United Nations A/HRC/63/31/Add.1

General Assembly

Distr.: General
24 September 2026

Original: English

Human Rights Council
Sixty-third session
7 September–9 October 2026
Agenda item 3
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*, **

Summary

Colombia faces many challenges stemming from the country's long history of armed conflict. Many of its nationals have been recruited into private military and security contracting roles, as well as into mercenary activities in armed conflicts abroad. Mercenarism has evolved into a complex, transnational phenomenon sustained by sophisticated recruitment networks, intermediaries, digital platforms, third countries and weak extra-territorial legal and regulatory oversight. Concerningly, many Colombians travelling abroad are victims of predatory recruitment. While the Government has taken important steps towards addressing these challenges, including the enactment of Law No. 2569 approving the ratification of the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, significant challenges remain. An effective response must address both the symptoms and the root causes of mercenarism. In terms of the domestic private security industry, continued efforts to strengthen regulation through the national regulatory body is needed given the immense use of private security companies throughout the country.

* The present report was submitted to the 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.

Please recycle

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 visited Colombia from 16 to 27 March 2026 at the invitation of the Government. The delegation was comprised of 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 also 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 that the visit was a success. It thanks the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and reiterates its sincere condolences for the passing of the Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Gustavo Gallón Giraldo, who played an important role in supporting 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; the Ministry of Defence, including representatives of the military and the police; the Superintendency of Private Security and Surveillance; the Ministry of the Interior, including the Directorate for Indigenous, Roma and Minority Affairs; the National Protection Unit; and the Ministry of Justice and Law. It also met with the Attorney General's Office, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the Inspector General's Office, the Ombudsman's Office, members of Congress, the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization, the Association of Retired Military Officers 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, individuals who had travelled abroad to participate in armed conflict and relatives of Colombians who had been recruited into armed conflict situations, including active combat roles.

6. The Working Group 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 it with information.

II. Context

7. The purpose of the visit to Colombia was to study and identify manifestations, challenges and emerging trends regarding mercenaries and mercenary-related actors, the role of private security companies,[1] 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 fulfil private military and security roles, including in conflict situations, in various countries around the world.

9. The armed conflict in Colombia lasted for more than five decades, from 1964 until the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement. During the conflict, thousands of Colombians joined the armed forces and guerrilla groups, obtaining extensive training and operational experience in combat and security operations. Plan Colombia (1999–2015), a bilateral security initiative with the United States of America, contributed to the professionalization and expansion of the Colombian armed forces. Generations of Colombians belonging to the State security forces and to 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 and the handling of weapons and explosives.

10. The armed conflict gave rise to the establishment of self-defence units, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. These units, which are permitted under Colombian law, were formed to protect communities from armed actors and guerrilla groups. Over time, some of them evolved into paramilitary organizations. Serious challenges arose alongside the armed conflict, with armed actors simultaneously engaging 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 in the post-2016 period 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 2024.[2] Recent reforms have maintained compulsory service while offering alternatives, including a "Social Service for Peace" programme 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. The Ministry of Defence reportedly has a budget of approximately $15.5 billion, representing around 11.7% of the total State budget for 2025.

High demand for security and military labour

12. Due to its surplus of highly skilled military and security labour and its socioeconomic vulnerabilities, Colombia serves as a continuous source of military labour in the global security market. While many Colombians have been recruited abroad to undertake legitimate security roles, there are numerous cases where individuals have been recruited as mercenaries or into mercenary-related activities or armed conflicts abroad.

Definition and scope

13. The Working Group understands the definitional challenge of qualifying a person as a mercenary. Despite the definition of a "mercenary" in international law[4] and the cumulative criteria in the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, of 1989,[5] categorizing a person as a mercenary remains difficult, particularly

[2] Law No. 1861 (2017) was the basis for compulsory military service. Article 216 of the Constitution establishes the obligation of Colombians to participate in national defence when required by law. Law No. 2384 (2024) amended Law No. 1861 (2017), expanding benefits and exemptions for conscripts and modifying certain aspects of the service regime.

[3] There were approximately 290,000 active-duty military personnel in 2023, including around 225,000 army personnel.

[4] Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), art. 47. See also the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries.

[5] According to which a mercenary is any person who: is specially recruited locally or abroad to fight in an armed conflict; is motivated essentially by private gain; is promised compensation substantially

given the covert settings in which they operate. However, the Working Group's mandate is to examine the activities of mercenaries and mercenary-related actors, the latter being a broader term that encompasses actors whose activities are akin to those of 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, which is why the Working Group assesses the profiles of these actors through their motivations, activities and impact on human rights, particularly the right of peoples to self-determination.[6]

III. Legal frameworks

15. The Colombian legal framework provides ample constitutional and human rights protections. The Constitution stipulates that international human rights treaties ratified by Colombia form part of the constitutional body of law, meaning that they are directly applicable in domestic law. Accordingly, 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 the international human rights treaties,[7] including the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), article 47 of which 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, the then President, Gustavo Petro, enacted Law No. 2569 to ratify the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, of 1989, and incorporate it into the domestic legal system. In August 2025, the Working Group had the unique privilege of making a submission to Congress to encourage the law's passage. The implementation of this initiative demonstrates the willingness and openness of Colombia to address the challenges of mercenarism.

17. Additional positive news is that a new bill (No. 539/26) has been introduced in Congress with a view to amending the Penal Code to comply with the international obligations that would arise from the State's accession to the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries. The bill passed its first reading and is now pending discussion during the new parliamentary term, which began in August 2026. In its current form, it would potentially provide stronger safeguards, including by supporting victims of predatory or illicit recruitment, providing for urgent consular and protection measures, making clearer distinctions between

higher than that paid to comparable members of the armed forces; is neither a national nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict; is 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 forces.

[6] See the glossary of terms at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/mercenaries/wg/annex-hrc-glossary-terms-technology-1-en.pdf.

[7] Colombia is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

participation as a mercenary and involvement as a victim of illicit recruitment and excluding humanitarian or other lawful activities.

18. The delegation notes this to be among the critical positive initiatives undertaken by the Colombian authorities to address 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. The principal regulation on private security activities is Decree No. 356 of 1994. This decree governs licensing, training, arms use and oversight of private security providers through the Superintendency of Private Security and Surveillance,[8] which is under the Ministry of Defence. The private security sector is economically significant, employing a large workforce. Given the ongoing security challenges in the country, Colombia is among the highest users, and employers, of private security companies. Such companies' main client is the Government. While the existence of a specific decree regulating the private security sector is commendable, 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 Superintendency's attachment to the Ministry of Defence.

Trafficking

20. Colombia is a State Party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. It has a comprehensive legal framework to combat trafficking in persons, principally through Law No. 985 of 2005, which criminalizes trafficking, defines forms of exploitation in line with international standards and establishes measures for the prevention of trafficking and for protection, assistance and support to victims. Under article 188-A of the Penal Code (Law No. 599 of 2000), as amended by Law No. 985 of 2005, 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' imprisonment) and mandated the creation of a national strategy for victim protection and assistance and human rights enforcement. The Working Group welcomed the enactment of Law No. 2608 of 27 July 2026, which establishes 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 trafficking in persons.

Regional framework

21. Colombia is a 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 on pertinent international legal obligations and good practices for States related to operations of private military and security companies during armed conflict and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers' Association 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 only

[8] See https://www.supervigilancia.gov.co/en.

a handful of private security companies are members of the Association. One of the reasons given for the low rate of membership of the Association is the cost thereof.

23. The Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights are a useful framework for addressing the role of private security companies, recruiters, intermediaries and other corporate actors involved in mercenary-related activities. They affirm the State's duty to protect against human rights abuses by businesses and the corporate responsibility to respect human rights and victims' right to access effective remedies.

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, 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. It does not specifically examine the activities of private security companies and mercenarism. However, it does have a 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 of or committed human rights violations or crimes related to armed conflict provided that these persons voluntarily submit to its jurisdiction. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace addressed civilian third parties and private actors in case No. 08.

Inter-agency working group on mercenary issues

25. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs[9] established an interim inter-agency working group on mercenary issues in 2025. The working group includes representatives from the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Justice and Law, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Ombudsman's Office, the Attorney General's Office, the Superintendency of Private Security and Surveillance and the Commission for the Search of Missing Persons.

26. The working group's tasks include 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. Other priorities include improving data collection, assessing social and economic factors affecting former members of the armed forces and police and carrying out public awareness and deterrence campaigns and preventive outreach for military and police personnel considered at higher risk of recruitment into mercenarism. At the policy level, the working group will assist in developing the new law on mercenarism.

28. Given the multifaceted dimensions of mercenarism and related activities, inclusive collaboration is imperative among relevant stakeholders, including United Nations entities in Colombia, such as OHCHR, the International Organization for Migration, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Development Programme, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), human rights

[9] Directorates responsible for human rights and international humanitarian law, migration, consular affairs and citizen services.

non-governmental organizations (NGOs), families of victims, representatives of private security companies and veterans' associations.

Anti-trafficking committee

29. The Ministry of the Interior leads anti-trafficking policy and chairs the national committee to combat trafficking in persons, comprising 17 institutions, including the National Police, the Prosecutor's Office, the Ombudsman's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute and Migration Colombia. The Ministry of the Interior serves as the technical secretariat and coordinates a nationwide network of 32 departmental entities and approximately 550 local committees.

V. Challenges

Ongoing travel of Colombians to armed conflict situations

30. Nationals continue to travel to participate in armed conflicts or security crises abroad, signalling the relentless demand in the transnational market for military labour and skills. In the past 11 years, there has been a surge in the global demand for Colombian personnel in military and security roles. Evolving geopolitical tensions and ongoing armed conflicts worldwide are likely to increase demand for experienced individuals with security and military skills, expanding market opportunities for Colombians to seek employment abroad in private military and security companies and mercenary-related roles.

31. The delegation was informed that more than 10,000 Colombians,[10] mostly retired State military personnel and former guerrilla combatants, could have been recruited into logistical or security-related roles, including 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. That lack of data also means that the number of Colombians abroad in armed conflict situations is likely underreported.

Profile and motivational factors

32. Many of those who travel abroad to join conflict situations are former or retired members of the military or former members of armed groups or paramilitary structures. However, there are also some individuals without military backgrounds who travel in search of better economic opportunities abroad. There is no uniform profile among those who travel, although many appear to have a military or police background or to have performed military service. An increasing number of women are travelling abroad to perform roles associated with military and security support and logistical functions, such as the assembly of drones. The majority of travellers, particularly those engaging in mercenary-related activities, are men recruited from across Colombia, including from Antioquia, Bogotá, Bolívar, Nariño, Santander and Valle del Cauca. Recruitment likely happens more in remote areas where it is difficult to observe trends and where socioeconomic vulnerabilities are acute due to a lack of economic opportunities. Recruits are from different ethnic groups, including Indigenous communities. Men of various ages have been recruited.

33. Travel is prompted by many factors, including a desire for adventure, the link between masculinity and 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 also key motivations. The early retirement of many Colombian military personnel, combined with limited opportunities for reintegration into civilian life

[10] This estimate is based on unofficial information and includes those travelling to perform legitimate security-related roles abroad. The former President, Gustavo Petro, reportedly mentioned that there were an estimated 7,000 Colombians in Ukraine alone.

and comparatively low domestic wages, pensions and retirement benefits, creates strong incentives to seek employment abroad. Colombians who join the military at 18 years old are eligible to retire after 20 years, meaning that, at 38 years of age, their skills are still in high demand. Furthermore, their relatively young age means that they can pursue further employment in combat zones. Compounding financial 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 senior military personnel may be sufficient, but, as regards lower-ranking personnel with fewer benefits, socioeconomic pressures at home combined with the lure of lucrative contracts abroad make them easy targets for recruitment. Locally, the minimum wage is around 2 million Colombian pesos (approximately US$ 500) per month. The wage for private security operations, including mercenary-related roles, can range from US$ 2,000 to US$ 6,000 per month and is sometimes 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 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 and logistics), many are recruited into criminal activities and military and security training and functions in conflict situations including in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Libya, Mexico, the Russian Federation, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and Yemen. Some are present in the Latin American region, using their skills in security-related work, but also in transnational criminal networks. Colombians are performing security functions in Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru. In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, private security contractors and mercenary-related actors were accused of attempting to overthrow the Government of the previous President, Nicolás Maduro. In Ecuador, six Colombians were detained in 2023 in connection with the assassination of a presidential candidate.

36. In 2021, the Working Group sent a communication[11] to the Government of Haiti regarding the assassination of the President, Jovenel Moïse. Twenty-six former Colombian soldiers, recruited through a Miami-based security company, were implicated in the assassination. The 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 had acted independently and not on behalf of the Colombian State. The delegation was provided with an update on this case from various stakeholders, who noted that judicial proceedings in Haiti continued to face delays. Courts in the United States 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 beginning of the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine in 2022, Colombian fighters have been identified on both sides of the conflict. Former Colombian soldiers were reportedly offered salaries of approximately Col$ 12 million per month (US$ 3,740) 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. Ensuring that travel to these two countries is voluntary, which is not prohibited under Colombian or international law, remains among the Government's principal concerns.

[11] See communication HTI 4/2021. All communications mentioned in the present report are available from https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/Tmsearch/TMDocuments.

38. Individuals travelling to destinations in Europe transit through locations including Amsterdam, Bucharest, Frankfurt, Istanbul, Madrid, Panama, Paris and Warsaw. Some travel through Gulf States, including the United Arab Emirates, 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 whether they are travelling 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 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. The Sudan was consistently noted as a country of concern. The Working Group expressed its concern about the recruitment of Colombians[12] into a battalion known as the Desert Wolves to fight alongside the Rapid Support Forces. They were reportedly recruited through the Global Security Services Group, which is chaired by an individual from the United Arab Emirates, and through the International Services Agency, which is based in the same country and was co-founded by a former Colombian colonel. More than 300 former Colombian soldiers have reportedly been recruited to support the Rapid Support Forces. Their functions include front-line combat operations, siege and attack missions, drone and artillery operations, the training of fighters, including child soldiers, in the use of missile systems, anti-air missile systems, communication systems and other weaponry, and the preparation of military training materials and coordination of propaganda activities.

40. The conflict in the Sudan has been marked by serious allegations of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, including extrajudicial killings, recruitment of children, looting, attacks on civilians and sexual and gender-based violence. The Sudan is one of the most visible theatres involving Colombian mercenaries, who reportedly trained children in the conflict. Reports of the crash in 2025 of an aircraft 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. The crash reportedly 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. The recruitment of Colombians into Middle Eastern security operations began around 2014, when private companies in Gulf States started hiring former Colombian military personnel in large numbers. Colombian former soldiers were reportedly among the 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 armed forces of the United Arab Emirates, which later led to their deployment to conflict zones in the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen under contract with private firms and not as 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 and security guard work, yet ended up in the conflict in Yemen.

Other regions

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

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

[12] See communications SDN 1/2026, ARE 1/2026 and OTH 6/2026.

VI. Recruitment

44. The 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, peer-to-peer networks among former military personnel, and informal intermediaries and brokers. Channels within WhatsApp and Telegram provide public platforms that extend beyond professional and peer networks to recruit ordinary citizens. Gaming platforms and communities are being used for recruitment, making this practice increasingly sophisticated and difficult to track.[13]

45. Individuals are also recruited by word of mouth through friends or former colleagues, both in Colombia and abroad. Intermediaries include private security companies and individuals such as retired generals, majors and colonels. In Bogotá, specific locations of recruitment are known. A particular hotel venue was said to be a popular recruitment site used by 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 are registered offshore to evade accountability, often with the support of third countries. In the case of the Sudan, Global Staffing,[14] a private company registered in Panama, channels payments to clients and recruits. The growing privatization and commercialization of Colombian military expertise through transnational networks falls within a legal grey area, with little oversight or accountability. Recruiters frequently operate through private security companies and intermediaries, meaning that it can be difficult to distinguish between legitimate security contracts and deployments.

47. Civilians have been recruited to participate in armed conflict. The profiling of potential recruits involves an assessment of their socioeconomic situations. Exploitation of economic vulnerabilities has thus been a method of targeting potential recruits. Many families of Colombians recruited abroad provided details of their low-income background; some lived below the 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 or Indigenous communities or were former members of paramilitary entities or armed groups.

48. Recruits have a wide range of profiles, indicating that demand is at a level where the need for human power, rather than individuals' skills and military prowess, is the determining factor. Recruiters often use fake profiles on social media platforms. Many are using different pseudonyms on 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, the difficulty in monitoring the free movement of travellers and the inability to hold rogue recruitment agents, companies, individuals and intermediaries to account have meant that recruitment is largely carried out without effective sanctions or oversight and is thus difficult to eliminate.

Predatory recruitment and elements of trafficking in persons

50. The international recruitment of Colombians reflects their economic vulnerability, the global demand for military expertise and the weak regulation of transnational recruitment networks. Predatory recruitment[15] 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 trafficking in persons, which is defined in the

[13] The Ministry of Information and Communications 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 the platforms' usage policies.

[14] Now known as Talent Bridge.

[15] See A/HRC/54/29.

Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children 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.[16]

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. Many cases of Colombians abroad reportedly 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 (aged 18 to 45) and individuals from low-income backgrounds. Recruitment hotspots are found throughout the country. Cauca was noted as a particular hotspot, with large numbers recruited. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian 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 front-line 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 or technical roles, high salaries (US$ 2,000–10,000 per 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 deployed directly to the front line 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 has faced challenges obtaining information through diplomatic channels with countries where Colombians have fallen victim to predatory recruitment. Around 300 families have worked through an NGO in Colombia to advocate for information and assistance for their relatives who have disappeared or died or are stranded against their will in the conflict in the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Financial hardship, digital illiteracy, the cost of DNA testing and difficulties accessing official procedures have further compounded 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 conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Three of these cases reportedly involved fraudulent job offers to join the Ukrainian side, while nine individuals are said to have been deceptively recruited to join the Russian side. The job offers were mainly made through social media with promises of civilian roles. Upon arriving at their destinations, some individuals faced 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 their withdrawal for several years.

[16] Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, art. 3 (a).

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.

58. The Working Group is concerned at the large number of possible cases of predatory recruitment, noting that each case needs to be assessed carefully to determine the facts and whether trafficking in persons or labour exploitation are indeed 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 in cases arising in the Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Recruitment for participation in foreign armed conflicts is not clearly criminalized under Colombian law. This can result in cases of predatory recruitment and trafficking in persons going largely undetected. Robust monitoring is required to identify these cases, since trafficking in persons is clearly criminalized under Colombian law. The new law on mercenarism should aim to address existing legal gaps in line with existing laws and standards on trafficking in persons.

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

Digital monitoring of recruitment patterns

61. Digital technologies are crucial for understanding recruitment and travel patterns linked to mercenary-related activities and participation in armed conflicts abroad. The authorities underscored the value of the 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, public 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 inform 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 security companies

63. The Superintendency of Private Security and Surveillance has around 1,370 private companies in its registry: 814 private security and surveillance companies, 386 departments of security, 19 consulting companies, 96 school-related companies, 10 training companies and 45 surveillance cooperatives. There are around 390,295 personnel in the private security workforce. The sector's income can account for as much as 2.5% of national gross domestic product, reflecting the significant demand for its services.

64. Private security companies can have a licence 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 Superintendency of Private Security and Surveillance stressed that private security companies complemented the public force and that their personnel were 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 Superintendency's jurisdiction and is not officially authorized by it.

65. While interlocutors acknowledged that there have been improvements in the regulation of private security companies, there is still a need to ensure that they are robustly monitored. Stronger due diligence and background checks of such companies are needed, as are the robust monitoring of their activities, even those of a transnational nature, and efforts to end the use of shell or front companies, such as those registered under the guise of a human resources firm, and associations with paramilitary structures. Rogue companies often go undetected, with some operating in conflict zones and in the extractive industry. Weapon tracing exercises have shown that companies that are not legally registered possess high-powered firearms. A recurrent concern was the inadequate vetting of owners and managers of private security companies, many of whom have military backgrounds. Rising risks related to the diversion and proliferation of weapons, the use of drones and emerging technologies and possible involvement in money-laundering were linked to private security contractors.

66. The demand for private security companies is also sustained through the National Protection Unit, which relies on companies to complement State protection measures for at-risk individuals, 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 Unit. Given the Unit's extensive use of outsourced protection services, effective supervision and vetting of private security contractors and human rights due diligence are essential to ensure accountability, professionalism and compliance with national and international standards. Since 2016, 1,600 social leaders have been assassinated, many while under the Unit's protection, 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 in 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 former soldiers are being recruited by Mexican cartels, and some have provided military, explosives and training expertise. The Mexican authorities reportedly detained 17 individuals linked to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, 12 of whom were Colombian nationals, including some with previous military experience. While foreign recruits, including Colombians, are linked to drone training and drone-related capabilities, public evidence does not generally suggest that large numbers of Colombians are specifically serving as operational drone pilots within cartel units.

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

Extractive industries

70. Private security contractors play a significant role in Colombian extractive industries, particularly mining and oil operations, where they protect infrastructure, personnel and commercial assets in areas affected by armed violence and with a 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, private security companies, 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 established their own community-based organizations to protect their communities, territory, culture and autonomy, particularly among the Nasa people in Cauca. Many Indigenous groups across Colombia have similar organizations. Unlike private security companies, these organizations operate on a self-governed basis

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 the suspension and emphasizes 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 or 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; there can also be significant legal and economic hardship.

Victims and families

74. The delegation met with families of Colombian nationals reported killed or missing in armed conflicts abroad. Based on the information received, 343 individuals were reported missing, with at least 121 confirmed deaths, in Ukraine. Data on Colombians present in other countries were scarce. 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 travelling abroad showed signs of deep prolonged psychological trauma. Without information confirming the status of their relatives, families face years of uncertainty, unable to complete mourning processes or to make practical decisions about their future. It is clear that many of these families require psychosocial support and care. The majority of the interlocutors were women whose spouses, sons, uncles and brothers were abroad in armed conflict situations. They spoke of exploitative practices by individuals and companies offering investigative services and the 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 unable to produce death certificates for their spouses abroad and were thus unable to provide the legal proof of death needed 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 hardship

77. The majority of those fighting abroad are heads of households and main 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. Widows are particularly at risk of taking high-interest informal loans to cover daily living costs, incurring debts to finance search efforts and becoming 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 told the delegation that they were unable to pay their mortgage and had therefore lost their home.

Legal challenges

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

Consular assistance

79. The Vienna Convention on Consular Relations requires States to cooperate in situations where individuals have passed away abroad. While Colombia has cooperated with some States, which facilitated consular engagement and information-sharing, others made it very challenging to obtain 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. The 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. The 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 are linked not only to the nature of the conflicts in which Colombians are involved, their informal recruitment and the opaque corporate structures involved, but also, worryingly, to the human rights impacts of their activities and operations.

82. Colombians deployed in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, the Sudan, the Russian Federation and Ukraine often operate in contexts characterized by indiscriminate violence, a lack of distinction between combatants and civilians, and systematic breaches of the Geneva Conventions. In the Sudan, recent investigations revealed that Colombian former soldiers who had been contracted through a company based in the United Arab Emirates were directly involved in the training of child soldiers. This represents a clear breach of international law. Colombians reportedly trained boys as young as 13 years in handling weapons and urban warfare techniques, raising the spectre of complicity in war crimes. Colombians have also been implicated in the perpetration of sexual violence against women and girls. The deployment of Colombians into active hostilities in the Sudan,

combined with credible reports of their participation in atrocities, has prompted United Nations inquiries into potential violations of the arms embargo on the Sudan and possible war crimes under the Rome Statute. 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. 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. Colombians who were predatorily recruited abroad were reportedly denied medical treatment and access to food and water and had their salary docked or withheld to pay for items necessary to perform their functions, such as equipment and 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 mercenarism in Colombia reflects the collusion between globalized warfare and fragmented justice and accountability systems. It highlights 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. The involvement of Colombia in the global mercenary market has far-reaching implications, undermining State authorities and impeding the right of peoples and communities to self-determination in armed conflict zones. The outsourcing of military expertise to private actors 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 Democratic Republic of the Congo, over gold in the Sudan and over 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, in which many former military and police personnel offer 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. Extractive activities and the operations of some private security actors have, in certain contexts, contributed to territorial tensions adversely affecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples 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 to conflict zones abroad in 2025.

Persons in vulnerable situations

92. There is a need for gender-sensitive assessments of recruitment practices, labour conditions and exploitation risks. Colombian women are increasingly travelling abroad, including to countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the United Arab Emirates, for various forms of employment. Women are directly affected as victims of trafficking, labour exploitation and deceptive recruitment and indirectly affected 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. A large number of unlicensed arms and weapons are reportedly within the reach of private security companies and armed actors, posing serious human rights risks.

94. Colombians who have travelled to armed conflict situations are increasingly familiar 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 and satellite, geospatial and real-time intelligence increasingly

complement conventional combat operations. Within Colombia, drones are increasingly used by armed groups. There has been an increase in drone attacks in border areas where criminal groups are known to be present. In Cauca, there have been as many as six or seven 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 access to international networks are specifically targeted by recruiters for future deployment in foreign conflicts or illicit security operations. Strengthening reintegration programmes, employment opportunities, psychosocial support and monitoring mechanisms is therefore critical to reduce the risk of repeated recruitment and prevent the perpetuation of transnational cycles of violence and exploitation.

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

Ongoing good practices by the Government

Good practices against trafficking in persons

98. Colombia has adopted several good practices against trafficking in persons that could potentially be models against predatory recruitment abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has led a campaign known as “Don’t Be Fooled!” In Antioquia, there is a strong awareness campaign called “Some Networks Don’t Connect, They Trap”. These campaigns use education programmes and escape room simulations to help young people recognize deceptive recruitment tactics. They involve school-based prevention initiatives and the training of public officials on fraudulent overseas employment offers and raise public awareness of the risks associated with social media recruitment. Partnerships with United Nations entities, NGOs and local authorities have helped strengthened the 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 the authorities for help and assistance.

The dismantling policy to address mercenarism

99. The dismantling policy[17] 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 prioritizes investigations into those who organize, finance and profit from recruitment activities, including individuals operating through social media platforms and messaging applications, and recruitment agencies and companies offering overseas security contracts under misleading or deceptive conditions.

101. A dismantling framework focuses on addressing the economic factors that drive mercenarism, such as the economic vulnerability and international demand for military

[17] The dismantling policy was developed within the framework of the 2016 Peace Agreement and seeks to dismantle the organizational, financial, political and territorial structures that sustain criminal and armed groups, rather than focusing solely on individual perpetrators.

expertise that contribute to overseas recruitment. It enables authorities to scrutinize 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 (in which the system for managing the risk of money-laundering and terrorism financing and the Financial Information and Analysis Unit would play a useful role) and strengthening the 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 the 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, more closely aligning responses to mercenarism with existing anti-trafficking frameworks.

105. Given the transnational nature of mercenary recruitment, strengthened international cooperation would be of benefit. 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 recruits, by strengthening employment opportunities, career transition programmes, overseas employment verification mechanisms and targeted awareness campaigns, which 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

A. Conclusions

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, socioeconomic 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 taken important positive steps to tackle mercenarism and mercenary-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. The dismantling policy offers an important framework that requires coordinated action by States of origin, transit and destination, international organizations, the private security sector, civil society, and family members of those affected.**

B. Recommendations

109. **The Working Group makes the following recommendations to the Government of Colombia:**

Legal and policy framework

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

(b) **Clarify the legal distinctions between mercenaries, private contractors, security personnel, individuals subjected to predatory recruitment and foreign volunteers in order to reduce legal ambiguity and strengthen accountability;**

(c) **Establish liability frameworks for both individual perpetrators and corporate entities involved in the recruitment, financing or facilitation of mercenary-related activities;**

(d) **Consider strengthening the regulation of private security companies, including by implementing a robust law to cover all forms of such companies' operations, including those with military elements that are conducted in multiple jurisdictions;**

(e) **Employ effective measures to prevent, investigate and prosecute the recruitment and deployment of Colombian nationals as mercenaries in the 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

(g) **Strengthen and regularize inter-agency coordination on mercenarism among relevant ministries, prosecutorial authorities, law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies to ensure prevention, investigation and victim protection efforts;**

(h) **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 socioeconomic measures

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

(j) **Strengthen socioeconomic support programmes, vocational training, employment opportunities and entrepreneurship initiatives for veterans, ex-combatants and at-risk youth;**

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

Victim protection and assistance

(l) **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;**

(m) **Ensure access to legal aid, psychosocial services, healthcare and social assistance for affected individuals and their families;**

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

Private security sector

(o) **Strengthen the regulation, licensing, monitoring and accountability of private security companies and recruitment agencies operating domestically and internationally;**

(p) **Establish enhanced human rights due diligence, transparency and reporting obligations for private security actors;**

(q) **Consider joining the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers' Association and the Montreux Document Forum in support of good practices in the regulation of private military and security companies;**

(r) **Strengthen oversight of emerging technologies, weapon transfers and other activities that may facilitate mercenary-related activities;**

(s) **Consider designating the Superintendency of Private Security and Surveillance as an independent regulatory authority, with statutory guarantees of its operational, administrative and budgetary independence from other ministries;**

(t) **Adopt robust human rights due diligence measures throughout recruitment, contracting and deployment processes;**

(u) **Ensure transparency regarding contractual terms, deployment conditions, risks and remuneration;**

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

Special protection measures

(w) **Adopt targeted measures to prevent recruitment in Indigenous territories and other communities in vulnerable situations;**

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

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

110. **The Working Group makes the following recommendations to 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 their nationality, migration status or contractual arrangements;**

(c) **Offer 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 recognition, 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.**

111. **The Working Group makes the following recommendations to 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 the 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.**

112. **The Working Group makes the following recommendations to the international community and regional organizations:**

(a) **Strengthen international cooperation to investigate, disrupt, punish and dismantle 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 and impartial investigation and prosecution of mercenary-related offences and strengthen accountability mechanisms to guarantee effective remedies for victims and to prevent impunity.**

113. **The Working Group makes the following recommendations to 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 support for identification and repatriation processes for relatives who are stranded in conflict zones abroad;**

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