

Child soldiers

The shadow of their existence



SPONSORED
100%
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300,000 child soldiers worldwide

Antonio (19): **"I joined the** **guerrillas** **when I was ten."**

**Children's personal accounts show why they
are recruited and what solutions are possible.**

War Child - March 2007

300.002

PRÓLOGUE

"When children are subjected to war whether by witnessing atrocities, forced into a life of violence or becoming victims of the countless suffering brought about by war, they are not only traumatized, psychologically and physically damaged, but they lose faith in their own humanity, their ability to be children again, to trust, to be happy and find meaning in their lives.

With the rise in the rampant use of children in war, there are unfortunately many children whose childhoods are filled with only violence, fear and a further distrust in their self worth as useful members of their communities, nations and the world. A child who lives in such a world is limited from knowing his or her own intelligence and humanity, as a life made up of fear and violence destroys all possibilities of hope.

However, this can be changed and these children can fully regain themselves, as they have the natural resilience to recover from life's worst circumstances when provided with the right support and care. The joy within children can be rekindled with patience, sensitivity, and the myriad creative methods and activities carried out by War Child to not only psychologically heal children but to also strengthen their personal development into remarkable individuals.

A child who completely recovers from war has a deeper understanding of the suffering brought about by violence and therefore knows the importance of living in peace. We can use the knowledge of such children for a better understanding of how to make peace in the world."

Ishmael Beah
March 19, 2007

Ishmael Beah is a former child soldier from Sierra Leone and is a member of a UN advisory committee on children's rights. He is also the author of *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, to be published by Sijhoff Press in August 2007.



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Introduction

Each year, 300,000 children worldwide are actively deployed in wars¹. These are children who have to fight as soldiers, perform espionage or reconnaissance activities, and provide sexual services to army commanders.

Children are deployed in nearly 75% of all armed conflicts worldwide², both by regular armies and by other armed groups, such as militias, paramilitaries and rebel groups and gangs³. Of these children, 80% are younger than 15⁴. Being a child and being a soldier cannot and should not be compatible. And still it happens. Every day.

Child soldiers highlight the shadow of their existence

By publishing this report, War Child wants to place child soldiers in the spotlight. The report provides insight into the situation in which they live and addresses the question of how and why they became child soldiers. The reasons why they become involved in armed conflict give insight into the possibilities for change, because no matter how persistent the problem of recruitment of child soldiers is, there is something we can do to break this spiral of violence. It is possible to create a new future for these children and everyone can play a part, including in the Netherlands.

This report focuses on the plight of child soldiers in Colombia, which has been embroiled in a civil war for more than 50 years. The war receives only scant attention in the Western media, and sometimes seems to have been forgotten altogether.



No fewer than 14,000 child soldiers belong to Colombian armed organisations⁵. They describe the abhorrent reality of their situation in accounts that were collected for this report. They are an example of the many thousands of children worldwide who are involved in wars not of their own making. As well as providing insight into the problem, the stories of the Colombian children are also a cry for help: "Do not forget us!"

Help War Child take the war out of a child soldier

By publishing this report, War Child is seeking to bring the issue to the attention of a large audience, helped by our organisation's reputation and our many supporters. War Child hopes to join forces with politicians, policy makers, journalists, companies and individuals. Together we can contribute to a better life for those hundreds of thousands of child soldiers who are currently deployed in armed conflicts every day.

Structure of the report

After a general outline of the child soldier issue in Chapter 1, we will explain the various forms of recruitment in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 deals with the issues in Colombia, while Chapter 4 addresses the reasons why Colombian children join armed groups. What actions can be taken in order to change this situation, and what contribution War Child can make in this respect, are the subject of Chapter 5. The report concludes with a brief summary and a reference to further information, suggesting ways in which individuals can help solve the worldwide problem of child soldiers.

N.B. The children in the stories are not the children in the photographs.



300.008

How Patricia became a soldier

Patricia's (19) home life was appalling. She was beaten and sexually abused. From the age of nine she had to work, without pay. Near the shop where she worked as an assistant, she occasionally came across guerrilla fighters. They were always laughing and looked good. She asked them if the guerrillas paid wages. When she was 11, she got into the car with them. Patricia explains how the guerrilla fighters trained her to kill.

"They let you watch when they murder people, showing you how they cut them into pieces and throw them away. And if they see that you are terrified or trembling, they give you some of the blood or get you to kill dogs or other living creatures. They forced me to kill a dog - the little dog I used to play with when I had time. The commander ordered me to do this because it would make me strong. He told me that if I started to cry, he would throw me into a hole. I managed to kill my dog."

"... We went to a village and were ordered to kill everybody. In one house there was a pregnant woman with a little boy who was maybe two years old. I went into the room and the woman started to cry. I looked at her and said, 'Run away, I will not harm you'. The woman did not trust me, but I told her, 'Go, but don't make any noise, because if they find out they'll kill me first and then you as well.' When the commander entered the room, I pretended I was looking for her. I said that there was nobody there. The commander told me that a female guerrilla was reported to be hiding there. He told me, 'If you've let her escape, we'll find out sooner or later.' I had to help him open a space where they were going to put all the people they killed that day. He told me to stand still and said that this was my last chance to tell the truth. As I started to cry, he put his gun against my head and told me that he preferred to kill me because I was crying. I closed my eyes and he pulled the trigger, but the gun was not loaded. He said that next time there would be bullets in it."

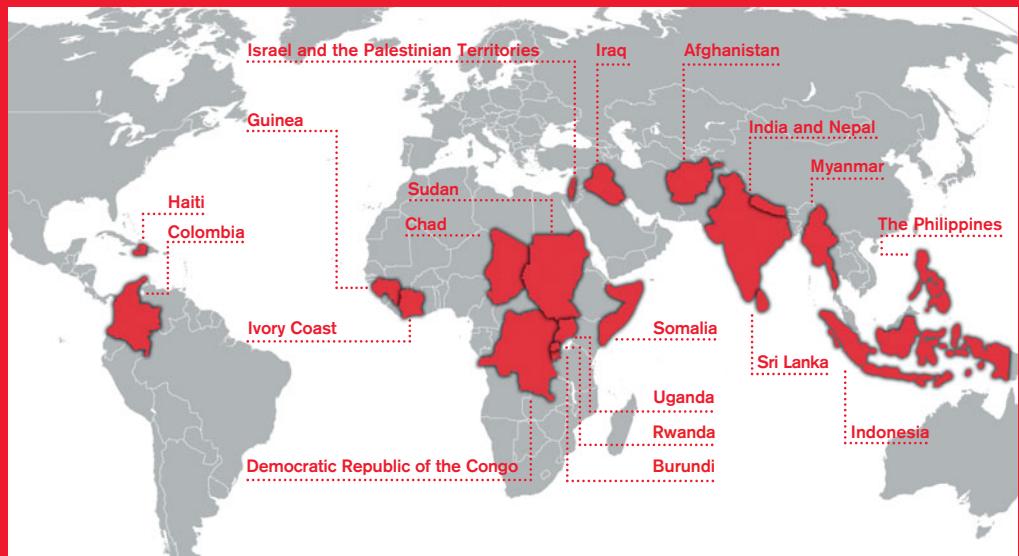
1 Child soldiers around the world⁶

Patricia continues:

"Afterwards I became sad and thought 'People have feelings. I can't stand the thought of them doing something like that to my brother. The families threatened by the rebels must really suffer.' I did not dare to talk any longer, or say anything, because if you defended something or someone, they did the same thing to you ... That is why I wanted to disappear. In my opinion, life is such a precious gift that you shouldn't waste it like that. Life is too beautiful to be violent to other people. When I was involved in the fighting, it was as if I had killed myself, because I had chosen to go there."

At present, at least 1 in every 10 soldiers in armed conflicts is a child⁷. Every child under the age of 18 that is active in a government army or another organised armed group is a child soldier⁸. Child soldiers are not only children who carry weapons, but also children deployed in other ways in the conflict, such as porters, cooks, spies, guards or sex slaves.

Armed organisations (such as rebel armies, paramilitaries and militias, but also the regular government armies) use child soldiers. Children are recruited because they are obedient and do not ask difficult questions. They learn quickly and are easy to influence. Furthermore, they are cheap and constitute a moral dilemma for the adversary who is not sure whether it is right to shoot at children. An increasingly large number of child soldiers are girls (currently, 40 percent⁹ of all child soldiers are girls) because sexual



abuse makes girls a particularly vulnerable group. It is also increasingly easy to deploy children, because arms are becoming lighter and lighter and therefore easier to manage.

NUMBERS AND PLACES

AFRICA

The number of child soldiers worldwide is estimated at 300,000. The problem is greatest in Africa where around 100,000 children are actively involved in conflicts. Currently, child soldiers are actively deployed in Guinea, the Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic (DR) of Congo, Chad, Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. According to UNICEF estimates, 12,000 children are still associated with the armed groups in DR Congo, even though the country is formally at peace and elections were held last year. In Northern Uganda there has been an ongoing conflict for over 20 years between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government. Over the years, the LRA has kidnapped 20,000 children. The LRA largely consists of child soldiers.



ASIA

Numbers in Asia are difficult to estimate, because governments do not give human rights organisations or aid agencies access to areas where conflicts are taking place. In Myanmar, the army recruits children aged between 12 and 18. Tamil Tiger rebels in Sri Lanka are thought to have thousands of child soldiers in their ranks.

In Afghanistan, war flared up again after the religious extremist Taliban regime was ousted. Taliban militias are trying to reclaim power in several parts of the country from the government led by President Karzai, who is supported by the United States. In his annual report on child soldiers, former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan stated in 2006 that there had been various indications that the Taliban were recruiting child soldiers. Owing to the inaccessibility of the areas, it was unfortunately not possible to obtain conclusive evidence. Child soldiers can also be found in Nepal, India, Indonesia and the Philippines. Human rights organisations suspect that armed groups in Chechnya also use children. However, there too, aid agencies are denied access.

MIDDLE EAST

In the Middle East, child soldiers are deployed in Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Iraq. For example, children in these areas are encouraged to commit suicide attacks or are used as a human shield.

LATIN AMERICA

In Latin America, Colombia is the country where most child soldiers can be found. Around 14,000 child soldiers are deployed by left-wing guerrilla movements and right-wing paramilitaries, while the army, too, uses children for military purposes.

Current situation

Much is being done in the areas of policy and lawmaking to stop the recruitment and deployment of child soldiers. The Security Council of the United Nations has adopted no fewer than six

resolutions since 1999 to combat these horrific practices. In 2005, a UN working group was created, which publishes regular reports about the recruitment and use of child soldiers. These reports may serve as evidence in prosecuting the perpetrators. For example, there is currently a case being heard against Thomas Lubanga, a rebel leader from DR Congo who is standing trial before the International Criminal Court in The Hague for recruiting and using child soldiers under the age of 15. Another positive development is the conference on child soldiers held in Paris in February 2007. This conference was attended by 58 countries, which condemned the recruitment of child soldiers and endorsed the Paris Commitments setting out the principles and guidelines that should be followed in order to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers and help those who were part of armed groups to resume their place in society.

What does War Child do to help child soldiers?

War Child invests in projects that help former child soldiers reintegrate in society, and in projects that prevent children joining armed groups. In times of war, violence makes deep inroads into society. In nearly all the countries where War Child has programmes, children are or were actively involved in the fighting. Examples of countries where former child soldiers take part in the War Child programmes include DR Congo, Sierra Leone, Northern Uganda, Colombia and Sudan.

War Child has no programmes exclusively for child soldiers. War Child organises activities for mixed groups of children and young people that encourage them to cooperate and to develop their own talents and social skills. Working with mixed groups prevents former child soldiers from being stigmatised and promotes their reintegration into society. War Child's activities are aimed at bringing former child soldiers, other children and people from the community together in order to restore trust.



300.012

Kidnapped

Sebastián (11): "I became involved in the guerrilla war before I was ten. I was playing when they took me away. I did not even see that a white van with blacked-out windows had pulled up. They grabbed me, threw me in the van and covered my face. They also took two other children. They drove us to a four-storey house. When they took us for training we went into the mountains. I enjoyed being with them, because they had everything: weapons, different kinds of shoes, clothes, three cars and a television. There were around 20 boys. I never had to fight. In those days, I didn't think about other people. I felt cool hanging out with them. The guerrillas taught me a lot. I was there for about two months and learned how to handle weapons like rifles and revolvers. I learned that you shouldn't let other people tell you how to live your life; you have to command respect. I lived with the guerrilla fighters and I enjoyed it."

I did not know they were doing such bad things, because I was in the house and, they only took us with them to go training in the mountains. One day they let me go, because I was one of the youngest. They told me that I was not ready for this. My mother took me to the police and they asked me questions, but I didn't say anything.

One day we had to run away because the guerrillas came and tied up everyone in our village, including my mother, my sister and me. They killed a few people with a machete and with saws, and they tortured them. They said that there was a man who had given them away and that they wanted to know who it was. I felt very bad when I saw how they killed those people. I felt empty, because I recognised them from my training and now they were killing children and adults. After that, every time I closed my eyes I could hear the screaming and feel my blood drain away. I was afraid to go to sleep because of these nightmares."

2 Forms of recruitment and international regulations

There are different ways of recruiting (child) soldiers: compulsory, forced or 'voluntary'.

Compulsory

Firstly, young people may join the army because of conscription. In some 30 countries, including Austria, Germany, Denmark, Israel and Russia, young people (normally from the age of 18) have to report for national service, which lasts on average between one and two years. The Netherlands abolished conscription in 1996.

Forced

Children are often forced to join an armed group. In the example on the previous page, ten-year-old Sebastián was kidnapped. Children are waited for outside their school, taken from the market or picked off the street. In some cases, a village or neighbourhood has to supply a certain number of children. The children and their families are put under such pressure that refusal is no longer an option. Refusing to take part in illegal armed groups often means death. The children, and often their entire family, feel compelled to flee to a different area.

'Voluntary'

Why would a child 'voluntarily' choose to fight in a war? This question will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4. A whole range of motives may ultimately cause a child to join an armed group. Whether this is a voluntary choice is questionable, because it is the child's difficult circumstances that make he or she decide to join the war. Suppose that a child is 16 years old, the head of a family with five mouths to feed, and the only work available is a job with the government army: is it any wonder that this child joins up voluntarily? Poverty, lack of future prospects, abuse and a history of murdered family members often play a part. What is more, the child does not know what he or she is choosing. The child is misled and

enticed with false promises of a salary, clothing, food, education, protection, status, respect and a good life. The term 'on his or her own initiative' is perhaps more appropriate than 'voluntarily'. Many children soon come to regret their choice, because they are exposed to hunger, cold, disease, coercion and violence. Any expectations they had rarely come true. They do not dare to run away, because they are often threatened with death.

VOLUNTARY RECRUITMENT IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands, too, has children under 18 in the government army: as trainee soldiers. The minimum age for joining up voluntarily is 17. The Dutch policy stipulates that minors cannot be deployed in military activities and that recruitment should be voluntary and with the consent of the parents or guardians. In addition, the army has to inform the recruits about their rights and obligations. The Netherlands signed the Optional Protocol (see next page) in 2000, but has not ratified it yet. This means that the Netherlands endorses the basic principles of the protocol but is not yet legally bound by these principles. The current Dutch policy is compatible with the conditions laid down in the Optional Protocol.

International regulations

RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN UNDER 15 IS A WAR CRIME

There are international regulations that prohibit the recruitment of child soldiers. In 1989, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force. The document was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations and prohibits the recruitment of children younger than 15. Nearly all the countries in the world, except for the United States and Somalia, have signed the Children's Rights Convention. The Rome Statute (1998) of the International Criminal Court in The Hague provides that the recruitment of children under the age of 15 is a war crime. This makes it possible to bring



charges against individual criminals and to prosecute them under international criminal law. The first such court case is currently pending against rebel leader Thomas Lubanga who is on trial for recruiting child soldiers in DR Congo.

RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN AGED BETWEEN 15 AND 18 IS ALLOWED UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS FOR GOVERNMENT ARMIES; FOR OTHER ARMED GROUPS IT IS PROHIBITED AND A CRIMINAL OFFENCE

In 2000, the UN drew up the 'Optional Protocol', which came into force in 2001. The protocol is a supplement to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The protocol increased the minimum age for national service (compulsory recruitment) to 18. Accordingly, compulsory recruitment below the age of 18 became prohibited for countries that had ratified the protocol. However, the protocol does allow governments to include children aged between 15 and 18 in the state army, provided that recruitment is voluntary and provided that measures are taken to prevent children from taking part in combat activities.

Under the protocol, other armed groups are prohibited from recruiting minors. By ratifying the protocol, countries undertake to do everything in their power to prohibit and penalise the recruitment of children under 18 by other armed groups. This means that illegal armed groups can be prosecuted under national law for recruiting minors.

Furthermore, states that signed the protocol regularly report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee makes recommendations and voices its concern if elements from the protocol are not properly followed up.

Matters are more complicated for countries that did not sign the protocol. The illegal armed groups in these countries can only be prosecuted for recruiting children younger than 15. Children aged between 15 and 18 are not protected against groups that want to deploy them in armed conflicts.

War Child: no children under 18 in armed organisations

War Child's aim is to achieve a peaceful future for children who have been affected by war. In our view, children younger than 18 do not belong in armed groups. Not even in the government army, even though the law may allow their recruitment. However, in the harsh reality of an armed conflict, children sometimes have no other option.

That this choice is understandable from the child's point of view does not release countries from their obligation to protect children. War Child believes that states have a responsibility to develop sufficient future prospects for their young people. A career in the army or with other armed organisations should not be the only way of earning a living or finding protection. Furthermore, states that signed the Optional Protocol must ensure that the recruitment of minors by illegal armed groups becomes a criminal offence, so that criminals can be prosecuted under the national criminal laws of the country concerned.



300.016



False promises

Patricia (19) joined the paramilitaries when she was 11. She recalls, 'The paramilitaries promised me that I would be free, but that was just a lie. You receive orders from a commander and you do as he says. In addition, people become frightened of you, because they think you are going to kill them. Therefore they keep their distance. You cannot make friends, except within the group, and there you get involved in bad friendships, because there are people who start to love everything that's going on and enjoy killing. If my father and mother had loved me and had been able to talk to me, I would never even have thought about joining the paramilitaries.'

What made me do it in particular was the situation at home. I had a father and a mother, but I could not talk to them. When I came home, they beat me. The worst thing was that my mother did not believe me when I told her that my stepfather had raped me. She always took his side. I could not cope any longer. Then I heard the paramilitaries talking. I saw how they were laughing with each other, that they were happy and playing around, and I thought, 'they do not even let me play at home!' So I decided, 'this is the life I need, I want to be left alone and be treated properly.'"

3 Civil war in Colombia

Colombia has been beset by war for over 50 years. Left-wing guerrilla movements tried to overthrow the government and demanded a fairer society. The army was never able to bring the guerrillas to their knees. Therefore, thirty years ago, major landowners and top mafia bosses set up paramilitary groups in order to defend themselves against the guerrillas (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia: AUC). Since then, the war has become bloodier and the guerrillas' traditional principles - more rights for the poor - seem to be a forgotten ideal. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the funding of the guerrillas by the former communist countries dried up. The largest guerrilla movement, FARC (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia), turned to the cocaine trade to fund its struggle. The paramilitaries did likewise. The smaller guerrilla movement, ELN (National Liberation Army), initially rejected the drugs trade, but rumours are now increasing that the ELN, too, is up to its neck in the trade. FARC and ELN also obtain a significant amount of funds from kidnapping civilians - especially rich Colombians, foreigners and politicians - and demanding a ransom. In 2002, FARC kidnapped presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. She is still missing

Carlos (10, fourth year in primary school): "I was very young, around six years old, when the army, the guerrillas and the paramilitaries came to our neighbourhood. They were fighting in the mountains, and the boys who lived there came down to our neighbourhood. One day my mother was ill and she said, 'I am going to buy pills'. The guerrillas were outside the shop and said, 'Come here, we will give you a pill'. It was not a pill, but a bullet. I was very frightened. These people were walking around and guarded the villages day and night."

"When I was seven the guerrillas came to look for my father, because he was working with the paramilitaries. They arrived at our house. My father was hiding with a little dog. They found him because the dog started to bark. They beat him up so badly that all the walls were spattered with blood. They blew up the house and made us homeless. They burned our clothes. The guerrillas told us to leave immediately."

Ten-year-old Carlos' experience is typical in Colombia. Because of the long civil war, many children have been witnesses, victims or perpetrators of violence. 14,000 children have been recruited as child soldiers by one of the many armed organisations¹⁰. More than one million Colombian children have fled and live in squalid areas without proper basic facilities¹¹. 64% of the population live below the poverty line. 20% of the children of school age do not attend school. Over 2.5 million children perform child labour¹². Some live on the streets. Because of the lengthy conflict, violence has become a part of Colombian culture and society. Many children are victims of domestic violence. Using violence is cool and is often regarded as normal. This has an effect on relationships and on the structure of society. A feeling of insecurity and distrust predominates.



Child soldiers in Colombia

Since the 1990s, child soldiers have been deployed on a large scale in the Colombian war. According to research by the Colombian university Luis Amigó, half of the soldiers used by the two largest guerrilla groups and the paramilitaries are children!¹⁹ The following table shows that one quarter are even younger than 15, which means that both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries are guilty of war crimes.

Recruitment age

AGE	FARC%	ELN%	PARA%	Total
11-15	36%	24%	13%	25%
16-18	19%	41%	26%	25%
19-22	15%	11%	25%	19%
22 and over	30%	24%	36%	31%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

The Colombian army also deploys children, although not as fighters but as informers, according to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. The children are paid for their services. For the children, this is an attractive prospect, given the poverty in which they (usually) live.

Colombian aid agencies have also pointed out that the army makes it very easy for children to join up. For example, the army organises campaigns such as 'Soldier for a day', which kindle children's enthusiasm for the army. According to a Coalition representative, these campaigns use "clowns and all, and even though that caused a major scandal, these practices still go on."

When the army fights the guerrillas and the paramilitaries in conflict areas, they sometimes set up camp at the local school if no other area is available. This brings youngsters into contact with soldiers, and it also makes schools a target in the battle instead of a safe environment for children.

Recruitment in Colombia

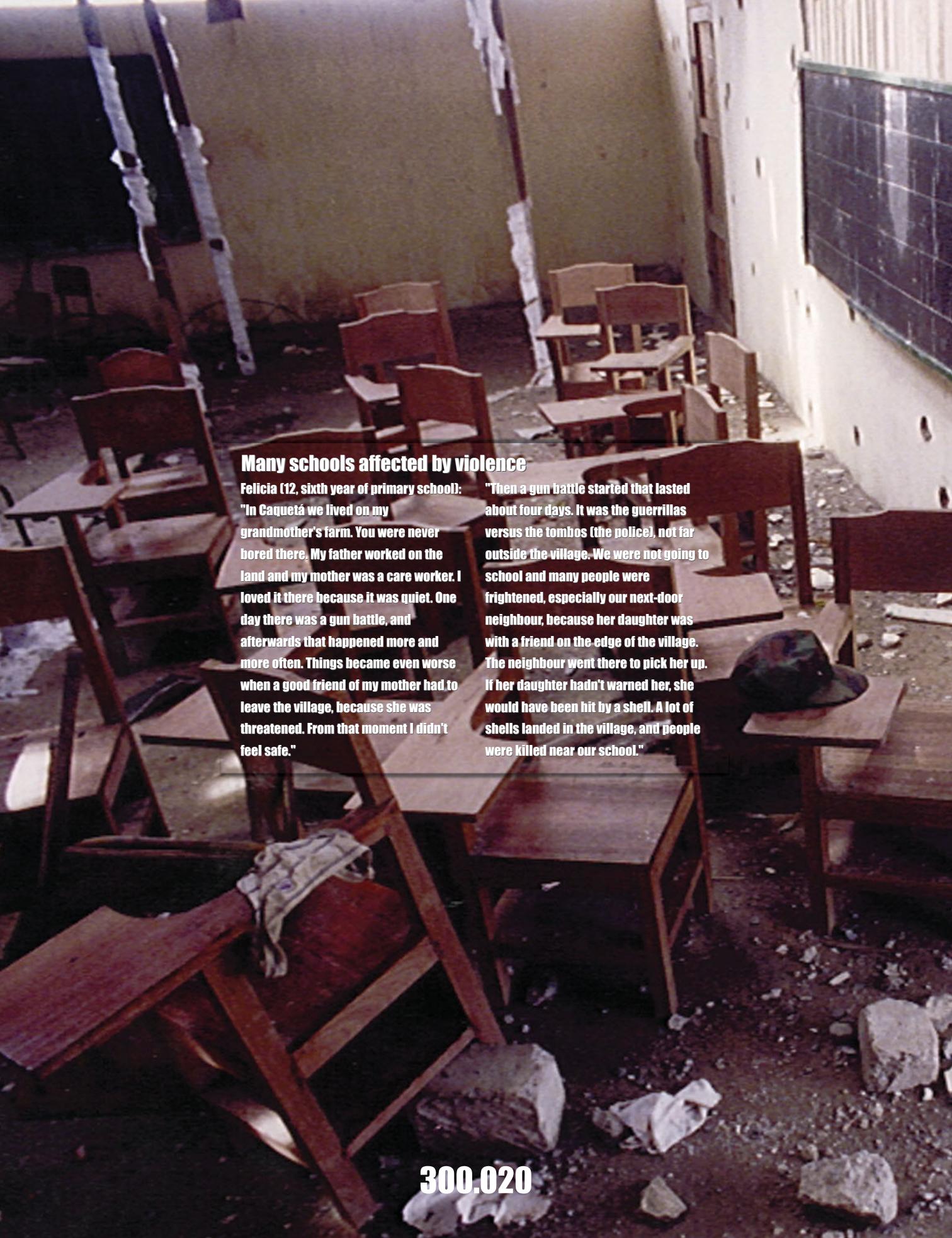
Many children are recruited in villages and in schools in the countryside and in poor city suburbs. Armed groups also go from door to door and claim the children. The family then has a choice between handing over the child or fleeing. Neither the guerrillas nor the paramilitaries allow families to refuse to hand over a son or daughter for their cause. If they do, the child or a family member is likely to be killed in retaliation.

Children are also kidnapped on a smaller scale. For example, members of the armed group wait for the children at the end of the school day, or kidnap them in the streets.

Apart from this forced recruitment, Colombia mostly has 'voluntary' recruitment.

Colombia has ratified treaties

Colombia has ratified the Children's Rights Convention and the Optional Protocol. By ratifying the protocol, states promise to do everything in their power to prohibit and penalise the recruitment of children under 18 by other armed groups. This means that the illegal armed groups can be prosecuted under national law for recruiting minors.



Many schools affected by violence

Felicia (12, sixth year of primary school):
"In Caquetá we lived on my grandmother's farm. You were never bored there. My father worked on the land and my mother was a care worker. I loved it there because it was quiet. One day there was a gun battle, and afterwards that happened more and more often. Things became even worse when a good friend of my mother had to leave the village, because she was threatened. From that moment I didn't feel safe."

"Then a gun battle started that lasted about four days. It was the guerrillas versus the tombos (the police), not far outside the village. We were not going to school and many people were frightened, especially our next-door neighbour, because her daughter was with a friend on the edge of the village. The neighbour went there to pick her up. If her daughter hadn't warned her, she would have been hit by a shell. A lot of shells landed in the village, and people were killed near our school."



300.021

N.B. The children in the stories are not the children in the photographs.

4 Reasons for 'voluntary' recruitment in Colombia

In Colombia, most children join an armed group on their own initiative. That group is usually the group that runs the area where the child lives. As observed in Chapter 2, the idea of recruitment being 'voluntary' is questionable. In this chapter we will look at the factors driving thousands of Colombian children into the arms of armed groups. Often several mutually reinforcing reasons play a part. By examining these children's motives, we get insight into possible ways of preventing recruitment and offering children alternative future prospects.

Main reasons for recruitment per armed group¹⁴

REASON FOR RECRUITMENT	ARMED GROUP		
	FARC	ELN	Paramilitaries
Love of weapons (cultural reason)	17,0%	16,0%	11,0%
Conviction (ideological reason)	24,0%	40,0%	11,0%
Lack of options (socio-economic reason)	10,0%	16,0%	17,0%
Availability of work (socio-economic reason)	16,0%	8,0%	25,0%
Revenge (for protection)	3,4%	5,4%	11,0%
Forced recruitment	12,5%	8,0%	14,0%
Other	17,1%	6,6%	11,0%

4.1 Cultural reasons

José (now 19) says, "A cousin of mine, who was about to leave, asked me why we weren't going together. I told him that I wasn't going, and until then my mind had been made up. The day I decided to join them was when they came with a slightly older woman. I had talked to her the first time, and I really liked her. So I went with them because I really fancied her, but there was something else as well. She gave me a weapon to hold, and I could wear a uniform. I felt big and strong. If I had a weapon, I thought, people would look up to me."

Taking part in a war is often regarded as a heroic act. A culture in which carrying weapons is seen as a sign of manliness may encourage young people to take part in a violent conflict. A weapon confers status and power, which are important in Latin-American culture. As described in Chapter 3, the long years of war in Colombia have created a culture in which the use of violence has become normal. Colombian youngsters often say that they love weapons. In war, children often identify with their weapon. It is all they have. They are their weapon. Losing their weapon means a death sentence. In addition, young people are sensitive to peer pressure. They want to belong. Being part of a group and taking part in a struggle may sound like an attractive adventure in which they can prove their worth.

For many Colombian children, the desire for status and power is reinforced by a lack of self-respect and identity due to the circumstances in which they grow up where domestic violence, lack of recognition and lack of future prospects, in particular, result in low self-esteem and make it difficult for the child to develop his or her own identity.



4.2. Ideological reasons

"We are fighting to defend the interests of the people and to realise ideals of change, freedom and social justice for the oppressed majority", is written on the website of rebel movement FARC.¹⁵

"Both the FARC and the ELN are part of the historic heritage of the anti-imperialist resistance. We are fighters for socialism and serve the revolutionary cause of the Latin-American people", are the opening lines of the ELN website.¹⁶

Sometimes children join up because they are raised to believe in the cause for which they are fighting, for example social justice, revolution, a holy war, freedom of religion, or autonomy for a minority group.

Marcos: "One night, when I was on a farm, the ELN came. Before then, I had only seen the army, but not the guerrillas or the paramilitaries. They stayed the night. They prepared a meal for themselves in the kitchen and a very nice girl started to talk to me. She told me that they were fighting for equality and that they wanted the state to stop exploiting people. She kept asking me to go with them and I said, 'no, I'm not going there with you!' I was 14 at the time."

4.3. Socio-economic reasons

Diego was seven when his mother gave his two brothers away and took him with her when she went to live with another man. For five years, he worked day and night for his stepfather. Diego wanted to go to school and - in addition to working for his stepfather - also accepted work on another farm to earn his school fees. Diego tells his story:

"I had to work very hard, do things that were really jobs for grown-ups. My day started at half past three in the morning when I got up, drank a cup of coffee and set out to milk the cows. When it got light, I had to start working on the land: weeding and all sorts of other things. I was very tired when I came home and only wanted to sleep. But he made me do other things. I had to do as he said; otherwise he would beat me. My mother didn't care; the only person that mattered to her was my stepfather. At first I tried to tell her 'look what's happening to me' and tell her how I felt, but she didn't take me seriously and said, 'you have to do as your stepfather says and respect him.' After a while, things got worse when he started to beat me for no reason. At the time, I really longed to study, which is why I sacrificed myself even more."



300.024

Revenge

Fernando is ten years old. He witnessed a raid by an armed gang. He told a social worker, "A group of young criminals stole 8,000 pesos from my mother. It was the money she had put aside to take the bus to work. That's when my mother said,

'we have to stop this. Bad people should be killed, so we don't need to be afraid any longer.'" Fernando continued, "When I grow up, I want to have a gun and then I will kill these people."

300.025

Diego continues:

"I worked on different farms, using what little I earned to pay my school fees. I got up at half past three and worked until six o'clock, got ready to go to school, studied from seven in the morning to three in the afternoon, and when I came home I worked until nine or ten in the evening. At the weekends I had to do more work in order to catch up on the things I had been unable to do because I had gone to school. I managed like that until the third year of primary school, but that was when I stopped because it was so hard."

Poverty and lack of future prospects are often the reasons why many young people turn to armed groups. The group offers better chances of survival by holding out the prospect of food, shelter and money. Sometimes parents encourage their children to join up, because the salary is paid to them instead of to the child. Furthermore, a child in an armed organisation means one less mouth to feed. Sometimes a child already has relatives in a guerrilla group or with the paramilitaries, in which case it is only a small step for the child to join the group as well. In addition to the chances of survival, armed groups also offer possibilities for climbing the social ladder. If children cannot go to school and future unemployment is looming, the prospect of a military career sounds attractive.

4.4. Protection and revenge

For many Colombian children, revenge is an important reason for wanting to use violence. They have seen how their village was raided and how loved ones were murdered, or they were neglected and abused by their own family.

Sixteen-year-old Estelle says, "My mother is a drug user. My stepfather was a thief and did heaven knows what. Right from when I was a small child my life was very bad, especially from the age of five when my stepfather raped me for the first time. I clearly remember it, because it happened on 31 December, which is why that day is now one of my worst days. I will never forget how he grabbed me and held me down in the washhouse. When I told my mother, she hit me and told my stepfather that I had invented a story about him raping me. He threatened me and said that if I told anyone, he would kill me and my two little sisters as well. When I was ten, I found out that my stepfather paid my mother every time he raped me. One day, after he had had me, she was standing there smoking in the washhouse and he gave her money and left. I watched and felt a deep hatred. I didn't know what it meant to love your mother because I only hated mine. What mother would do a thing like that to her daughter?"



Children who are witnesses or victims of violence become painfully aware of their vulnerability. Children who have been repeatedly exposed to violence are more likely to join armed groups.

By fighting with the army, the guerrillas or the paramilitaries, they can take revenge - for instance for the death of family members - and protect themselves and their families against further violence. When they discover that violence does not offer protection against more violence, it is too late and they are already embroiled in the fighting.

Estelle from the above example case met a boy one day who was with the FARC guerrilla movement. He said that the FARC might be able to help her. "I had no idea what that was, the guerrillas or the paramilitaries. I had only seen the army once or twice. All I thought was that I could leave home and that my mother would be unable to get me back."

She was 11 years old, and the commander of the camp where

the boy took her thought she was too young. She was given two weeks in the camp to consider her decision. If she still wanted to stay then, she would really have to stay. If she attempted to escape she would be sentenced to death. Estelle stayed, even though she realised she would leave her childhood behind in the guerrilla camp. She would have to carry a rifle and kill, and live in constant fear of being killed.



No other way out

Estelle (16): "They both hit me with those little cowhide whips. They beat me for any reason at all. I had to listen to my stepfather because my mother forced me to. My mother had a box I had to stand on when I was washing the dishes and clothes. I fell off once and had a gaping head wound, but she acted as if

nothing had happened. I tried several times to escape, but my mother came after me, caught me and whipped me until she grew tired. The first time I ran away I was eight years old."



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5 A different future: recommendations for action

Giving children sufficient perspective and prospects in society will reduce the chance of them choosing an existence as a child soldier or being susceptible to recruitment. What can we do to remove the reasons that cause children to join an army or other armed group?

Action can be taken at various levels to prevent recruitment:

Aimed at children

- Make sure that children have an alternative by offering them education and development of their skills;
- Make children aware of their rights and inform them about life as a child soldier;
- Ensure that children remain with their families where possible and receive sufficient care and protection;
- Change children's attitude to violence and recruitment, thus removing their wish to join armed organisations;
- Provide children with birth certificates and identity cards.

Aimed at the children's environment

- Reduce the poverty at family level that causes many children to join armed organisations;
- Support the capacity of the community to protect children. Ensure that parents, guardians and teachers are aware of children's rights and needs and help them meet these rights and needs;
- Support local organisations and initiatives that contribute to the realisation of children's rights.

By the Colombian government

- Bring about peace and reduce the demand for child soldiers;
- Improve the protection of children against violence by armed organisations;
- Document and report on the recruitment of children;
- Address the impunity of people who violate human rights;
- Create employment opportunities and provide education for marginalised children;
- Do not propagate violence and make absolutely sure that violent groups and the state army no longer use schools.

By the international community

- Call on international organisations and the press to make the urgent situation in Colombia a high priority on the international agenda;
- Call on the Colombian authorities to improve the protection of children;
- Set up and support campaigns against the deployment of child soldiers and against the arms trade;
- Monitor the efforts made by the Colombian government to fulfil its obligation to protect children and offer peaceful future prospects.

The realisation of children's rights would create a situation in which children are respected. This would eliminate many of the reasons for joining armed organisations.



5.1. What does War Child do?

War Child is an independent aid agency that is dedicated to a peaceful future for children in war zones. We work to achieve this aim by contributing to these children's psychosocial wellbeing through a focus on the child and his or her environment. Creative activities stimulate a child's self-confidence. By means of dance, music, theatre and sports they learn to express their emotions and come to terms with their experiences of war.

WAR CHILD AND CHILD SOLDIERS WORLDWIDE

War Child invests in projects that help former child soldiers reintegrate in society, and in projects that prevent children from joining armed groups. The starting point is a community-based approach in which former child soldiers and the community are brought together to restore trust.

War Child in Colombia

The War Child programme in Colombia focuses on prevention to keep children from joining armed groups, reintegration to ensure the successful return of former child soldiers to society, and peace building to break through the culture of violence and work on trust, respect and non-violent conflict resolution.

STRONG CHILDREN ARE LESS SUSCEPTIBLE TO RECRUITMENT

War Child supports eight local Colombian organisations (see colophon) that help vulnerable children in these areas to create a positive future for themselves. The organisations offer children an alternative to violence, so that they do not need to become involved with armed groups. These alternatives include creative and sports workshops in which children discover and can express their ideas about daily life, their fears and desires, their identity as a boy or a girl, their living environment and history. Through these activities they learn to deal with their emotions and experiences, they become more self-confident and their self-respect increases. As a result, they are better equipped to handle difficult situations. Strong children are less susceptible to 'voluntary' recruitment. In addition to the creative workshops, children with major problems sometimes receive extra individual psychosocial support as well.



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One day I ran away

Estelle: "I was tired of fighting all the time. Whether it was the police, the army, or the paramilitaries: when they said 'go to the front', you had to go and it was hard, because we had to walk for days without sleep and hardly eating anything. I was saddest when I saw friends die. When I was thirteen I wanted to run away. In the group I experienced war, hunger and cold and saw people die."

"One day I did run away. I was sent ahead as a scout and suddenly my courage left me. I sat down and all I could do was cry. When I heard music I looked out across the valley. Then I stopped thinking and ran down a little road and kept running."

Apart from creative workshops, these organisations teach children about peace and about how to resolve conflicts with words rather than weapons. Furthermore, some partners organise leadership courses and offer active young people the opportunity to develop into peace builders. Another important point is that the children learn what their rights are and how they can realise these rights. Children who know what life with armed groups is like and who know their rights will be less tempted to join these groups.

War Child's partner organisations also train teachers, so that they can recognise children's problems and give them better support. In addition, the parents are involved in the projects. Work is done with parents to acknowledge the rights of their children and to teach them how to satisfy their emotional needs. Finally, these organisations stage events to provide information, so as to make entire communities aware of the rights of their youngest members. This is difficult to implement in Colombia, because armed groups threaten and sometimes even murder active community leaders.

REINTEGRATION OF FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS

Children are exposed to extreme physical and emotional risks. Poor living conditions and shocking experiences seriously disrupt their development. Various organisations in Colombia help to reintegrate these young people into society. There is a great risk that they will lapse back into war because they see no opportunities in ordinary society. Proper reintegration of these young people means that they are less likely to return to an armed group. This, too, is a form of prevention.

When child soldiers have handed in their weapons, they face the difficult task of picking up the thread of an ordinary life again. Initially, child soldiers are taken in by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF). Since the late 1990s, this institute has taken in more than 3,000 former child soldiers who had run away or been taken prisoner by the army. The ICBF works with local organisations that provide the facilities to take care of the former child soldiers and reintegrate them into society.



In general, children go through the following three stages:

1. initial intake,
2. living in a home providing education, work and psychological support, and
3. living more independently in residential groups.

The main problems faced by the programme are as follows:

- Lack of money, because organisations are paid per child but the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) does not fill all the places that are available. Furthermore, the ICBF changes the organisations it works with very frequently.
- During the reintegration process, there is little interaction between the youngsters and the outside world, which hampers their return to society.
- Psychosocial support is minimal and aimed especially at dealing with problems, rather than developing the strength and talents that the youngsters possess.
- The programme stops when children reach adulthood, even though they are not always ready to function in society.

War Child supports two organisations that take in former child soldiers. One of these organisations takes in youngsters for the ICBF. With War Child's support, they are offered a supplementary psychosocial programme. The other organisation focuses on youngsters aged 18 who no longer fall under the regular programme because of their age but who are not ready yet to fully reintegrate into society.

The initial focus of the support is on making these children mentally strong, so that they can stand on their own two feet.

Secondly, the support is aimed at re-establishing contact between former child soldiers and their contemporaries who did not fight in the armed groups; in order to ensure that they can lead a peaceful co-existence. Finally, a reunion with the child's family has proven to be a decisive step in any successful reintegration. Sometimes it is too dangerous or impossible for other reasons for youngsters to return to their families. In that case, War Child's partners look for an alternative social network, so that the youngsters are not on their own when they have completed the programme and can count on the support of a friend, family member or trusted person.

"Becoming a child soldier is easy; it is much more difficult to regain your humanity afterwards. Nevertheless it is possible". These were the words of former child soldier Ishmael Beah during a conference on child soldiers in Paris. The story of Antonio from Colombia also shows that, although it is difficult to find a place in society again, it can be done in the end, provided that care, attention and proper assistance are available.

I want to live my own life
Antonio (19) says: "I joined the guerrillas when I was ten. I found the idea of serving with an armed group very appealing. After five years I left. I was tired, very tired. We were fighting every day, which was hard. The way that the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare

(ICBF) works was not for me. For six months I took part in the reintegration process, but then I joined the paramilitaries. In other words, I went back to the armed groups. I stayed with the paramilitaries for two years and had a fairly good life there: I earned some money and was not tortured. It was difficult to get out. However, I was arrested and ended up in Cali, where I looked for work. There I met people and again became mixed up in crime, this time via a gang that was active in the city. In addition, I became addicted to drugs. Here (at the Juan Bosco Organisation, ed.) I have learned to live my own life. I can now read and write. I don't want to go back, I want to be myself and will not be discouraged. I want to leave that illegal life far behind me."



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N.B. The children in the stories are not the children in the photographs.

6 Summary

In recent years, the United Nations, the International Criminal Court and many governments and civil-society organisations have addressed the child soldier issue, both by developing legislation and policy and by providing direct assistance for children and their environment. Nevertheless, 300,000 children were still used as child soldiers in 19 countries in 2006.

There are three methods of recruitment: compulsory by the state army, forced or voluntary. International regulations provide that the recruitment of children under 15 is a war crime, regardless of whether this recruitment is forced or voluntary. The state army may recruit children aged between 15 and 18 on a voluntary basis, provided that certain conditions are met. Recruitment of children aged between 15 and 18 by any other armed groups is prohibited. In the opinion of War Child and many other aid agencies, all children under 18 who are deployed - in whatever capacity - by armed groups in an armed conflict are child soldiers. They must be protected against violence and must be offered prospects for the future other than joining an armed organisation.

Unfortunately, many children face a different reality. In addition to forced recruitment by means of kidnapping, the reasons why children join armed organisations 'voluntarily' include glorification of violence, radical ideologies, extreme poverty, lack of future prospects, threats and intimidation, domestic violence, sexual and physical abuse, and lack of appreciation and recognition. To combat the recruitment of children, we have to take action at various levels: the children themselves, their environment, the government and the international community.

In this report, we chose Colombia as an example in order to provide insight into the complex issue of child soldiers. Colombian children explained how they had become involved in the war and how they always carry the shadow of their past with them. These stories are typical of the experiences of child soldiers worldwide.

Children are the future of the country. They constitute the basis of tomorrow's society. If they can develop in a healthy way and learn how to resolve conflicts peacefully, we will together be able to break the spiral of violence.

War Child has programmes all over the world that help former child soldiers return to society, and that prevent children from joining armed groups.

Help us!

Help us take the war out of a child soldier. Help children such as Estelle, Patricia, Carlos and Sebastián who are deployed as soldiers all over the world. War Child hopes that the accounts in this report will inspire the media and politicians to keep the issue on the agenda. Companies and private individuals can also help child soldiers become children again. The child soldier special at www.warchild.nl will tell you how you can take action yourself.

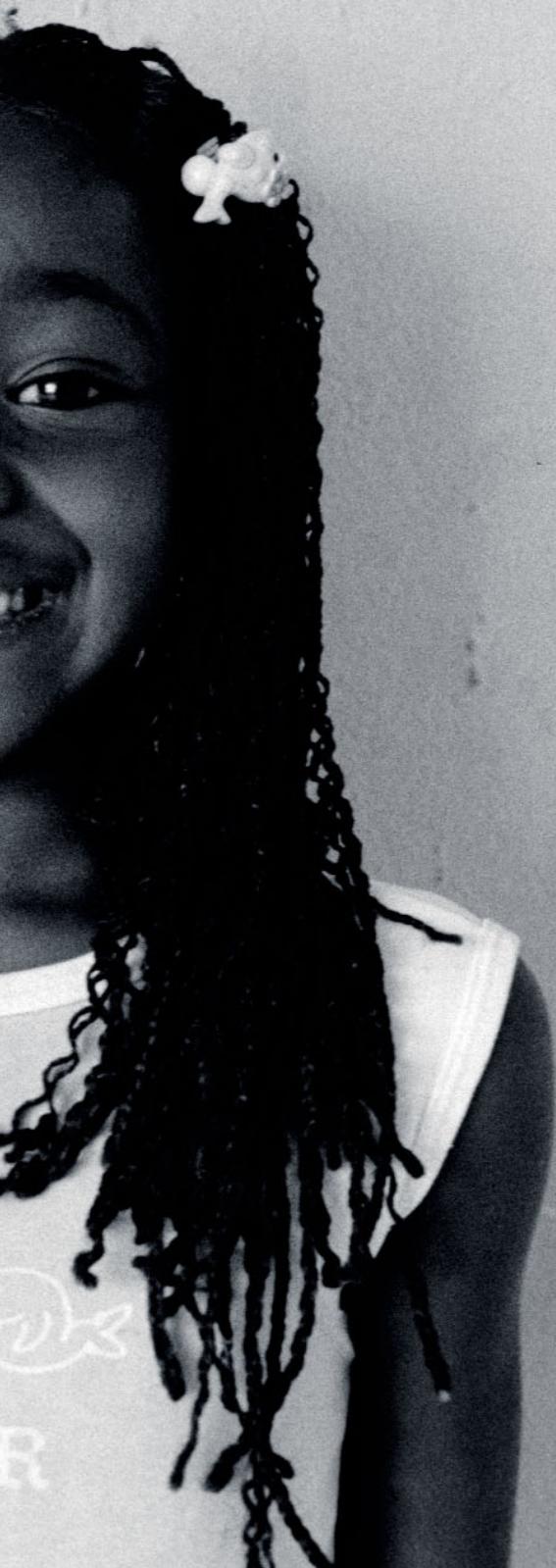
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Foto's:

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N.B. The children in the stories are not the children in the photographs, and all names have been changed.

Notes

- 1 Human Rights Watch, the United Nations and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimate the number of child soldiers at 250,000 to 300,000. Because war zones are very difficult to access, these figures are estimates only.
- 2 Human Security Report 2005.
- 3 We are making a distinction between armed groups (non-State armed groups) and regular armies (State armed forces). In this report, we use the term 'armed organisations' where we mean both armed groups and regular armies.
- 4 Human Security Report 2005.
- 5 Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Child Soldiers Global Report, 2004.

- 6 Unless stated otherwise, the facts and figures in this chapter were collected by Human Rights Watch and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.
- 7 Paris Principles, 2007, p. 7.
- 8 See website <http://www.unddr.org/iddrs/05/30.php>, Chapter 3.
- 9 UNICEF, State of the World's Children, 2005.
- 10 Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Child Soldiers Global Report, 2004.
- 11 Situación de la Infancia: niñez desplazada y víctima del Conflicto, 7 March 2007, <http://www.unicef.org.co/08-desp.htm>
- 12 Human Development Index (HDI): benchmark developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
- 13 Ciudadanos excombatientes: un desafío de reconciliación e inclusión para Bogotá. Investigación de la Fundación Universitaria Luis Amigó, Sede Regional Bogotá, 2006.
- 14 Ciudadanos excombatientes: un desafío de reconciliación e inclusión para Bogotá. Investigación de la Fundación Universitaria Luis Amigó, Sede Regional Bogotá, 2006.
- 15 Los verdaderos terroristas, 14 February 2007. <http://www.farcep.org/?node=2,2622,1>
- 16 Homepage, 7 March 2007, <http://www.eln-voces.com>.



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