

The FARC and Child Soldiers: A Question of Reintegration – So Near, Yet So Far

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On May 15, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia; FARC) announced that they will release child soldiers as part of the ongoing peace negotiations.¹ A potential milestone for human rights in Colombia, this plan was agreed upon during negotiations of a mutual ceasefire between the FARC and the government, one of the last items left on the agenda to end a conflict that has spanned almost 50 years.² Although the original deadline for the release of child combatants was March 23, negotiations have been extended in order for both sides to agree on its underlying terms and conditions.³ Specifically, the FARC have agreed to immediately release from their custody all minors 15 and younger. Additionally, a “roadmap for the exit of remaining minors” — meaning that those between ages 15 and 18, will be developed.⁴

Now, the country is eager to see how the Colombian government, the FARC, and UNICEF will reinsert these children into society, as well as to see what charges will be brought against members of the FARC regarding their use of child soldiers.

Peace negotiations between the FARC and the Santos administration have been in the works since November 2012, when both sides expressed interest in bringing an end to decades of bloodshed with the help and support of Norway, Cuba, Venezuela, and Chile.⁵ A report by June S. Beittel for the Congressional Research Service, says that there was much room for “cautious optimism” due to the peace talks occurring in Cuba, foreign support and mediation, and a “broad spectrum” of collective peace talks on the government’s negotiation team.⁶ It should also be noted that the FARC already have been cooperative in the release of General Rubén Darío Alzate Mora, the only general that they have ever managed to kidnap back in November 2014. The kidnapping

¹ Casey, Nicholas. “Colombia and FARC Rebels Reach a Deal to Free Child Soldiers.” *New York Times*, May 15, 2016. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/16/world/americas/colombia-and-farc-rebels-reach-a-deal-to-free-child-soldiers.html>

² “Colombia: FARC to remove child soldiers from ranks.” *Al Jazeera*, May 16, 2016. Accessed May 17, 2016.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/colombia-farc-remove-child-soldiers-ranks-160516054514607.html>

³ Brigida, Anna-Cat. “Will Colombia’s child soldier recruiters face justice?” *Al Jazeera*, May 17, 2016. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/03/colombia-child-soldier-recruiters-face-justice-160323055437408.html>

⁴ Casey, “Colombia and FARC Rebels Reach a Deal to Free Child Soldiers.”

⁵ Beittel, June S. “Peace Talks in Colombia.” *Congressional Research Service*, March 31, 2015, 18. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42982.pdf>

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29

was a response to continued military activity during peace talks. Alzate and two other soldiers' releases were due to the FARC leadership's commitment to the ongoing peace process.⁷

Colombia's Young Guerrillas

According to a 2012 comprehensive U.N. report on the involvement of minors and adolescents in Colombian armed conflict, 50.14 percent of adult combatants of FARC are inducted as minors.⁸ Interim Prosecutor General Jorge Perdomo also cited that the FARC have recruited 11,566 child soldiers since 1975.⁹ Although frequently forced into different armed groups such as the FARC, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army; ELN) and increasingly violent paramilitary groups (*Bacrim*), most minors simply lack any option other than volunteering due to social and economic vulnerability common in most rural areas, especially in those with a heavy indigenous populations.¹⁰ Many children are already used to constantly changing chaotic surroundings and the loss of family members, since the civil war has displaced at least 6.6 million nationals.¹¹

Many children are subjected to physical and psychological isolation in order to be fully indoctrinated. However, many young volunteers have had a change of spirit and eventually wish to leave. In response, the FARC's punishment for desertion is death.¹² The majority of armed Colombian boys are tasked with gathering intelligence and maintaining watch, laying mines, directly participating in combat and tactical assaults, as well as cooking and ranching. Around half are involved in assisting with extortions, kidnappings, and assassinations. The girls involved are primarily used to gather intelligence and infiltrate hostile areas.¹³ Due to the intensity of their tasks within the organization, many are psychologically impacted. About 81 percent of demobilized child recruits of the FARC, the ELN, and the *Bacrim* report that they have serious problems regarding their mental health. About half suffer from sleep disorders, anxiety, or the consumption of psychoactive drugs.¹⁴

Implications for Peace

It is important to note that the release of child soldiers by the FARC is an important human rights development. As previously stated, the estimated total number of child soldiers recruited by the FARC is about 12,000 since 1975. Additionally, Colombia's Ministry of Defense reports that 71 percent of demobilized child soldiers were at one point part of the FARC.¹⁵ The release of soldiers

⁷ "Colombia kidnapping: Farc expected to release Gen Alzate." *BBC*, November 30, 2014. Accessed May 18, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-30263402>

⁸ Springer, Dr. Natalia, *Como corderos entre lobos: del uso y reclutamiento de niños, niñas, y adolescentes en el marco del conflicto armado y la criminalidad en Colombia*. Bogotá: Springer Consulting Services, 2012, 27.

⁹ Alsema, Adriaan. "FARC faces charges for recruiting more than 12000 child soldiers." *Colombia Reports*, May 17, 2016. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://colombiareports.com/farc-face-charges-recruitment-12000-children/>

¹⁰ Springer. *Como corderos entre lobos*, 30.

¹¹ "Colombia: FARC to remove child soldiers from ranks."

¹² Springer. *Como corderos entre lobos*, 26-27

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48

¹⁵ Florey, Rebecca. "The reality of Colombia's child soldiers." *Colombia Reports*, February 17, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://colombiareports.com/reality-colombias-child-soldiers/>

under the age of 15 is seen as a major victory by human rights groups, but all parties involved understand that steps must also be taken to ensure that those released do not automatically fall back into violence. Coordination between the government, the FARC, and the organizations providing oversight, such as UNICEF, is necessary in order to create an avenue to a better life for the former child soldiers.

Unrelated to the human rights aspects, the agreement presents all actors involved in the peace talks with a sense of encouragement that both sides are committed to this joint endeavor. In previous years, the FARC have rationalized their use of child soldiers in many different ways. A frequent strategy that they employed was to make an emotional appeal, citing the alternatives that child volunteers face. A statement put out by the FARC explains that “when the war intensified, many arrived whose fathers had been killed by paramilitary violence or simply had fled mistreatment and had no futures [...] in these cases, we gave them refuge and protection that orphan hood [sic] and poverty denied them.”¹⁶ At face value, this explanation of the FARC’s previous acceptance of child volunteers appears valid. The convergence of scarce economic opportunities, high levels of corruption, and a variety of paramilitary and guerilla groups, often leave children nowhere else to turn but to groups like the FARC. However, the apparent merit of this argument does not overcome the clear, malodorous manner in which the use of child soldiers has contradicted the FARC’s lofty goals.

On May 2, in regards to the peace negotiations, the FARC’s international twitter account (@FARC_EPeace), released the message, “With realism and conviction we are working [f]or a better country. We need everyone’s participation.”¹⁷ The use of child soldiers, which was still in practice when this tweet was sent out, is directly opposed to the creation of a less violent and “better” country. By finally taking responsibility and releasing children under the age of 15, the guerilla organization has bought itself a certain level of credibility in the peace talks. Although this agreement is a small step towards a negotiated peace, the FARC have shown both, the Colombian government and the international community, that their desire to improve Colombia is real.

A second reason that the mood surrounding the peace talks may be improved by the release of child soldiers is that the FARC are making a clear concession. Although they represent only a portion of the FARC’s forces, child soldiers are quite useful in a variety of ways to the guerillas’ cause. Following the announcement in 2012 that the Colombian government and the FARC would engage in peace talks, a number of prominent public figures voiced their strong criticisms. The most notable of these critics is former President Álvaro Uribe (2002 – 2010). During his presidency, Uribe launched a massive campaign against guerilla forces and is known for his feral rhetoric in regards to the FARC. In perhaps his most scathing criticism of the peace talks, he compared the negotiations to a complete surrender to the FARC.¹⁸ However, the release of child soldiers represents the latest development in a string of concessions by the FARC including: the exclusion of foreign policy discussions in Havana, far weaker rural reforms than were hoped for, and the potential for FARC leaders to be charged with war crimes and to face prison time. For peace talks to succeed, parties on both sides must be willing to consider the requests of the other.

Will the FARC be Held Accountable?

¹⁶ Casey. “Colombia and FARC Rebels Reach a Deal to Free Child Soldiers.”

¹⁷ FARC International, Twitter post, May 2, 2016, 5:43 a.m., https://twitter.com/FARC_EPeace

¹⁸ Renwick, Danielle. “FARC, ELN: Colombia’s Left-Wing Guerrillas.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2016.

Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.cfr.org/colombia/farc-eln-colombias-left-wing-guerrillas/p9272>

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One aspect of the agreement remains to be addressed: whether those involved in the recruitment, capture, and training of child soldiers will be held accountable for what are considered to be major war crimes and crimes against humanity. Child soldiers under the age of 18, under Colombia's Victims Law, are considered victims of illegal organizations, under which the FARC classifies, and are therefore innocent of any crimes associated with these kinds of organizations.¹⁹

This shifts the strain to the leaders of the FARC who have either recruited volunteers or forced young children and adolescents into FARC ranks. In September of last year, both the government and the FARC agreed to the creation of a special tribunal, which among its various responsibilities will provide sentencing for individuals accused and found guilty of serious crimes.²⁰ At this point in the negotiations, it is unclear whether the negotiators definition of "serious crimes" will include those related to the use of child soldiers.

Addressing the Issue of Reintegration

It is important to note that President Santos has repeatedly declared that no specifics of the peace negotiations will be divulged to the public until the negotiations are concluded in their entirety. In an interview with Carla Hills, Co-Chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations, Santos explained his reasoning for this: "That's why nothing's agreed until everything's agreed [...] because each element of a peace process in the case—this case, the FARC, put to the Colombian people by itself, individually the elements, people will naturally reject it."²¹ For this reason, the exact details as to how the government and the FARC plan to reintegrate the newly released children are known by only those directly involved in the negotiations.

The agreement to release child soldiers under 15 is a step in the right direction for Colombia. Current methods of reintegration are similar to those in Central Africa, where former child soldiers are placed into reintegration homes or schools in order to provide them a buffer, or rehabilitation period. Executive Director of the Romeo Dallaire Child Soldier Initiative, Dr. Shelly Whitman, has expressed her confidence in Colombia's reintegration program, saying, "Credit must be given to the government, who have a national two-year rehabilitation programme for child soldiers which I believe is the most comprehensive in the world."²²

While the input of experts such as Dr. Whitman are useful, the feedback from the actual children placed into the programs is what provides more effective insight into whether the reintegration efforts can be considered successful. According to a study titled "*Como Corderos Entre Lobos*" (Like Lambs Among Wolves), Dr. Natalia Springer surveyed the opinions of former child soldiers on the reintegration programs in which they have been placed. "The boys and girls

¹⁹ Reed, Charlotte. "Learning from the Past and Looking Towards the Future: The Situation of Child Soldiers in Colombia." *Peace and Conflict Monitor*, September 12, 2013. Accessed May 17, 2016.

http://www.monitor.upeace.org/innerpg.cfm?id_article=1011

²⁰ Renwick. "FARC, ELN: Colombia's Left-Wing Guerillas."

²¹ President Juan Manuel Santos, interview by Carla Hills, Council on Foreign Relations, September 22, 2014.

²² Alexander, Harriet. "Last child soldiers in the Americas to be freed as Farc agree to release Colombia's children." *The Telegraph*, May 16, 2016. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/16/last-child-soldiers-in-the-americas-to-be-freed-as-farc-agree-to/>

say that they have not had major problems adapting to civil life (70 percent), that the demobilization has been positive (91 percent), and that they highly value the programs with which they are affiliated.”²³ In contrast with the positive light that Dr. Springer’s study shines onto the reintegration program, there are accounts from former child soldiers that highlight the negative aspects of the program, as well as difficulties that they have encountered in readjusting to life without the FARC. Often times, the former soldiers feel that the program is pushing them towards a reality to which they cannot relate. A former soldier described the downfalls of the program, stating that, “They force us to push aside these things, to erase them, in order to create a new future that denies what we were and what we learned. They guide us to accept an identity that is not ours, to be bakers and cobblers.”²⁴ Another anonymous former soldier explained their frustration with the program: “There are no spaces to reflect on our stories; there is no mourning process. They focus on how to prepare us to fit into society’s norms, without understanding why, at some point, we left them behind.”²⁵

Although the majority of opinions among children in the programs is overwhelmingly positive, the dissenting opinions of many reveal what is considered to be the biggest oversight by negotiators of the peace talks: that the children are not involved in any capacity. A great portion of child soldiers are volunteers due to dire economic and familial situations, and it is a major concern that those being released by the FARC will turn to the ELN or various other illegal organizations for the same reasons they turned to FARC in the first place. It is necessary that the peace talks address the efficacy of the reintegration programs, as well as the issues that drive children to join groups like the FARC. Nevertheless, and at all costs, the voices of the soon-to-be former child soldiers must be heard.

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²³ Springer. *Como corderos entre lobos*, 48.

²⁴ Ladisch, Virginia. “In Reintegration Programs, Seeing Former Child Soldiers as More Than Just Victims.” *International Center for Transitional Justice*, November 19, 2013. Accessed May 17, 2016.

<https://www.ictj.org/news/more-than-just-victims>

²⁵ Ibid.