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Children and armed conflict in Colombia

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions, is the fifth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Colombia and covers the period from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2021. In the report, the Secretary-General addresses the effect of cycles of violence on children in the country, highlighting trends and patterns with regard to the six grave violations committed against boys and girls, and provides information, where available, on perpetrators.

During the reporting period, the implementation of the Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace between the Government of Colombia and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP), which put an end to a five-decade-long conflict and led to a substantial decrease in the number of violations committed against children, continued to advance. Over the same period, however, violence in conflict-affected areas has surged, including as a result of clashes involving dissident FARC-EP groups, other armed groups and Colombian security forces, gravely affecting the protection of children.

In the report, the Secretary-General highlights the efforts made by the Government of Colombia to strengthen the framework to respond to, end and prevent grave violations against children, including through prevention strategies. The report also contains recommendations to all parties aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children and strengthening child protection in Colombia.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the fifth report of the Secretary-General on the situation of children affected by armed conflict in Colombia. Covering the period from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2021, it presents the trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children since the previous report ([S/2019/1017](#)) and the adoption by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of its conclusions on children and armed conflict in Colombia ([S/AC.51/2020/5](#)). In the report, the Secretary-General outlines progress and challenges in addressing those violations and provides specific recommendations to strengthen child protection in Colombia. Where possible, parties to conflict responsible for grave violations were identified. In that regard, in annex I to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/75/873–S/2021/437](#)), the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) remained listed for the recruitment and use of children as a party that had not put in place measures to improve the protection of children.

2. The information contained in the present report was documented and verified by the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting in Colombia, co-chaired by the Resident Coordinator and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Conflict and violence, access restrictions and fears on the part of communities with regard to reporting continued to pose serious challenges to the verification of grave violations against children. Starting from March 2020, restrictions related to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic further exacerbated those existing challenges. The information contained herein therefore does not represent the full extent of the grave violations committed in Colombia during the reporting period, and the actual number of violations is likely to be higher.

II. Overview of political and security developments

3. During the period under review, Colombia continued to make progress in the implementation of the Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace ([S/2017/272](#), annex II) between the Government of Colombia and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP), with 13,608 accredited¹ former FARC-EP combatants, including 3,139 women, participating in the reintegration programme as at 13 September 2021. The Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition created under the peace agreement, which includes the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition (Truth Commission) and the Unit for the Search of Persons Deemed as Missing in the context of and due to the conflict, continued to make progress to guarantee the rights of victims, including children. Overall, violence has decreased in the country since the signature of the peace agreement in 2016, which has also had a positive impact on the lives of children. However, serious challenges remained in the comprehensive implementation of the agreement, especially in terms of security for former combatants, social leaders, human rights defenders and conflict-affected communities.

4. The reporting period was characterized by the continuing reconfiguration of armed groups and expansion of their presence, in particular in rural and remote areas marked by poverty and a limited presence of State authority, including in former FARC-EP strongholds. That was compounded by disputes between armed groups seeking to increase their territorial, social and illicit economic control. The situation posed serious security and protection-related challenges for communities, including children, living in those areas. In addition, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic further increased the vulnerabilities of children to, and their risks of being affected by, grave violations.

¹ Accreditation refers to the issuance of a certificate by the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace to certify that an individual had been part of FARC-EP.

5. The concentration of violence in some regions, including Antioquia, Cauca, Caquetá, Chocó, Guaviare, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo and Valle del Cauca Departments, has been the product of limited State presence, difficulties in securing economic, social and cultural rights, illicit economies, the presence of armed groups and high levels of poverty. Those factors remained a threat to the reintegration process, transitional justice, the protection of civilians and peacebuilding. According to the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, 286 former FARC-EP combatants have been killed since the signing of the peace agreement, including young adults who had been children at the time of their association with the group. Female former combatants and children of former combatants faced additional risks of violence, including sexual violence and recruitment. Furthermore, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) verified the killing of two boys among numerous cases of killings of human rights defenders, as well as several child casualties during large-scale killings.

6. Dissident FARC-EP groups and other armed groups – such as ELN, the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), also known as Clan del Golfo; the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), also known as Los Pelusos; and Los Caparrapos; – have continued to clash among themselves and with Colombian security forces and to perpetrate violence against the population.

7. The increased presence of and social control by those armed groups in certain areas, such as Antioquia, Chocó, Nariño and Norte de Santander Departments, led to a surge in the number of people isolated as a result of the imposition of a state of confinement and restrictions of movement, which limited their access to basic services and goods. Armed groups controlled a wide range of aspects of the life of communities under their influence, through threats, restriction of movement, check points and forced illicit economic activities. Communities were pressured to sell land or to use it to cultivate illicit crops, and their ability to gain access to basic services and education was limited. Mobility restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the situation. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, at least 122,954 people, including an estimated 35,657 children, had been subject to confinements and movement restrictions during the reporting period, owing to the presence of armed groups, clashes between those groups or with Colombian armed forces and the presence of landmines. The number of people subject to confinements and movement restrictions increased from 15,273 in the second half of 2019 to 73,789 in 2020. At least 33,892 people were subject to confinement in the first half of 2021, a situation that affected mainly the communities in the Departments of Antioquia, Chocó, Nariño and Norte de Santander. Confinements and movement restrictions were imposed beyond those departments, however, extending to rural communities in Risaralda Department. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities were disproportionately affected by those conflict dynamics.

8. Forced displacement also remained of great concern, in particular for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, at least 84,552 people, including an estimated 25,241 children, were victims of mass displacements, which increased significantly over the reporting period. Most displacements took place in the Departments of Antioquia, Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Valle del Cauca and had been due mainly to clashes between armed groups or between armed groups and Colombian security forces and to violence and homicides committed against social leaders and human rights defenders. Population displacements also occurred in the rural communities in the Departments of Bolívar and Huila for the first time since 2012 and 2010, respectively.

9. Between July 2019 and June 2021, the Office of the Ombudsman of Colombia issued 94 early warnings to prevent possible human rights violations in conflict-affected regions.² In 82 of those warnings, the recruitment and use of children were among the

² See the dashboard on early warnings (in Spanish only) of the Office of the Ombudsman of Colombia, available at <https://alertastempranas.defensoria.gov.co/Alerta/Tablero>.

risks identified. The Departments of Antioquia, Cauca, Chocó, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Valle del Cauca were those with the most warnings.

10. Communities, civil society organizations and political actors continued to call upon the Government and ELN to resume peace talks. The Government insisted that talks were conditional upon ELN ceasing violent actions such as installing landmines, recruiting children or kidnapping. ELN maintained its position that any such request must be addressed at the negotiating table (S/2021/298). In March 2020, following the Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire, ELN announced a one-month unilateral ceasefire, starting on 1 April, to facilitate the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite calls by international and local actors, ELN decided not to extend the ceasefire beyond 30 April, stating that it had not been reciprocated by the Government (see S/2020/603). Exploratory dialogues to resume peace talks have been held, but without success to date.

11. Since April 2021, a national strike and widespread demonstrations have been carried out with the support of various civil society actors and with significant participation by young people. Demands were related to a wide range of issues, such as a tax reform proposed by the Government, which was subsequently withdrawn on 2 May, health care, education, basic income and the implementation of the peace agreement. Serious human rights violations were documented by the United Nations during the protests, in particular with respect to the right to life and personal integrity, including against youth and adolescents. Between 28 April and 16 June 2021, OHCHR registered allegations of 56 deaths (54 civilians and 2 police officers) in the context of the protests (S/2021/603). The death of a 17-year-old boy was also verified. In addition, OHCHR received information on four cases of sexual violence against three girls and one boy (two of them verified) and on cases of personal injuries against two girls and two boys.

12. According to public data received from the Colombian migration authorities, more than 1,729,000 refugees and migrants from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, including 404,000 children, were living in Colombia as at 31 December 2020.³ In August 2019, the Government of Colombia extended the right to nationality to all children at risk of statelessness born to Venezuelan parents between January 2015 and September 2021. As at 4 July 2021, 68,486 children had been granted nationality, according to the National Registry for Civil Status. In March 2021, the Government of Colombia adopted a temporary statute for the protection of Venezuelan migrants, which should lead to improved protection and greater access to basic social services for Venezuelan children in situations of risk and vulnerability, including in the context of armed conflict. It is estimated that some 400,000 children would benefit from the temporary protection statute.

13. In March 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Colombia, which resulted in nationwide movement restrictions and the halt of in-person learning in schools. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the vulnerabilities of children among both Colombian and Venezuelan migrants and refugees and their risks of being affected by grave violations. The closure of schools affected children in remote rural or poor communities in particular, where the lack of computers and/or Internet connection hampered distance learning. Children living in areas with a strong presence of armed groups were therefore further exposed to the risks of recruitment and use. The COVID-19-related socioeconomic crisis also had a negative impact on local economies and family income. The urgent and greater needs among families relying on day-to-day subsistence also increased the risks of the recruitment and use of children. The reduced presence of State authority and humanitarian actors due to movement restrictions related to the pandemic added further risks of grave violations. In some areas, armed groups took advantage of the pandemic to expand their territorial presence and control over communities.

³ Colombia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Colombia termina el 2020 con un 2.35% menos de migrantes venezolanos en su territorio", Migración Colombia, 29 January 2021.

III. Grave violations against children

14. Between 1 July 2019 and 30 June 2021, the country task force verified 383 grave violations committed against 330 children (217 boys, 109 girls and 4 of unknown sex), representing a decrease compared with the previous report, in which 850 grave violations were indicated as having been verified, but which covered a three-year period. Although the annual average of verified grave violations from both reports show a decrease, the number of grave violations remained steady during the current reporting period, with 101 violations verified in the second half of 2019, 208 in 2020 and 74 in the first half of 2021. Recruitment and use continued to be the most prevalent violation verified, affecting 220 children, followed by killing and maiming (118), rape and other forms of sexual violence (14) and abduction (10). In addition, the country task force verified 8 attacks on schools and hospitals and 13 incidents of denial of humanitarian access. A total of 30 children were victims of multiple violations, with recruitment and use resulting from or leading to other violations in most such cases.

15. Dissident FARC-EP groups were the main perpetrators, with 141 violations, which represents a change from the previous reporting period, during which ELN was the main perpetrator. Others included ELN (64), AGC (29) and Los Caparrapos (24), while unidentified armed groups were responsible for 104 violations. In addition, 19 grave violations were attributed to the Colombian armed forces and 2 to the Colombian police force. A majority of the violations occurred in the Department of Antioquia (90), followed by the Departments of Cauca (58), Nariño (43), Arauca (39), Caquetá (30), Chocó (28), Meta (22), Valle del Cauca, Putumayo and Norte de Santander (17 each), Guaviare (9), Tolima (4), Huila (3), Amazonas (2) and Bolívar, Casanare, Córdoba and Risaralda (1 each). This aligns with the breakdown set out for previous reporting period, during which verified cases were concentrated mostly in the same departments.

16. Children from indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities remained disproportionately affected by grave violations, with at least 50 violations against 43 indigenous and Afro-Colombian children verified. Those children lived in the areas that were most affected by conflict, which were generally also characterized by high levels of poverty, a limited presence of State authority, illicit economies and the presence of armed groups. They also faced great humanitarian needs, with their well-being severely affected by the lack of access to basic health, education, water and sanitation services, as well as by weather-related emergencies such as flooding.

17. At least eight Venezuelan children were verified as having been victims of grave violations during the reporting period. Venezuelan child migrants and refugees were especially vulnerable, as they transited through informal border crossings where armed groups were present in considerable strength. Furthermore, the presence of anti-personnel mines posed an additional hazard for the children. Other factors representing risks to their protection included trafficking, difficulties in accessing education and social services, poverty, child labour, their lack of legal status and their lack of opportunities.

18. The documentation and verification of information continued to be a challenge, owing to conditions of insecurity and fear on the part of communities and victims with regard to reporting violations. The COVID-19 pandemic further limited monitoring and reporting activities owing to movement restrictions, which added to pre-existing security constraints hindering access to specific territories. However, the country task force was able to continue most of its monitoring and verification of grave violation activities through established networks. In that context, victims and communities experienced additional difficulties in reporting information owing to a reduced field presence of government and humanitarian actors, a lack of or distrust in remote complaint mechanisms, weak access to communication networks and fears of reprisals by armed groups with increased territorial and social control. Lastly, the identification of armed groups responsible for grave violations remained complex, owing to their reorganization and fragmentation, which led to the inability to attribute a high number of violations to a specific armed group. Therefore, the data contained in the present report does not represent the full extent of grave violations committed in Colombia.

A. Recruitment and use

19. The country task force verified the recruitment and use of 220 children (146 boys, 70 girls and 4 of unknown sex), with 65 children affected during the second half of 2019, 116 in 2020 and 39 in the first half of 2021. The main perpetrators were dissident FARC-EP groups, responsible for the recruitment and use of 106 children, followed by ELN (48), unidentified armed groups (31), AGC (18) and Los Caparrapos (16). One girl was used by national armed forces as an informant.

20. The 220 children subjected to recruitment and use, including one Venezuelan girl, were between the ages of 12 and 17 years, and 56 of them were under 15 years of age. They were recruited and used in 15 departments, namely, Antioquia (58), Cauca (27), Arauca (26), Meta (21), Caquetá (17), Chocó (16), Nariño (13), Putumayo and Valle del Cauca (10 each), Norte de Santander (8), Guaviare (6), Tolima (4), Amazonas (2), Huila and Casanare (1 each).

21. The recruitment and use of children often led to other grave violations, principally killing and maiming, but also sexual violence and abduction. A total of 24 children were verified to have been killed or maimed while associated with armed groups. For instance, in March 2021, in Guaviare Department, a national armed forces military airstrike against a FARC-EP dissident group caused the death of several armed group members, including a 16-year-old girl associated with the group. In another case, a 14-year-old girl was sexually abused during her association with a dissident FARC-EP group in May 2020, in Caquetá Department.

22. Children were not only used in combat, but also assigned support roles, such as informants, porters and traffickers. Adolescent boys often received military training by armed groups to become combatants. Girls were also used in combat, in addition to as informants or for sexual purposes. For example, in August 2019, during confrontations between ELN and the national armed forces in Antioquia Department, a 15-year-old boy and two 14-year-old girls associated with ELN were injured in combat.

23. Children were recruited through various methods, such as abduction, threats made against their families and promises of protection, jobs, money or material benefit. Insecurity, poverty, lack of access to basic services, being a school dropout, domestic violence, lack of future opportunities or having a family member in an armed group were also drivers of child recruitment. For instance, in January 2021, in Antioquia Department, AGC recruited five indigenous children between the ages of 14 and 17 years, using promises of financial benefit. In Meta Department, in October 2020, members of a dissident FARC-EP group recruited three 14-year-old boys and threatened the community that they would recruit more children. In some cases, when communities did not comply with the code of conduct imposed by armed groups, they recruited children as a form of retaliation and in order to spread fear among the community. For instance, in August 2020, in Arauca, ELN recruited and used six boys, between the ages of 15 and 16 years, to forcibly work on a farm because the group considered that the children had been using drugs and were not behaving according to the armed group's standards. The boys were released after a month, following pressure by their families and community leaders. Some reports received from local communities also indicated that armed groups allegedly forced children to consume drugs in order to create an addiction and then use them in exchange for the substance. The number of complaints of child recruitment made by families to authorities remained low, owing to fears of reprisal, the lack of knowledge or trust in protection services, long distances or a lack of budget to travel to urban centres to seek support. Challenges in monitoring cases of child recruitment and use were more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

24. Civilian-military activities continued to be conducted during the period under review. In areas in which armed groups were present, social, development, cultural and sports activities were carried out by the national armed forces, putting children at risk of retaliation, solely as a result of interacting with the armed forces, and at risk of being used in intelligence activities. Pursuant to article 41 (29) of Law 1098 of 2006 on childhood and adolescence, the armed forces must abstain from using children in such activities.

B. Killing and maiming

25. The country task force verified that a total of 118 children (81 boys and 37 girls), some as young as two years of age, were killed (78) and maimed (40) during the reporting period, including 3 Venezuelans (2 boys and 1 girl). Of that total, 27 children were killed or maimed in the second half of 2019, 67 in 2020 and 24 in the first half of 2021. Most child casualties were attributed to unidentified armed groups (56), followed by dissident FARC-EP groups (26), national armed forces (13), ELN (10), AGC (8), Los Caparrapos (3) and the national police (2).

26. The Department of Cauca accounted for the highest number of verified cases of killing and maiming (28), followed by the Departments of Nariño (27), Antioquia (25), Caquetá (8), Arauca, Putumayo and Norte de Santander (6 each), Chocó (4), Guaviare, Valle del Cauca and Huila (2 each) and Bolívar and Córdoba (1 each).

27. Child casualties were the result of gunshot (76), anti-personnel landmines and unexploded ordnance (33), aerial attacks (8) and cruel or inhuman treatment (1). Children recruited and used by armed groups were killed and maimed during their association (24), which underscored the dangers inherent to their association with parties to the conflict. For example, in August 2019, seven children between the ages of 12 and 17 years associated with a FARC-EP dissident group were killed during the bombing by the national armed forces of the armed group's camp in Caquetá Department.

28. Children were also targeted directly for alleged associations with opposing armed groups. For example, in August 2020, in Nariño Department, elements of a dissident FARC-EP group shot and killed four children (one boy and three girls), between the ages of 15 and 17 years, who were accused of being collaborators for another armed group operating in the area.

29. Colombia is one of the countries most affected by the presence of explosive devices, which constituted a major cause of the killing and maiming of children during the reporting period. The country task force verified 33 child casualties caused by explosive devices, specifically, 19 anti-personnel landmines, 9 improvised explosive devices and 5 unexploded ordnances. In February 2020, in Nariño Department, four boys, between the ages of 12 and 17 years, were injured by the explosion of an improvised explosive device that they had found and played with. In March 2020, in Antioquia Department, a 12-year-old girl and a 17-year-old boy, both from an indigenous community, were injured by a landmine and died on their way to the hospital. Explosive devices also represented a risk for children recruited by armed groups. For instance, in May 2020, in Antioquia, a 16-year-old girl associated with ELN lost both hands when an anti-personnel mine that she was setting up exploded. Incidents took place in rural areas with a presence of armed groups clashing over social, territorial and illegal economic control. According to the information management system on activities relating to anti-personnel mines of the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, 46 children were victims of anti-personnel mines or unexploded ordnances, 6 of whom died.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

30. The country task force verified that 14 children (2 boys and 12 girls, including a Venezuelan girl) between the ages of 2 and 15 years, were victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence in the second half of 2019 (2), in 2020 (9) and in the first half of 2021 (3). The scale of sexual violence affecting children is believed to be underreported, as documenting such violations remains a challenge, owing to survivors' fear of reporting and of stigmatization, the lack of appropriate systems for care and response from local and national institutions and access constraints faced by the country task force for monitoring and reporting, as well as COVID-19-related restrictions.

31. Verified cases were attributed to unidentified armed groups (five), national armed forces (five), dissident FARC-EP groups (three) and ELN (one) and took place in the Departments of Valle del Cauca (five), Nariño (three), Norte de Santander (two), and Arauca, Caquetá, Risaralda and Guaviare (one each). For example, in June 2020, in Risaralda department, a 12-year-old indigenous girl was sexually abused by six national armed forces members. The soldiers were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to time in prison. The girl has been receiving assistance from the Colombian Family Welfare Institute.

32. In some instances, survivors were forced to leave their homes for fear of retaliation. For example, a 15-year-old girl was raped by an unidentified armed group. She and her family moved to another area after receiving threats by the armed group. A 12-year-old girl who had been sexually abused by a member of a dissident FARC-EP group fled her home with her family to prevent reprisals by the group.

33. The health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has increased vulnerabilities and risk factors for survivors of sexual violence in areas affected by the armed conflict, including in border areas. Movement restrictions led to increased difficulties for survivors, their families and networks to set up protection and prevention mechanisms and to gain access to referral pathways. The irregular situation of migrant and refugee women and girls put them at greater risk, given their difficulties in gaining access to protection services. The closure of the border between Colombia and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela from March 2020 to June 2021 increased the risk of sexual violence and trafficking in persons for Venezuelan migrants and refugees and Colombian returnees from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, who turned to using informal border crossings (*trochas*) controlled by armed groups.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

34. Eight incidents of attacks against schools (six) and hospitals (two), including protected persons in relation to schools and hospitals, were verified in 2020 (six) and in the first half of 2021 (two). This decreasing trend could be explained by the fact that schools were closed during most of the period under review, reducing not only the risks of attacks and of threats of attacks against schools and teachers, but also the avenues for reporting them. Verified incidents were attributed to unidentified armed groups (five) and AGC, ELN and dissident FARC-EP groups (one each) and occurred in the Departments of Chocó (four), Cauca (two), Antioquia and Caquetá (one each). Most attacks occurred in rural areas.

35. The six attacks on schools were attributed to unidentified armed groups (four) and AGC and dissident FARC-EP groups (one each). Most incidents (five) involved attacks on or threats directed at protected persons in relation to schools, which, in some cases, led to the killing of teachers and the suspension of classes. For instance, in January 2020, in Chocó Department, an attack occurred during clashes between two unidentified armed groups, leading to a school being damaged. As a result, the teachers of seven schools left the area, and classes were suspended over several days for at least 153 students. In March 2021, 10 teachers of one municipality in Antioquia Department were forced to flee after receiving threats from dissident FARC-EP groups because the teachers were not natives of the area. That incident affected the education of 1,500 students.

36. Both attacks on hospitals occurred in 2020 and were attributed to ELN (one) and an unidentified armed group (one), in Cauca and Caquetá Departments (one each). The incidents involved threats against medical personnel (one) and shots fired at an ambulance that was driving an injured patient (one).

Military use of schools

37. The use of schools for military purposes by armed forces and armed groups placed students at risk and interfered with their education and with support for their protection. The country task force verified the military use of four schools in the Departments of

Arauca (three) and Caquetá (one) by national armed forces (three) and a dissident FARC-EP group (one). The national armed forces were responsible for the military use of three schools for periods of up to approximately two days. For example, in July 2019, national armed forces soldiers camped in a school in Arauca department for two days. Members of a dissident FARC-EP group used a school in Caquetá Department in March 2020 for one day. The group imposed rules on students, such as a prohibition on boys' wearing earrings and having long hair, and encouraged them to join their ranks.

E. Abduction

38. The country task force verified the abduction of 10 children (7 boys and 3 girls) in the second half of 2019 (3), in 2020 (2) and in the first half of 2021 (5). Most violations were attributed to Los Caparrapos (five), followed by ELN (three) and dissident FARC-EP groups (two), and occurred in the Departments of Antioquia (five), Arauca (three) and Meta and Caquetá (one each).

39. The children were abducted for the purpose of recruitment and use (six), on suspicion of being spies (three) or for unknown reasons (one). For example, in January 2020, in Meta Department, a 13-year-old girl was abducted for recruitment purposes by a dissident FARC-EP group, while she was playing with other children in a community house. At the time of writing, the girl remained associated with the group. In February 2021, in Antioquia Department, five boys between the ages of 15 and 17 years had been travelling by road when armed members of Los Caparrapos forced them to join the group. Four of them were released in March 2021, but one boy remained unaccounted for at the time of writing.

40. Another reason behind the abduction of children was the suspicion or identification of children as being alleged informants for another party. For example, in December 2019, in Arauca Department, ELN released three children (one boy and two girls) whom they had previously abducted, alleging that they were spies of the national armed forces. The three children were handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

41. The country task force verified 13 incidents of denial of humanitarian access to children in the second half of 2019 (4), in 2020 (8) and in the first half of 2021 (1). Incidents were attributed to unidentified armed groups (seven), FARC-EP dissident groups (three), AGC (two) and ELN (one) and took place in the Departments of Chocó (four), Arauca (three), Caquetá (two) and Antioquia, Cauca, Norte de Santander and Putumayo (one each).

42. Restrictions of movement, clashes and the presence of armed groups affected the humanitarian access of children to basic services. In February 2020, in most areas of Arauca Department, ELN announced an armed strike for three days, imposing restrictions of movement on civilians and forcing the suspension of all activities, including education and public transportation and the closure of local markets, which resulted in local communities not having access to any means of subsistence. In July and August 2019, unidentified armed groups imposed a state of confinement on several communities in Chocó Department, restricting mobility and access to crops and affecting the food security of families and children living in the area. As a result of that incident, at least 1,222 children stopped attending classes. It was also reported that many members of armed groups did not know about the objectives and mission of humanitarian organizations and therefore did not respect their activities at the local level, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, and imposed additional blockades, checkpoints and access restrictions.

IV. Release of children and programmatic response

43. The Colombian Family Welfare Institute continued to implement a specialized programme for the protection and reintegration of children released from armed groups. According to the Institute, a total of 323 children (228 boys and 95 girls) who had previously been associated with residual organized armed groups (149), ELN (88), criminal gangs (80) and EPL (6) were enrolled in the programme during the period under review (87 children in the second half of 2019, 144 in 2020 and 92 in the first half of 2021).

44. Regarding the reintegration of children disengaged from FARC-EP in the framework of the peace agreement, in 2020, the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace recognized an additional 232 former FARC-EP combatants as having been children at the time of the laying down of weapons. Those young adults have the right to be included in the programme entitled “A different path of life” and to have access to reparations under Law 1448 of 2011 on victims and land restitution. The total number of children disengaged from FARC-EP, who by now have all reached the age of majority, stood at 406 (217 boys and 189 girls) at the time of writing. Security guarantees remained a concern for them. Since the signing of the agreement, four members of the programme have been killed, three of them during the reporting period. In addition, the payment of reparations to 30 members of the programme was still pending, and only 29 had received resources for income-generation projects. In May 2021, the technical working group on children of the National Reintegration Council was reactivated, in order to address challenges related to security and protection concerns, the implementation of the “A different path of life” programme, including psychosocial support, and the inclusion in the programme of the 232 individuals who were recognized as eligible in 2020.

V. Progress in addressing grave violations against children

45. During the reporting period, further steps were taken by the Government to prevent the recruitment and use of children. In November 2019, the Office of the Presidential Counsellor for Human Rights and International Issues, through the Intersectoral Commission for the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of, and Sexual Violence against, Children and Adolescents by Illegal Armed Groups and Organized Criminal Groups, issued a new policy to prevent the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence against them. In July 2020, the Commission approved a national plan of action to implement the policy, and, in August 2020, launched a strategy entitled “*Súmate por mí*” (Join Up for Me). The strategy is being implemented in 209 prioritized municipalities and is aimed at providing technical assistance to local authorities in order to foster protective environments for children at the local level, with the support of the United Nations multi-partner trust fund, UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration and the United States Agency for International Development. In January 2021, the Office of the Presidential Counsellor announced the start of a strategy for the local implementation of the aforementioned policy. A total of 23 local advisers were hired to ensure collaboration with local government institutions, both at departmental and municipal levels. In March 2021, the Government announced the creation of a special group and the launch of a “mega-operation” against the recruitment and use of children and young people. The Government released a list of the 30 most wanted child recruiters, announced the deployment of 2,200 police officers with the support of the national armed forces to areas where risks of recruitment and use are higher and the activation of 14 new recruitment prevention teams by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute. In June 2021, the Government announced the launch of a training plan for over 250,000 military and police personnel on the promotion of and respect for children’s rights.

46. In connection with the above-mentioned initiatives, in February 2021, the Office of the Ombudsman launched a national strategy that consists of highlighting the risks

of recruitment, providing support to victims and conducting research on child recruitment dynamics.

47. Mine risk education was strengthened in Colombia during the period under review, with the support of UNICEF and the Mine Action Service. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, 39 national and international organizations were accredited by the national mine action centre, through a strategy of quality management aimed at developing capacities and compliance with national mine risk education standards. A total of 14,632 mine risk education activities were conducted in high-risk areas, with the participation of 227,598 people, including 101,611 children. In November 2020, participants at the Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction agreed to grant the Government of Colombia its request for an extension, to 31 December 2025, for completing the destruction of anti-personnel mines in mined areas. Furthermore, according to Government sources, between July 2019 and June 2021, 2,964,019.21 m² of land were cleared, and 848 explosives devices destroyed, by nine civilian humanitarian demining organizations.

48. Regarding the prevention of and response to conflict-related sexual violence, the Victims' Unit implemented strategies for the care of survivors, including psychosocial care, and to facilitate the fulfilment of survivors' rights to truth, justice and reparation.⁴ In November 2020, the Government presented new guidelines to strengthen gender equality and the empowerment of women in the Colombian armed forces and the police, with a special emphasis on the prevention of sexual violence. Since February 2021, no statutory limitations have been applicable to the crime of sexual violence against children in Colombia. Investigations were also conducted with regard to cases of sexual violence attributed to national armed forces, leading to prosecution. For instance, six soldiers were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to 16 years in prison, while another soldier was sentenced to 8 years of imprisonment as an accessory to the fact, for the rape of a 12-year-old indigenous girl in Risaralda Department in June 2020. The Government reported that prosecutors on the case carried out more than 160 investigative activities that made it possible to establish the participation of the soldiers in the violation.

49. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace made progress on case No. 007, which was opened in March 2019 and which is focused on the recruitment and use of children and other related violations affecting children, such as homicide, torture or sexual violence, as a consequence of or in relation to their association with armed conflict. In September 2020, 15 former FARC-EP leaders appeared before the Special Jurisdiction. Some of them acknowledged the presence of children in the ranks of FARC-EP, recognized that sexual violence and forced abortions had been perpetrated and asked for forgiveness. Others emphasized that the group did not have a policy of recruiting children and claimed that it could not monitor the conduct of all units. In February 2021, the Special Jurisdiction published child-focused guidelines for organizations and victims on how to prepare and submit reports on violations against children in armed conflict. In February 2021, in a report submitted to the Special Jurisdiction, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute pointed to 3,878 cases of children recruited and used by the former FARC-EP. More than 18,000 individual cases of children recruited and used by the former FARC-EP were identified, and, as at 30 June 2021, 274 victims had been accredited for participation in the judicial proceedings of the case.

50. The Truth Commission promoted the participation of children through in-person and virtual work sessions and dialogues conducted in several areas of the country, aimed at listening to their voices and learning from their experiences and their perspectives on the impact of armed conflict, as well as their recommendations for non-repetition. Artistic activities were carried out and multimedia products built together with children, with the objectives of sharing their experiences and their opinions about peace and

⁴ The Victims' Unit was created in January 2012, following the passing of Law 1448 of 2011 on victims and land restitution, in which measures for the provision of attention, assistance and reparation to the victims of the internal armed conflict are set out.

armed conflict. In November 2019, the Commission organized a national event for truth, where child victims, and adults who had been victims during childhood, publicly shared their testimonies about the impact of armed conflict on their lives. During the event, members of the former FARC-EP, armed forces and paramilitary groups publicly recognized their responsibilities and offered apologies. Child-friendly protocols and tools were also developed with the support of UNICEF to collect children's testimonies on grave violations through individual interviews and focus groups. To date, the Commission has documented the stories of more than 42,000 victims of armed conflict, over 6,700 of whom had been affected during childhood. The final report of the Commission, due in June 2022, will include a dedicated chapter on children, in which it will highlight the grave violations and disproportionate impact of armed conflict on children, as well as specific recommendations for non-repetition.

51. In December 2020, the national House of Representatives and the Senate approved the extension of the Victims and Land Restitution Act until 2031, in order to allow for the provision of reparations to the remaining 7 million victims of the armed conflict who had not yet received any. According to the Victims' Unit, more than 2.4 million registered victims of the armed conflict are children who were affected by different types of violations, such as forced displacement, abduction, killing, recruitment and use and sexual violence.

52. The country task force continued to engage in dialogue and advocate with strategic partners in Government, civil society and the international community with regard to the prevention of and response to grave violations against children. Meetings between the country task force and the Government were held to discuss the situation of children affected by the armed conflict and to find ways to foster their protection. In October 2020, the country task force and the Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia, co-chaired by Canada and Sweden, held a dialogue with members of local institutions and civil society in Putumayo Department on the risks of recruitment and use of children due to the closure of schools, the social control of armed groups, the presence of illicit economies and the limited presence of State authority in rural areas. In November 2020, the country task force and the Embassy of Belgium jointly organized a virtual event to foster dialogue and identify ways to implement the conclusions on children and armed conflict in Colombia adopted in July 2020 by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. More than 80 high- and technical-level representatives of the Government, the international community, civil society and United Nations agencies participated in the event. They highlighted the need to strengthen the financial and technical capacities of local authorities to implement the national policy and plan of action to prevent recruitment and use of children and the need to strengthen local child-friendly complaints and response mechanisms, among other issues. The country task force also continued to strengthen the monitoring and reporting capacities of its members and to extend the network of local monitors through capacity-building sessions.

VI. Observations and recommendations

53. **I reiterate my call upon all parties to abide by their respective obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law and to end and prevent all grave violations against children. I remain concerned about the high number of cases of the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, in particular by dissident FARC-EP groups and ELN. I urge all armed groups to adopt and implement commitments to end this grave violation and release all children present in their ranks immediately. I recall that children associated or formerly associated with armed groups and forces should be treated primarily as victims.**

54. **I welcome the progress that the Government of Colombia has made in preventing and responding to grave violations against children. I commend the advances made in the implementation of the "Súmate por mí" strategy to foster protective environments for children at the local level and the start of a strategy to**

implement, at the local level, the policy of the Office of the Presidential Counsellor for Human Rights to prevent the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence against children. I encourage the Government to continue to prioritize these prevention programmes and to ensure their sustainability through an allocated budget and designated institutions, at both the national and local levels, to ensure their coordination and implementation, in order to prevent new cases of the recruitment and use of children. I encourage the strengthening of existing institutions and programmes that prevent child recruitment, in particular in vulnerable areas of the country where the presence of State authority is limited. I also encourage the Government to strengthen the Intersectoral Commission for Rapid Response to Early Warnings, so as to ensure that alerts issued by the Office of the Ombudsman are addressed, in particular in relation to threats of violence against children, the recruitment and use of children and other grave violations affecting children. I further call on the Government to prevent the organization of civilian-military activities with children.

55. I urge the Government of Colombia to continue to pursue its efforts aimed at guaranteeing the effective reintegration of young adults who left the ranks of the FARC-EP as children at the time of the laying down of weapons and are participating in the programme “A different path of life”, including those recognized in 2020, by facilitating their access to income-generating projects, security guarantees, reparations and psychological support, while taking into consideration age, gender and ethnicity in all programmes.

56. I reiterate my call on all parties to immediately cease the killing and maiming of children and to take all necessary measures to protect children during military operations, in line with the principle of precaution, and to avoid confrontations in areas where civilians and children are present. I also reiterate my call on armed groups to end, immediately and definitively, the use of indiscriminate explosive devices that cause death or injury to children. Furthermore, I strongly encourage the Government to continue, and to scale up, its demining and mine risk education activities across the country.

57. Sexual violence against children remains a great concern in Colombia and I reiterate my call upon all parties to the conflict to end this violation immediately. I welcome the advances made by the Government’s Victims’ Unit in implementing strategies for the care of survivors. I urge the Government to prioritize prevention activities and to ensure that adequate programmes are available and accessible to all survivors. I further appeal to the authorities to investigate, prosecute and sanction anyone found responsible for sexual violence against children, as well as all other grave violations against children. I welcome in this regard the accountability measures taken with regard to cases of sexual violence against children attributed to elements of the national armed forces.

58. Armed groups must both cease and prevent attacks on schools and hospitals, and I urge all parties to the conflict to prevent the military use of such facilities. I further call on the Government of Colombia to swiftly endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration.

59. I commend the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition for its efforts to ensure child participation in the transitional justice processes and I welcome the advances made in terms of accountability, with the progress made by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace in case No. 007, which is focused on the recruitment and use of children and other related violations affecting children as a consequence or in relation to their association with the armed conflict. I also welcome the progress made by the Truth Commission and its special focus on children. In that regard, I encourage the Government to continue to support transitional justice institutions, through financial and technical assistance, in order to guarantee that the rights of children to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition are fulfilled.

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

61. **I commend the parties for their continued commitment to the implementation of the peace agreement and urge the Government to continue to pursue the vital task of ensuring its comprehensive implementation in rural and remote areas so as to ensure sustainable peace, reconciliation and the non-repetition of grave violations against children.**
