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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY BY ALDO CIVICO**

**Child Soldiers in Colombia: A Complex and Evolving Phenomenon**

Hearing

Ending the Use of Child Soldiers:
History, Impact and Evolution

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
September 19, 2014

I would like to thank the co-chairs of the Tom Lantos Committee on Human Rights, Congressman Jim McGovern and Congressman Frank Wolf, and the members of this committee for holding this hearing on child soldiers and for the opportunity to speak with you today on such an important and sensitive topic.

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I am Aldo Civico and I am an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Rutgers University, in Newark. Since 2001, I have been conducting ethnographic research on the armed conflict in Colombia. The encounter in 2003 with one of the major leaders of the paramilitaries brought me to focus my research on the perpetrators of gross human rights violations.

Over the years, I met and became familiar with members of paramilitary death squads, the guerrillas, criminal groups, groups linked to drug trafficking, and urban gangs. In addition, my understanding of the Colombian armed conflict has been shaped by the encounters with dozens of victims, human rights leaders, and Colombian scholars—among others.

During my ethnographic research, I had also the opportunity to meet and to interview several minors who were members of armed groups in Colombia. In addition, several of the combatants I met, though they were already adults at the time of our interview, had been recruited when they were still minors.

As a discipline, anthropology prioritizes qualitative over quantitative research methods, and my own fieldwork relies on long term observation as well as in-depth interviews and the recording of life histories. Today, I would like to share with you some of the insights that I learned by listening to the stories of some of the child soldiers I met over the past decade in Colombia.

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Today, Colombia faces the historic opportunity to end its internal armed conflict of 50 years. Two years ago, President Juan Manuel Santos announced the beginning of formal peace talks between the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces guerrillas, the FARC. Talks are currently underway in Cuba, while pre-talks have begun also with the guerrillas of the National Liberation Army, the ELN.

If, as it is hoped by a great majority of Colombians, a peace agreement will be signed in the near future, the country will have the opportunity to turn the page and to leave behind a history of violence perpetuated by paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the state in which 218,000 people lost their lives, 27,000 people were kidnapped, almost 2,000 massacres were carried out, over 27,000 individuals were disappeared, and about 5 million people were forcibly displaced.

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Children and adolescents have been suffering significantly as a consequence of both the armed conflict and severe inequality, which marks everyday life of a great number of Colombians. Minors make up 37% of the total population. Almost a quarter of them, that is 24%, live below the poverty line; another 13.5% suffer chronic malnutrition and 18.3% do not have access to education.

Because of the internal armed conflict, children have been the victims of all forms of violence, from killings, to disappearances, to forced displacement. According to a report issued by the Bogota-based Historical Memory Group, in the past 30 years, 2.5 million children were forcibly displaced; 154 were disappeared; 154 were selectively killed; and 342 were victims of land mines.

In addition, children were often forced to witness the torture and killing of their parents, family members, friends and neighbors. Minors thus had to endure not only the consequences of

physical violence, resulting often in the mutilation of their bodies, but also the trauma caused by unspeakable psychological abuse.

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The lived experience of child soldiers is the product of larger forces at play. The biographies of minors who join armed groups in Colombia reflect the geographical, social, economic and cultural conditions of marginality that they inhabit. This environment not only constrains the opportunities and choices minors have, but at the same time enables their biographies as child soldiers.

Some examples from my own fieldwork in Colombia will serve to understand some of the circumstances that brought minors to be recruited or to join illegal armed forces.

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In areas marked by scarcity, the presence of an armed group is at times perceived by a minor as an opportunity to ameliorate his or her own living condition and to better his or her status in society.

For a male adolescent, in particular, joining an armed group becomes a strategy to fulfill his understanding of manhood, by carrying a weapon, wearing a uniform, or riding a motorbike.

Edwin joined the FARC guerrilla when he was about 10 years old. He was living in a small village in the department of Antioquia. At the time, the village was under the influence of the guerrillas. His family struggled to make ends meet. He was fascinated by the uniforms the guerrilla fighters wore and the weapons they carried. Edwin believed he would be better off by joining the FARC. One morning he left his family and joined the guerrillas.

Jose grew up in a coca growing area of Colombia. His parents, as most of the residents of his village, were coca leaf collectors. Still a child, he began helping his parents in the coca fields. The entire social and economic life of the village where he grew up revolved around those fields. There was no presence of the state, he told me when I interviewed him. The only school he could go to was hours away in walking distance and the guerrillas were the only authority in the area. Jose did not like to work in the coca fields and becoming a guerrilla fighter seemed to him the best strategy available to him for better living conditions.

Jader was abandoned by his teenage mother at birth, and he grew up in a small farm owned by his grandparents. He was 14 years old when his grandfather died and Jader felt alone and abandoned in the world. When a paramilitary group came through the family's estate, Jader talked to the commander and asked to join his paramilitary unit. His request was granted and Jader was sent to a paramilitary training camp. Eventually, Jader became a field commander, and

one of his responsibilities was to escort drug shipments along the Atrato River, which crosses the Afro-Colombian region of Chocó.

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Several of the combatants I interviewed came from families whose involvement in the conflict stretched over a few generations.

The story of Luna is a case in point. In the northern region of Uraba, one of Luna's uncles was a guerrilla leader of the EPL, the Peoples Liberation Army, who eventually switched over to the paramilitaries. Other members of the family were guerrilla fighters, while some of his older brothers had joined the Colombian army. Because of the variety of armed groups to which several members of his family belonged, Luna liked to say his family was like a fruit salad. Eventually, Luna joined the ranks of the paramilitaries, and in his early twenties became a field commander.

For Luna, it all began when he was 12 years old. At the time, he was living with his married sister. It was his brother-in-law who introduced him to the world of selective killing. His brother-in-law, in fact, was a hit man. "He was doing the killing while I was driving the bike," Luna told me. Soon after, Luna joined a paramilitary death squad, which carried out social cleansing in the region. "This is how I started killing lots of people, but it was a good life," Luna told me.

The adrenaline and the power that Luna felt carrying a gun nourished in him an obsessive fascination for weapons. Killing, he told me, became like practicing a sport. "I didn't have a childhood; that is to say not a regular childhood where one goes to school," he confessed once. "I spent my childhood among weapons," he observed.

When the paramilitaries demobilized, along with his companions, Luna disarmed, but after a few months, he felt useless and emasculated. He thus joined a drug trafficking criminal group. A few years ago, Luna was killed by a hit man near the town where he was living with his wife and her son.

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In some cases, it is the witnessing of violence and the desire for revenge that brought minors to join an illegal armed group.

This is the case of Oscar, a member of the paramilitaries I met in Medellin during the demobilization process. At the time of our meeting he was in his mid twenties, but Oscar had joined a paramilitary death squad when he was only 14 years old, after he witnessed the killing of his mother on behalf of the guerrillas.

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The story of Manuel is a paradigmatic one.

When Manuel's mother separated from her abusive husband, she moved with her two children to the periphery of Medellin. Manuel, the younger son, at the time was only 11 years old. To provide for her family, Manuel's mother spent long hours away from home; so the streets became Manuel's home.

In the street, Manuel befriended with people who belonged to local gangs affiliated to a Bacrim. Manuel began his criminal career as a lookout, then as a drug courier, and in a short time he became a full member of a gang. Manuel was smart and proactive, and soon he was entrusted with more responsibilities until, at age 15, he became the commander of an entire sector in the neighborhood where he was living. Still a teenager, he had become a professional criminal, taking orders from his boss and giving orders to his army of gang members, all minors like him.

When Manuel shared his story with me, he told me his commander had become a father figure to him; someone who took care of him and protected him, while the bond he had created with the other gang members turned them into brothers. Carrying a gun, having money that allowed him to dress in a fashionable way, made Manuel feel significant, important and respected.

Two circumstances changed the course of events in Manuel's life. David was his best friend in the gang and someone of his own group shot him. David breathed his last in Manuel's arms at the hospital. The episode opened Manuel's eyes, and he realized that one day his best friend's fate might also become his own destiny. Manuel made his mind up and negotiated his exit from the gang. "You are smart and you deserve a different kind of life - the boss told him — but if I meet you I am going to kill you."

The second circumstance that helped Manuel's transition was an informal group of graffiti artists that invited him to join their crew. Painting murals helped Manuel to transcend his own experience and to consolidate the new life he embraced. Today, Manuel is a positive youth leader in his community and a college freshman, studying law.

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The life of Colombian child soldiers, that is their imaginary and lived experience, mirrors the culture of violence and the condition of marginality in which their biography takes shape and unfolds. Child soldiers in Colombia are the product of the armed conflict, the illegal economies and the structural violence (which includes poverty, malnutrition, lack of education and health care, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, etc.) into which they were born. It is the intertwinement of these conditions of marginality that qualify the forced character of child soldiers' recruitment in Colombia.

The forced and illegal recruitment of minors by armed groups in Colombia, therefore does not mean only, as it happens in certain instances, that children and adolescents are abducted, that is snatched from their homes and families against their will. Rather, in the great majority of the cases it is the overall conditions of marginality that represent the forced character of children's recruitment. As anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom once observed, often in war the safest place to be is in an armed group.

The great majority of the child soldiers who shared their experiences with me, were minors in search of respect; in their eyes, joining an illegal armed group like the guerrillas, a paramilitary death squad, or a gang linked to a drug trafficking criminal group, was perceived as the best strategy at hand to satisfy their basic human needs for security, a sense of belonging, and significance. In other words, joining an armed group was understood as the most effective strategy to interrupt a pattern of misery and marginalization from which they wanted to break away.

In line with the research of other anthropologists in other conflict zones around the world, my research confirmed that child soldiers, rather than being simply vulnerable individuals subject to manipulation by adults belonging to armed groups, are rational human actors, who have an understanding of the difficult and marginalizing conditions in which they live.

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I would like to conclude, respectfully submitting to your attention some recommendations.

1) Attention needs to be paid to the peace process between the government of Colombia and the FARC guerrillas in Cuba. Currently, parties are negotiating the reparations of victims. The agenda does not mention child soldiers explicitly, but the reintegration of minors who filled the ranks of the FARC in the past and in the present needs to be addressed.

The demobilization and reintegration of paramilitary members that begun in 2003, completely neglected the issue of forced recruitment of minors. This is a mistake that cannot be repeated.

2) I briefly mentioned that according to the United Nations, the Colombian army uses minors as informants, despite the fact that military directives prohibit any use of children for intelligence objectives. This observation has been indirectly acknowledged also by the State Department, which in its latest Country Report on Human Rights, mentions that in Colombia "illegal armed groups killed or threatened children with death on suspicion of being informants for the military."

I suggest that the United States Congress verify whether minors are used for intelligence purposes and if child soldiers, when they demobilize, are retained in military bases beyond the 36 hours allowed by Colombian law and interrogated before being handed over to the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare. Military aid to Colombia should be conditioned by the armed forces complying with the laws protecting children in conflict.

3) To prevent the recruitment of child soldiers, the support of policies and interventions that give minors access to education in areas of Colombia where armed groups are recruiting children and adolescents, should be a priority for the United States, especially at a time when the beginning of a post-conflict phase is becoming increasingly a possibility. As Amartya Sen highlighted a few years ago, development is a pillar of freedom, and education is a pillar of development.

An instance of a sound policy and innovative intervention that address the root causes of illegal recruitment are, for example, the 80 educational parks the Department of Antioquia, under the leadership of Governor Sergio Fajardo, is currently building in at-risk areas. These parks, that include libraries and spaces for the performance of the arts, were conceived to be a protective environment for children. Access to education reduces the risk for children and adolescents to join an armed group.

Furthermore, the educational and artistic initiatives created by youth leaders and youth groups in urban areas, such as the graffiti group that supported Manuel in his life transformation, should also be encouraged and supported with small grants as well as with opportunities for conflict resolution and leadership development. From within spaces of death, these courageous and creative young people give life to spaces of hope, where an alternative future without violence can be imagined.

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4) Because urban areas are becoming increasingly the spaces where children and adolescents are illegally recruited by armed criminal organizations, Congress should consider

expanding the definition of child soldiers contained in the 2008 Child Soldiers Accountability Act to include also minors illegally recruited by gangs to work for drug trafficking and transnational crime organizations.

In fact, extending the notion of child soldiers to minors trapped in urban gangs will provide the international community as well as national governments with the legal framework and the tools to intervene and to protect minors living in urban areas and illegally recruited by organized crime, implementing the strategies and the tools today available for child soldiers as defined by the Rome Statue. At the same time, it would allow the severity of a war crime to be applied to the leaders of organized crime that illegally recruit children and adolescents.

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In conclusion, as I have tried to demonstrate, the continued illegal recruitment of child soldiers in Colombia highlights a complex problem that is multi-causal in nature. While the guerrillas and organized crime do illegally recruit minors, becoming a child soldier is a strategy that children and adolescents employ to satisfy basic human needs.

The success of the peace talks and an end to Colombia's internal armed conflict will be a major contribution to reducing the forced recruitment of minors. Nonetheless, efforts should be focused also on transforming the root causes of violence in Colombia, such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, and lack of education—all factors that create the forced conditions the encourage the recruitment of minors for war.

In fact, failing to have a systemic understanding and approach to the overall factors and dynamics underpinning the child soldier reality will only perpetuate the pattern of forced recruitment of minors by criminal groups in Colombia.

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