### 4. Government Response

According to a document published by the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, ICBF), a government institution responsible for providing assistance and protection to children and families (Colombia n.d.), the ICBF has provided assistance to 5,005 demobilized children from 1999 to September 2012, with 194 of them in 2012 (ibid. Dec. 2012, 5). The document indicates the following programs for minors victim of forced recruitment:

- Generations with Well-being Program (Programa Generaciones con Bienestar), which is present in 95 percent of municipalities at risk of forced recruitment and focuses on mistreatment, abuse and exploitation (ibid., 8);
- School Feeding Program (Programa de Alimentación Escolar, PAE), which aims to provide assistance to children to encourage them to stay in school (ibid., 9);
- From Zero to Forever Program (De Cero a Siempre), which consists of activities for both the short and long term to [translation] "mitigate the risk of recruitment by a socioeconomic exclusion" (ibid.);
- Mambrú doesn't go to war ... this is another story Program (Mambrú NO va a la Guerra... este es otro cuento), which aims to provide protection of minors from forced recruitment by addressing the structural causes of this phenomenon (ibid.).

The Research Directorate could not find additional information or information on the effectiveness of these programs among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact representatives of the following organizations were unsuccessful: Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz, Northwestern University.

A researcher at the Universidad de Los Andes and the Centro de Recursos para el Análisis de Conflictos could not provide information.

**Internet sites, including:** Caracol Noticias; Child Soldiers International; City University of New York; Colombia – Defensoría del Pueblo, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Ministerio del Interior, Policía Nacional de Colombia, Procuraduría General de la Nación; *El Colombiano*; ecoi.net; European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights; Factiva; InSight Crime; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Federation for Human Rights; International Institute for Counter-Terrorism; *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*; *El Mundo*; Organization of American States; Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia; UN – RefWorld, Reliefweb, UN Development Programme, UNICEF; *El Universal*; Washington Office on Latin America.

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