

# A Colombian presidential hopeful was shot. A 15-year-old is the prime suspect

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Getty Images

When Colombian senator and presidential hopeful Miguel Uribe Turbay was shot in the head on 7 June, it shocked the international community. After years of growing peace, the attack was a callback to Colombia's most violent years, when cartel-ordered assassinations were a common occurrence.

But the identity of the alleged shooter proved even more shocking - a 15-year-old child.

A video, shared widely online, shows police arresting a young man with a boyish face and hair over his shoulders, wearing blue jeans and a green T-shirt.

Media has reported that after he was swiftly arrested, he cried out: "I did it for money for my family."

He subsequently pleaded not guilty, the prosecutor's office said.

Turbay has remained in critical condition at a clinic in Bogotá since last Saturday. Authorities are now searching for the people behind this crime, who allegedly used the boy to carry out the hit.

Unfortunately, if it proves to be true, the boy's story is all too common. According to the Colombian Ombudsman's Office, 409 children and teenagers were recruited by armed groups in 2024, an increase from the 342 cases reported in 2023.

Authorities acknowledge that the data is underestimated.

Decades of armed conflict and organised crime have left thousands of children victims of violence in Colombia.

Over the years, many have been recruited by now-extinct drug organizations like the Medellín cartel led by Pablo Escobar and left-wing guerrillas, paramilitary forces and new armed and criminal groups.

"Minors were even used by public forces in undercover missions. Every single actor of the conflict has recruited minors," Max Yuri, director of the Institute of Political Studies at Antioquia University, told BBC Mundo.



AFP / Getty Images

*More than 30 years after Escobar's death, child recruitment remains a problem in both urban and rural areas*

## The child hitmen hired by Escobar

In the 1980s, many youngsters and minors were picked up by Escobar to carry out hits.

"It was known as the practice of 'Los suizos'. Many youngsters and minors joined suicidal missions," Jorge Mantilla, a criminologist and security consultant and security coordinator for the Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development, told BBC Mundo.

One of the most infamous was John Jairo Arias Tascón, known as 'Pinina,' considered to be one of the hitmen closest to Escobar.

He is linked to several high-profile crimes, such as the assassination of the minister of justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla in 1984; the attack on Avianca Flight 203, in which 110 people died in 1989; as well as several murders of politicians, journalists, civilians, and criminal adversaries.

Pinina died aged 29 in a shoot-out with police in 1990 in Medellín. It is believed he started as a hitman as young as 15-years-old.

On 22 March 1990, another 14-year-old boy named Andrés Arturo Gutiérrez Maya shot and killed presidential candidate Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa at Bogotá's El Dorado airport.

Then there was Gerardo Gutierrez, "Yerry", another young man who ended up being the main suspect in the killing of presidential candidate Carlos Pizarro Leongomez in 1990.

Escobar was initially blamed for the crime, but he denied any involvement.

According to the Historical Memory Center in Colombia, "Yerry" was shot dead by a bodyguard. Years later, the leader of the paramilitary group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, Carlos Castaño, admitted that he trained the hitman and planned the crime along with corrupted Colombian officials.

To this day, the murder of Pizarro has not been fully solved.

## Minors as war weapon

Recruited children usually share a common background.

Most come from low-income urban areas or isolated rural territories where the Colombian state has a limited presence.

There is a difference, however, between rural and urban recruitment.

While minors in urban areas often seek to improve their economic and social status, many rural youths are forcibly recruited by armed groups, who also harass and threaten their families.

"It is a cheap labour force, easy to replace. Because of their malleability, they are often assigned acts of terror such as dismemberment," Mr Yuri said.

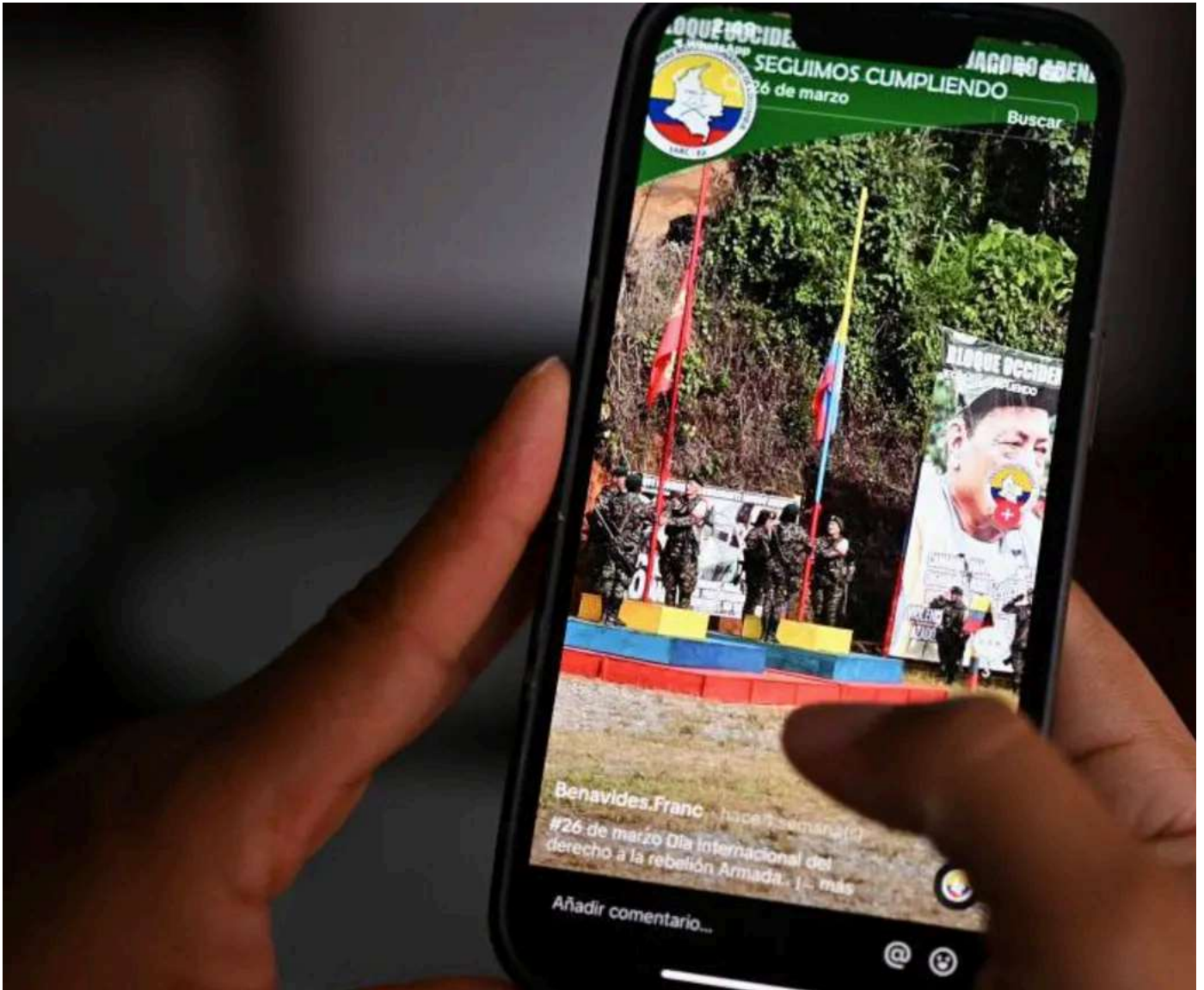
"It is common for them in cities to also be involved in the transportation of weapons, drugs, drug dealing, extortion collection, hitmen work, and murders," he added.

The Special Jurisdiction for Peace estimates that more than 18,000 children were recruited by Farc guerrilla between 1996 and 2016, when this left-wing group signed a peace deal with the government.

But continued clashes between Colombian forces and other guerrilla groups mean that the demand for child hitmen has not gone away.

Meanwhile, the recruitment methods have become more sophisticated.

In June 2024, the BBC reported how armed groups are using tools such as TikTok to reach youngsters in isolated areas in Colombia.



AFP / Getty Images

*Authorities fear that forced recruitment of minors is increasing*

## Rising numbers

A report by the Colombian newspaper El Tiempo states that 1,953 minors were reported missing in 2024, more than half of whom are still unaccounted for.

The information is based on data provided by the National Institute of Legal Medicine, and one of the theories behind the disappearances is that the children may have been forcibly recruited.

Children who live in impoverished regions are especially vulnerable.

Of the 409 minors the Ombudsman's Office identified as having been recruited, about 300 were detected in Cauca, a troubled part of Colombia where coca is grown to make cocaine, that has become a frequent site of military operations.

Other hotspots for recruitment were Putumayo and Cauca Valley, where the conditions of violence are similar.

Mr Mantilla said that some recent data indicated forced recruitment may have skyrocketed by 1,200% in the last few years since the pandemic.

The rise is attributed to economic decline in vulnerable areas post-pandemic, and the territorial expansion of armed groups, Mr Yuri said. He also said public institutions are better at tracking these youths than they once were, leading to a rise in the overall official numbers.

"Child recruitment has been possible because of the existence of unprotected, abandoned and marginalised children, and legal loopholes in the Colombian justice system," Mr Mantilla said.

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