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CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA[1]

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Introduction

This article was originally written in 1993 as a working paper at the National University of Colombia. The objective was to construct a global analysis of the impact of armed conflict on children in Colombia. It was hoped that the paper would be a starting point to provoke public debate and more indepth policy oriented research on measures to improve the lives of child victims of political violence.

A situation of armed conflict between the government and various armed opposition groups has existed in Colombia since the late 1940s. In recent years the violence associated with the conflict has escalated, accompanied by an increase in the number of civilians killed or affected by the direct or indirect consequences of war. It has been widely assumed that children, who comprised 40.4 percent of the Colombians in 1990, are the sector of the population which has suffered the most in the fighting. However, little research has been conducted in Colombia regarding the nature and extent of the relationship between armed conflict and the deterioration in the situation of children which is being experienced in the country.

One of the most serious impediments to research on the impact of armed conflict on children is the limited availability of information. The situation has not been studied in a comprehensive manner despite the existence of numerous human rights organizations and extensive documentation on the overall human rights situation.[2] Rather, the situation of children tends to be considered as one aspect, often among many, of the larger problem of political violence. Frequently, child related issues are not discussed at all. In addition, there are few organizations specifically dedicated to children. Those which do exist often

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do not identify the problem of political violence as being within the mandate of their work.

Even the most basic information, such as the number of children actually affected by the direct and indirect consequences of war, is lacking. The information which does exist tends to be fragmented and dispersed, both within and between organizations, and its management has lacked coordination. Researchers and organizations have not yet conducted an analysis of the information that does exist in a manner which could be used to produce a comprehensive study. Consequently, there is also very little published research on armed conflict and children in Colombia.

Methodology

Taking into account the limitations created by armed conflict and the lack of information, this article is based on field research conducted in different regions of Colombia affected by armed conflict. A total of 251 persons were interviewed between August and October, 1993. Of this number, 36 were interviewed as individuals. The remaining 215 persons were interviewed in group situations. Group interviews were usually conducted with members of one family or staff members of organizations working with internally displaced persons. Interviews were conducted with the following groups of persons:

(i) child victims of armed conflict and their families or other persons responsible for the children in the absence of the parents;
(ii) agents of Colombian government and nongovernmental organizations working with the child victims of armed conflict.

Through the interview process we attempted to construct a global analysis of the situation of children affected by armed conflict in Colombia. In particular, we were concerned with identifying the nature, extent and implications of the direct and indirect impacts of armed conflict on Colombian children. Our original intent had been to conduct two separate sets of interviews; one series with child victims of political violence currently living in zones of conflict and the second series with children who were displaced as a result of the violence and were living in urban areas. These two situations constitute the environment in which the majority of child victims of political violence live.

However, the intensity of the fighting in many parts of the country made field research in the actual zones of conflict impossible. The interviews, therefore, were conducted with internally displaced persons and the organizations working with them. In the absence of direct information from zones of conflict persons were asked two distinct sets of questions intended to gain information about:

(i) their lives in their communities of origin, their experience with political violence and the circumstances surrounding their displacement. This information was intended to establish the situation in the zones in the absence of direct field research;
(ii) their lives as internally displaced persons.

Given limitations on time and resources it was not possible to visit all of the regions of Colombia with concentrations of internally displaced persons. Instead, specific centers were chosen as being representative of the general situation in the country:

(i) field research was conducted in the urban areas of Villaviencio, Barrancabermeja and Monteria. These are the centers of three of the regions of Colombia recognized to be among the most significantly affected by violence. Respectively, these regions are los Llanos Orientales, el Magadalena Medio, and el Noroccidente (including the departments of Uraba, Cordoba and Sucre);

(ii) in addition, the cities of Bogota and Medellin were chosen. They are among the urban areas which receive the largest numbers of persons displaced by the armed conflict occurring in the rural areas of the country.

The analysis offered in this paper comes largely from the displaced persons themselves. These persons live daily with the consequences of political violence and, at one point, also lived in the zones of conflict themselves. Through their direct experience they are the persons most familiar with the impacts of the violence. In the majority of cases those interviewed stated that they still feared for their lives and asked not to be identified or associated with the results of this study. Under these circumstances it was sometimes difficult to arrange interviews and it was necessary to develop a confidence on how the information would be used.[3]

Finally, this article is divided into three parts. Part one will present an overview of armed conflict in Colombia, including the different actors and the modalities of the violence. Part two includes the findings of the interviews. The second part is divided into two sections. The first section summarizes the interview findings related to the situation of children living in the actual zones of conflict while the second looks at displaced children. Finally, the third part offers some conclusions and recommendations.

Defining the Impacts of Armed Conflict on Children

The deterioration in the wellbeing the children is not simply a result of the threat of death or physical injury in the regions where the armed conflict occurs. Rather, the impact of the violence must be understood in a context which transcends the personal considerations of those whose lives have been directly affected. Each action that occurs within the scenario of armed conflict generates an impact. In turn, the impact interacts with pre-existing social or economic factors and has longterm repercussions for the country in general. In this sense "...the damaged caused by armed conflict does not simply occur in relation to the destruction it causes in the lives of individuals; the damage also occurs in social structures, the institutions which govern the lives of citizens, the values and principles on which those citizens are educated and how those same values may be used to justify the repression (Martin-Baro 1989: 14)." While thousands of children have suffered through their own direct experience with armed conflict, many more have been affected indirectly as a result of the damage caused to Colombian society at large.

For this reason it is important to distinguish between direct and indirect impacts:

- *direct impacts* are the consequence of violent confrontations between the Colombian military and the guerrillas or military operations which target the civilian population. They may also occur as the result of actions taken by military supported paramilitary groups against the civilian population (Moreno 1991: 36-38);
- *indirect impacts* can be seen in the longterm damage caused to economic, political and social infrastructure as a result of armed conflict (Moreno 1991: 36).

In the course of our field investigation we also found it necessary to distinguish between impacts of a socio-economic, socio-political and socio-psychological nature:

- *socio-economic* impacts occur as a result of the destruction of the economy in a zone of conflict. It may also be seen at the national level, particularly in the distorted allocation of the country's resources into maintaining the armed forces to the detriment of social priorities. In many regions of Colombia the economic consequences of war are evident in the shortage of food and medicines, the interruption of the education, reduced access to basic services, and an increase in the incidence of infant mortality and disease resulting from poverty and the weakened physical state of children. Exposure to situations of armed conflict also has

psychological consequences for children which undermine their ability to realize their human potential and participate in Colombian society (Ressler et.al. 1993; Macksoud 1993);

- *socio-political* impacts are related to the denial of the fundamental rights of children, including freedom of expression, political participation and social organization around issues which affect the wellbeing of the communities where children live. Acts of repression which accompanies armed conflict have the specific objective of preventing the civilian population from organizing itself (Gutierrez 1993). The impact is often to destroy both the channels for civil society to participate in the political process and the fabric of social solidarity (Perez 1993a: 16-17);
- *socio-psychological* impacts refer to the effects of trauma experienced by children as a result of their exposure to the direct or indirect impacts of armed conflict.[4] Exposure or actual participation in combat, witnessing acts of violence, the violent death of a loved one, the destruction of homes and property or in some way being a target of repression or threats of violence has been proven to have a negative psychological impact on children (Macksoud 1993). The resulting trauma is evident in behavioral problems which have implications for the child's longterm development and ability to participate in Colombian society. Given the magnitude of political violence in Colombia, the psychological consequences of the current conflict should be understood as a crisis of the public health of the nation (Castano 1992: 12).

An impact in one of these areas has implications for all aspects of the child's wellbeing. For example, the effects of psychological trauma in a child are likely to be compounded by economic deprivation where treatment or assistance is not available. Equally, socio-political factors, such as the lack of a family or social support network, can contribute to the seriousness of the situation and prolong the trauma (Castano 1992 and 1993).

PART ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION IN COLOMBIA

In our research we found a constant interaction between the direct impacts of armed conflict and pre-existing economic, political and social conditions. These additional factors played an important role in determining the nature and extent of the impact of the conflict in the lives of children. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of armed conflict for

Colombian children, therefore, it is necessary to begin with an overview of the general situation in Colombia.

Armed Conflict in Colombia

Armed conflict in Colombia occurs within the context of a 40 year old internal war between the government of Colombia and various armed opposition groups. The conflict is the oldest of its kind in Latin America and affects much of the physical territory of the country. Of a total of 1,010 municipalities, over 400 reported armed confrontation between government forces and members of guerrilla groups in 1992. Most of the violence occurs in rural areas and the specific regions affected are constantly changing in accordance with the strategies and movements of the different actors.

There are three main protagonists in the conflict, including various guerrilla groups, the Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia; FAC) and paramilitary groups which have often received the support of the military.[5]

The Armed Forces of Colombia are comprised of the three branches of the military (land, sea and air forces), the National Police (Policia Nacional de Colombia; PNC) and the various intelligence units affiliated with them. In 1993 the public forces employed 234,251 persons, or 70 percent of all federal government employees (*Portofolio*, 13 September 1993). Defense and security expenditures were projected to be 16.4 percent of the 1994 federal budget (Fedesarrollo 1994).

The Armed Forces enjoys growing influence and autonomy in defining government policy on central issues related to the management of public order and civil conflict. Within this context, the strategy employed by the military for fighting the guerrillas shifted in the early 1980s from regular warfare to counterinsurgency tactics (Gallon 1983).[6] The change in strategy was accompanied by large increases in the defense budget as the Colombian government has re-equipped the Armed Forces according to the needs of the new warfare. For example, the defense budget increased 56 percent in real terms 1993 as 25 new mobile brigades incorporating 23,000 soldiers were created (CINEP 1994: 76). Since the 1940s a state of emergency has also been in effect on an almost permanent basis, allowing the government sweeping powers to manage public order. State of emergency powers have been used to suspend constitutional rights related to legal processes and human rights.

The Guerrillas include the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia; FARC) and the National Liberation Army (Ejercito Nacional de Liberacion; ELN). These are the largest groups active in Colombia today with an estimated 14,000 combatants under arms. The FARC conducts military operations through forty "frentes" (fronts or

armed units) located throughout the country while the ELN maintains an estimated 20 fronts, many of which are located in the regions of the Magdalena Medio and the northern and western regions of Colombia (*Cambio 16*, No.14, September 1993: 32). Four smaller groups, including the Popular Liberation Army (Ejercito Popular de Liberacion; EPL) and the Movement of April 19 (Movimiento 19 de Abril; M-19) signed peace agreements with the government in the early 1990s and have since demobilized.

All guerrilla groups in Colombia had their origin in the period of Colombian history known as the National Front. The National Front was a formal powersharing agreement between the Liberal and Conservative parties which was in effect from 1958 to 1974. It ended a period of de facto civil war between the two parties known as The Violence (La Violencia- 1948-1958) and a subsequent period of military dictatorship (1953-1958).[7] Under the National Front agreement, the Liberals and Conservatives maintained almost exclusive control of power in Colombia. They divided all government positions between themselves and rotated their control of the Presidency every four years. The agreement institutionalized the historical dominance of the Liberals and Conservatives over the political system and effectively excluded third parties from meaningful participation. Guerrilla groups, therefore, evolved in response to the closed nature of the political system created by the National Front agreement and growing economic disparity.

Paramilitary Groups were officially created by the Colombian government in 1968 as community based auto-defense units. In the 1970s and 1980s many additional groups were formed by ranchers, large landowners and drug traffickers and supported with arms and training by members of the armed forces (Americas Watch 1989 and 1993; Giraldo 1992: 18; Ruiz 1993: 5-12; Uprimny and Vargas 1990: 136). Until 1989 the activities of paramilitary groups were coordinated by the highest levels of the government and the military command within the framework of general military operations. By 1990 the UN Special Rapporteur on Summary or Arbitrary Executions found that more than 100 such groups were operating (UN document E/C.N.4/1990/22/Add.1).

Paramilitary groups usually operate in zones under military control or zones of conflict. They specifically target and act to control the civilian population. Most operations are conducted against persons involved in legally constituted social organizations and non-traditional political parties. The pattern of operations suggests that the objective of the paramilitaries "is to extinguish opposition" through intimidation or murder (UN doc. E/CN.4/1995/50/Add.1/para.42). Actual direct encounters between the paramilitaries and the guerrillas are rare.

In 1989, then President Barco passed legislation banning paramilitary groups.[8] However, despite official policy numerous recent reports from national

and international organizations contend that the evidence of "full complicity" between the military and paramilitary forces is "overwhelming" (Asociacion SETA 1993: 14). According to the organization Americas Watch, the number and influence of paramilitary groups increased as a result of a compliant attitude on the part of the highest levels of the Colombian government (Americas Watch 1989: 67). Furthermore, the study demonstrated that the paramilitary groups could often count on the support of the Colombian armed forces as part of their overall counterinsurgency strategy.

Peace Negotiations were conducted without success throughout the decade of the 1980s. In 1984, after a very difficult process of negotiations, the government reached ceasefire agreements with the FARC and M-19. The FARC subsequently formed a political party, the Patriotic Union (Union Patriotica; UP) to participate in the political process while the M-19 tried to expand the negotiation process through a network of national dialogues. However, violence continued during the ceasefire. For example, almost 1000 members of the Patriotic Union were assassinated in the first two years of the party's existence. Several important leaders of the M-19 were also killed. The ceasefire subsequently broke down, resulting in an escalation of violence.

Peace agreements were eventually signed in the early 1990s between the government and four smaller guerrilla organizations, with the group M-19 taking the lead. At the same time a new constitution was ratified to reflect the emerging national consensus on the future direction of the country. New negotiations were also opened with the two remaining guerrilla groups, the FARC and the ELN. However, talks brokedown in late 1992, and the government declared "total war" against the guerrillas and persons or organizations suspected of supporting them. Neither party has since shown the political will to return to the negotiating table and political violence has increased to new levels. The government has consistently shown a preference for a military rather than political solution to the conflict and the guerrillas maintain their insistence on pursuing their objectives through armed struggle.

Impunity is the final significant characteristic of the armed conflict which needs to be introduced. In interviews, the victims of political violence often raised this issue. Despite compelling evidence, there are almost no cases where member of the Colombian military responsible for human rights violations have been held accountable for their actions through the due process of law. In his 1993-94 report the Colombian Prosecutor General estimated that the rate of impunity was 97 percent, meaning that only three percent of reported violations resulted in penal sanctions (Procuraduria General de la Nacion 1994). Unofficially, Colombian human rights organizations place the impunity rate at over 99 percent. Impunity, therefore, is almost absolute.

Impunity extends to military support of paramilitary groups which are now illegal. In 1993 Americas Watch concluded:

> "...no person had been detained for their role in organizing, leading or training paramilitary groups. There have been cases of disciplinary proceedings against members of the armed forces accused of collaborating with paramilitary groups. However, these cases have not resulted in any further penal sanctions or disciplinary sanctions of a serious nature (Americas Watch 1993: 75-76)".

Human rights organizations and the Colombian Prosecutor General conclude that impunity is a cause and not a consequence of violence. Failure to apply sanctions destroys confidence in the judicial system, legitimizes political violence and allows the structures responsible for both common crime and politically motivated violence to remain intact. The effect of impunity is particularly corrosive when it is enjoyed by agents of the state who act outside the rule of law.

The Paradox of Economic Growth and Increased Poverty

This paper does not lend itself to a detailed analysis of the Colombian economy. However, it is important to note that armed conflict in Colombia occurs within the paradox of rapid economic growth accompanied by increasing economic disparity. The disparity suggests that the benefits of growth have not been distributed in Colombian society, a source of considerable social tension throughout the country's history.

Since the mid 1970s Colombia has enjoyed one of the highest rates of sustained economic growth in all of Latin America. In 1993 the GNP grew at a rate of 5.1 percent and it was projected to grow a further 5.3 percent in 1994 (Fedesarrollo 1994: No.9). Colombian government forecasts contend that these levels of increase will be sustained into the future. Statistical evidence from the early 1980s suggested that economic growth had translated into an improvement in the lives of the general population. For example, a government census found that the number of persons living below the poverty line declined from 45 percent of the total population in 1980 to 38 percent in 1986 (Sarmiento 1991: 35).

However, the incidence of poverty has been on the rise again since the mid-1980s. In 1993 government statistics found that 47.1 percent of Colombians lived below the poverty line. Of this number 33 percent lived in "critical poverty" and were unable to satisfy their most basic needs. An additional 15 percent of the population lived just above the poverty line and could fall below it with a small change in their economic fortunes.[9] The situation of poverty is

most acute in rural areas where 30 percent of Colombians live. According to UNICEF, the poverty level in rural areas reaches 70 percent (UNICEF 1992). Furthermore, a population growth rate of approximately 2 percent annually means that the number of Colombians living in poverty has also increased significantly in absolute terms.

Children are the sector of the Colombian population most deeply effected by growing poverty. The government estimated that 42.7 percent of the total population under 18 years of age lived below the poverty line. Of these children 23.6 percent lived in absolute poverty and were unable to satisfy even their basic needs. The four million children living in rural areas, where the overall incidence of poverty in the highest, are the most deeply affected (UNICEF 1993: 9).

The implications of poverty for children are reflected in the general indicators of human wellbeing. Perhaps the most dramatic is the fact that 21 percent of Colombian children are reported to suffer from chronic malnutrition in 1990 (UNICEF 1993: 22). An another indicator is the lack of access which children have to basic services. A government study found that 80 percent of the general population had either limited health insurance or none at all[10] while only 20 percent of Colombians have what could be considered adequate insurance (Fedesarrollo 1994 No.8: 13). In addition, 40 percent of the general population did not have access to health services which were located within one hours travelling time from their home. In the specific case of children, only 19.8 percent under the age of five have access to state sponsored social security programs such as medical insurance. Coverage for children in the age group between 5 and 14 years is even lower at 9.3 percent (UNICEF 1992: 14).

PART TWO: THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON CHILDREN IN COLOMBIA

The impact of armed conflict on children must be viewed in the overall context of the general situation in Colombia. Two changes in scope and modalities of the fighting are relevant for the purpose of this study. Firstly, the conflict has expanded to encompass much of the national territory of Colombia. In its initial stages, the fighting between the government and the various guerrilla organizations took place on a limited scale and was isolated to specific regions of the country. However, over the past three decades both the Colombian military and the guerrillas have expanded the size of their forces and the zones of operation. The direct implication is that armed conflict today touches the lives of many more civilians than previously. The fighting occurs in rural areas which are the poorest regions of the country and where, consequently, the most economically vulnerable sectors the population lives.

Secondly, the modality of the conflict has also changed. As noted, in the 1980s the Colombian military adopted a new counterinsurgency strategy for combating the guerrillas. Conventional warfare tactics formerly targeted the guerrillas. However, the Colombian military adopted a much broader ideological definition of "internal enemy" which encompasses both guerrilla combatants and civilians who are alleged to support the guerrillas or be sympathetic to their objectives. The strategy is intended to eliminate the guerrilla's base of support in the civilian population and is often described as "removing the water from the fish" (Procuraduria General de la Nacion 1994).

Sectors of the civilian population have, therefore, implicitly become the target of military operations in a much broader ideological concept of warfare. The victims of political violence are usually legally constituted political opposition groups and members of unions or social and community organizations. As a result of their opposition to the government, these persons are often accused of being members of guerrilla organizations or of being sympathetic to the them. As such members of the civilian population have become part of the "internal enemy" and, therefore, military targets in contravention of international humanitarian law.[11] Civilian casualties would certainly be dramatically lower if international humanitarian law was observed.

The impact of the change in strategy is reflected in statistics related to violent deaths and human rights abuses. Fourteen thousand eight hundred and sixty five persons were reported killed in politically motivated violence in Colombia between 1990 and 1994 (*Justicia y Paz*, Vol 7, No.2 1994: 21). Of these 14,865 persons, only 5,358 died in actual armed confrontations between government and the guerrillas (*Justicia y Paz*, Vol 7, No.2 1994: 21).[12] Equally important, however, the armed conflict created the conditions and ideological rationale for human rights violations committed against civilian non-combatants. The remaining 9,507 victims died as a result extra-judicial killings or other forms of abuses committed in non-combat situations, almost twice as many as were killed in the actual fighting (*Justicia y Paz*, Vol 7, No.2 1994: 21). An additional 2,000 persons have been the victims of forced disappearance between 1979 and 1994 and tens of thousands of persons have been the victims of torture or other forms of human rights abuses or detained under state of emergency laws (Gairdner and Tuft 1995).

The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children Living in Rural Areas
a. Socio-economic impacts

From the interviews and our own observations it was clear that the economic destruction in rural zones of conflict caused by the war has a devastating impact on poor children. In particular, the lack of food and medicine increases the incidence of hunger, illness, infant mortality, impaired access to

education and other symptoms of economic deterioration which would not normally exist under peacetime circumstances. This fact has been confirmed in other studies (Moreno 1991: 36).

Conflict frequently results in the destruction of the rural economic infrastructure or effects the ability of the civilian population to pursue their livelihood. For example, the Colombian military has frequently conducted aerial bombardments of zones of suspected guerrilla operation. Bombardment endangers the lives of the civilian inhabitants of those zones. It also results in the destruction of civilian homes, crops, domestic animals and farm implements. In this context, we were informed that one direct result of the bombardments has been a worsening the food situation and an increase in hunger and the incidence of malnutrition:

> "On our farm we had corn, rice, platano and animals. With the problem of the violence everything changed. There were aerial bombardments and armed confrontations near our house. One night [the Colombian military] "fumigated" our farm [using machine guns from a helicopter]. The bombardment lasted two hours. We lost our animals and can't produce anymore... the war has caused much hunger and it is always we the peasants that have to suffer.[13]

The persons interviewed said that military counterinsurgency operations which often followed the bombardments usually lasted for an extended period of time. The civilian population living in the zones affected were forced to leave their farms for the duration of these operations. As a consequence, many informed us that they suffered the loss of their harvest. It appears that the simple fear of losing a crop is, in itself, enough to cause a reduction in food production. Believing there is a good possibility that they will lose their crops to the violence, peasant farmers often feel that there is no point in planting:

> "The simple fact that we have a good farm with a good harvest is enough for them [the military] to accuse us of collaborating with the guerrillas and for them to attack us. Everything was destroyed... in the end it was not worth the trouble to plant more than was necessary to survive."[14]

> "...the people don't plant their crops like they did before. Why plant? We never know when the military will arrive and destroy everything".[15]

The resulting reduction in food production and destruction of crops in military operations increases the incidence of malnutrition among children, especially when counterinsurgency operations are prolonged or when they are

conducted repeatedly in the same region. During ground operations the military often goes door to door asking for members of guerrilla organizations. We were told that the military frequently destroys food and other goods which they allege could be of benefit to the guerrillas. The fear and disruption which these operations cause is often enough to force people to abandon their livelihood:

> "We could no longer live like this; with the anxiety, the fear of bombardment, the shooting, the cruelty of having to leave suddenly with our children to look for refuge. We had to abandon everything that we owned, the animals, our land and all our belongings and we move to Barrancabermeja."[16]

The majority of children living in what are currently zones of conflict belong to the poorest sectors of Colombian society. Even in peace time they lack access to basic social services, such as healthcare, and would likely not be covered by any form of social security. However, armed conflict significantly worsens the situation and renders the child population more vulnerable to poverty related illness and disease. In this sense, the violence causes an increase in the actual demand for basic social services, such as healthcare, potable water and sanitation, at the same time as that it is responsible for reducing children's access to those services. For example, we noted that health posts appeared to exist in some of the regions where interviews were conducted. However, the almost total absence of medicines and other supplies means that they are effectively unable to offer services:

> "Although there is a health post with a nurse in the village there is no medicine. If a child becomes sick it is necessary to travel to the city. To go to the city we have to pay travel and lodging and the medicine is always expensive."[17]

In addition, any shortages of food, medicine or other necessities are made worse by military controls over their distribution. The objective of the military is to deny the guerrillas access to supplies.[18] The civilian population is the target of such control operations and is most directly effected by the shortages and hardships which they cause. For example, we were informed that in some regions of the country families are permitted to only purchase sufficient food for a one week period. The inability of people living in rural areas to maintain a food supply means that they must interrupt their work every eight days to travel into town and make their purchases. Sometimes the violence prevents civilians from making the trip meaning that they have to find alternative sources or go hungry. Persons who are found to be in possession of foodstocks or medicines risk being accessed of being members of the guerrillas and become the targets of repression.

Children living in the rural areas of Colombia have a low level of education. Parents are not able to permit their children to attend classes when the actual violent confrontations occur between the military and the guerrillas. In addition, educators are often the target of political violence and repression in militarized zones as a result of the visible and important role they play in the community. For example, the Colombian Federation of Teachers (Federacion Colombiana de Educadores; FECODE) reports 47 teachers were assassinated between 1991 and 1992, and more than 400 others received death threats (UN doc. E/CN.4/1992/30 para.109). Many teachers are forced to flee their communities, leaving schools without teachers for extended periods of time. It is not uncommon, therefore, for us to encounter children aged 13 and 14 who only have 2 or 3 years of primary level education:

> "Things are very difficult for the children who attend school. From where we live they must walk for two hours to get [to school]. As a result of the persecution of their father the children's education has been interrupted many times. One of my daughters is old enough to be in the third grade, but she can't go on with the other students because she has not yet completed the first or second grade."[19]

Finally, it appears that investments in the construction and maintenance of schools made by the government is very limited. In the regions visited for this study the school was usually constructed and maintained by the community without any government support. This form of community organization can, in itself, lead to repression in cases where the zone is under military control.[20]

b. Socio-political Impacts

We observed that the main socio-political impacts of armed conflict occurring in rural areas were related to the observance of civil and political human rights and the integrity of social structures, both in the family and the community.

Articles 12-15 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), to which Colombia is a signatory, guarantees that every child has the right to freedom of thought, free expression and to have a voice in issues which effect their lives and their communities. These rights are also effectively guaranteed in the Colombian Constitution of 1991. However, in our observation many Colombian children are denied these and other fundamental human rights because of the situation of armed conflict.

As already noted, many Colombian civilians are identified as targets in counterinsurgency operations under the ideological concept of "internal enemy". Violent acts committed against civilians usually occur when the military alleges

that the members of social organizations or nontraditional political parties are either members of the guerrillas or are sympathetic to their goals. The repression, violence and fear which can result from involvement in social organizations often results in parent discouraging their children from been active in community activities or from expressing a political opinion. The fear that any form of accusation, real or fabricated, which links persons to the guerrilla can result in persecution or death causes parents to place severe regime of silence on their children. Children are taught from an early age, therefore, to mistrust others and to hide their opinions:

> "If you are accessed of being a guerrilla the military will kill you, or they will get the paramilitaries to do it. It is best to shut up and keep a low profile so that you don't attract their attention".[21]

Under these conditions we observed that fear becomes an important disincentive against community organization or social activism which falls outside of the political mainstream. Consequently, the fear generated by political violence in Colombia is, in itself, an important mechanism for political control. People appear to be intimidated into renouncing their own political involvement, despite the legal nature of those activities, accepting the situation or collaborating with the military against others in the community (Perez 1993a: 16-17).

> "People are terrorized and are afraid to organize themselves or even say what they think because [the military] kills us... the government has closed all legal means of social protest. As a result many persons have become passive about their situation and they teach their child to act in the same way".[22]

The operations of paramilitary groups are particularly effective in creating an environment of fear which discourages any kind of nonconformist activity. For example, members of a nongovernmental group in Barrancabermeja informed us that the fear and persecution which existed in the Magdalena Medio region was largely caused by a paramilitary group known as Death to Kidnappers (Muerte a Secuestradores; MAS).[23] According to the nongovernmental group, the fear was so generalized and deeply entrenched in the psyche of the community at large, and children in specific, that children never speak about political or community activities they or their parents are involved in (or were involved in the past). The children also never talk about political opinions held by themselves or their parents, even to their friends at school. When we asked children from the Magdalena Medio region if they were able to express themselves freely we almost always received the same reply:

> "We never know when there is an informant from the military or MAS among our friends who are paid for any kind of information. It is easy to earn a bit of money for yourself informing on others."[24]

We also received testimony in Medellin, Barrancabermeja, Yondo and Monteria that the Colombian military often uses children as informants. This was particularly the case in military intelligence operations aimed at identifying the political positions of the parents, relatives and other adults with some form of close relationship to the children.[25] We were told that children were paid for information and that payments were made either in cash or in the form of motorcycles or other goods. Poverty and depravation can make acting as an informant one of the few economic alternatives available. The goods or money acquired through their relationship with the military also provided social status in a society with few opportunities for advancement. Child informants also received protection from police or military authorities or from the various paramilitary groups. In this way, we were told that children can be easily enticed or manipulated into participating in counterinsurgency activities:

> "The military looks for people in the civilian population to work as informants for them. They want to identify who are the leaders [in the community]. So many people invent things as a way to make money. In this way the military has taken advantage of many children to get information by buying them candy or toys or with money".[26]

> "They [the military] use children as a source of information on the opinions and activates of the people in their families. This happens in school or in the street".[27]

The parents of children from zones of conflict also frequently expressed to us their belief that the method of teaching used in rural areas, called the "the New School" (la Escuela Nueva) was manipulated as a source of information in military intelligence operations. We saw that the textbooks and exercises used in these schools include activities such as making a map of the farm or area where the child lives, identifying the location of the house and how many roads or paths lead to it. Children are asked to describe the things contained in the house, who lives there and how many people have visited or are resident on a temporary basis. They are also asked to identify which social organizations their parents belong to and about the activities of adults close to them.[28]

Finally, we observed that armed conflict works to breakdown family and social structures in rural areas. The wellbeing of children depends on the

existence of these structures. The breakdown most obviously occurs with the death of family member or forced displacement. However, parents also frequently expressed their anxiety that the children from zones of conflict had become accustomed to the violence and living with the environment of war. In their opinion, this has a destructive effect on both the children and the overall social fabric of the community. For example, the suspicion and lack of confidence caused by the existence of child informants has created polarization in schools and the community at large. The resulting tension and suspicion destroys relationship both within the community and even in the family itself, demonstrating that political violence is not the problem of individuals but that it has profound social implications as well (Martin-Baro 1989: 14).

c. Social-psychological impacts

Every child interviewed for the study had directly experienced political violence while still living in their community of origin. Almost all of the children interviewed had lost a close family member, usually the father, through death or forced disappearance as a direct result of the conflict. The majority informed us that they witnessed the aerial bombardments of their homes and the ground-based counterinsurgency operations which followed. During these operations many children and their families believed that they would be killed by the military and were forced to flee their homes and hide in the surrounding countryside. In several cases the children themselves had been threaten with death by the military or paramilitary as a means cohering them to provide information. For example, one displaced family in Villahermosa, Meta, told us how a mobile brigade of the Colombian armed forces arrived at the family home looking for the father. The soldiers threatened the mother and the oldest son with death if they did not reveal the whereabouts of the man. Later, one of the soldiers took the youngest daughter and threatened to cut her throat if the family did not provide the information.[29]

The cases of the socio-psychological impacts of political violence presented in this study, therefore, likely represent the most serious manifestations of socio-psychological problems in the country. We observed that the psychological impacts of the violence on children were profound and that most or all of them showed symptoms of severe emotional trauma. Nevertheless, the cases should also be taken as are further evidence of the generalized deterioration of the situation of children which results from the direct and indirect impacts of the ongoing violence.

In interviews we asked what aspect of the conflict had been most difficult for them. Most of the children identified the difficulty of living with an omnipresent and pervasive sense of fear. They identified their direct experiences with the violence, and their reoccurring memories of those experiences, as the

main cause of that fear. According to nongovernmental organizations working with child victims, fear can incapacitate children and prevents them from functioning normally within society:

> "Imagine what it is like to be so young and to live with the memories [of the violence]. Some children are so fearful that they withdraw completely are not even capable of having friends or going to school."[30]

Besides fear, the majority of children interviewed said that being forced to leave their homes on a longterm basis, with their resulting separation from friends and a familiar environment, was the worst part of their experience. It was normal to find children who, beyond emotional trauma, also exhibited a deep sense of frustration at not being able to understand why they had been subjected to the violence. They often seemed unable to comprehend why someone would commit violent acts against them or their families and why they couldn't simply return home and resume their former lives.

> "Three years ago the military killed my father and my oldest sister who was 19 years old at the time. Last May the military disappeared another sister, the twin of the of the first one [who was killed]. When my mother reported the killings seven members of the military and one civilian arrived at our house and threatened to kill her and our youngest brother if she did not withdraw the complaint. In school I didn't have friends anymore. Everyone has changed their attitude towards us and they yelled at us as if we were members of the guerrillas. What hurts most of all is that all this has happened and I don't know why. They only worked for the good of the community."[31]

Many children expressed a sense of impotence at being unable to protect their families and homes from violent acts. Over time this sense of responsibility and guilt seemed to become focused on their inability to confront the persons responsible and, in doing so, achieve some form of justice. In this context, one of the primary sources of depression and disillusionment expressed by children was the fact that the persons responsible for the violence enjoy virtual impunity for their actions.

The implications of impunity must be understood at two levels. Firstly, the inability of the Colombian legal system to punish members of the military or paramilitary organizations who commit human rights violations produces a desire for revenge among the victims of the violence. We found that, in cases where the father has been killed, the necessity of exacting some form of revenge is often projected by the mother onto the oldest son and, subsequently, is

adopted collectively by the children. The children live for years, perhaps the rest of their lives, with the anger and hatred which the desire for revenge creates. In the longterm, such sentiments profoundly affect the ability of children to relate to or participate in society and any social or political processes and mean that the effects of the violence will exist long after the armed conflict itself is over.

Secondly, the impotence felt by many of the victims also produced a sense of apathy and a lack of interest in social issues related to their lives. Many expressed the feeling that "there is nothing that I can do" and showed little interest in their future. One child of ten years old whose father had been killed told us "why should I continue studying when any day some can come and kill me".[32]

In the longterm impunity also has significant costs for the political system. Taken as one aspect of the overall scenario of the violence, its effect is to discourage participation in the political process. Impunity is a factor in the destruction of community and political organizations, legally formed under the Colombian constitution, and the physical elimination of the leaders of those organizations. The existence of impunity, therefore, undermines the workings of the democratic process in Colombia and the ability of political institutions to represent the broad spectrum of Colombian society.

Finally, one of the symptoms of trauma which was most frequently brought up in the interview process was problems with education. Parents with children still in school indicated that most had problems with their studies. In interviews the parents usually stated that academic problems resulted from both the frequent interruptions in the children's studies caused by the conflict and the psychological impact of many years of violence. Parents said that children often lost interest in school or were unable to focus on their studies. As a result the children either received poor grades or simply dropped out of school.

Various factors play an important role in the defining the nature and extent of the impact of violence on the child. According to professionals working with the children these may include the personality of the individual, the seriousness and duration of their exposure to the violence and their access to some form of treatment. The methods of professional treatment commonly used was to help the child re-create the trauma and verbalize the experience. The existence of a network of social support was also identified as important to the treatment process (Castano 1992; 1993). We noted, however, that resources for treatment were either limited or, in most cases, not available. The treatment that was available seemed to come exclusively from nongovernmental organizations and we saw no evidence of government programs for child victims with psychological problems.

Political Violence and Internally Displaced Persons

It is estimated that over 300,000 Colombians were displaced by political violence between 1986 and 1992. An additional 50,000 persons are thought to live as refugees in Ecuador (Perez 1993b: 10). There are no statistics on the displacement of children. However, considering that over 40 percent of the Colombian population is below the age of 18, it can be roughly estimated that there are over 120,000 displaced children. "The population affected are, in large part, peasant farmers. Families are large and comprised of small children or young adolescents. There are usually no adult males and in many cases the father has been killed" (Castano 1992: 3).

Many argue that the current estimates regarding displacement under-represent the actual situation. There is no national system for registering or counting internally displaced persons and no statistics exist for many regions of the country which have suffered massive displacement (Perez 1993b: 10). Persons tend to flee a region in small groups of one or two families and, out of fear, they usually remain silent about their situation. In addition, it must be noted that internal displacement has been occurring in Colombia since the beginning of The Violence in the late 1940s and there have been many "waves" of displacement since then in which millions of persons have been affected. Figures regarding children should also be considered conservative. Rural families are usually larger than urban families and the fact that the large majority of the persons killed in political violence are adults also has the effect of increasing the ratio of children to adults in the population.

The principle authors of the violence which causes internal displacement are members of the Armed Forces of Colombia or paramilitary groups (ICVA 1991: 20-21). In the majority of cases the persons affected migrate within the national territory of Colombia because "their life, physical integrity and liberty have been made vulnerable or are threatened" (IIDH 1993: 1). They are usually displaced by the politically motivated killing, or threat of killing, of a family member. In most cases the persons killed was the husband and father, who was also the primary income earner for the family. Their widows and children were subsequently forced to leave the zone in question under threats against their own safety. At one point many displaced persons often had a relationship with some form of community or social organizations, such as trade unions or community councils, or were accused of belonging to a political organization. These organizations are legally constituted and act within the framework of the constitution and Colombia's political institutions (Osorio 1993: 48). However, they are targeted for repression for their nonconformity with mainstream Colombian politics.

There are different forms of internal displacement which are conditioned by the different combinations and modalities of political violence occurring in

a particular region (Perez 1993b: 19; Giraldo 1992: 22). We found that only a small percentage of the total internal displacement appears to occur as the direct result of confrontation between the military and guerrillas. Instead, displacements of the civilian population most frequently takes place during operations conducted by the Colombian military. These are often followed by operations conducted by paramilitary groups which are characterized by violent acts, such as massacres, and threats against the civilian population.

Internal displacement is temporary in nature in cases where military operations are themselves shorterm and where a paramilitary group is not permanently established. Under such circumstances the civilian population usually take refuge in nearby rural areas and is able to return to their homes after the operations have been terminated. Permanent displacement occurs in cases where a military base is established following the initial counterinsurgency operation. Permanent displacement also occurs in cases where a paramilitary group is established and is active well beyond the termination of formal military operations.[33] The target of paramilitary operations is the civilian population and their are few reported encounters between paramilitary groups and the guerrillas. In the case of permanent displacement the victims most frequently take refuge in urban areas (Perez 1993b: 19-20). As noted, most persons who have been displaced on a longterm basis chose to move to urban areas where they can maintain their anonymity and more easily protect their physical security (Osorio 1993: 32-33).

Through the interview process for this study we also found that the impunity enjoyed by the persons responsible for human rights violations is a determining factor in the decision to leave a region. The persons interviewed believed that there were no guarantees for their security. They demonstrated a sense of impotence and vulnerability concerning the possibility of aggression which occurs when the military or paramilitary identifies an individual as being sympathetic to the guerrillas. They showed a sense of confusion or disbelief regarding the passive attitude of state agencies when confronted with the frequent reoccurrence of human rights violations. We were also made aware of some cases where persons were killed when it was alleged that they were informant for the military.

We conducted interviews in areas of the country thought to have the largest concentrations of displaced persons. These included La Porfia in Villavicencio, Cantaclaro, Robinson Pitalua in Monteria, Pablo Acuna, Los Lagos, Sagrada Familia in Barrancabermeja, the barrio of Viudas in Medellin and Casuca and Ciudad Bolivar in Bogota.

a. Socio-economic Impacts

The vast majority of internally displaced children live below the poverty line. Almost without exception, the displaced persons we observed could most likely be classified as belonging to the sector of the Colombian population which lives in "absolute poverty".

Economic hardship is directly related to the circumstances surrounding displacement. In the most cases the persons affected were formerly able to earn at least a subsistence income as peasant farmers. Any cash income was supplemented by the ability of the family to grow their own food. However, once displaced, families lose most of their possessions and the source of their livelihood, including their homes, farm land and implements, domestic animals and crops. When their relationship with the land is broken displaced persons also lose access to their primary source of food. In this context, we observed that their economic situation declined from subsistence living on the farm to absolute poverty in the city.

Displaced persons have few economic opportunities in their new environment. They must compete for housing and employment with the poor population already living in urban slum areas. Displaced persons enter into this competition without the support of their extended family or other members of the community and they have no economic resources to fall back on. At the same time they must confront the urban-rural cultural differences. Lacking formal education and the work skills to compete in an urban economy, the adults responsible for the wellbeing of children often turn to the informal sector. Work in the informal sector can consist of occasional employment, selling goods in the street, collecting and selling recyclable goods such as glass or plastic or piece work done in the home. Studies indicate that persons active in the informal sector usually earn below the minimum wage, which was approximately USD120 a month in 1993, and do not have access to state or company sponsored social security programs.

As noted, the majority of displaced person are women and their children. While a precise number is not available, it is known that many of the women are widows whose spouses were killed in political violence. Consequently, many families have lost the primary income earner and women are obliged to assume the traditional roles played by both males and females even though they may not be prepared or able to do so. The responsibility for the economic and emotional support of the children falls on their shoulders. Women must create the mechanisms for the subsistence and economic income for the family with little possibilities for success.[34]

It is common that displaced women lack formal education or formal training. Outside of an agricultural setting, therefore, they have few alternative economic possibilities to support themselves and the persons who depend on

them. Within the informal sector women often find employment as domestic workers. In general the salary in this sector is below the official minimum and insufficient to meet basic needs.

> "Displaced women have a double burden. After being removed from their land and being forced to look for a new life under horrible economic conditions, they must also become the head of the family. She lives under high stress [as a result of her responsibilities]".[35]

Under these conditions, income earners from displaced families are unable to provide the minimum for the subsistence of the children. We were told in one interview that:

> "[Living here] we feel that the war is, above all else, an economic war. We lack food because we can not grow it. Of those that have work here, 95 percent have only temporary jobs. When the government creates new [living areas] it doesn't worry about providing basic services. In this barrio the sewers, the electricity, the water- everything is a result of the work of the people themselves. The community had to assume the responsibility [to provide the services]. The peasant farmers suffer when they come here and the children suffer as much as their parents. The children of peasants are looked down on and have to endure hunger and illness. Displacement is very violent for the children.[36]

As a result, we found the child victims of displacement and their families living in precarious circumstances. Most persons we interviewed lived in houses constructed from materials scavenged by the family. The houses usually consisted of one or two rooms, had a dirt floor and provided shelter for as many as two families of up to 20 persons. In addition, urban barrios with concentrations of displaced persons usually lacked basic services or community infrastructure such as water, sanitation and sewer systems, garbage collection, health and education. Those families who had electricity often obtained it illegally by tapping into existing hydro lines.

In Ciudad Bolivar and Casuca, Bogota, we noted that families living in the poorest sections of the barrio only had access to potable water once a week. We were told that, on occasion, the watertruck did not arrive, leaving the barrio without water for weeks at a time.[37]

> "Here we live very poorly. There is no water [service] and we have to carry our water here from far away. Sometimes we have to buy water and it is always very expensive. Sometimes there simply is none."[38]

Under conditions of economic depravation the overall development of children is threatened. Any such debilitation has longterm consequences both for the individual and Colombian society at large. Most importantly, in our visits we found that the diet of the children was inadequate for their normal development and that the children often exhibited visible symptoms of malnutrition. We observed that the lack food, clothing and access to basic services makes displaced children living in urban poor areas particularly vulnerable to illness and epidemics. Parasites and skin diseases are also a significant problem in cases where children drink nonpotable water or where sanitation is poor (Betanci 1993). These forms of illness could be easily controlled under peacetime conditions where even a minimal healthcare infrastructure was in place. However, in the current situation they tend to be difficult to cure and often constitute a threat to the longterm health of the children.

In cooler regions of the country which are situated at high elevations, such as Bogota, it is common for the children to suffer from bronchitis and respiratory illnesses. In warmer lowlying regions of the country respiratory illnesses are also common, owing in large part to the humidity.

> "It is very cold here and the children are always sick. There are many epidemics and no doctors. For this reason the children are always sick and they get better very slowly."[39]

Poverty also undermines access to education. Many displaced families can not afford to send their children to school. Instead, necessity forces them to work to supplement the family income. Again, most such work is in the informal sector, including working as street vendors, shining shoes or collecting recyclable goods. Many also work in the home looking after younger siblings while the parents are at work. For those whose education is interrupted, it is difficult for children to make up lost time at school. The economic situation of families often does not always improve over time and lost academic years can be difficult to recover when the child is older. The parents and organizations we interviewed recognized the importance of the education of their children. However, they said repeatedly that the difficulty of their economic situation made it impossible to afford school:

> "In the city life is expensive because you have to buy everything. For this reason there is no money to study. The most important thing is to find money for the family to live."[40]

> "The most important thing is to solve the immediate problems of meeting the basic necessities and then finding money for school.

We are always trying to look for scholarships and trying to find work for the mother."[41]

b. Social-political impacts

As was the case with persons living in rural areas, the most significant socio-political impact of political violence among displaced persons is their withdrawal from community activities as a result of fear of further persecution. We found that most displaced persons interviewed had some previous relationship with a social organization and believed that they were targeted by the military for that activity. Almost all of these persons had given up any form of political or community involvement after their displacement even though most stated that they still believed that organization was necessary. The displaced persons interviewed expressed their fear that they would be again subjected to some form of violence if their neighbors were to find out about their past political affiliations.

As a result of the fears for their safety, displaced families often attempt to resolve their problems on an individual basis rather than seeking some form of assistance in the community. One implication is a tendency towards apathy and passiveness. The fear of the violence renders the victims of political violence reluctant to be involved in any form of community organization. Their fear and passiveness is, inturn, projected by adults onto their children. Many parents told us that they insist that the children not speak to others about what happened to the family, where they came from or why the father or other family members are dead. Children, therefore, are put in the position of denying their past. This was expressed very clearly by the children:

"We had to leave [our home] because the army came to kill us... The soldiers killed some people the same day that we left. Here we have many friends but we have to take care because there are many informers. It is better not to speak about the past because if we speak everyone will begin to ask more questions. It is better to shut up."[42]

"Here we have no freedom. All we do is go to school and then come home. We have no friends and we can't talk with anyone because there are so many informers. You never know who you are talking with and what will happen."[43]

"I want to return to our farm but I don't think that it will be possible. Even though I don't like it, I have to stay here. I miss the people in the countryside. Here it is impossible talk or have confidence in anyone. It's as if a person isn't worth anything- only

> the lives of presidents and politicians have any value. Of course, things would change if everyone organized against the government...but people here are so untrustworthy."[44]

The general lack of protection and the vulnerability of displaced persons, demonstrates that the situation of political violence results in violations of the basic human rights of children. Furthermore, the loss of homes and communities effectively constitutes the elimination of a displaced persons basis of personal, family and cultural identity (Castano 1993). The impacts of displacement are aggravated by the need to remain in hiding or keep a low profile, the constant sense of fear and economic problems. However, the impacts have a different dynamic in children than in adults resulting in different responses and consequences (Gutierrez 1993):

> "Things don't work for me in the barrio. Here there are many bad people, thieves and drug users. In Miraflores [where I am from] people showed solidarity between each other. Here no. I want to go back to the farm but my mother doesn't. She wants to sell the farm."[45]

c. Socio-psychological Impacts

It is very difficult to make generalizations about the socio-psychological problems experienced by internally displaced children in Colombia. The effects of trauma and fear are not always immediately visible and their longterm implications for the individual and society at large are difficult to calculate. However, the psychological impacts are real and serious. They must be addressed within the context of the general situation of the displaced children and their families. In this light, CEDAVIDA, an organization which has been working for five years with displaced families, identifies the situation of children as follows:

> "In cases where the father has died it is necessary to reconstruct the family. In general, it falls on the oldest son to abandon his role as a child and assume the responsibilities of the dead father, including earning an income to sustain the family. The families precarious economic situation usually forces the other children to become involved in earning money to support the family. Effectively, therefore, children are forced to abandon their childhood and assume adult roles which can be disorienting and has implications for their overall development. Added to this, both the children who are forced to work and those who are able to attend school tend to feel out of place in [their new urban environment]. With displacement their channels of socialization, most importantly with

> their neighbors, are broken. In the city the culture, codes of social behavior and forms of language are different, leaving many children feeling that they are disconnected [or isolated] and unable to communicate with their environment.
> The end result of the [different manifestations we see in children of the impacts of political violence] is to leave them without a sense of direction for the future. This is owing, fundamentally, to the fact that displacement was not their decision. Frequently the children do not know why they moved or how long the displacement will last. For fear of being identified again as a target by the military the parents tell the children not to mention anything about their past. The children, therefore, must reconstruct their lives while living in a strange environment, under precarious economic conditions without a clear picture of the future because they don't know when, or if, they will return to their homes."[46]

In this context, the majority of the children expressed confusion about why they moved and their desire to return to their place of origin. As one child of eight years old told us, "I only want to go home and be a farmer as I have been all my life".[47] A father of eight children said:

> "It was very hard for the children when we had to leave. In the countryside they had freedom- here no. It was very difficult to find a home for ourselves and our eight children and they always ask us 'What happened? Why are we here? When will we go back to the farm?'. I always responded that we came here on a trip because there is no other answer to give. As they were small we were afraid that they would tell [others what happened]. It was as hard for us as for the children because we couldn't tell them the truth about what happened".[48]

The displaced child must, therefore, confront a series of problems which are the consequence of political violence while at the same time dealing with personal loss of home or family members. Many children we observed were still not over the fear caused by being the target of aerial bombardment or ground based counterinsurgency operations even years after their exposure to the violence. Many children showed signs of trauma in the interviews. We observed that this trauma manifests itself in an inability to adapt to their new lives and homes and prolonged depression despite the passing time and physical distance from where the violence took place.

The displaced families with children, and the organizations working with them, told us that the abrupt change in environment, from the farm to urban

slums, combined with the economic insecurity were also important factors contributing to longterm psychological problems in children. In particular, many children had trouble adapting from the relative freedom of open green spaces in rural areas to the crowding and pollution of the city. Once again, we observed that the combined effects of socio-political or socio-economic impacts was to extend the post-violence trauma and to undermine the possibility of the child's recovery.

Displaced children often have not developed the same emotional defense mechanisms as the adults (AVRE 1991). We were told that, within two to six months after witnessing the death of a loved one, the children often began to repeatedly relive the violent act. In many cases the child became withdrawn and emotionally isolated him\herself. In the experience of organizations working with displaced children, those who did not receive some form of treatment of support in dealing with the trauma exhibited longterm psychological problems, particularly in adapting to new situations and integrating into society.

Social workers also told us that children frequently reverted behavior from a former stage of development which they had already passed through. Some examples given were bedwetting or thumbsucking. This, in part, explains the problems that many children experienced in school. Again, the availability of support and treatment was identified as an important factor in determining the duration and seriousness of these problems. In general, we were told that the children who had access to a good social support network appeared to recover from the effects of the trauma much more quickly than those who did not. This has direct and serious implications for the physical, emotional and intellectual development of the child (ARVE 1991; Castano 1992 and 1993).

Finally, the issue of impunity was frequently raised by displaced persons. We were told that the fact a child had been exposed to violence was not, by itself, sufficient to cause longterm depression or other psychological or emotional problems. Impunity was the single most important additional factor to the violence which we identified through the interview process. It was brought up both by the victims of displacement and nongovernment organization workers.

> "When [my grandson] was only seven years old he was already afraid because of the [aerial] bombardments. This was the year that the military killed his father, leaving 14 bullets in the body. Two years later the military killed two of his cousins. My grandson saw the decapitated bodies. The following year I was almost killed by an assassination attempt. So, my grandson and I were displaced to Bogota. We know that the people responsible are very powerful and no one will ever be brought to justice for the killings.

> It caused him a great deal of pain to leave his family, to lose his father and all of the other violent acts he has had to witness. Even I was traumatized. However, knowing that the violence was committed with impunity may be the greatest injustice. My grandson had some psychological treatment but we had no money to continue and we had to stop. He is doing very poorly in school because he is always thinking [about what happened]. Before he did very well inspite of the [aerial] bombings. Many times he just starts to cry for no reason. He still likes toys made for very young children even though he is already 13 years old".[49]

PART THREE: CONCLUSIONS

In the longterm, the problems faced by the child victims of political violence in Colombia can only be resolved through a political settlement between the government and the guerrilla groups. This demands an end to the fighting through a negotiated peace agreement. Such an agreement must be accompanied by social policies intended to promote an environment of tolerance between former enemies and development polices which reduce the economic disparities in Colombian society. In addition, the political system must be reformed to allow for the participation of sectors of Colombian society which are currently excluded.

Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that such ideal conditions can be achieved in Colombia in the near future. Neither side in the conflict has shown the political will to return to negotiations. For its part, the government of Colombia has consistently demonstrated it's preference for a military rather than political solution to the problem of armed conflict. It is precisely within the context of this policy that members of the civilian population have been targeted as part of the "internal enemy" on the sole basis of their involvement in legal political or social organizations or for their presumed political sympathies.

However, even in the current situation there are measures which, if taken by the government of Colombia, would have the immediate effect of reducing the number of violent acts committed against civilians. The result would be a corresponding decline in the number of child victims of political violence. Following our investigation we conclude that possible actions could be taken by the government at three different levels. More than anything else, taking such actions would require a determined show of political will on the part of the government to end the violence.

1. Political Reform and Observing International Humanitarian Law

The government must ensure that Armed Forces of Colombia respect their obligations under international humanitarian law. Specifically, this means guaranteeing that the civilian population is not a target for military operations and that every effort is made to protect the safety of civilians living in zones where military operations are being conducted. These rights are already guaranteed under the various international treaties and conventions, including the Geneva Conventions, to which Colombia is a signatory. However, the extreme numbers of human rights violations committed by members of the armed forces against the civilian population indicates that these obligations are not being respected or enforced.

For their part, the guerrilla organizations must also respect international humanitarian law which is intended to protect the civilian population. The guerrillas must also respect the autonomy of political and community organization and respect their right to exist even where these organizations are not in agreement with the goals held by the guerrillas. The international community can continue to play a role in monitoring the compliance of both the guerrillas and the military.

The Colombian government must act immediately to disarm and dismantle paramilitary groups. The members of the groups, which exist in contravention of Colombian law, should be brought to justice. In addition, all members of the Colombian police and armed forces involved in supporting the groups should be removed from their positions and subjected to the due process of law, including penal sanctions where these are found appropriate.

The situation of impunity which exists in Colombia can also not be allowed to continue. Impunity for human rights violations has become both a consequence and a cause of political violence. The knowledge that the individuals responsible for gross human rights violations will never be held responsible for their actions through the due process of law simply encourages future violence on the part of the military and alienation and violence on the part of the victims. To break the cycle of violence the government of Colombia must act decisively to establish the rule of law. This means enforcing current laws and reforming institutions, laws and practices which permit impunity to occur.

Finally, political plurality, as guaranteed by the Colombian constitution, must be respected and tolerated. Persons or organizations should not be singled out for repression or targeted as sympathizers of the guerrillas for the simple fact that they disagree with some aspect of government policy or are working to find collective solutions to community problems. This would, in effect, include the vast majority of civilians who are victims of the current political violence. In the longterm Colombia's political institutions will require reforms

which guarantee the broadbased participation of civil society in the political process.

2. Internal Displacement

We believe that the number of civilians displaced by armed conflict would be significantly reduced if the government and guerrillas respected international humanitarian law. However, in the absence of a peace agreement and considering the prolonged nature of the fighting it is inevitable that the conflict would still have serious implications for the civilian population. If taken by the government of Colombia, the following measures would reduce the suffering of the victims of displacement and improve their prospects for a return to a more "normal" life.

Our research indicated that there are almost no government sponsored programs for displaced persons or victims of political violence. In addition, there appears to be little coordination between the few programs that do exist. To deal with the problem of displacement the government of Colombia must invest significant new resources into new programs directed at displaced persons. These programs need to be holistic to the extent that they consider every level of the problem, including housing, healthcare, education, income generation and other basic services. Services must be especially targeted to the needs of child victims and those persons on whom the children depend.

Despite the magnitude of the problem of internal displacement there is little concrete information available on the real dimensions and characteristics of the problem. A comprehensive study of the situation is, therefore, required to provide the empirical information and analysis needed before effective assistance programs can be created. The study should be undertaken through the initiative of the government of Colombia and be coordinated with international and nongovernmental organizations working in related areas.

The government should facilitate the return of the victims of displacement to their homes at the earliest possible date. The return should be accompanied by a guarantee safe passage, protection for the victims which would allow them to re-establish their homes and farms and compensation for any damages caused by agents of the Colombian state in military actions.

Where displacement does occur as the consequence of military actions, the government should do everything possible to settle the persons affected in areas of the country with a similar cultural and economic environment. Furthermore, when the return to the community of origin is impossible, the government should provide further assistance which would allow the victims to establish themselves in their new location. This should be done taking into account the preferences of the victims. The government must also guarantee the safety and

provide resources and logistical support to nongovernmental organizations working with the victims of displacement.

3. Programs For Child Victims

Finally, special consideration must be given to the situation of child victims of political violence and internal displacement. Any policy or programs should be guided both by human rights guarantees provided under national law and Colombia's adherence to international agreements, particularly the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, our research found that the problems of children cannot be considered in isolation of the situation of the child's family. In this sense, programs directed at children must take into account the role of the family.

In zones of conflict or where concentrations of displaced persons live the government should support special programs to provide for the basic needs of children, including nutrition and healthcare. Access to education is a right enjoyed by Colombian children under the constitution and must also be guaranteed.

Special training and resources should be provided to teachers working in zones of conflict or in communities with high concentrations of internally displaced persons. The training would allow teachers working with child victims to provide for the particular forms of education necessary in the difficult and stressful conditions under which the children live. The government must also provide a guarantee of safety for teachers working in these zones.

A guarantee of protection and access to resources must be provided to nongovernmental organizations working with child victims, including at all levels of socio-political, socio-economic and socio-psychological problems which are manifest in child victims. Military operations to deny access to food and medicine to the guerrillas should not endanger the wellbeing of the civilian population and no form of military use of schools should be permitted.

***Afterword* - David Gairdner, August 1995**

There has been no comprehensive studies on the situation of children affected by armed conflict in Colombia since this report was presented in late 1993. In the absence of such a study, the same analytical framework used by the authors in 1993 can also be applied in 1995. Based on this analysis it can be assumed that the situation of children has deteriorated in the past two years.

War and Peace

Ardila and Tuft concluded that improvements to the situation of Colombian children could only begin after a negotiated political settlement

between the government and the guerrillas. In 1995 there was no end in sight to the fighting. The election of Ernesto Samper Pizano as President of Colombia, in August, 1994, was accompanied by optimism that new peace talks were possible. Samper appointed a High Commissioner for Peace and took measures to create an environment for negotiations. The government's initiatives were reciprocated by various guerrilla factions and the two parties agreed on a framework for negotiations in December, 1994. However, the talks brokedown in early 1995 and there is no indication that they will resume in the near future.

The failure of negotiations is aggravated by the current political situation as neither side appears to have the political strength or internal cohesion necessary to move the process forward. The Samper administration has been weakened by a political scandal around allegations that the President's campaign received USD6 million in illegal contributions from the Cali drug cartel. The scandal implicates the President, senior members of his government, Congresspersons and many other prominent Colombians. It has diverted the administration's attention from other issues, undermined the government's political clout and has created a crisis in Colombia's political institutions by supporting longstanding allegations of a close relationship between the Cali cartel and the highest levels of the Colombian government, military and private sector.

For their part, the FARC and ELN are fragmented and unable to present a united front in the negotiations. Regional units appear to be acting independently, suggesting that the guerrillas have internal problems of command and control. In this context, the fighting has intensified and assumed its own dynamic at the regional level.

Human Rights Violations

Ardila and Tuft also found that the dramatic impact of armed conflict on Colombian children was a direct result of the targeting of the civilian population in military operations. Current statistics on human rights violations suggest, that in the absence of a peace agreement, international humanitarian law is still not being observed. Almost 15,000 persons died in politically motivated killings between 1990 and 1994. Put in perspective, this is more than the total number of documented killings during the years of military dictatorship in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay and Paraguay (*Justicia y Paz*, Vol 7, No.2 1994: 21). The large majority of the victims continue to be civilians who died outside of combat situations. Research done by reputable national and international human rights organizations concludes that the Colombian armed forces, and the paramilitary groups alleged to be supported by them, are responsible for over 70 percent of the violations. As a result, the Colombian government has been repeatedly condemned at the international level for failing

to show the political will to control the military and provide guarantees of safety for civilian non-combatants who are being targeted in counterinsurgency operations (Gairdner and Tuft 1995).

During the 1994 election campaign President Samper promised to respect human rights, as guaranteed under national law and Colombian's adherence to international convention, and end impunity by enforcing the rule of law. According to Samper, "internal conflict cannot be used as an excuse for violations of human rights and international humanitarian law" (Presidencia de la Republica 1994). However, reported violations have actually increased since Samper came to power and impunity remains absolute. According to one prominent Colombian human rights organization "the first real actions of the Samper government raise doubts regarding its commitment and the cohesiveness and strength of its (human rights) policy" (Comision Andina de Juristas 1994: 2). Importantly, the number of paramilitary groups, which target civilians and are supported by the military in violation of Colombian law, has also increased to over 130 in 1994 (*Cambio 16*, 3 October 1994). It can be assumed, therefore, that more Colombian children are being directly affected by the conflict.

Internal Displacement

The impact of the escalation of the conflict can also be seen in statistics related to internal displacement. Two new studies show that the situation is worse than previously estimated. The Catholic Bishop's Conference of Colombia found that as many as 627,000 persons have been internally displaced by political violence in the past ten years.[50] Noting that the civilian population did not receive the protection guaranteed under international humanitarian law, the Bishop's concluded that "children and youth show the most evidence of trauma resulting from the conflict" (Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia 1994: 5) Over 60 percent of the internally displaced, or at least 360,000 persons, were under 19 years of age and 71 percent were under 25 years. In addition, 60 percent of all displaced persons were female and 40,000 female heads of families were widowed in the violence. This figures are several times larger than the best available estimates used by Ardila and Tuft in 1993.

In addition, a Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations visited Colombia in October, 1994, to investigate the situation of displaced persons.[51] Echoing the finding of both the Catholic Bishops and Ardila and Tuft, the Representative found that children constitute the majority of displaced persons in Colombia and was "alarmed" by "the grave humanitarian and human rights implications" of their situation (UN doc. E\CN.4\1995\50\Add.1: 51). In general, displaced persons were "part of the poorest layer of Colombian society" (p.14) and lacked access to food, housing, education, health care and basic services (pp.71-73). The Representative placed

a special emphasis on "the psycho-social effects of urban unemployment on the younger generations [of internally displaced] who have grown up in a climate of violence and crime which unemployment fosters" (p.73). Even in the unlikely event of a peace agreement the Representative concluded that "the structural problems in the country were such that they will continue to produce displacement for the foreseeable future" (p.8).

NOTES

1. This article was translated from the original Spanish and revised and edited for publication by David Gairdner.

2. This is in contrast to the situation in other parts of Latin America, particularly in the countries of Central America the Southern Cone region, where extensive research related to children and violence has been conducted.

3. Interviews with displaced persons were largely arranged through the assistance of community organizations who work with displaced persons. We were able to speak freely as a result of the confidence shown by the leaders of these organizations. In every case the victims refused to be identified in the final document.

4. The term socio-psychological is used here rather than psychological as the former encompasses a recognition of the importance of the general social environment and processes and the interaction of these factors with the psychological wellbeing of a person (Ressler et. al. 1993: 165-66).

5. Colombia is most recognized at the international level for drug related violence. While the drug trade has a highly destructive effect on national life, it is not primarily responsible for political violence. National and international organizations report that the drug cartels were responsible for only 1.8 to four percent of the total number of reported human rights violations between 1991 and 1993 (Asociación SETA 1993 p.iv).

6. Similar tactics have been used elsewhere in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, including in Central America and the countries of the Southern Cone region.

7. An estimated 300,000 people were killed during The Violence, making it the bloodiest civil conflict in Latin American history since the conquest. A further one million persons were displaced from zones of conflict.

8. Decrees 813, 814 and 815/89.

9. DANE, cited in *Caja de Herramientas*, August 1994: 16.

10. DANE, cited in *Caja de Herramientas*, August 1994: 16.

11. The shift in strategy to counterinsurgency warfare occurred at the same time as a popular organizations were at their most powerful. Unions, for example, represented 13 percent of the workforce in the 1970s compared with about five percent in the 1990s (Sanchez 1991: 277 and 283). Organizations of peasant farmers, indigenous communities, the church, women

and urban poor also had millions of members and, at the height of their influence in the 1970s and early 1980s, presented a significant challenge to the Liberal and Conservative party controlled state. These organizations were legally constituted and often focused on specific community or sectoral problems, such as providing schools or other forms of community infrastructure or providing a political voice to sectors of the population that had no representation in the closed formal political process.

12. Of this number, many of the victims were civilian non-combatants caught in the crossfire.

13. Interview with a family of two parents and four children in Cimitarra, Magdalena Medio.

14. Interview with two families, the first consisting of both parents and two children and the second of both parents with six children, in San Vicente de Chucurri, Magdalena Medio.

15. Interview with a family of two parents and four children in Cimitarra, Magdalena Medio.

16. Interview conducted with a family from Yondo, Magdalena Medio. Decimated by the loss of several members, the family is today made up of three adults and nine children. After three consecutive displacements they now live in Bolivar City, a slum on the outskirts of Bogota.

17. Interview with a pregnant mother with her four children from the department of Caqueta, displaced and now living in Casuca on the outskirts of Bogota.

18. For this study military control over food and medicine supplies was verified in interviews with a mother and her five children in the department of Cordoba, a pregnant mother and her four children in the department of Caqueta and ten peasant farmers in the community of Yonda (Magdalena Medio). The existence of controls was also verified by Amnesty International (Terre des Hommes 1987:160).

19. Interview with a family of two parents and eight children displaced from Norte de Santander and currently living in Casuca, Bogota.

20. This situation was reiterated in various interviews in the regions of Magdalena Medio, Meta and Cordoba.

21. Interview with a 13 year old girl from Villahermosa, Meta.

22. Interview with a member of the Franciscan order in Barrancabermeja.

23. Organizations included the national the National Association of Peasant Users (Asociacion Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos; ANUC), the Franciscan religious order, and Albergue Campesino in Barrancabermeja.

24. Interview with a 12 year old female child in Carmen, Magdalena Medio.

25. Testimony given in interviews with parents of displaced children in these four cities.

26. Interview with the father of four children from Yondo, Magdalena Medio.

27. Interview with a father of five children from Puerto Nare, Antioquia, now living in Medellin.

28. Interview with a family of both parents and 12 children from Vista Hermosa, Meta. The parents indicted that the military arrived at their house to interrogate family members immediately after the children completed one of these exercises in school. Parents interviewed in the Magdalena Medio region expressed the same concerns about the education system and had similar experiences.

29. Interview with a mother and her five children in Villahermosa, Meta.

30. Interview with a nongovernmental organization worker in Bogota.

31. Interview with a 12 year old girl currently living in Ciudad Bolivar, Bogota, with her mother, a sister and a brother.

32. Child from Yondo now living in Ciudad Bolivar, Bogota.

33. Frequently, both the military and paramilitary groups establish a permanent presence in a region at the same time. Their operations tends to complement each other.

34. See "Mujer y desplazamiento en Cordoba", Corporacion Maria Cano y ORFEDEC, Moteria, 1993.

35. Interview with a member of a nongovernmental organization working with displaced persons in Villavicencio.

36. Interview with the father of five, displaced from San Vicente de Chucurri, Magdalena Medio and now living in Los Lagos, Barrancabermeja.

37. Interview with a former leader of an organization of peasant farmers from Puerto Wilches now living with his three sons in one of the worst sections of Ciudad Bolivar.

38. Interview with a mother of three children, displaced from Castilla, Meta, and now living in Casuca, Bogota.

39. Interview with a mother of three children, displaced from Castilla, Meta, and now living in Casuca, Bogota.

40. Interview with two displaced brothers with their parents in Casuca, Bogota.

41. Interview with members of a non-governmental organization working with displaced in Bogota.

42. Interview with a nine year old displaced child from the region of Macarena now living in Casuca, Bogota.

43. Interview with four brothers between the age of seven and fourteen. The children were displaced with their families from Norte de Santander and now live in Ciudad Bolivar, Bogota.

44. Interview with a 13 year old boy displaced with his family from Miraflores, Meta. The family is now living in La Porfia in Villavicencio.

45. Interview with a child of 13 years who was displaced, with her mother and brothers, from Miraflores, Meta, after her father was killed. The family now lives in Villavicencio.

46. Interview with CEDAVIDA, Bogota. Also see Salazar 1993: 141.

47. Interview with an eight year old child from Vista Hermosa. The child had been displaced several times. In Villahermosa he survived aerial bombardment by the Colombian military and hid in the mountains on several occasions. Permanent displacement occurred when the military threatened to kill several members of his family. The child cried during the entire interview. He is currently receiving treatment from AVRE.

48. Interview with the father of eight children displaced from Villahermosa and now living in La Porfia, Villavicencio.

49. Interview with a grandfather from the Magdalena Medio region, displaced with his grandfather, first to Bogota and then to Villavicencio.

50. Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia, Estadisticas del Desplazamiento Interno, noviembre de 1994. Research was based on information gathered through church structures in Colombia. Some displaced persons do not relate to the church and, therefore, the figure of 627,000 represents the minimum number of displaced persons.

51. Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Francis Deng, Internally Displaced Persons in Colombia, UN doc. E\CN.4\1995\50\Add.1.

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