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Children and armed conflict in Colombia

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the sixth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Colombia and covers the period from 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2023. In the report, the Secretary-General addresses the effect of cycles of violence on children in the country, highlighting trends and patterns with regard to the six grave violations committed against boys and girls and provides information, where available, on perpetrators.

The reporting period was characterized by a considerable increase in all six grave violations. Indigenous children and children of African descent were disproportionately and increasingly affected. Girls were also increasingly affected as compared with the previous reporting period. In the report, the Secretary-General outlines progress made by the Government of Colombia to strengthen the framework for responding to, ending and preventing grave violations against children, including through prevention strategies. The report also contains recommendations for all parties aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children and strengthening child protection in Colombia.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the sixth report of the Secretary-General on the situation of children affected by armed conflict in Colombia. Covering the period from 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2023, it includes information on trends and patterns of grave violations against children committed by parties to conflict in Colombia since the previous report ([S/2021/1022](#)) and the adoption by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of its conclusions on children and armed conflict in Colombia ([S/AC.51/2022/2](#)). The report includes information on progress made, concerns about, opportunities and recommendations for preventing and responding to grave violations. Where possible, parties to conflict responsible for grave violations were identified. In that regard, in annex I to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/77/895-S/2023/363](#)), the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) dissident groups are listed for the recruitment and use of children.

2. The information contained in the present report was documented and verified by the country task force on monitoring and reporting in Colombia, co-chaired by the Resident Coordinator and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Conflict and violence, access restrictions and fears of retribution against communities continued to pose serious challenges to the verification of grave violations against children. The information contained herein therefore does not represent the full extent of the grave violations committed in Colombia during the reporting period, and the actual number of violations is likely to be higher.

II. Overview of the political and security developments

3. The reporting period covered the final year of the administration of the previous President, Iván Duque Márquez, and the first year of the administration of the current President, Gustavo Petro Urrego, who took office in August 2022. The new administration announced a “total peace” policy, which includes commitments to human security, the implementation of the Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace between the Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, the resumption of peace negotiations with ELN and dialogues with other armed and criminal groups.

4. Colombia continued to make progress in the implementation of the peace agreement, with a focus on community-based reintegration, sustainable economic reintegration, access to land, education and the empowerment of women. The National Reintegration Council approved a sustainability strategy for collective projects, with a focus on security, land access and gender equality. The tripartite working group on mines conducted activities to address the issue of antipersonnel mines and unexploded ordnance in various departments.

5. Former combatants continued to face security threats and violence from armed groups and criminal groups, resulting in killings, attempted homicides and disappearances. Since the signing of the peace agreement, the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia has verified a total of 375 killings, including 25 young adults who had been children at the time of their association with FARC-EP and who were killed or who had died. Efforts to prosecute the perpetrators of such attacks have been limited.

6. The violence extended to social leaders and human rights defenders. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights verified 202 cases of

killings of human rights defenders (178 men and 24 women, 2 of whom were transgender women) during the reporting period. The Office of the Ombudsman of Colombia issued a national early warning on risks to social leaders and human rights defenders, calling for strengthened prevention and protection measures.

7. During the reporting period, the humanitarian situation deteriorated in several areas of the country, as a result of the armed conflict. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs registered over 111,000 children subject to displacement or confinement during the reporting period, mostly Indigenous or of African descent, in particular in the Nariño, Chocó and Cauca Departments, where 85 per cent of the cases had occurred. Violence, forced displacements and confinements had serious impacts on the physical and mental health of children, and on their access to health care and education, and led to their increased exposure to protection risks, including grave violations. Grave violations or threats of violations, such as recruitment and use, sexual violence and killing and maiming, including by landmines, were among the causes of displacements or confinements of families.

8. The Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition, created under the peace agreement, made progress in addressing crimes committed by former combatants and State agents and in guaranteeing victims' rights and their participation in the process. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace, created under the same agreement, held collective hearings, with the participation of accredited victims, including children and adults who had been children at the time of their violations, and issued several indictments against former members of FARC-EP and security forces. Preparations for implementing restorative sentences are under way.

9. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace opened three new "macro" cases during the reporting period, notably on crimes committed by public security forces and other State agents in association with paramilitary groups, crimes committed against people from ethnic communities and crimes not subject to amnesty committed by FARC-EP.

10. The Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, also created under the peace agreement, released its final report in June 2022, which included a specific chapter on children. Its documentary archive, which contains testimonies of both victims, including children, and perpetrators, was handed over to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and the General Archive of the Nation for its public access. The committee set up to follow up on the recommendations of the Truth Commission worked with the Government to ensure their implementation. Many recommendations were related to the protection of children and the restoration of their rights. The Unit for the Search for Persons Deemed Missing in the context of and due to the armed conflict has continued its efforts to search for missing persons and has recovered and returned numerous bodies, including those of children, to their families.

11. The Government and ELN resumed formal peace negotiations in November 2022. Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Norway and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) agreed to support the parties as guarantor countries. The Verification Mission and the Catholic Church are supporting the dialogues. Three rounds of talks were held during the reporting period and, as at the time of writing the present report, the parties were in the sixth round of talks. After the first round of talks, held in Caracas, the negotiating parties announced their decision to conduct actions to provide humanitarian relief in conflict-affected areas. In June 2023, during the third round of talks, held in Havana, the Government and ELN agreed on a bilateral temporary ceasefire, starting on 3 August 2023, for a six-month period that could be renewed by mutual agreement. In addition, a national committee on participation was established, to define the methodology for the participation of civil society in the peace process. The parties have requested the support of the Verification Mission and the Catholic

Church in the verification of their bilateral ceasefire, as well as in facilitating the work of the participation committee that will facilitate the dialogue and compile proposals from and recommendations by civil society. As at the time of writing, children's rights and the release of children by ELN had not yet been discussed formally at the peace table.

12. The High Commissioner for Peace of the Government of Colombia engaged with other armed groups, such as the Clan del Golfo, also known as Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), FARC-EP dissident groups and criminal groups, that had expressed interest in starting peace dialogues. In December 2022, the Government announced the start of bilateral ceasefires with five armed groups for a period of six months. The Government suspended its ceasefire with AGC in March 2023, alleging a lack of compliance by the armed group. In May 2023, the Government suspended its ceasefire with the FARC-EP dissident group known as Estado Mayor Central, after the group killed four associated children who had escaped. After the end of the reporting period in July 2023, the Government and Estado Mayor Central announced the start of peace negotiations.

13. The reporting period was characterized by a decrease in confrontations between the Government and armed groups. However, the strengthening of some armed groups and the expansion of their territorial and social control over communities in certain regions with limited state presence remained of concern. FARC-EP dissident groups, ELN, AGC and other armed groups continued to fight for control of territory and illicit economies and against the Colombian armed forces, although confrontations with security forces have decreased in the context of the peace dialogues. The armed groups strengthened their ranks through the recruitment of children and young people. Several armed strikes were conducted by armed groups, affecting mostly rural areas, during which they banned travel along roads and rivers, subjected people to confinement and prevented the supply of food and fuel and access to health and education services, including for children. An estimated 7.2 million people faced protection and humanitarian risks due to the presence of armed groups and social control measures. For example, between 5 and 9 May 2022, AGC conducted an armed strike to protest the extradition to the United States of their leader, known as "Otoniel". According to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the extradition led to over 300 incidents of violence, such as the killing of and threats to civilians and attacks against the Colombian armed forces, and to restricted access to education for thousands of children. Large military operations were also conducted by the Colombian armed forces, including aerial strikes on armed groups' camps during the first year of the reporting period, killing several children. Air strikes against armed group camps where children might be present were suspended in August 2022 by the Ministry of National Defence.

14. Although armed conflict continued to be prevalent mostly in remote rural areas characterized by limited State presence and weak socioeconomic indicators, some urban areas, such as Bogotá, Buenaventura, Cali, Cúcuta, Medellín and Quibdó, were also affected by alliances between armed groups and criminal groups conducting illicit activities. Such gangs established invisible borders within cities to take full control of certain urban areas, including by threatening communities, perpetrating homicides and torture and recruiting and using children.

15. During the reporting period, the Office of the Ombudsman issued 90 early warnings related to security threats, including 75 that explicitly included imminent threats of recruitment and use of children, mainly in Amazonas, Caquetá, Cauca, Putumayo and Valle del Cauca Departments. In a report on sexual violence against children, the Office highlighted that this crime continued to be a common tactic used by armed groups to threaten, intimidate and control territories and that children were being trafficked for sexual exploitation by networks of criminal gangs and armed

groups. Local coordination teams working as part of the humanitarian country team, released several alerts on child protection risks in Amazonas, Caquetá, Guaviare, Meta and Vaupés Departments, including on over 21,000 children at risk of recruitment and use.

III. Grave violations against children

16. Between July 2021 and June 2023, the country task force verified 615 grave violations against 476 children (306 boys, 166 girls and 4 of unknown sex), representing a sharp increase in grave violations of 61 per cent compared with the previous reporting period (383). An increase in verified grave violations was also observed throughout the reporting period, reflecting the ongoing deterioration of the situation of children affected by armed conflict in Colombia, with 287 grave violations verified between July 2021 and June 2022 and 328 grave violations between July 2022 and June 2023. The first six months of 2023 was the period with the highest verified number of violations (197). Some 72 children (46 boys and 26 girls) were victims of double violations, with recruitment and use resulting from or leading to other violations in most such cases (68). In addition, two girls were victims of three grave violations, and two children (one boy, one girl) were victims of four grave violations.

17. FARC-EP dissident groups remained the main perpetrator, with 339 grave violations or 55 per cent, followed by ELN (107), AGC (52) and the Colombian armed forces (27). Unidentified perpetrators were responsible for 90 grave violations. FARC-EP dissident groups committed violations in 14 departments, with the highest concentrations in Cauca (132), Nariño (62), Arauca (31), Caquetá (21) and Putumayo (21). ELN perpetrated violations in nine departments, with the highest concentrations in Arauca (46), Norte de Santander (20), Chocó (20) and Nariño (10). AGC perpetrated violations in seven departments, with most cases in Chocó (23) and Antioquia (22). The Colombian armed forces perpetrated violations in nine departments, including Arauca (8), Chocó (5) and Caquetá (4). Children were also affected by violations perpetrated by criminal gangs with control over drug trafficking, extortion and other illicit activities, mostly in urban areas, for instance in such cities as Barranquilla, Bogotá, Buenaventura, Cali and Medellín. Criminal gangs have, on occasion, been reported to have connections with armed groups. However, continual reorganization, change and fluidity in leadership have hindered the ability to understand the connection with armed groups and to attribute responsibility for grave violations.

18. The increase in grave violations compared with the previous period can be explained by armed groups fighting harder to control more territories, coerce civilian communities into complying with their demands and protect their illicit sources of revenue, as well as the subsequent need to increase their ranks with new recruits, including children. Although the frequency of large-scale military operations and clashes tended to drop in the second half of the reporting period, clashes between armed groups and systematic violence against civilian communities, such as killing, threats, torture, extortion and abduction, continued.

19. Recruitment and use continued to be the most prevalent grave violation verified, affecting 348 children, followed by killing and maiming (133). Sexual violence against children increased, with 33 cases verified compared with 14 verified during the previous reporting period. Similarly, child abductions increased, with 44 cases verified, compared with 10 in the previous period. A total of 41 attacks on schools and hospitals were verified, compared with 8 in the previous period, and 16 incidents of denial of humanitarian access.

20. The situation of Indigenous children and children of African descent worsened during the reporting period. A total of 207 children from those communities (170 Indigenous and 37 of African descent) were victims of grave violations, representing 43 per cent of all cases. Those communities are in remote rural areas characterized by difficult access, poverty, a limited presence of State authority, limited services and limited investment, as well as armed groups fighting for the control of illicit revenues linked to drug production and trafficking, mining and other natural resources. They also experienced great humanitarian needs, with their well-being severely affected by discrimination, a lack of access to basic health, education, water and sanitation services and weather-related emergencies. In some areas, such as in Chocó Department, their situation and reduced opportunities heavily affected their mental health, sometimes leading to suicide and drug consumption.

21. The number of children of other nationalities, notably Ecuadorian and Venezuelan, facing grave violations increased from 6 in the previous period to 23. Refugee and migrant children, in particular unaccompanied children and those separated from their families, faced heightened risks of recruitment and use, child labour, trafficking and sexual exploitation, as they live in and transit through areas with a presence of armed groups and criminal organizations and have limited access to State protection systems. Many of them also lack identification documentation. Despite efforts to provide documentation and access to rights through the temporary protection statute for Venezuelans, challenges persist in ensuring their access to that mechanism and in issuing the documentation.

22. Grave violations were verified in 18 departments, which represent 56 per cent of the departments in Colombia. Of the verified grave violations, 73 per cent occurred in departments along the Pacific coast and along the border with Venezuela. Verified violations occurred in the following departments: Cauca (151), Arauca (101), Nariño (86), Chocó (59), Antioquia (46), Norte de Santander (31), Putumayo (28), Caquetá (27), Valle del Cauca (27), Guaviare (14), Meta (14), Tolima (11), Amazonas (5), Guainía (4), Huila (4), Bolívar (2), Casanare (2) and Córdoba (1). In addition, two grave violations occurred in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in areas along the border with Colombia, affecting two children who had been abducted and taken to Colombia. When taking into consideration the total number of children in each department, the 10 departments most affected by grave violations were Amazonas, Arauca, Caquetá, Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Guainía, Guaviare, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Putumayo. The absence or limited number of verified grave violations in other departments may not reflect reality. For instance, some areas in the Caribbean region are subject to strong social control by armed groups, but a reduced presence of humanitarian organizations may explain the lack of reporting. Although the number of departments affected by grave violations was the same as in the previous reporting period, the number of municipalities affected increased by 23 per cent compared with the previous period, reflecting a tendency towards territorial expansion by armed groups. The municipalities most affected by grave violations were characterized by one or more of the following: high poverty levels, limited State presence and social services, a lack of education opportunities, a lack of formal work opportunities for young people, gender-based violence, illicit economies and crops, the presence of mines and the influence of multiple armed groups.

23. The long-term and persistent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on poverty and education, among other things, continued to contribute to the vulnerabilities of children to, and their risk of, being recruited by armed groups and becoming victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation, among other grave violations. Despite the end of pandemic-related mobility restrictions, the reopening of schools and the normalization of the economy, many out-of-school students have not re-entered the

education system, and families are still struggling to recover from the financial consequences of the pandemic.

A. Recruitment and use

24. The country task force verified 348 cases of the recruitment and use of 347 children (232 boys and 115 girls), representing an increase of 58 per cent compared with the previous reporting period (220 children). One boy was used twice by two different armed groups. Instances of this grave violation also increased during the reporting period, with more cases of recruitment and use verified in the first six months of 2023 (141) than in all of 2022 (131). FARC-EP dissident groups continued to be the main perpetrators of recruitment and use, responsible for the recruitment and use of 241 children, or 69 per cent, followed by ELN (61), AGC (29), unidentified perpetrators (15) and the Colombian armed forces (2). Children were recruited and used in 17 departments. The department most affected was Cauca (100), followed by Nariño (50), Arauca (48), Chocó (32), Antioquia (24), Norte de Santander (17), Caquetá (14), Valle del Cauca (13), Tolima (11), Putumayo (11), Guaviare (9), Meta (7), Amazonas (4), Huila (3), Bolívar (2), Guainía (2) and Casanare (1).

25. The children recruited and used were between 3 and 17 years old. There was an increase in the number of girls recruited and used during the current reporting period (115) compared with the previous reporting period (70). Girls tended to be recruited and used at a younger age than boys – 43 per cent were less than 15 years of age, as compared with 27 per cent of boys. A total of 163 children, constituting almost half of the victims (47 per cent), were Indigenous or of African descent. In addition, children of foreign nationalities continued to be affected (11 Venezuelans and 2 Ecuadorians).

26. At least 22 per cent of those children (77) were used in combat roles, and the others were used in support roles, for example as informants, messengers, cooks, cleaners, extortionists and coca harvesters and for sexual purposes. Children were recruited through various methods. For example, two children (one boy, one girl) aged 17 were recruited by ELN through abduction. Other recruitment strategies included threats, false promises, offers of money, goods and presents and sexual harassment (especially in the case of girls). Reports indicated that children, in particular girls, were used by armed groups to recruit other children in schools and communities.

27. Some 178 children were either recovered by the Colombian armed forces in military operations, released through community mediation or escaped, and 139 are believed to remain associated. Association with armed groups continued to be very dangerous and often led to other grave violations. A total of 31 children were killed, 9 were maimed and 18 were subjected to sexual violence while associated with armed groups. For example, in Caquetá Department, a 16-year-old boy associated with a FARC-EP dissident group and used in a combat role was killed by the group while trying to escape. In another example, in Guainía Department, two children (one boy and one girl) between the ages of 16 and 17 years, recruited by FARC-EP dissident groups, were killed during their association with the group. Verified cases of sexual violence against 18 children (17 girls and 1 boy) associated with armed groups sharply increased compared with the one case verified in the previous period. However, sexual violence against children associated with armed groups is believed to remain underreported, given the imbalance of power, the lack of freedom, the normalization of gender-based violence within the ranks of armed groups and the lack of a State response to such cases.

B. Killing and maiming

28. The country task force verified that 133 children (87 boys, 42 girls and 4 of unknown sex), some as young as a few months old, were killed (73) and maimed (60), including 7 Venezuelan children. This represents an increase of 13 per cent compared with the previous period (118). Indigenous children (36) and children of African descent (14) were disproportionately affected, representing 38 per cent of child casualties. The grave violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (51), FARC-EP dissident groups (41), the Colombian armed forces (22), ELN (12) and AGC (7). They occurred in the departments of Cauca (30), Arauca (26), Chocó (16), Antioquia (13), Nariño (13), Caquetá (11), Valle del Cauca (8), Putumayo (7), Meta (3), Guainía (2), Norte de Santander (2), Guaviare (1) and Huila (1).

29. The main cause of killing and maiming of children was gunshots (73), as a result of direct targeting (41) or crossfire (13) or during their association with armed groups (19). For example, in October 2021 in Antioquia Department, a three-year-old boy was injured in crossfire between AGC and the Colombian armed forces. The child subsequently received medical care in a hospital. In Norte de Santander Department, during a community celebration for national children's day in April 2022, a 14-year-old girl was injured during indiscriminate shooting by a FARC-EP dissident group.

30. The second major cause of killing and maiming, but the primary one when considering only maiming, was landmines, improvised explosive devices and unexploded ordnance. A total of 41 children (4 killed and 37 maimed) were victims of explosive devices, representing 31 per cent of all cases. For example, in September 2021, in Arauca Department, four children were injured after members of ELN threw improvised explosive devices that exploded in a school and a nearby house. Child casualties also resulted from air strikes by armed forces (14), which remained a concern in the first half of the reporting period. In Caquetá, in July 2022, the Colombian armed forces bombed a FARC-EP dissident group camp, killing two girls and one boy between 15 and 17 years of age, who were associated with the armed group. Other child casualties resulted from torture (four) and unknown reasons (one).

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

31. The country task force verified that 33 children (3 boys and 30 girls) between the ages of 10 and 17 years, had been victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence, representing a considerable increase compared with the previous reporting period (14). The grave violations occurred in Nariño (11), Cauca (5), Chocó (4), Norte de Santander (4), Arauca (2), Putumayo (2), Valle del Cauca (2), Amazonas (1), Guaviare (1) and Meta (1). They were attributed to dissident FARC-EP groups (13), ELN (7), unidentified perpetrators (6), AGC (5) and the Colombian armed forces (2).

32. Girls were disproportionately affected by sexual violence, representing 91 per cent of cases. Sexual violence affected Indigenous girls and girls of African descent (42 per cent) and Venezuelan and Ecuadorian girls (9 per cent) in particular. Sexual violence affecting children associated with armed groups increased drastically, from 1 verified case in the previous period to 18 during the current reporting period. Cases included rape, sexual abuse, trafficking for sexual exploitation, early marriages and forced contraception. The scale of sexual violence affecting children is believed to be underreported, as documenting such violations remains a challenge, owing to survivors' fear of reporting and of stigmatization, the lack of appropriate systems for care and response from local and national institutions and access constraints faced by the country task force for monitoring and reporting. That sexual exploitation and

trafficking for sexual exploitation by criminal organizations and armed groups tends to occur in highly insecure areas also hampered the monitoring of cases.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

33. The country task force verified 41 attacks on schools (36) and hospitals (5), including protected persons in relation to schools and hospitals. The 36 attacks on schools involved threats against teachers (25), damages to schools (8) and attacks against teachers (3). This represents a six-fold increase compared with the previous period, when six incidents were verified. Perpetrators were FARC-EP dissident groups (23), unidentified perpetrators (7), ELN (5) and AGC (1). The attacks occurred in the departments of Arauca (14), Putumayo (7), Cauca (4), Nariño (4), Caquetá (2), Valle del Cauca (2), Casanare (1), Chocó (1) and Guaviare (1). For instance, in Caquetá Department, at least five teachers received threatening notices from a FARC-EP dissident group giving them 24 hours to leave the municipality.

34. The five attacks on hospitals involved two attacks on ambulances and two attacks and one threat of attack against medical personnel. The perpetrators were FARC-EP dissident groups (two), unidentified perpetrators (two) and AGC (one). The grave violations occurred in Antioquia, Cauca, Guaviare, Meta and Norte de Santander (one each).

35. A total of 16 cases of military use of schools were verified, representing a 300 per cent increase compared with the previous reporting period (4). The incidents were attributed to FARC-EP dissident groups (11), AGC (2), the Colombian armed forces (1), ELN (1) and unidentified perpetrators (1) and occurred in the departments of Arauca (5), Nariño (4), Chocó (3), Cauca (2), Antioquia (1) and Bolívar (1). For instance, AGC members have been intermittently using a school in an Indigenous community in Chocó Department as a camp. Two improvised explosive devices were planted beside the school. As a result, children stopped attending classes. The military use of those schools affected access to education for hundreds of children. All the schools were vacated by the end of the reporting period.

36. Other incidents of concern in the vicinity of schools, such as the presence of armed groups, armed confrontations or the presence of mines, were reported and affected the continuity of education for thousands of children, exposing them to risks of recruitment, killing and maiming, while also exacerbating the learning crisis and affecting the mental health of entire communities.

37. Schools were also used for civilian-military activities by the Colombian armed forces, such as circuses, gift distributions, celebrations or talks with children, including in areas in which armed groups were present, putting children at risk of retaliation, solely as a result of their interacting with the armed forces. Furthermore, schools were often used as temporary shelters by communities affected by displacement and during hostilities, restricting continuous access to education for children.

E. Abduction

38. The country task force verified the abduction of 44 children (32 boys and 12 girls), representing a 340 per cent increase compared with 10 verified violations in the previous period. Indigenous children and children of African descent accounted for 41 per cent of abductions, while Venezuelan children accounted for 11 per cent. The main perpetrator was ELN (19), followed by FARC-EP dissident groups (15), unidentified perpetrators (5), AGC (4) and the Colombian armed forces (1).

Abductions occurred in the departments of Cauca (11), Arauca (10), Nariño (7), Chocó (5), Antioquia (4), Norte de Santander (3), Meta (1) and Valle del Cauca (1). Two violations occurred in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in areas along the border with Colombia.

39. The children were abducted mostly for the purpose of recruitment and use (19). Other reasons included extortion, allegations of children being informants for another party or as a punishment for infringing rules set by armed groups in communities. Some children were abducted from schools. For instance, in Cauca Department, four boys aged between 12 to 15 years were abducted from a school by a FARC-EP dissident group. Furthermore, children abducted were at a high risk of suffering other grave violations. Three were killed, three were subjected to sexual violence, and two were tortured. Of the total number of abducted children that were still alive at the time of writing the present report, 31 had been released and 10 were believed to still be with the group.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

40. The country task force verified 16 incidents of denial of humanitarian access, an increase compared with the 13 cases verified in the previous period. The cases involved the prohibition of access of humanitarian organizations, the burning of humanitarian vehicles, robberies and attacks on humanitarian staff. The grave violations were attributed to AGC (5), FARC-EP dissident groups (4), unidentified perpetrators (4) and ELN (3) and occurred in the departments of Antioquia (4), Norte de Santander (4), Arauca (1), Chocó (1), Córdoba (1), Guaviare (1), Meta (1), Nariño (1), Putumayo (1) and Valle del Cauca (1). For example, in Antioquia Department, two cars being used by a government humanitarian mission were burned by AGC in the context of an armed strike.

41. Other interferences and practices of concern by armed groups increasingly hampered the work of and access by humanitarian organizations, such as threats to humanitarian workers, checkpoints, requests for information about activities, the checking of humanitarian information and communications technology equipment and requiring humanitarian vehicles to obtain stickers to enter certain areas. In 2022, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs registered 599 humanitarian access restrictions, including access limitations for humanitarian organizations, incidents affecting medical missions and restrictions on mobility and on communities' access to goods, services and assistance. Between January and June 2023, 175 restrictions affecting humanitarian actors were recorded.

IV. Release of children and programmatic response

42. The Colombian Family Welfare Institute continued to implement a specialized programme for the protection and reintegration of children released from armed groups. According to the Institute, a total of 392 children (67 per cent boys, 33 per cent girls) were enrolled in the programme during the reporting period, an increase compared with the previous period (323). The children had been recruited and used by FARC-EP dissident groups (279), ELN (63), AGC (44) and other armed groups (6), mainly in the departments of Cauca (140), Nariño (60), Antioquia (42), Chocó (32), Valle del Cauca (24), Arauca (17), Bolívar (17) and Norte de Santander (14).

43. In April 2023, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute and UNICEF published a study on children enrolled in the programme from 2013 to 2022. Findings showed that 37 per cent of the children were Indigenous or of African descent, representing an increase of 10 per cent compared with 2007 to 2013. The proportion of girls

increased by 4 per cent during that period. Non-protective family environments remained a risk, with 78 per cent of children experiencing domestic violence prior to recruitment and 58 per cent having family in armed groups. The use of children by armed groups, for example to work in illicit crops, in drug trafficking, as messengers or in intelligence activities, was often a first step to recruitment. Most children (89 per cent) were living in territories with a presence of armed groups and illicit crops, and 36 per cent had a sentimental relation or friendship with a member of an armed group. This often led to the normalization or idealization of armed groups, through interest in weapons and uniforms as symbols of social status and power. Recommendations from the study include a stronger community, gender and ethnic approach, emphasizing increased child participation as being crucial for the ongoing peace negotiations.

44. The reintegration programme, entitled “A different path of life”, for children released from FARC-EP, established in 2017 in the framework of the peace agreement, continued to be implemented. As at the time of writing, of the 412 youth beneficiaries enrolled in the programme, 328 are still actively participating, 25 have died, and the others either never joined or have left the programme. Significant progress was made through the programme in terms of reconnecting family ties, legal identity and documentation, basic income, health and education. However, challenges remain in terms of psychosocial support, parenting support, security, reparation, economic reintegration and access to employment.

V. Progress in addressing grave violations against children

45. During the first half of the reporting period, the Intersectoral Commission for Preventing the Recruitment and Exploitation of, and Sexual Violence against, Children and Adolescents by Illegal Armed Groups and Organized Criminal Groups prioritized 145 municipalities in high-risk areas for recruitment and use and developed a plan to strengthen municipal immediate action teams to improve prevention effectiveness. The commission was inactive during the Government transition. The Commission resumed its work in April 2023 and issued a statement in which it reaffirmed that the recruitment of children was always forced and called upon armed groups to cease both that grave violation and sexual violence against children.

46. During the reporting period, a government strategy was initiated in several departments, focused on providing specialized assistance, including psychosocial care, to victims of gender-based violence, and in particular sexual violence. The objective is to enhance capacity at the local level, thus ensuring that administrative authorities and service providers address cases of violence against children, adolescents and families with a gender perspective.

47. In 2023, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute implemented an intersectoral strategy, called *Atrapasueños* (Dreamcatcher), aimed at strengthening skills and capacities at the local level to prevent and reduce risks of violations of the rights of children, adolescents and young people in the context of armed violence. As at October 2023, 78,849 children and 29,854 adolescents and young people had been reached through the strategy.

48. In August 2022, the Ministry of National Defence announced the suspension of aerial attacks against armed groups’ camps where children were suspected of being present, stressing that children recruited and used by armed groups were always victims. Since the announcement, no children were reported to be victims of air strikes.

49. In November 2022, the Government endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration. In December 2023, outside the period covered by the present report, a plan of action for the implementation of the Declaration was launched by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of National Defence.

50. In May 2023, the Government adopted its national development plan, which includes strategies to prevent grave violations against children in armed conflict. In the plan, the release of children is set out as a mandatory prior condition to the signing of any peace agreement with armed groups, and reparations for child victims are prioritized.

51. The Government continued to implement its comprehensive national policy for action against antipersonnel mines. International standards on mine risk education were integrated into national technical regulations. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, 292,902 people participated in mine risk education, including 22,804 children. In addition, between 2021 and 2023, 2,627,073 m² of land were cleared and 687 explosive ordnance devices destroyed. With the support of UNICEF and civil society organizations, mine risk education was integrated into educational settings, thus reinforcing school risk management capacities, and an ethnic approach was strengthened.

52. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace made progress on case No. 07, which is focused on investigating 18,677 cases of child recruitment and use by former FARC-EP within the framework of the armed conflict, including related crimes such as sexual and gender-based violence, homicide, torture, cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment and forced disappearances. In all, 47 reports were submitted by victims and public institutions. A total of 3,843 victims (713 individually and 3,130 collectively as members of ethnic communities) had been accredited to participate in the judicial proceedings as at November 2023. Collective hearings were conducted with victims in different areas of the country. In February 2022, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace opened a new line of investigation within case No. 07, on discrimination and violence against children with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities who had been recruited and used.

53. In August 2022, a hearing was held on 21 former FARC-EP members, with the participation of 265 victims. The former combatants were questioned about their recruitment tactics and their treatment of children, including with regard to sexual violence. They were compelled to provide support to locate 122 children who remained missing. In December 2022, another line of investigation was opened in relation to the recruitment and use of children from ethnic communities. In March 2023, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace identified 94 cases of recruitment and use by public security forces and called upon victims to get accredited to take part in the judicial process. Efforts by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the Unit for the Search for Persons Deemed Missing and the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences resulted in the recovery and identification of six bodies of recruited children.

54. The Truth Commission presented its final report in June 2022, following over three years of research and dialogue with more than 27,000 victims and key informants, including children and young people. The report includes a specific chapter on children that contains testimonies of victims and perpetrators and an analysis of trends, patterns, responsibilities, causes and lasting impacts of armed conflict on children, with a specific focus on recruitment and use, forced displacement, the loss of parents and caregivers and the impact on education. To ensure the input and participation of children, the Commission conducted consultations with them, with the support of UNICEF and civil society organizations. In a national consultation of children, adolescents and young people for truth, over

5,200 children and adolescents were convened from around Colombia to share their experiences and perspectives on violence and the armed conflict, as well as on the importance of truth and their aspirations for the future. Among the children and young people consulted, 98 per cent believed it was important to know what happened during the armed conflict, and 80 per cent wanted to learn about the conflict in school. A broad range of organizations has been disseminating the findings of the final report, including among children and young people in communities, on social media and in schools. Child-friendly methodologies and training courses have been developed for teachers to help them to discuss the final report with their students. The aim of such dissemination activities is to promote dialogue on and improve awareness about the root causes and consequences of the armed conflict and to promote ways to foster reconciliation and peace in the country.

55. The country task force conducted several capacity-building activities to strengthen and scale up both the monitoring of grave violations and the protection of children in armed conflict. A total of eight field missions were conducted to strengthen the monitoring capacities of 156 staff members of humanitarian organizations and local institutions in the departments of Arauca, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo and Valle del Cauca.

56. The country task force continued its dialogue with the Government and with civil society and the international community to raise awareness about the situation of children in armed conflict and to foster greater cooperation and action to prevent and respond to grave violations. In May 2022, the country task force organized a field mission to Norte de Santander Department for a delegation of the Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict, so they could learn first-hand about the impact of armed conflict on children, in particular recruitment and use, and about the progress made and challenges faced by prevention and response programmes in addressing grave violations.

57. In December 2022, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict visited Colombia and met with government officials, the Ombudsman, the High Commissioner for Peace and representatives of civil society, the diplomatic community and the United Nations. The Special Representative highlighted opportunities and made recommendations to include children's rights in the Government's total peace agenda and offered United Nations expertise in supporting the Government in preventing and responding to grave violations.

58. On 5 December, the country task force and the embassy of Norway jointly organized a conference on lessons learned and opportunities with regard to the protection of children in armed conflict within the framework of the implementation of the conclusions on children and armed conflict in Colombia adopted in June 2022 by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. With the participation of the Special Representative, over 120 high-level and technical-level government officials and representatives of the international community, civil society and the United Nations discussed opportunities to include child rights, the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups, the prevention of recruitment and use and the protection of schools in peace dialogues.

59. The Government has been developing the country's first national action plan in line with Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#), which sets the agenda for women and peace and security. The action plan will be an important milestone for the protection of girls in armed conflict.

VI. Observations and recommendations

60. I reiterate my call upon all parties to abide by their respective obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law and to end and prevent all grave violations against children. I am concerned about the considerable increase in grave violations against children and, notably, the high number of cases of the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, in particular by dissident FARC-EP groups, ELN and AGC. I urge all armed groups to adopt and implement commitments to end this grave violation. In particular, I call upon ELN and FARC-EP dissident groups to adopt action plans with the United Nations and to release all children, namely, any person below 18 years of age, present in their ranks immediately. I call upon the Government to facilitate the engagement between the United Nations and parties listed in annex I to my most recent report on children and armed conflict ([A/77/895-S/2023/363](#)) to develop those action plans, in order to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children.

61. I am encouraged by the resumption of negotiations between the Government and ELN, the parties' willingness to consolidate the bilateral ceasefire in effect and their steps to ensure the inclusion of Colombian society through the work of the national committee on participation established in August 2023. Furthermore, I welcome the dialogues and ceasefire agreements initiated by the Government with other armed groups, which provide renewed opportunities for the protection of children. I urge the parties to address child protection priorities, the release of associated children and child participation at the earliest stages of the dialogues and in any other future peace negotiations. I further call upon the parties to consider grave violations against children and the use of antipersonnel mines and other explosive devices as prohibited conduct when negotiating ceasefires.

62. I commend the Government of Colombia for the progress made in preventing and responding to grave violations against children and for the suspension in August 2022 of air strikes against camps of armed groups where children may be present. I am, however, concerned about Indigenous children and children of African descent being disproportionately affected by the conflict. Programmes that prevent grave violations against children, in particular programmes benefiting Indigenous children and children of African descent, should be strengthened, in consultation and with the participation of ethnic communities, and their sustainability ensured through an allocated budget and designated institutions, at both the national and local levels. I encourage the strengthening of existing institutions and programmes that prevent grave violations, with a gender and ethnic focus, in particular in vulnerable areas of the country where the presence of State authority is limited. I also call for the implementation of an inter-institutional strategy to prevent the recruitment and use of children and for the swift activation of an emergency response mechanism to protect children at imminent risk of recruitment, sexual violence and other grave violations, through the operationalization of the immediate action teams in conflict-affected areas. I further call upon the Government to avoid the organization of civilian-military activities with the participation of children.

63. I welcome the progress made within the specialized programme of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute for the protection and reintegration of children released from armed groups. I urge the Government to address the remaining challenges of the reintegration programme entitled "A different path of life", in terms of psychosocial support, gender focus, family support, security, reparation, economic reintegration and access to employment.

64. I reiterate my call upon all parties to immediately cease the killing and maiming of children, to take all necessary measures to protect children in line with the principle of precaution and to avoid confrontations in areas where civilians and children are present. I also reiterate my call upon armed groups to end, immediately and definitively, the use of indiscriminate explosive devices that cause death or injury to children. Furthermore, I strongly encourage the Government to continue its explosive ordnance clearance, victim assistance and explosive ordnance risk education activities across the country.

65. I am concerned about the considerable increase in sexual violence against children, including during their association with armed groups, and reiterate my call upon all parties to end this grave violation immediately. I urge the Government to allocate the necessary resources to increasing the availability of gender-sensitive, child-friendly and safe identification, reporting and protection mechanisms for child survivors at the local level. I appeal to the authorities to investigate, prosecute and sanction anyone found responsible for sexual violence against children, as well as all other grave violations against children.

66. I welcome the progress made by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace in case No. 07, focused on the recruitment and use of children and other related violations affecting children as a consequence of or in relation to their association with the armed conflict. I also welcome the final report of the Truth Commission dated June 2022 and its specific chapter on children. I call upon the Government to implement the Commission's recommendations and disseminate its findings to children and young people, including in schools. I also call on the Government to continue to support transitional justice institutions, through financial and technical assistance, in order to guarantee that the rights of children to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition are fulfilled.

67. I urge armed groups to cease and prevent attacks on schools and hospitals, and I urge all parties to the conflict to prevent the military use of such facilities. I also welcome the endorsement by the Government of the Safe Schools Declaration and call for the swift implementation of its action plan on safe schools at the local level.

68. Considering the linkages between displacement and grave violations against children, I reiterate my call upon the Government to strengthen its programmes and its institutional response with respect to the relocation and return of displaced populations, to facilitate their access to basic services, including education and health care, and to extend gender-sensitive protection and prevention measures in communities subject to a state of confinement owing to the presence of, and territorial control by, armed groups.