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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights, including
the right to development**

Visit to Colombia

**Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of
violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples
to self-determination*****

* The present report was submitted to conference services for processing after the deadline for technical reasons beyond the control of the submitting office.

** The summary of the report is being circulated in all official languages. The report itself, which is annexed to the summary, is being circulated in the language of submission and Spanish only.

Annex

Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination on its visit to Colombia

I. Introduction

1. The Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination (the Working Group) visited Colombia from 16 to 27 March 2026, at the invitation of the Government. The delegation included Michelle Small (Chair-Rapporteur) and Joana de Deus Pereira, accompanied by staff of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).
2. Pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 2005/2 and Human Rights Council resolution 60/5, the Working Group is mandated to study and identify sources, causes, manifestations and trends with regard to mercenaries and mercenary related activities, and their impact on human rights, particularly on the right to self-determination. It is mandated to monitor the activities of private military and security companies and their effects on human rights.
3. The delegation thanks the Government of Colombia for its cooperation, openness and commitment to ensuring the visit was a success. It thanks the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and reiterates its sincere condolences for the passing of Ambassador Gustavo Gallón Giraldo who played an important role in the support received for this visit.
4. The delegation visited Bogotá, Cali and Medellín. It met with State representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including its Consular Services; Ministry of Defence, (including representatives of the military and police), Superintendency of Private Security and Surveillance; Ministry of the Interior, including the Directorate for Indigenous Authorities; National Protection Unit; and the Ministry of Justice. It met with the Office of the Attorney General of the Nation; the Special Jurisdiction for Peace; Inspector General's Office; Ombudsman's Office; Members of Congress and representatives of the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation (ARN;), Association of Retired Officers of the Military Forces (ACORE), and local authorities in Cali and Medellín.
5. Meetings were held with representatives of the United Nations; civil society organizations, private security companies, veterans' associations, academics, and individuals who had travelled abroad to participate in armed conflict and relatives of Colombians who were recruited into armed conflict situations, including active combat roles.
6. The Working Group particularly thanks the OHCHR country office for its excellent support and assistance in the preparation and conduct of the visit. It sincerely thanks all the interlocutors who made time to meet with the delegation and provide information to the delegation.

II. Context

7. The visit to Colombia aimed to study and identify manifestations, challenges and emerging trends regarding mercenaries and mercenary-related actors, the role of private security companies¹ and the impact of these actors on human rights including the right to self-determination.

¹ Colombian law does not permit the operation of private military companies in the country. It governs private security and surveillance companies.

8. The visit was prompted by the phenomenon of Colombians travelling abroad, to partake in private military and security roles, including in conflict situations, in various countries around the world.

9. Colombia's history of armed conflict lasted for more than five decades, beginning in 1964 until the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement. The conflict engaged thousands of Colombians in armed force and guerrilla groups, providing for extensive training and operational experience in combat and security operations. Plan Colombia (1999 – 2015), a bilateral security initiative with the United States contributed to the professionalisation and expansion of Colombia's armed forces. Consequently, generations of Colombians within the State security forces, and within non-State armed groups, acquired highly sought after military and security-related skills and competencies, including in areas such as counter-insurgency operations, intelligence-gathering, logistics, the handling of weapons and explosives, *inter alia*.

10. Self-defence units emerged out of the armed conflict particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. These units, permitted under Colombian law, formed to protect communities from armed actors and guerilla groups. Over time, some of these units evolved into paramilitary organizations. Serious challenges arose alongside the armed conflict with armed actors simultaneously engaging locally in drug trafficking, illegal mining, extortion, urban criminal networks and armed violence against local populations. This led to scores of human rights abuses and mercenary-related activities. The evolving security architecture post-2016 thus fundamentally altered the dynamics of security in Colombia.

11. The Colombian military has long been one of the country's largest public employers. Military service was compulsory for men under the country's constitutional and legal framework until 2024². Recent reforms have maintained compulsory service while offering alternatives, including a "Social Service for Peace" program that allows eligible young people to fulfil their civic obligations through community and peacebuilding activities rather than military service. Colombia has one of the largest military forces in Latin America.³ There are approximately 440,000 active uniformed military and police personnel. Reportedly, the Ministry of Defense has a budget of approximately \$15.5 billion, which is around 11.7% of the total Colombian budget for 2025.

High-demand for security and military labour

12. Due to a surplus in highly-skilled military and security labour coupled with socio-economic vulnerabilities, Colombia serves as a source of continuous military labour into the global security market. Many Colombians have been recruited abroad to undertake legitimate security roles, however there are numerous cases of those recruited as mercenaries or into mercenary-related activities within the region and into armed conflicts abroad.

Definition and scope

13. It should be clarified from the outset that the Working Group understands the definitional challenge of qualifying a person as a mercenary. A mercenary is defined in international law⁴ and the cumulative criteria in the 1989 Convention on Mercenaries⁵ makes

² Law 1861 (2017) was the basis for compulsory military service. Article 216 of the Constitution establishes the obligation of Colombians to participate in national defense when required by law. Law 2384 (2024) amended Law 1861(2017), expanding benefits and exemptions for conscripts and modifying certain aspects of the service regime.

³ Approximately 290,000 active-duty military personnel in 2023, including around 225,000 army personnel.

⁴ Article 47, Additional Protocol I, Geneva Conventions (1977) and further elaborated in the 1989 UN International Convention on mercenaries.

⁵ A mercenary is a person who is: specially recruited locally or abroad to fight in an armed conflict; motivated essentially by private gain; promised compensation substantially higher than that paid to comparable members of the armed forces; neither a national nor a resident of territory controlled by a

it difficult to categorise a person as mercenary, particularly given the covert settings in which they operate. However, the Working Group's mandate looks into the activities of mercenaries and *mercenary-related actors*, the latter being a broader term that identifies those whose activities are akin to mercenaries, yet may fall short of fulfilling the definition in international law.

14. These actors often operate in various situations, including armed conflicts and are often primarily (though not exclusively) motivated by financial or economic gain. Mercenary-related actors are not defined in international law hence the Working Group assesses the profiles of these actors, via their motivations, their activities and their impact on human rights, particularly the right of peoples to self-determination.⁶

III. Legal frameworks

15. Colombia's legal framework amply provides for constitutional and human rights protection. Article 93 of the 1991 Constitution stipulates that international human rights treaties ratified by Colombia form part of the *Bloque de Constitucionalidad*, granting them constitutional status and direct applicability in domestic law. As such, certain international human rights treaties have constitutional or quasi-constitutional status and are used by Colombian courts, including the Constitutional Court, to interpret and enforce fundamental rights. Colombia has ratified the majority of international human rights treaties,⁷ including Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, whose Article 47 defines mercenaries and excludes them from combatant and prisoner-of-war status. It is a signatory to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Positive efforts to regulate mercenarism

16. The delegation was pleased that during its visit, President Petro enacted Law 2569 to ratify the 1989 International Convention on mercenaries. The law aims to incorporate the Convention into the domestic legal system. In August 2025, the Working Group had the unique privilege to make a submission to Congress to encourage the passage of this law. The implementation of this initiative demonstrates Colombia's willingness and openness to addressing the challenges of mercenarism.

17. Additional positive news were received that a new draft law (539/26) was introduced in Congress aimed at amending the Penal Code to comply with international obligations that would arise from acceding to the 1989 Convention on mercenaries. This bill passed its first reading and is now pending discussion in the new Parliamentary term, which began in August 2026. The current legal text potentially provides stronger safeguards including in supporting victims of predatory or illicit recruitment, providing urgent consular and protection measures, providing clearer distinctions between participation as a mercenary or being a victim of illicit recruitment; and the exclusion of humanitarian or other lawful activities.

18. The delegation notes this to be among the critical positive initiatives undertaken by the Colombian authorities to address the issues concerning mercenarism. It hopes to continue providing technical assistance and support to the relevant authorities with regard to the new law and subsequent efforts to tackle mercenarism.

Decree on Private Surveillance and Security

19. Colombia's principal regulation on private security activities is Decree 356 of 1994. This law governs licensing, training, arms use, and oversight of private security providers

party to the conflict; not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict; has not been sent by a non-party State on official duty as a member of its armed force.

⁶ Definitions and Legal implications under Key Documents at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-mercenaries>.

⁷ Signatory to ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, CAT, CRC, CRPD, CED, ICRMW and CERD.

through the Superintendence of Surveillance and Private Security (SVSP)⁸ which is under the Ministry of Defence. The private security sector is economically significant, employing a large workforce. Given the ongoing challenges to security in the country, Colombia is among the highest users/employers of private security companies. The main clientele for PSCs is the Colombian Government. While it is commendable to have a specific decree regulating the PSC sector, there are concerns that the decree is outdated as the framework remains largely unchanged since the 1990s. Questions have emerged regarding the need for stronger independent oversight mechanisms, particularly given the SVSP's institutional integration under the Ministry of Defence.

Trafficking

20. Colombia is a State Party to the Palermo Protocol.⁹ It has a comprehensive legal framework to combat trafficking in persons, principally through Law 985 of 2005, which criminalizes trafficking, defines forms of exploitation in line with international standards, and establishes measures for the prevention of trafficking and the protection, assistance, and support of victims. Under Article 188A of Colombia's Penal Code Law 599 (2000), as amended by Law 985 (2005), trafficking in persons is defined as any person who recruits, transports, transfers, harbours or receives a person, within the national territory or abroad, for purposes of exploitation, commits the offence of trafficking in persons. The Penal Code establishes strict penalties for human traffickers (13 to 23 years in prison) and mandated the creation of a national strategy for victim protection, assistance, and human rights enforcement. The Working Group welcomed the enactment of Act 2608 of 27 July 2026, which covers the forced recruitment of persons over the age of 18 in the context of armed conflict as one of the forms of exploitation constituting the crime of human trafficking.

Regional framework

21. Colombia is party to the American Convention on Human Rights and is subject to the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The Convention requires States to prevent, investigate, and remedy human rights violations committed by both State and non-State actors.

Relevant soft-law instruments

22. The Montreux Document and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers (ICOCA), establish standards and good practices for the regulation and oversight of private military and security companies. Colombia is yet to sign the Montreux Document and a handful of private security companies are members of ICOCA. The costs of membership was referred to as a reason for the low membership in ICOCA.

23. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) is a useful framework for addressing the role of private security companies, recruiters, intermediaries and other corporate actors involved in mercenary-related activities. It affirms the State's duty to protect against human rights abuses by business enterprises and the corporate responsibility to respect human rights and the right of victims to access effective remedies.

⁸ Superintendencia de Vigilancia Seguridad Privada, at <https://www.supervigilancia.gov.co/en>, 1 April 2026.

⁹ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.

IV. Institutional framework

National human rights institutions

24. Colombia has a robust institutional framework for human rights protection and accountability. The Ombudsman's Office plays a central role in monitoring and reporting human rights violations, including those linked to armed groups and private security actors. The Attorney General's Office is responsible for investigating and prosecuting crimes such as trafficking, illicit recruitment, organized crime, and other offences that may intersect with mercenary-related activities. In the transitional justice sphere, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), established under the 2016 Peace Agreement, investigates and adjudicates serious human rights and humanitarian law violations committed during the armed conflict, contributing to truth, justice, and accountability. The JEP does not have a specifically look into the activities of PSCs and mercenarism. However, it is within its mandate to examine the involvement of civilian third parties or State agents who are not members of the security forces and who have contributed to the commission or committed human rights violations or crimes related to armed conflict, provided these persons voluntarily submit to the JEP's jurisdiction. Civilian third parties and private actors have been addressed in Case 08 of the JEP.

Inter-agency Working Group on Mercenary Issues

25. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁰ established an interim inter-agency working group on mercenary issues in 2025. The agency includes representatives from the Ministry of Defence; Ministry of Justice and Law; Ministry of Labour; Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Health and Social Protection; Ombudsman's Office; Office of the Attorney General; Superintendence of Private Surveillance and Security and the Commission for the Search of Missing Persons.

26. The agency undertakes various measures including monitoring Colombian nationals involved in or affected by mercenary-related activities; updating information on those linked to mercenary activities; providing assistance to affected individuals and their families; strengthening coordination with embassies and consulates abroad and developing preventive measures aimed at reducing recruitment into mercenary or mercenary related activities.

27. A priority for this agency is to improve data collection; assess social and economic factors affecting former members of the armed forces and police; carry out public awareness and deterrence campaigns and preventive outreach to military and police personnel considered at higher risk of recruitment into mercenarism. At the policy level, the agency will assist in developing the new law on mercenarism.

28. Given the multi-faceted dimensions of mercenarism and related activities, inclusive collaboration is imperative among relevant stakeholders including UN entities in Colombia such as the OHCHR, IOM, UNHCR and UNDP (inter alia), ICRC and human rights non-governmental organizations and families of victims, representatives of private security companies and veteran's associations.

Anti-Trafficking Committee

29. The Ministry of Interior (MoI) leads Colombia's anti-trafficking policy and chairs the National Committee to Combat Trafficking in Persons, comprising 17 institutions, including the National Police, Prosecutor's Office, Ombudsman's Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ICBF, and Migration Colombia. The MoI serves as the technical secretariat and coordinates a nationwide network of 32 departmental entities and approximately 550 local committees.

¹⁰ Directorate of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law; Directorate Migration, Consular Affairs and Citizen Services.

V. Challenges

Ongoing travel of Colombians to armed conflict situations

30. The ongoing travel of nationals to participate in armed conflict or security-crises abroad has persisted signaling the relentless demand in the transnational market for military labour and skills. In the last 11 years, there has been a surge in the global demand for Colombian personnel in military and security roles. The evolving geopolitical tensions and ongoing armed conflicts worldwide, are likely to increase demand for experienced security and military skills, creating expanding market opportunities for Colombians to seek employment abroad in PMSC and mercenary-related roles.

31. The delegation was informed that there could be over 10,000 Colombians,¹¹ mostly comprised of retired state military personnel and former guerrilla combatants, who were recruited into logistical or security-related roles, some of whom are recruited into mercenary-like activities in conflict zones. Due to a lack of precise data, it is difficult to ascertain who among these individuals are voluntary enlisters, contractors engaged in legitimate work, or mercenaries or mercenary -related actors. The lack of data means that the number of Colombians abroad in armed conflict situations is likely under-reported.

Profile and motivational factors

32. Many of those who travel abroad to join conflict situations are former military or veterans¹² or were part of armed groups or paramilitary structures. However, some without military backgrounds but travel in search of better economic opportunities abroad. There is no specific profile that is uniform across those who travel, though many appear to have a military or police background, or have performed military service. There are increasingly women who are traveling abroad into roles associated with military and security support and logistical functions, such as the assembling of drones. The majority of travellers, particularly those engaging in mercenary-related activities, are men recruited from across Colombia including from Antioquia, Bogotá, Bolivar, Nariño, Santander and Valle del Cauca, and Nariño. Recruitment likely happens more in remote areas where it is difficult to observe trends and where socio-economic vulnerabilities are acute due to lack of economic opportunities. *Recruitees* are from different ethnic groups, including from indigenous communities. Men of various ages have been recruited.

33. Ongoing travel is prompted by many factors, including seeking adventure, masculinity being linked to military strength, nostalgia for military service or a desire to support a particular cause. The main motivation is economic or financial gain. Promises of European residency and citizenship are key motivations.. The early retirement of many Colombian military personnel, combined with limited reintegration opportunities to civilian life, comparatively low domestic wages, pensions and retirement benefits, creates strong incentives to seek employment abroad. A Colombian who joins the military at age 18 is eligible to retire after 20 years, meaning at 38 years of age, he is still in high demand for his skills and his relatively young age means he can still pursue further employment in combat zones, Compounding fiscal obligations in this age range include mortgages, car payments, childcare and healthcare, which in the absence of inflation pegged income, creates pressures to find alternative sources of employment and income.

34. Pensions for military in the senior ranks may be sufficient, but for those in lower ranks with less benefits, socio-economic pressures at home, combined with the lure of lucrative contracts abroad, make individuals easy targets for recruitment. Locally, the minimum wage is around 2 million COP (around 500 USD) per month. Private security operations, including

¹¹ This estimate is based on unofficial source information and is inclusive of those traveling to participate in legitimate security-related roles abroad. Reportedly, former President Petros mentioned an estimate of 7000 Colombians in Ukraine alone.

¹² Former or retired members of the armed forces/military.

those recruiting for mercenary-related roles can range from 2000 to 6000 USD per month, some higher depending on the nature of the functions.

Global presence and destination countries

35. Recruitment networks, operating through private security companies, intermediaries, former military contacts, and social media platforms, regularly target veterans and those with military training service with promises of high salaries and security-related work in regions such as the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Africa. While many travel to engage in non-illicit functions (such as guarding, transport, logistics), many are recruited into criminal activities, and military and security training and functions in conflict situations including in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Mexico, Libya, Russian Federation, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, Ukraine and Yemen. Some are present in the Latin American region, providing their skills in security-related work, but also in transnational criminal networks. Colombians are actively working in security-functions in Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru. In Venezuela, private security contractor and mercenary-related actors were accused of attempting to overthrow the previous government of President Maduro. In Ecuador, six Colombians were detained in 2023 in connection to the assassination of a presidential candidate.

36. In 2021, the Working Group sent a communication¹³ to the Government of Haiti regarding the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse. Twenty-six former Colombian soldiers were implicated in the assassination, recruited through a Miami-based security company. Haitian authorities arrested 18 Colombians, while others were killed during the operation. The case exposed a sophisticated transnational recruitment network involving private companies and foreign intermediaries. Colombia cooperated with the Haitian authorities through information-sharing and consular assistance while maintaining that those involved acted independently and not on behalf of the Colombian State. The delegation was provided with an update on this case from various stakeholders noting that judicial proceedings in Haiti continue to face delays. The U.S. courts have prosecuted several individuals linked to the assassination, resulting in convictions and life sentences, including of Mario Antonio Palacios and Germán Alejandro Rivera García.

37. Since the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, Colombian fighters were identified on both sides of the conflict. Former Colombian soldiers were reportedly offered salaries of approximately 12 million COP per month (US\$3,740.00) and promised legitimate security contracts (some higher offers were for the Russian Federation). Some military units are said to be composed mainly of Colombians and others from Latin America. Travel to these two countries remains among the principal concerns of the government in terms of ensuring that travel is on a volunteer basis which is not prohibited under Colombian or international law.

38. Travel to destination countries in Europe are through transit points including Amsterdam, Bucharest, Frankfurt, Istanbul, Madrid, Panama, Paris and Warsaw. Some go through Gulf countries, including the UAE to reach Africa. As visas are not required in many countries, Colombians can travel abroad under the guise of tourism, making it difficult to detect they are traveling to join an armed conflict abroad. There is currently no mechanism to effectively monitor or track the movements of Colombians abroad other than conventional travel and border methods tracking systems used for all passengers.

39. Private military and security companies and individual recruiters have been hiring Colombians into conflict zones around the world. Sudan was consistently raised as a country of concern. The Working Group expressed its concern about the recruitment of Colombians¹⁴ into a battalion known as Desert Wolves, alongside the Rapid Support Forces. The recruitment was reportedly done through Global Security Services Group (GSSG) chaired by an Emirati, and the International Services Agency co-founded by a former Colombian colonel, both based in the UAE. More than 300 former Colombian soldiers have reportedly

¹³ HTI 4/2021.

¹⁴ AL SDN 1/2026; ARE 1/2026; OTH 6/2026 at

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=30739>.

been recruited to support the RSF. Functions of these recruits include frontline combat operations; siege and attack missions; drone and artillery operations; training fighters, including child soldiers, in the use of missile systems, anti-air missile systems, communication systems, and other weaponry; preparing of military training materials and coordinating propaganda activities.

40. The Sudan conflict has been marked by serious allegations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, recruitment of children, looting, attacks on civilians, and sexual and gender-based violence. Sudan is one of the most visible theatres involving Colombian mercenaries who reportedly trained children in the conflict. Reports of a crashed aircraft in 2025 allegedly transporting Colombian fighters and weapons highlighted the growing integration of Colombian personnel into transnational security and military networks connected to regional geopolitical and economic interests. Reportedly, the aircraft crash resulted in the death of more than 40 Colombians who were on board with weapons and military equipment. Colombians were said to be instrumental in the siege of El Fasher.

41. Recruitment of Colombians into Middle Eastern security operations began around 2014, when private companies in Gulf countries started hiring ex-Colombian military personnel in large numbers. Colombian ex-soldiers were reported among foreign fighters recruited through Gulf-based security companies to support military operations in Libya, Somalia and Yemen. Some were recruited as early as 2014 to fill roles within the Emirati armed forces, which later led to deployment to conflict zones in Syria and Yemen under contract with private firms and not part of the armed forces. The roles of Colombians have ranged from security and protection services to logistics and direct combat. Some were reportedly recruited into Saudi Arabia for logistical support roles, guarding of premises and security guard work, yet some ended up in the conflict in Yemen.

Other Regions

42. Colombians are present in Ecuador, Peru, Haiti, Mexico, Brazil and other neighbouring countries, providing both legitimate security services and serving as mercenaries and undertaking illicit mercenary-related activities.

43. The Colombian authorities emphasized that participation in foreign conflicts is often voluntary, for example in the Ukraine and Russian Federation, making it difficult to prevent recruitment or restrict travel under existing legal frameworks. Individuals recruited by private military or security-related entities are considered to be acting independently, and for employment purposes. They note that compensation disputes have largely been seen as civil or labour matters rather than issues for government intervention.

VI. Recruitment

44. Recruitment of Colombians abroad is increasingly facilitated through social media, social or professional military networks, and informal contacts, particularly targeting former military personnel and former members of non-state armed groups. Recruitment is increasingly digital, decentralized, and transnational, relying heavily on platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook and Telegram, and peer-to-peer networks among former military personnel and informal intermediaries and brokers. 'In-app' channels on WhatsApp and Telegram provide public platforms for recruitment beyond professional and peer networks to ordinary citizens. Gaming platforms and communities are being used for recruitment, making this practice increasingly sophisticated and difficult to track.¹⁵

45. Recruitment by word of mouth were via friends or former colleagues, both in country and abroad. Intermediaries include private security companies and individuals, including retired generals, majors, and colonels. In Bogota, specific locations of recruitment are known.

¹⁵ Ministry of Information and Communication Technology does not have the legal authority to monitor social media channels used to recruit Colombians abroad. It has direct channels for reporting content that violates usage policies on these platforms.

A particular hotel venue was said to be a popular recruitment site used by a former military personnel to run recruitment campaigns.

46. Transnational corporate networks involving Colombian nationals are responsible for recruitment. Proxy entities are used to organize contracts and payments to obscure financial trails, and offshore registration to evade accountability, often with the support of third countries. In the case of Sudan, a private company registered in Panama (Global Staffing¹⁶) and used to channel payments to clients/recruits. The growing pattern of Colombian military expertise being privatised and commercialised through transnational networks operates in a legal grey zone, with little oversight or accountability. Due to recruiters frequently operating through private security companies and intermediaries, it can be difficult to distinguish between legitimate security contracts and deployments.

47. Civilians have been recruited with the intention of joining armed conflict. The profiling of potential recruits involved knowing their socio-economic situations. Exploitation of economic vulnerabilities was thus a method of targeting potential recruits. Many families of Colombians recruited abroad provided details of their low-economic background, some living below minimum wage, or with no income, while grappling with high debt and extreme pressure to earn a living. Some of the families were from remote parts of the country, from indigenous communities, or were former members of paramilitary entities or armed groups.

48. There is a wide range profiles of recruits, indicating that the demand and drive for recruitment is at a level where the need for human-power is the determinant factor, rather than just purely skills and military prowess. Recruiters often used fake profiles on social media platforms. Many recruiters are using different pseudonyms through various platforms making recruitment easy and far-reaching. Rogue private security companies, some unregistered or operating irregularly, are also channels of recruitment.

49. The existing legislative gap at the time of the visit, and the difficulty in monitoring the free movement of travellers; combined with the inability to hold rogue recruitment agents, companies, individuals and intermediaries to account, has meant that recruitment is largely carried out without effective sanction or oversight, making it ultimately difficult to eliminate.

Predatory recruitment and human trafficking elements

50. The international recruitment of Colombians reflects the intersection of economic vulnerability, global demand for military expertise, and weak regulation of transnational recruitment networks. Predatory recruitment¹⁷ involves the recruitment of individuals in a manner that takes advantage of their socioeconomic situation, vulnerabilities, or marginalized status, often involving forms of exploitation. This is akin to human trafficking which is defined by the Palermo Protocol as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.¹⁸

51. Across various countries and other regions, recurring patterns of deceptive recruitment practices, and significant human rights risks once deployed were consistently raised as major concerns.

52. Reportedly, many cases of Colombians abroad involve trafficking elements, including deception and fraud; confiscation of passports; restriction of movement; forced labour; inability to terminate contracts; coercion, or threats. Recruitment disproportionately affects former military personnel; young men (ages 18–45) and individuals from low-income backgrounds. Recruitment hotspots are found throughout the country. Cauca was noted as a particular hot-spot with high numbers of recruitment. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian

¹⁶ Now Talent Bridge.

¹⁷ A/HRC/54/29.

¹⁸ Article 3(a), Palermo Protocol.

communities face heightened vulnerability due to limited State presence, poverty and marginalization and ongoing armed violence in their territories. Upon arrival abroad, recruits are frequently stripped of contract protections and placed directly into frontline combat configurations within active war zones. Many are subjected to verbal, physical and racial abuse by commanders.

53. Fraudulent job offers, including promises of jobs in security, logistics, engineering, mechanics and or technical roles, in addition to high salaries (USD 2,000–10,000/month) and short-term contracts lure many individuals. Contracts are often in foreign languages, with no translation provided, and recruits are misled about the nature of their work and are deployed directly onto the frontline or combat zones in conflicts abroad, some after only brief training periods. Survivors describe high casualty rates, non-payment of promised salaries, coercive treatment, and obstacles to leaving military units.

54. Many family members have difficulty obtaining information about the status of their relatives abroad. The Government faced challenges obtaining information through diplomatic channels with concerned countries where Colombians were victims of predatory recruitment. Around 300 families have worked through an NGO in Colombia to advocate for information and assistance for their relatives who have disappeared, died or are stuck against their will in the conflicts in Russian Federation and Ukraine. Financial hardship, digital illiteracy, the cost of DNA testing, and difficulties accessing official procedures have further compounded the situation of predatory recruitment, as families are unable to have their relatives' bodies repatriated. Families have organized collectively to provide mutual support, facilitate reporting, seek diplomatic engagement, and advocate for stronger government action to address deceptive recruitment practices and support victims and their relatives.

55. In 2025, Colombia recorded 436 trafficking cases, including 12 cases involving the recruitment of Colombians for military activities linked to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Three of these cases are reportedly through fraudulent job offers to join the Ukraine while nine are said to have been deceptively recruited to join the Russian Federation. The job offers for these cases were mainly through social media with promises of civilian jobs. Upon arriving at their destinations, there were instances of mistreatment and non-payment of promised wages.

56. The 12 cases involved men aged 32 to 45 from Cauca, Antioquia, La Guajira, and Nariño. Recruitment occurred through deceptive job offers promising military-related work and high salaries that either changed or failed to materialize upon arrival. Some recruits were allegedly bound by contracts preventing withdrawal for several years.

57. The Government has tried to provide support to affected families, activating consular protection mechanisms, and seeking information on victims' whereabouts and welfare through diplomatic channels. It has been difficult to obtain information from destination countries, especially in situations of armed conflict, leaving relatives to travel to conflict zones in search of answers about their relatives.

58. The Working Group is concerned at the high numbers of possible predatory recruitment, noting that each case needs to be assessed carefully to determine not only the facts but whether there has indeed been human trafficking or labour exploitation involved. The government is seeking stronger profiling, tracing, and identification mechanisms, including possible ICRC support, to assist families.

59. Information gaps continue to limit support and engagement on cases arising in Sudan, Somalia, the DRC, Ukraine and Russia. Officials noted that recruitment for participation in foreign armed conflicts is not clearly criminalized under Colombian law. This can result in cases of predatory recruitment and human trafficking being largely undetected. Robust monitoring is required to identify these cases given that human trafficking is clearly criminalised under Colombian law. The new law on mercenarism should aim to address existing legal gaps in harmony with existing laws and standards on human trafficking.

60. Consular assistance focused on repatriation, documentation, psychosocial support, pensions, and ensuring due process for detained nationals remains imperative.

Digital Monitoring of Recruitment Patterns

61. Digital technologies is crucial to understanding recruitment and travel patterns linked to mercenary-related activities and participation in armed conflicts abroad. Colombian authorities underscored the value of lawful and human rights-compliant monitoring of travel trends, recruitment methods and emerging risk indicators.

62. Relevant tools may include the analysis of travel and border records, passenger information systems, open-source intelligence (OSINT), publicly available social media content and online recruitment channels. Financial investigations, including the analysis of payments originating from private military or security entities and unusual financial transfers associated with conflict zones, may assist authorities in better understanding recruitment dynamics and informing preventive measures. Any such monitoring should be conducted in accordance with international human rights standards, including safeguards relating to privacy, data protection and due process.

VII. Private and Security Companies (PSCs)

63. The Superintendency on private security companies (SVSP) has around 1,370 private companies in its registry: 814 for private security and surveillance; 386 departments of security; 19 consulting companies; 96 related to schools; 10 training companies and 45 surveillance co-operatives. There are around 390, 295 personnel in the PSC workforce. The income from the PSC sector can be as high as 2.5% of the national GDP – reflecting the significant demand for its services.

64. Private security companies can have a license for up to 10 years. Approximately 80% of licence renewal requests are approved, while 20% are denied due to non-compliance. Common reasons for denial include failure to maintain life insurance for security personnel; failure to maintain civil liability insurance; non-payment of fees, sanctions, or fines; failure to update regulatory databases and failure to meet minimum legal and financial requirements. The SVSP stressed that PSCs have a complementary role to the public force and their personnel are not permitted to undertake military missions, combat operations, or activities linked to armed conflict. Private security thus remains strictly civilian in nature. Participation by Colombians in foreign armed conflicts or overseas security operations falls outside the SVSP's jurisdiction and are not considered an activity officially authorized by the agency.

65. While interlocutors acknowledged that there have been improvements in PSC regulation, there is still a need to ensure robust monitoring of companies. Stronger due diligence and background checks of PSCs are needed, and; robust monitoring of their activities even those of a transnational nature; ending the use of shell or “front” companies (e.g. registered as human resources firms as a guise) and associations with paramilitary structures. Rogue companies are often undetected, some operating in conflict affected areas and in the extractive industry sector. Weapons tracing exercises have shown high-powered firearms among companies who are not legally registered. A recurrent concern was the inadequate vetting of PSC owners and managers, many of whom have military backgrounds. Rising risks related to weapons diversion and proliferation; the use of drones and emerging technologies, and possible involvement in money laundering were linked to private security contractors.

66. The demand for PSCs is also sustained through the National Protection Unit (UNP), which relies on companies to complement state protection measures for individuals at risk, including human rights defenders, journalists, community leaders, and public officials. Through contractual arrangements, private security providers supply armed personnel, vehicles, communications equipment, and other protective services under the oversight of the UNP. Given the UNP's extensive use of outsourced protection services, effective supervision, vetting, and human rights due diligence over private security contractors are essential to ensure accountability, professionalism, and compliance with national and international standards. Since 2016, 1600 social leaders have been assassinated, many while under protection of the UNP, highlighting the need for stronger security measures.

Organized crime and illicit networks

67. Strong links exist between mercenary-related actors and transnational organized crime networks including to drug trafficking, trafficking in persons; money laundering, and illicit arms networks. Colombian nationals have been involved in criminal and cartel operations in neighbouring countries, including Mexico.

68. Colombian ex-soldiers are being recruited by Mexican cartels, and some have provided military, explosives, and training expertise. Mexican authorities reportedly detained 17 individuals linked to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), 12 of whom were Colombian nationals, including some with previous military experience. Foreign recruits, including Colombians, are linked to drone training and drone-related capabilities, but public evidence generally does not identify large numbers of Colombians specifically serving as operational drone pilots within cartel units.

69. In 2024, two cases were known to involve former members of security forces who went to Mexico based on agricultural job offers and were subsequently recruited by criminal organizations. One individual remains missing while the other is in the process of repatriation.

Extractive industry

70. Private security contractors play a significant role in Colombia's extractive industries, particularly mining and oil operations, where they protect infrastructure, personnel, and commercial assets in areas affected by armed violence and weak state presence. Former military and security personnel are vulnerable to recruitment by organized criminal groups involved in illicit economies. Between 2000 and 2008, the State established mining and energy security battalions to protect strategic infrastructure. Questions were raised regarding past patterns of cooperation among certain companies, PSCs, public security forces, and paramilitary structures in extractive areas affected by armed conflict.

71. Indigenous communities have witnessed illegal extractive operations in their territories. As a result, they have employed their own indigenous guards (Guardia Indígena), a community-based, self-protection organization to protect their communities, territory, culture, and autonomy, particularly among the Nasa people in Cauca. Similar guards exist among many Indigenous groups across Colombia. Unlike private security companies, these guards operate under self-governance rather than as a commercial private guard service; are unarmed and frequently come under attack from criminal groups and armed actors.

Suspension of companies

72. In April 2026, the Government suspended the licences of 31 private security companies following allegations of criminal infiltration and misuse of security services. The Working Group commends this and emphasises the importance of robust regulatory oversight and accountability mechanisms within the private security sector to prevent its exploitation by criminal or mercenary-related networks.

VIII. Social impacts

73. When Colombians travel abroad and subsequently go missing, die, fall victim to trafficking or other forms of disappearance, the consequences for families left behind can be severe and long-lasting. These impacts are not only emotional and social but can also create significant legal and economic hardship.

Victims and Families

74. The delegation met with families of Colombian nationals reported killed or missing in the context of armed conflicts abroad. Based on information received, 343 individuals

were reported missing with at least 121 confirmed deaths in Ukraine. Data was scarce on Colombians present in other countries. Families described significant challenges in obtaining timely and reliable information regarding the fate or whereabouts of their relatives, including limited access to information from foreign authorities, difficulties in locating and identifying remains, high costs associated with DNA testing, and lengthy administrative procedures for obtaining death certificates and other official documentation.

Prolonged psychological trauma

75. Many relatives of those traveling abroad showed signs of deep prolonged psychological trauma. Without information confirming the status of their relatives, families can remain trapped in years of uncertainty, unable to complete mourning processes or make practical decisions about their future. It is clear that many of these families require psychosocial support and care. A majority of interlocutors were women whose spouses, sons, uncles and brothers were abroad in armed conflict situations and who informed of exploitative practices by individuals and companies offering investigative services and repatriation of bodies from abroad, preying on families' vulnerabilities and trauma.

Barriers to pensions and survivor benefits

76. Access to a survivor's pension generally requires proof that the pensioner or contributor has died and that the claimant is an eligible beneficiary. Documentation of death is fundamental to the process. The delegation met with wives and partners who were not able to produce death certificates for their spouses abroad and thus were unable to establish the legal fact of death to access pension funds and social security benefits. Consequently, spouses and dependent children face mounting economic hardship with no access to pensions; life insurance payouts; employment-related death benefits; bank accounts and other assets requiring proof of death.

Economic hardships

77. The majority of those fighting abroad are heads of households and main income-earners, leaving behind families with no income. Additionally, new expenses associated with searching for the missing person, engaging lawyers, travelling, or trying to obtain documents from foreign authorities are cumbersome for families in Colombia. For widows in particular, several risks emerge taking high-interest informal loans to cover daily living costs; incurring debts to finance search efforts and become trapped in cycles of indebtedness. Those left behind often depend on intermediaries who exploit their economic vulnerability and often scam or deceive them for more money. Children often have to leave school to support families. Many informed the delegation of being unable to pay for mortgages and therefore lost their homes.

Legal challenges

78. Without official confirmation of death, families can become stuck in a legal limbo. They may be unable to transfer property; settle estates; remarry; access inheritance rights; change land titles and administer bank accounts. This administrative exclusion can last for years, especially when disappearances occur in another jurisdiction and require cooperation between Colombian authorities and foreign governments.

Consular Assistance

79. The Vienna Convention requires States to co-operate in situations where relatives have passed away abroad. While Colombia has cooperated with some States who facilitated consular engagement and information-sharing, others were very challenging in obtaining timely information regarding deaths, disappearances, detention or deployment in conflict

zones. Families repeatedly expressed frustration at the lack of information and limited responses regarding the status of their relatives. The increasing number of deaths and disappearances abroad has placed additional pressure on consular services and highlighted the importance of enhanced international cooperation, information-sharing and victim-centred support arrangements.

Identification and Tracing Mechanisms

80. Colombian authorities emphasized the urgent need to strengthen systems for the identification and tracing of nationals affected by armed conflicts abroad. Improved DNA identification mechanisms, more accessible forensic services, and enhanced cooperation between States to facilitate the recovery, identification and repatriation of remains are crucial. Authorities highlighted the value of developing recruitment-risk indicators, monitoring transit routes and travel pathways, strengthening intelligence-sharing, and improving public awareness of the risks associated with recruitment into foreign conflicts.

IX. Human rights and accountability concerns

81. The overseas deployment of Colombian nationals as mercenaries presents a series of acute human-rights and legal challenges. These concerns arise not only from the nature of the conflicts in which Colombians are involved, the informal recruitment and opaque corporate structures involved, but concerning the human rights impacts their activities and operations have.

82. Colombians deployed in countries such as DRC, Haiti, Sudan, Russian Federation and Ukraine, often operate in contexts characterized by indiscriminate violence, lack of distinction between combatants and civilians, and systematic breaches of the Geneva Conventions. In Sudan, recent investigations revealed that Colombian ex-soldiers contracted through a UAE-based company, were directly involved in the training of child soldiers. This represents a clear breach of international law. Reportedly, Colombians trained boys as young as 13 in weapons handling and urban warfare techniques, raising the spectre of complicity in war crimes. Further, Colombians have been implicated in the perpetration of sexual violence against women and girls. The deployment of Colombians into active hostilities in Sudan, combined with credible reports of their participation in atrocities has prompted United Nations inquiries into potential violations of the arms embargo on Sudan and possible war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. If confirmed, such actions would implicate not only the direct participants, but also the corporate intermediaries and sponsoring states in grave breaches of international law.

83. Patterns of trafficking and deceptive recruitment are concerning. These recruits are denied fundamental labour protections. Their employment falls outside the scope of national labour codes, and private military and security companies frequently evade responsibility by using shell companies or proxy entities in multiple jurisdictions, many of which have weak oversight mechanisms. Injuries, unpaid wages, and deaths go unaddressed. Reportedly, Colombians who were predatorily recruited abroad were denied medical treatment, access to food and water, the docking or withholding of pay for items necessary to perform functions (e.g. equipment, uniforms). The lack of enforceable contracts and the extraterritorial nature of operations render these workers effectively rightless once deployed.

84. Obstacles to investigation and justice exist. Cases involving mercenaries are notoriously difficult to prosecute due to the complex interaction of extraterritoriality, corporate secrecy, and jurisdictional gaps. The new law on mercenarism has the potential to address the extraterritorial dimension of responsibility and accountability and provide mechanisms for international cooperation, information-sharing, prosecution and remedies for victims. Without stronger intergovernmental coordination and transparency from private actors, Colombia risks becoming both a source and a shield for human-rights violations committed by its citizens overseas.

85. Ultimately, the phenomenon of mercenaries for Colombia reveals collusion between globalised warfare and fragmented justice and accountability systems. It underscores the

urgent need for strong national frameworks that can regulate private military labour, protect vulnerable recruits, and ensure justice for victims of abuses committed in transnational conflicts.

Right to self-determination

86. Colombia's involvement in the global mercenary market has far-reaching implications including the undermining of State authorities and impeding the right of peoples and communities to self-determination in armed conflict zones. The outsourcing of military expertise into private hands weakens the state's control over its own monopoly on violence. The flow of remittances from mercenary salaries creates perverse incentives and informal economies tied to conflict abroad. The recruitment of Colombians abroad also illustrates the neocolonial dynamics of global warfare, in which developed nations and wealthy states subcontract violence to cheaper labour from the Global South. Colombians function as "disposable soldiers," in wars fought over resources in the DRC, gold in Sudan, and strategic influence in the Middle East, none of which benefit them or their country.

The right to work

87. Any policy response to the growing participation of Colombians in foreign armed conflicts must carefully balance two legitimate and competing interests. On the one hand, Colombian citizens enjoy the right to seek employment abroad and to pursue economic opportunities outside their country, including in the private security sector where many former military and police personnel possess valuable professional skills. Overly restrictive measures could unduly limit freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to livelihoods for veterans who often face significant socioeconomic challenges following retirement or demobilization. Given the limited employment opportunities available to many former combatants, foreign security contracts represent one of the few viable means of supporting themselves and their families.

88. On the other hand, States have a legitimate responsibility to regulate and monitor the recruitment and deployment of their nationals when there is a risk that such activities may contribute to armed conflicts, mercenary operations, human rights violations, or breaches of international humanitarian law. Effective oversight is particularly important where recruiters use deceptive practices, conceal the nature of assignments, or facilitate the participation of individuals in hostilities on behalf of non-state armed groups or foreign actors.

89. Rather than imposing blanket prohibitions on overseas employment, Colombia could delineate what services and activities are strictly prohibited, strengthen licensing requirements for recruitment agencies, improve information-sharing with destination countries, establish registration and reporting mechanisms for high-risk security contracts, and provide greater support and guidance to departing personnel. Such measures would help protect the rights of Colombian workers while reducing the risk that economic vulnerability is exploited to fuel conflicts abroad or facilitate activities prohibited under national and international law.

Indigenous Peoples

90. Indigenous peoples continue to face forced recruitment, displacement, restrictions on freedom of movement and violent control by armed actors, such as in the Cauca region.

91. The extractive activities and the operations of some private security actors have, in certain contexts, contributed to territorial tensions adversely affecting indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination, land, territory and natural resources. Protecting indigenous communities from recruitment and violence and ensuring their meaningful participation in decisions affecting their territories is imperative. The delegation was informed of 69 cases of recruitment of indigenous persons in 2025 to conflict zones abroad.

Persons in vulnerable situations

92. The need for gender-sensitive assessments of recruitment practices, labour conditions and risks of exploitation is necessary. Colombian women are increasingly travelling abroad, including to countries such as the DRC and the UAE, for various forms of employment. Women are affected directly as victims of trafficking, labour exploitation and deceptive recruitment, and indirectly as family members who bear the economic, social and caregiving burdens associated with the death, disappearance or injury of relatives abroad. Children remain particularly vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation including into armed groups and organized crime. They experience manipulation through digital platforms and exposure to emerging forms of warfare and conflict-related activities, including the operation or support of drone technologies. Persons with disabilities are also known to be targeted for recruitment.

Arms, weapons and emerging technologies

93. The proliferation of arms in Colombia is a significant security concern. Reportedly, a large number of unlicensed arms and weapons are within the reach of private security companies and armed actors in Colombia, posing serious human rights risks.

94. Colombians who travelled to arm conflict situations are increasingly associated with the use of emerging technologies and advanced weaponry, including surveillance tools, drones, communication and satellite systems, and modern small arms, reflecting the evolving and sophisticated nature of contemporary military operations and grave risks of human rights violations.

95. Many Colombians were recruited to be trained in drone operations, armoured systems, and advanced communication and surveillance technologies. The growing demand for Colombian veterans reflects the value placed on experienced personnel who can operate in technologically complex conflicts where unmanned aerial systems, precision targeting, electronic warfare, satellite, geospatial and real-time intelligence increasingly complement conventional combat operations. Within Colombia, drones are increasingly being used by armed groups to further their cause. There is an increase in drone attacks in borderland areas where the presence of criminal groups are known. In Cauca, there has been as many as 6 to 7 drone attacks in a three month period.

Returnees

96. Returnees from conflict abroad face trauma and mental health challenges. They face heightened risks of re-recruitment into mercenary, private military or criminal activities, particularly where underlying economic vulnerabilities, unemployment or lack of reintegration support remain unaddressed. Individuals with military training, combat experience and international networks are specifically targeted by recruiters for future deployments in foreign conflicts or illicit security operations. Strengthening reintegration programmes, employment opportunities, psychosocial support and monitoring mechanisms is therefore critical to reducing the risk of repeated recruitment and preventing the perpetuation of transnational cycles of violence and exploitation.

97. Returnee victims of predatory recruitment can face stigma and social exclusion, making them vulnerable to re-recruitment into mercenarism or illicit activities.

Ongoing good practices by Government

Good practices against human trafficking

98. Colombia has several good practices against human trafficking that could potentially be models against predatory recruitment abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has led a "Don't be fooled campaign!" In Antioquia, there is a strong awareness campaign called "Some Networks Do Not Connect, They Trap". These campaigns use education programmes

and "escape room" simulations for youth to recognize deceptive recruitment tactics. They use school-based prevention initiatives; training public officials on fraudulent overseas employment offers and employ public awareness on risks associated with social media recruitment. Partnerships with UN entities, NGOs and local authorities have helped strengthened this campaign. There is also a campaign known as "Stop! It Could Be Human Trafficking" and a social hotline and digital reporting channels are available for the public to reach authorities for help and assistance.

Dismantling Policy to Address Mercenarism

99. Colombia's Dismantling Policy¹⁹ offers a useful framework for addressing mercenarism because it shifts attention from individual recruits to the networks, incentives and structures that facilitate recruitment and deployment. Rather than focusing solely on prosecuting former soldiers who participate in overseas conflicts, this approach seeks to identify and dismantle the criminal, financial, corporate and digital ecosystems that sustain mercenary-related activities.

100. A key advantage of the policy is its emphasis on targeting recruitment networks. Mercenary recruitment increasingly involves a range of actors, including recruiters, intermediaries, private companies, financial sponsors, digital advertising channels and transport facilitators. The dismantling approach prioritises investigations into those who organize, finance and profit from recruitment activities, including individuals operating through social media platforms, messaging applications, recruitment agencies and companies offering overseas security contracts under misleading or deceptive conditions.

101. A dismantling framework focuses on addressing the economic structures that drive mercenarism such as the economic vulnerability and the international demand for military expertise that contribute to overseas recruitment. It enables authorities to scrutinise and combat the financial flows and profit structures behind recruitment. This could include monitoring overseas contracts offered to former military personnel, investigating payment channels, identifying money laundering risks (for which SARLAFT and UIAF would be useful for) and strengthening regulation of intermediaries involved in overseas security employment.

102. Prevention policy can include recruitment risk assessments and early-warning systems in regions where recruitment is concentrated, particularly in areas with significant populations of former military personnel. Community-based reporting mechanisms, local monitoring efforts and analysis of emerging recruitment trends could help identify risks before recruitment occurs and allow for targeted preventive interventions.

103. The growing role of digital technologies in recruitment highlights the relevance of the dismantling approach. Treating social media platforms as part of the recruitment infrastructure would support stronger monitoring capacities, enhanced cyber-investigations, cooperation with digital service providers and the establishment of reporting mechanisms for suspicious recruitment activities, while ensuring respect for human rights and privacy safeguards.

104. This strategy could be victim-focused and incorporate victim identification mechanisms, legal assistance, psychosocial support, family assistance, repatriation procedures and reintegration services, aligning responses to mercenarism more closely with existing anti-trafficking frameworks.

105. Given the transnational nature of mercenary recruitment, the approach would benefit from strengthened international cooperation. Enhanced information-sharing, joint investigations, mutual legal assistance and cooperation with destination and transit countries would improve States' ability to identify and dismantle transnational recruitment networks.

106. This framework highlights the importance of addressing the specific vulnerabilities of former military personnel, who constitute a significant proportion of those recruited by

¹⁹ Colombia's Política de Desmantelamiento (Dismantling Policy), developed within the framework of the 2016 Peace Agreement, seeks to dismantle the organizational, financial, political and territorial structures that sustain criminal and armed groups, rather than focusing solely on individual perpetrators

strengthening employment opportunities, career-transition programmes, overseas employment verification mechanisms and targeted awareness campaigns would help reduce economic pressures and other factors that make former soldiers vulnerable to recruitment. By addressing these structural drivers, a dismantling approach offers a comprehensive and preventive framework for tackling mercenarism that can be consistent with human rights principles and sustainable peacebuilding objectives.

X. Conclusions and recommendations

107. Mercenarism in Colombia has evolved into a complex, transnational phenomenon that extends beyond the actions of individual mercenaries and is increasingly sustained by sophisticated recruitment networks, private intermediaries, digital platforms, third countries, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and weak legal and regulatory oversight. The phenomenon poses significant risks to the enjoyment of human rights, contributes to instability and violence, and exposes individuals to exploitation, trafficking, forced labour and other forms of abuse. While Colombia has undertaken important positive steps to tackle mercenarism and its related actors, significant challenges remain.

108. An effective response requires a human rights-based, victim-centred and comprehensive approach that addresses both the symptoms and root causes of mercenarism. Colombia's Dismantling Policy offers an important framework that requires critical coordinated action by States of origin, transit and destination, international organizations, the private security sector, civil society and family members of those affected.

109. The Working Group makes the following recommendations:

A. Government of Colombia

Legal and Policy Framework

(a) Expedite the passage of the law criminalising mercenarism and related conduct in accordance with international human rights and humanitarian law standards, particularly the 1989 Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries.

(b) Clarify the legal distinctions between mercenaries, private contractors, security personnel predatory recruits and foreign volunteers to reduce legal ambiguity and strengthen accountability.

(c) Establish liability frameworks applicable to both individual perpetrators and corporate entities involved in recruitment, financing or facilitation of mercenary-related activities.

(d) Consider strengthening the regulation on PSCs, including implementing a robust law to cover all forms of operations of PSCs including those with military elements, operating in multi-jurisdictions

(e) Employ effective measures to prevent, investigate and prosecute the recruitment and deployment of Colombian nationals as mercenaries in Sudan and other armed conflicts, strengthen oversight of individuals serving as private military and security contractors, and cooperate with international accountability mechanisms addressing serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

(f) Draw upon the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to strengthen the regulation and oversight of private security companies, recruitment agencies and other relevant corporate actors.

Institutional Coordination and Data Collection

(a) Strengthen and regularise inter-agency co-ordination on mercenarism among relevant ministries, prosecutorial authorities, law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies to ensure prevention, investigation and victim protection efforts.

(b) Develop integrated national data collection and monitoring systems on recruitment patterns, overseas deployments, disappearances, fatalities and returnees, while ensuring compliance with data protection standards.

Prevention and Socio-Economic Measures

(a) Expand prevention and awareness campaigns, particularly in regions and communities identified as vulnerable to recruitment, including among former military personnel and young people.

(b) Strengthen socio-economic support programmes, vocational training, employment opportunities and entrepreneurship initiatives for veterans, ex-combatants and at-risk youth.

(c) Develop comprehensive reintegration programmes for returnees, including psychosocial support, employment assistance and community-based reintegration measures.

Victim Protection and Assistance

(a) Establish procedures to identify and protect persons who may have been subjected to trafficking, forced labour, deceptive recruitment or other forms of exploitation in the context of mercenary-related activities.

(b) Ensure access to legal aid, psychosocial services, healthcare and social assistance for affected individuals and their families.

(c) Facilitate access to DNA identification mechanisms and establish dedicated services for families seeking information on disappeared, missing or deceased relatives.

Private Security Sector

(a) Strengthen the regulation, licensing, monitoring and accountability of PSCs and recruitment agencies operating domestically and internationally.

(b) Require enhanced human rights due diligence, transparency and reporting obligations for private security actors.

(c) Consider joining the ICOCA and the Montreux Document Forum in support of good practices on the regulation of private military and security companies

(d) Strengthen oversight of emerging technologies, weapons transfers and other activities that may facilitate mercenary-related activities.

(e) Consider having the SVSP as an independent regulatory authority, with statutory guarantees of operational, administrative and budgetary independence from other government Ministries

(f) Adopt robust human rights due diligence measures throughout recruitment, contracting and deployment processes.

(g) Ensure transparency regarding contractual terms, deployment conditions, risks and remuneration.

(h) Combat deceptive, coercive or exploitative recruitment practices and establish accessible grievance mechanisms for affected individuals.

Special Protection Measures

(a) Adopt targeted measures to prevent recruitment in Indigenous territories and other communities in vulnerable situations.

(b) Strengthen safeguards against the recruitment and exploitation of women, children, young people and persons in vulnerable situations, including through effective measures in digital space.

(c) Integrate gender-responsive approaches into all prevention, protection and assistance measures.

B. States of Origin, Transit and Destination

- (a) Establish proactive screening procedures to identify individuals who may have been recruited through deception, coercion, abuse of vulnerability, trafficking or fraudulent employment schemes.
- (b) Ensure that persons stranded in conflict-affected areas are assessed for protection needs and trafficking indicators regardless of nationality, migration status or contractual arrangements.
- (c) Facilitate safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return or relocation options based on individualized risk assessments.
- (d) Ensure that affected individuals have access to temporary protection, legal status, shelter, healthcare, psychosocial support and livelihood opportunities where needed.
- (e) Apply the principle of non-punishment to victims of trafficking and exploitation who may have committed unlawful acts as a direct consequence of their exploitation.
- (f) Guarantee effective access to remedies, compensation and restitution, including for victims who have returned to their countries of origin.

C. States Hosting Colombian Nationals Affected by Armed Conflict

- (a) Facilitate consular access and assistance for Colombian nationals, including access to travel documents, legal assistance, interpretation services and communication with family members.
- (b) Cooperate with Colombian authorities in evacuation, repatriation and identification processes where requested by affected individuals or their families.
- (c) Ensure that protection and assistance measures are accessible without requiring participation in criminal proceedings.

D. International Community and Regional Organizations

- (a) Strengthen international cooperation to investigate, disrupt, sanction and terminate transnational recruitment networks involved in mercenary-related activities, trafficking and labour exploitation.
- (b) Enhance judicial, prosecutorial, intelligence and law enforcement cooperation among States of origin, transit and destination.
- (c) Promote information-sharing on recruitment methods, trafficking patterns and emerging risks while respecting privacy and data protection standards.
- (d) Strengthen regional cooperation mechanisms involving key transit and deployment countries.
- (e) Provide technical assistance and capacity-building to support legislative reform, victim protection systems, regulatory oversight and institutional coordination
- (f) Ensure the prompt, impartial investigation and prosecution of mercenary-related offences, and strengthen accountability mechanisms to guarantee effective remedies for victims and prevent impunity.

E. Civil Society and International Organizations

- (a) Continue monitoring, documenting and raising awareness of recruitment practices, human rights violations and protection risks associated with mercenary-related activities.

(b) Strengthen community-based prevention programmes targeting populations vulnerable to recruitment.

(c) Support victims and families, including those within civil society organizations, through legal assistance, psychosocial support, documentation initiatives and referral pathways. Provide stronger assistance to identification and repatriation processes for relatives abroad, stuck in conflict zones.

(d) Continue providing technical assistance, capacity-building and policy advice to support Colombia's efforts to prevent mercenarism, dismantle recruitment networks and strengthen protection and accountability mechanisms.
