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Lockdowns Produced a New Generation of Child Soldiers

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TUMACO, Colombia—On a dusty, unpaved street in one of Tumaco's troubled neighborhoods, children dressed neatly in white and blue uniforms push through the door of a two-room schoolhouse to take their seats. Most schools in this Pacific coastal town and across Colombia as a whole reopened in September, a full 18 months after they were closed due to COVID-19. But this school, "Educate the Streets," made the decision never to shut down. For its staff, the virus's threat always seemed lower than the danger of idle kids.

When the lockdown started, volunteers who ran the school in the neighborhood of Viento Libre huddled among themselves to consider their options. There was only one choice, they decided: Keep classes going and hope authorities would not order a closure. "The moment when we stop teaching is the moment when recruitment into the [armed] groups starts," said Luz Dary, a teacher who taught kids ages 5 to 9. "The teachers did not stop teaching during COVID, and the parents didn't stop sending their children," she added. "This is a school, but mostly, it is a safe space."

“ Child recruitment into armed groups has become a matter of national concern. ”

In urban pockets like this one as well as across sweeps of Colombia’s countryside, child recruitment into armed groups has become a matter of national concern. A perfect storm of accelerating conflict and new armed outfits, together with closed schools and economic desperation, has led to a surge in the number of youth and minors joining criminal ranks.

Colombia’s government reported that at least 465 children underwent recruitment between 2016 and 2020, though by all accounts, this is a huge underestimate. Fearing reprisals from the groups and far away from government offices, many families choose not to report the crime.

In Viento Libre, residents said armed groups recruit children as young as age 11 or 12, though they often draw in even younger kids to do favors, deliver messages, or spy in return for food or candy. Recruitment is invisible, pernicious, and ubiquitous. Often, the extent of child recruitment is only visible when it ends in tragedy. At least three military bombardments since 2019 have resulted in the deaths of minors who were in armed groups’ encampments.

Among the most prolific recruiters are a cohort of armed groups known as Revolutionarv Armed

Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents, which primarily emerged after a 2016 peace deal between Colombia and the FARC. In 2017 and 2018, a small number of mostly midlevel officers abandoned the peace process to restart illicit economic enterprises in drug trafficking, mining, and extortion that the FARC had left untended when they laid down arms. In the years since, they have recruited voraciously from communities in former FARC-controlled areas.

The now-demobilized FARC, a 50-year insurgency driven by Marxist ideology, also recruited children: 18,677 children in the 20 years between 1996 and 2016. But the dissidents, made up of an unruly bunch of factions rather than a disciplined revolutionary guerrilla, have put their own cruel stamp on the practice. Communities suffering from recruitment recount how dissident factions send children to the front lines without training, allowing them to serve as cannon fodder against rival armed groups or the military. Some parents find out where their children have gone only after their corpses turn up in battle. For the vulnerable children they recruit, the allure of food, salaries, and motorcycles is often enough to discount the risks. “You ask children here what they want to do, and some of them say they want to be guerrillas,” Samira, one of the school’s founding teachers in Viento Libre said.

Every year, the volunteer staff of “Educate the Streets” walk their neighborhood to find children who have fallen out of the system, scooping them from the streets and putting them behind desks and into uniforms. It is a chance for a way out—but only that.

Conflict is nothing new in Tumaco, which sits on the Western coastline of Nariño, a department with 950 miles of navigable rivers and just 130 miles of paved road. The meandering rivers and far-flung hamlets make ideal trafficking routes for moving raw material for cocaine to the sea, where it then heads to the United States, Europe, or Asia. Buyers increasingly pay for shipments with arms, which flow back into Nariño’s rural areas and fortify armed groups’ control.

In the years before the peace accord, these routes were largely controlled by the FARC. As FARC guerrillas clashed with Colombia’s military or violent paramilitary groups that emerged in the late 1990s to combat the insurgency, civilians fleeing war zones often headed to Tumaco, which grew into a web of unmanaged and vulnerable settlements. Today, roughly half of the population of Tumaco is officially registered as victims of the conflict, rendering them eligible for state support.

When the FARC agreed to lay down arms and leave their former territories in 2016, many conflict-ridden areas saw a dramatic drop

Hidden areas saw a dramatic drop in violence. Rural Nariño felt temporarily transformed. In the countryside, farming communities could travel along river routes without fear. “After 2016, we could suddenly walk where we wanted to walk any time we wanted,” recalled an Afro-Colombian leader from the rural Magüí Payán municipality.

In Tumaco, however, the violence never receded. Residents recall how new dissident groups appeared as early as 2017, sparring with other criminal groups for urban trafficking routes.

These new groups have included factions of self-proclaimed FARC dissidents as well as the country’s largest remaining leftist guerrilla movement, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and remnants of criminal and paramilitary groups. In a frantic scramble to control the lucrative land and river routes the FARC left behind, these groups have gone on a recruiting drive.

“ Children have often been easy targets, won over with both sticks and carrots. ”

Children have often been easy targets, won over with both sticks and carrots. In some cases, armed groups oblige families to send a member to their ranks: “At the moment, it is either you send your child or we take your child,” said one senior military official. But the groups’ promise of food and sustenance sweetens the deal, especially for many local families in economic distress.

The pandemic ignited the potential for child recruitment. Up the coast from Nariño in the department of Cauca, rural Indigenous communities recount how child recruitment has “shot through the roof,” in the words of one youth activist in Toribío, Cauca. Indigenous authorities there have documented 92 cases of recruitment this year (up from just two cases in 2017).

When the Colombian government locked down inter-municipal travel in 2020, armed groups in Cauca saw a golden opportunity to take over coveted lands. Under the guise of implementing a quarantine, they limited communities’ movements to free up trafficking corridors and expand their footprint.

As they swept across new areas, they found untended and bored young people wherever they looked. Outside large cities, few students had access to internet or any sort of virtual classes, so when schools closed, teachers could only provide occasional paper lessons and worksheets. Professors lost touch with pupils in some cases. Armed groups stepped in to fill young peoples’ free time. “They created football clubs, taught classes—many students stopped their official studies and chose a different path,” said a female Indigenous leader from Caloto municipality. “The students who [stayed] with their [virtual] studies were threatened.”

At a moment when the economy was frozen, armed groups started throwing around rumors of high salaries they would supposedly pay: up to $1,000 a month, plus access to motorcycles, cell phones, and power within the community. Military officials who have recovered child recruits said once children join, recruits rarely receive all of what was promised.

“ Groups are … increasingly targeting young girls as paid militants, girlfriends, informants, and lures for male recruits. ”

Other children were drawn into picking coca, an arduous task that is well suited to children’s smaller hands and agile bodies. Families who lost jobs or relied on informal incomes from the pandemic found themselves newly reliant on their children’s earnings. A good coca picker can earn the equivalent of roughly $20 to $25 a day. Groups are also increasingly targeting young girls as paid militants, girlfriends, informants, and lures for male recruits, community members said.

A similar combination of abundant free time and economic need bred crisis back in Tumaco. On a recent morning walk through Viento Libre, Samira from “Educate the Streets” explained what her pupils

have been up against. Many have

parents who lost their jobs or struggled to earn informal incomes during lockdown. Children out of school had nowhere to go and no food at home to keep them there.

Far too often while she walked, the teacher would point out a family with a son in an armed group or a cousin in the ranks or a mother who acted as courier. The constant lure of these armed groups is visible. Passing between the wooden houses, some lifted high on stilts to avoid recurrent flooding, she pointed to one structure that stood out: a three-story, concrete loft with electricity and a garden. This, she explained, was the house of a high-ranking combatant in one of the armed groups.

Although schools are open again and lockdowns lifted, recruitment's momentum is proving difficult to stop. Indigenous authorities in Cauca said armed groups have already penetrated community life. More and more families have a member who has been recruited or joined, rendering them in various ways dependent on the armed groups for economic survival. Anyone who dares to speak out faces serious repercussions.

"Today, people who are against the groups, they will paint your house [with graffiti], tell you how many hours you have to leave [before they will kill you]," said the Indigenous leader from Caloto. "So not just the Indigenous leaders but also anyone in the community

also anyone in the community

against these groups has to stay quiet."

Child recruits from northern Cauca have started turning up as battlefield casualties in the department's south around the city of Argelia, where rival dissident factions fiercely combat one another, the ELN, and the military, according to Indigenous authorities. In October, for example, the military reported 10 deaths in a single day, including children.

Colombia's government is acutely aware of the rise in child recruitment and said it is trying to combat it. The state ombudsman issued an early warning in December 2020 suggesting the pandemic accelerated recruitment. In February, Colombia's family protection agency and attorney general's office announced the opening of a number of new investigations to find the main culprits.

Yet authorities' reactions have also proved controversial, revealing a level of indifference in some cases and insufficient commitment in others. After a minor was killed in a bombardment of a dissident camp in southern Colombia in March, Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano Aponte wrote off the tragedy, arguing that once recruited, children were rendered "war machines" and therefore legitimate targets.

Back along the Pacific coast, the military insists that keeping children out of conflict is a priority. In Tumaco, they have set up checkpoints and constantly man major crossing points, filling policing roles. However, walk the streets of Viento Libre and other vulnerable areas, and there is not a police officer or soldier in sight.

Colombia's government has deployed a brigade to every municipality of Nariño, totaling roughly 6,000 troops. They patrol trafficking routes, but many of the rivers are too shallow for military boats, and the dense, forested lands peppered with small settlements offer ample cover for crime. "The rivers are connecting corridors" for trafficking, said one senior military official. "We set up control points, both with larger boats and small canoes, but we are mostly in large rivers. The small rivers are where the groups operate."

Those interventions seem distant from the reality in Viento Libre, where teachers suggest a different set of solutions: opportunities, food, and basic well-being. "We need to work on prevention," said Lucia, a teacher of older students. "We need to show these children other examples." For now, few examples are in sight outside the walls of the classroom.