



Colombia

CHILD ALERT



# Childhood in the Time of War:

Will the children of Colombia know peace at last?

SAN ANDRÉS,  
PROVIDENCIA  
AND SANTA CATALINA

Providencia and  
Santa Catalina Islands  
San Andrés Island

100 Km



Caribbean Sea

PEOPLE IN NEED

5.8M



NORTH  
PACIFIC  
OCEAN

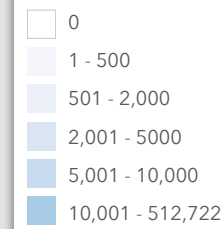
PANAMA

ECUADOR

- 1. Atlántico
- 2. Bogotá, D.C.
- 3. Cundinamarca
- 4. Quindío
- 5. Risaralda



People in need  
by municipality



# FOREWORD

With a war that has been raging in their country for more than five decades, Colombians 50 years of age or younger – 4 out of 5 people – have never known what it means to live in peace. Generation after generation of men and women came into the world, grew up and started their own families in the midst of a conflict that hasn't just claimed lives and property. It has also sown mistrust, shattered families and affected the fabric of a whole society.

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*Unless more and better resources are invested in creating opportunities for children and young people to thrive, long lasting peace in Colombia will continue to be an elusive dream.*

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For children, the cost has been particularly high: Thousands of boys and girls have been killed, injured, orphaned, forcibly displaced, recruited into armed groups, sexually abused and kept out of schools.

Today the country is poised to turn the page on one of the darkest chapters in its history. Negotiators from the Government and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP), the country's largest armed group, are close to signing a peace deal that will see both parties commit to ending the war and building sustainable and long-lasting peace.

The peace agreement has been in the works for over three years, a period during which there were signs of improvement on the ground. For example, between 2013 and 2015, the number of children killed or injured by landmines and unexploded ordnance was cut in half while the number of displaced children went down by 40 per cent as armed confrontations decreased.

However, fighting between different parties persisted during the same period, causing at least 75 children to die, 181 to be injured and 230,000 to be displaced.

No one is under the illusion that the agreement, if and when it is signed, is a magic wand that will end all Colombia's ills and bring peace and stability overnight. FARC-EP is by no means the only armed group in the country. Other groups, such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), remain active, and drug-related violence continues to put lives at risk.

Inequities are deep, leaving rural, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities with few resources and even fewer options. Disillusioned youth – 1 in 5 youth in Colombia is neither employed, at school or in training – may be left with few choices beyond joining other armed groups and criminal gangs.

Unless more and better resources are invested in creating opportunities for children and young people to thrive, long lasting peace in Colombia will continue to be an elusive dream.

**Roberto De Bernardi,**

UNICEF Representative in Colombia.

Child Alert is a briefing series that presents the core challenges for children in a given crisis location at a given time. This issue focuses on Colombia where peace negotiations are under way to end one of the longest conflicts in modern history. As the country prepares for a new chapter in its history, UNICEF urges all parties to put children first.

# INTRODUCTION

Forced displacement. Recruitment into armed groups. Killings. Abductions. Sexual violence. Death and injury from landmines. Damaged schools. This is the price that millions of children in Colombia have paid – and continue to pay – as a result of the country’s 50-year conflict.

National data show that out of 7.6 million people in Colombia who are registered as victims of the conflict, 2.5 million – or 1 in 3 – are children. Nearly 45,000 children have been killed, 2.3 million have been displaced and 8,000 disappeared since data collection started in 1985.<sup>1</sup>

Children under the age of 5 make up 1 in 10 of the total number of those killed, abducted, disappeared and tortured, and 1 in 5 of those displaced.

Indigenous and Afro-Colombian children have been particularly vulnerable throughout the conflict. They represent 12 per cent of the displaced, 15 per cent of survivors of sexual violence, and 17 per cent of those tortured.

Although the conflict in Colombia is mostly known as a war between the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), other parties are also involved, each pursuing its own economic and strategic interests – and each violating human rights and international humanitarian law in the process.

Table 1: The impact of the conflict on children, in numbers, 1985-present

Type of abuse and violation	Number of children
Death threats	73,000
Sexual violence	870
Enforced disappearance	8,000
Forced displacement	2.3 million
Killings	43,550
Abductions	615
Torture	320

Source: National Victims Registration Unit. Numbers refer to registered cases only.

For the past three years, the Colombian Government and FARC-EP have been negotiating an agreement to end the war and build sustainable and long-lasting peace. These negotiations – over comprehensive land development policies, political participation, illicit drugs – are taking Colombia closer and closer to ending the last armed conflict of the western hemisphere, and one of the longest wars in modern history.

Since the peace talks started, the number of displaced children went down, reaching 40,000 in 2015 - its lowest level in 20 years. The number of children killed or injured by landmines and unexploded ordnance decreased as well, from 57 in 2013 to 27 last year – the lowest level in 15 years.

But these figures are still too high.

Because while all eyes were on Havana, Cuba, where the peace negotiations are taking place, hostilities between different warring factions continued to exact a heavy toll on the country’s youngest citizens: Since the peace talks started at the end of 2012, at least 75 children have been killed, over 180 have been injured, and an estimated 1,000 have been recruited into armed groups. As these are only registered data, the actual numbers could be much higher.<sup>2</sup>



Children from the Awá indigenous community in El Diviso, Nariño. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have been particularly vulnerable to the armed conflict in Colombia.

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<sup>1</sup> Victims Registration Unit (RUV), <http://rni.unidadvictimas.gov.co/?q=node/107>, accessed on 10 March 2016.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations and national data.

## *“Why did they take away my mother?”*

The day Willinton Leyder Ortiz turned 10, armed men came to his village, took away his mother and killed her. Now at 15, he often wonders why humans are so violent.

Leyder is an Awá, an indigenous community living in the jungle and villages of Nariño, in western Colombia on the border with Ecuador. The Awás have traditionally lived in the jungle, subsisting on hunting and fishing. As the conflict drew closer to their homes, they became an easy prey for armed groups and criminal bands. Mines, sexual violence and insecurity forced many of them out of the jungle and into towns.

Unlike most teenagers, Leyder doesn't really go out much. He prefers to spend his time at home, perched up on a tree where he spends hours reading and thinking. Thinking about human beings. Why do they like to destroy things? Why do they treat nature the way they do?

His mother's killing wasn't the first time that Colombia's war came knocking on his door. His father had been killed the year before and his grandmother disappeared a few years earlier.

But even those two tragic events didn't prepare him for his mother's loss.

For his sister Solanyi, two years his junior, the blow was even harder. She doesn't remember much from her years back in the jungle and she struggles to hold back tears when she remembers the day life as she knew it came to an end.

Today Solanyi and Leyder live with their aunt Gladis and her four children. Leyder wishes he could turn back the time and dreams of getting a scholarship that will allow him to go to university. Solanyi dreams of becoming a teacher, or a ballerina or both.



Leyder and his sister Solanyi.

# A CHRONIC HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Fighting between different armed groups continues to cause mass displacement and to expose children to the danger of landmines, sexual violence and recruitment. While the risks are present throughout the country, their nature, frequency and impact on children depend on whether they occur in urban or rural areas.

Nearly 17 million people – or 1 in 3 – live in areas affected by the conflict in Colombia. Some 5.8 million people need humanitarian assistance.<sup>3</sup>

Since January 2013, more than 250,000 children have been affected by the conflict, including 230,000 who were displaced, averaging nearly 6,000 children a month.<sup>4</sup>

Conflict-affected areas have higher levels of malnutrition and vector-borne diseases than the rest of the country. Attacks on infrastructure and the presence of landmines limit access to safe water, sanitation and basic health services.

Insecurity makes access to the worst affected areas a challenge, depriving entire communities of humanitarian assistance.

## Children on the battlefield

An estimated 1,000 children – or one child a day – were recruited and used by armed groups and militias in the last three years. This figure is based on national and United Nations verified data and the actual numbers may be much higher. As with other conflicts around the world, exact figures on how many children are used in Colombia's conflict are very hard to come by.

Children in Colombia join armed groups for different reasons, including violence at home, lack of opportunities, hard economic conditions, desire for vengeance, threats and forced recruitment.

Once within the ranks of armed groups, children serve a variety of roles such as doing domestic chores; as messengers or informants; to make, plant or detect anti-personnel landmines; as guides and guards; as sexual companions to military leaders; and to recruit other children. They also participate in hostilities and abductions.

## Child recruits in numbers

Since 1999, nearly **6,000 children** ran away from non-state armed groups or were released by the military and received state protection. Of them:

More than



are from Afro-Colombian or indigenous communities.

30% are girls

1/3

come from just four departments:



Antioquia (654)

Meta (426)

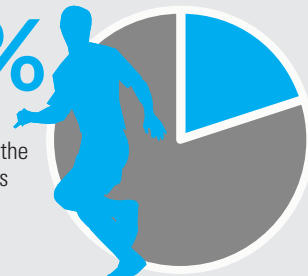
Cauca (401)

Caquetá (427)

Over

80%

ran away from the armed groups



Remaining

20%

were rescued by the military or police forces.

Nearly

4,900

were between 15-18 years of age



The average age of recruitment is

13

<sup>3</sup> Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Colombia Humanitarian Needs Overview 2016*, OCHA, October 2015.

<sup>4</sup> RUV, 2016.

## "I had problems at home so I joined an armed group."

"Things were bad at home, so bad that I lost the will to live. I thought if I joined an armed group, I would get killed.

"I first ran away from home when I was 12. I went on to live with a friend. My mother would sometimes come and get me, but I would leave again. When I was 15 I got pregnant. Having a baby is a big responsibility. I didn't know what to do.

"There were always guerrilleros in my village. I had seen them a few times and I decided to join them. It took me days to reach their camp. At first I didn't like it there, but then I met someone. We were together for a year before he was killed in battle. He was in another location and I only learned about his death six months later.

"When I joined, my daughter was still a baby. I wasn't there during the first years of her life and I will never get that time back. I would often call home to ask about her. But it's not the same. Now that I'm back, she wants to be with me all the time. She tells me she loves me and begs me not to leave her again. When she says that, I go to my room and start crying. I haven't been a mother to her.

"It's very important to have a partner there. It can be of great support. When we have to move, a partner can help you carry your load. Partners live together and if one of them has to go on mission, they can wait for each other if they're in love. But men don't wait for women.

"The first time I was in a battle I was very scared because I didn't know how to handle a gun.

"Sometimes I would cry and pray to God to give me strength to carry on. It's not a good place for children or even adults. People don't know how hard it is. If you can't defend yourself, you can die. One day there was an explosion. We were surrounded by soldiers and helicopters were flying above us. I thought I was going to die. But I didn't want to die. And I didn't want to go to jail. I don't know how or where I got the energy, but I managed to escape.

"I thought about my mother then. My death would have been a major blow to her. Once, I was almost killed. A bullet flew right over my head. I still have a scar.

"I wouldn't go back there. I want to move on with my life. The years I spent there were wasted. When one leaves, you have to start from scratch.

"My message to young people who want to do what I did? That they need to think really hard first. You don't just join and that's it. It's a big responsibility. If you do any damage, they will do things to you that you wouldn't like."

Angelina (not her real name), 23.

Girls represent a significant proportion of child recruits. Many are forced to abort when they become pregnant. Those who do deliver often have their babies taken away from them and given away to families outside the military camp.

Nearly 870 children were released or ran away in the last three years, one third of whom were girls.<sup>5</sup>

Children who run away from the armed groups and militias or are released by the military or police forces remain at risk of re-recruitment if they are not provided with the necessary counselling and support.

UNICEF is concerned about reports that some former child recruits were tried in the criminal justice system as perpetrators, despite provisions in the Colombian law to treat them as victims.

<sup>5</sup> ICBF, *Programa especializado para la atención a niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados de grupos armados ilegales*, January 2016 report.

## Education under threat

According to UNICEF estimates, children in Colombia's conflict-affected areas make up 40 per cent of the out-of-school population among primary and lower secondary school students.

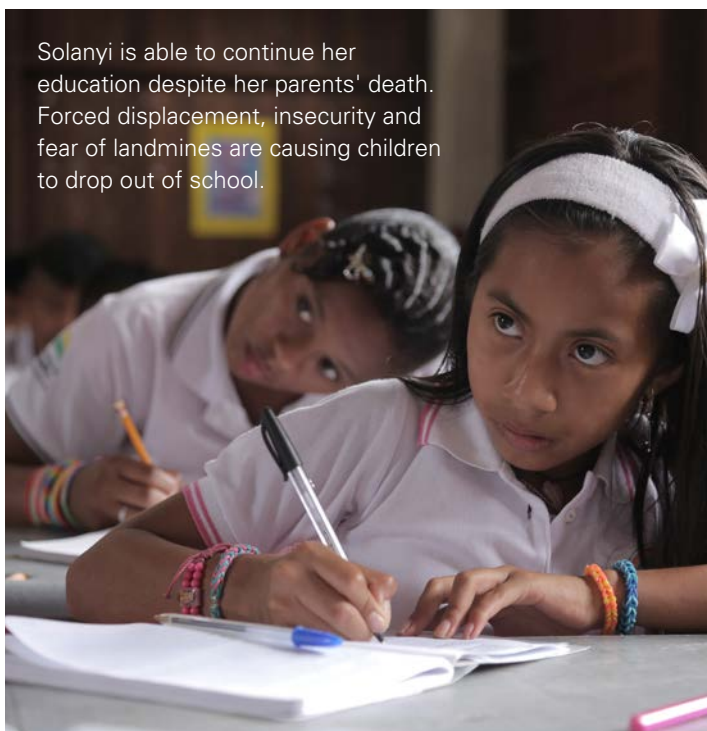
Forced displacement, insecurity, the threat of recruitment and of sexual violence, and the presence of antipersonnel mines in and around schools are causing children to drop out of school.

In addition, children's participation in civic military activities, such as parades, and school study visits to military bases can expose them to the risk of military attack and retaliation by members of non-state armed groups.

Damage to schools during armed confrontations further exposes children to harm and causes school closures.

Death threats against teachers, killings, displacement and insecurity have resulted in teacher shortages in the worst affected areas, limiting children's schooling opportunities even more.

In the last three years, at least 10 teachers were killed and 65 schools were either damaged, mined or used for military purposes by parties to the conflict.<sup>6</sup>



Solanyi is able to continue her education despite her parents' death. Forced displacement, insecurity and fear of landmines are causing children to drop out of school.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations verified data.

## A sexual violence pandemic

Sexual violence against girls and boys is widespread across the country, though it remains grossly under-reported. According to forensic data, there were nearly 18,000 cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents in 2013, representing over 80 per cent of all reported cases. Some 70 per cent of cases involved girls under the age of 14.<sup>7</sup>

According to national data, 180 children – mostly girls – were victims of sexual violence committed by parties to the conflict in the last three years.

In the conflict areas, sexual violence is a major cause of displacement. It is used by non-state armed groups as a strategy to assert social control and to intimidate civilians and extort money. Women and girls living near illegal mining settlements controlled by non-state armed groups are at heightened risk of sexual exploitation.

Sexual violence is so prevalent in Colombia that it will most likely continue unabated even after the peace agreement is signed.

## Landmines and other explosive hazards: A constant threat

Since 1990, landmines and unexploded remnants of war killed and injured over 11,000 people, including more than 1,100 children.<sup>8</sup> This is the second highest number of registered child victims in the world after Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup>

Non-state armed groups continue to use anti-personnel landmines, unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices for military purposes and to protect illicit crops. Landmines are also frequently found in schoolyards, near water sources and on rural roads.

In the past three years, landmines and unexploded ordnance, killed 21 children and injured another 108.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond their direct physical and psychological impact, landmines and other explosive hazards limit communities' ability to move freely and reduce their access to health centers, schools, crops, workplaces, markets, rivers and roads.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, *Análisis de la situación de la infancia y la adolescencia en Colombia 2010-2014*, UNICEF, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Dirección contra minas, <http://www.accioncontraminas.gov.co/estadisticas/Paginas/victimas-minas-antipersonal.aspx>, accessed on 27 February 2016.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Mine Action, <http://www.mineaction.org/programmes/colombia>, accessed on 10 March 2016.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations verified data.





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## *“My baby and I survived a landmine explosion.”*

“It was 2:30 in the afternoon on 12 October 2012. I was on a public transport van with my husband, my 7 month-old baby, Luz Ariana, and 10 other passengers, heading back home after taking my baby to the doctor for a respiratory infection. Then there was a big explosion.

“What I remember most is my baby’s scream. I never heard a baby scream so loud. It was frightening, even scarier than the explosion itself. Her little face was all covered with blood. Everybody around us was screaming. I was badly hurt, my leg was hanging loose and I couldn’t get off the van. I passed my baby to her father and kept asking him to check that she hadn’t lost her little arms or legs.

“My daughter had a burn on her leg and thankfully recovered quickly. I lost a tendon and had to spend a month and a half in hospital for treatment.

“When I went back home, I was overjoyed to see my children again. Luz Ariana was afraid of me at first, with all the scars and

the bandages. I wasn’t nursing her anymore and we had to learn to know each other again.

“My children gave me the strength to carry on. I didn’t want the other children to tell them that their mother was an ‘invalid.’ I also didn’t want people to treat me differently or feel sorry for me.

“After the accident, I would sometimes ask myself: Why me? Why did I have to go through this? But then I would think about all the good things that happened to me. It’s as if God opened a door and said: ‘Luz Dari, I didn’t let you live just so you would sit idle and do nothing. You have to find ways to help other people.’

“Now I go around schools and companies and tell people about my experience and explain what landmines are and how they can avoid them. There are a lot of landmines here and no signs to point them out. I feel like I’m saving lives.”

Luz Dari Landázuri, 38, Tumaco, Nariño.

# CALL TO ACTION

UNICEF urges parties to the conflict to let children's interests come first, in accordance with national law, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

- **Victims not perpetrators:** Children associated with armed groups are victims first and foremost. They need to be protected, reunited with their families and offered the support they need to re-integrate into society.
- **Demobilization can't wait:** Releasing children from armed groups should not be contingent upon the outcome of the peace agreement. There is no place for children in war.
- **Re-recruitment is a serious threat:** Children associated with armed groups live in the most remote and vulnerable areas, with limited education and job opportunities. Unless these children receive better opportunities, joining other armed groups or criminal gangs will be their only hope to survive.
- **Protective environments are key:** Children and adolescents need protective, stigma-free environments which see them as active participants in their communities, rather than problem makers or potential delinquents.

# UNICEF IN ACTION

## Child protection

UNICEF is working with the Colombian government to prevent sexual violence, exploitation and abuse of children and adolescents across the country, and to respond to their needs. Providing these children with access to justice and medical and psycho-social support is critical to peace-building.

In the last five years, over 180,000 children benefited from a UNICEF-supported programme that aims to protect children from joining armed groups or criminal bands.

The programme allows children to develop life skills through trainings on child rights and the culture of peace; art, cultural and sports workshops; and peace-building and reconciliation initiatives.

One of these initiatives is Golombiao, a football game that enables boys and girls to play together as a way of learning how to work out their differences and resolve conflicts.

The programme involves families, teachers, communities and local authorities, equipping them with the tools to build a protective environment for children.

In addition, UNICEF is helping raise awareness among armed and police forces of national and international child protection norms.



Children learning about the danger of landmines.

## Children and transitional justice

UNICEF works to make sure that children affected by the conflict have safe, priority, equal and non-discriminatory access to all aspects of transitional justice, including justice, truth and guarantees of non-repetition and reparation.

UNICEF also promotes the development of local initiatives that enable children and adolescents to participate in processes of reconciliation and peace building in schools, communities and family environments.

## Mine risk education and victim assistance

UNICEF works with partners to identify areas most affected by anti-personnel landmines and other explosive hazards. This monitoring allows for the design and implementation of community-based strategies that help local populations understand the risks associated with these artifacts and promote safe behaviours to prevent accidents.

UNICEF also provides assistance to landmine survivors, including transportation, accommodation and food expenses, and legal support. In addition, UNICEF helps develop and implement strategies for the socio-economic re-integration of survivors and their families, including through information gathering and dissemination, strengthening survivor networks, and providing psychosocial support.

## Inclusive education

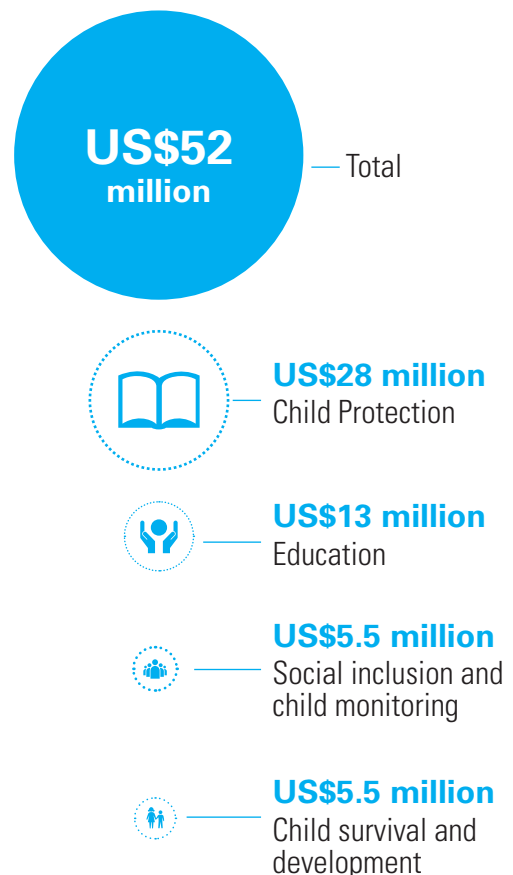
UNICEF supports national and local authorities, teachers and communities to develop school-based peace-building, reconciliation and resilience initiatives.

UNICEF provides technical assistance for the development of national curriculum guidelines around the principles of civic education, peace and reconciliation; for the prevention of violence, including sexual violence, in schools; and for the promotion of a culture of gender equality, diversity and human rights in schools.

## Social inclusion

UNICEF works to strengthen local capacity in the areas worst affected by violence, poverty and institutional weakness to put in place child-friendly public policies that will help bring long-lasting and sustainable peace.

### UNICEF Colombia funding needs (2016-2019):



# Childhood in the Time of War:

## Will the children of Colombia know peace at last?

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