

IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Colombia: Whether armed groups such as the National Liberation Army (Ejército de liberación nacional, ELN) or the Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo) [also known as the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, AGC), Los Urabeños and Clan Úsuga] use non-members to carry out bombings or recruit minors on their behalf (2018–May 2022) [COL201062.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

For information on armed groups in Colombia, including the ELN and Gulf Clan, see Responses to Information Requests COL200696 of July 2021 and COL200703 of August 2021.

1. Overview

According to October 2021 media sources, the Gulf Clan is Colombia's largest illegal armed group (Colombia Reports 3 Oct. 2021) or its "dominant criminal force" (InSight Crime 24 Oct. 2021). Colombia Reports, a South American non-profit, English-language news source (Colombia Reports n.d.), stated in October 2021 that Gulf Clan combatants numbered between 3,000 and 7,000 (Colombia Reports 3 Oct. 2021). An October 2021 article by InSight Crime, a media organization focused on organized crime in Latin America that conducts field research to provide reporting and analysis (InSight Crime n.d.), reports that the Gulf Clan is present in "at least 17 of Colombia's departments, as well as internationally" (InSight Crime 24 Oct. 2021). The same source further states that the Gulf Clan "stronghold is centered around the Gulf of Urabá in the departments of Antioquia and Chocó" and extends into Córdoba, with the group having an "extensive presence" along the Caribbean coast, in Medellín, and in departments including La Guajira, Santander, Valle del Cauca and Norte de Santander (InSight Crime 24 Oct. 2021).

An October 2020 InSight Crime article describes the ELN as "the most powerful criminal group in Colombia" (InSight Crime 27 Oct. 2020). Colombia Reports states that it is the last remaining Marxist guerrilla group in Colombia (Colombia Reports 3 Oct. 2021). Sources report that the ELN is estimated to have 3,000 "armed members" (Colombia Reports 3 Oct. 2021) or 2,400 (US 12 Apr. 2022, 14) or 2,500 members (*LA Times* 17 Jan. 2019). According to a January 2019 *Los Angeles Times* (*LA Times*) article, the ELN is "mainly" in Arauca and Norte de Santander departments (*LA Times* 17 Jan. 2019). A June 2020 article from the Colombian radio station La FM, citing an interview with the Inspector General of Colombia, states that ELN activity is [translation] "most concentrated" in the departments of Antioquia, Cauca, Nariño and Norte de Santander with a "considerable number" of cases of forced recruitment of minors in Catatumbo, Norte de Santander (La FM 11 June 2020). In October 2020, InSight Crime reported that the ELN was active in "at least 16 of Colombia's 32 departments, as well as in its major cities" (InSight Crime 27 Oct. 2020). However, Colombia Reports stated in October 2021 that the ELN "mainly" operates in rural areas (Colombia Reports 3 Oct. 2021).

2. Recruitment of Minors

According to a March 2022 UN Secretary-General's report, child recruitment by armed groups "remains a critical concern," with 68 municipalities across 15 departments at "high-risk" and 226 municipalities at "medium-high risk" (UN 28 Mar. 2022, para. 83). The *Guardian* reports that "forced recruitments are concentrated in areas with extreme poverty and poor access to basic services," noting that recruitment has increased along the Pacific coast and in the south-west of Colombia (*The Guardian* 9 Nov. 2020).

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2021* indicates that armed groups forcibly recruit children as both "combatants and informants" in the departments of Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Nariño, and Norte de Santander (US 12 Apr. 2022, 16). According to a researcher from the Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Youth in the Armed Conflict in Colombia (Coalición contra la vinculación de niñas, niños y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia,

COALICO) [1], interviewed by InSight Crime for an article published in August 2020, child recruitment occurs across the "entire" Pacific Coast, including in the departments of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño and "parts of Putumayo" (InSight Crime 28 Aug. 2020). According to a report on children and organized crime published by the Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime (Observatorio Colombiano de Crimen Organizado, OCCO) [2], there were cases of child recruitment recorded in 30 of Colombia's 32 departments between 2017 and 2020; 50 percent of these were in Córdoba, Antioquia and Chocó (Charles, et al. Feb. 2022, 5). As cited in La FM, Colombia's Inspector General indicated that there has been a [translation] "considerable number" of cases of forced recruitment of minors in Catatumbo, Norte de Santander (La FM 11 June 2020).

According to Colombia's Inspector General, as cited by La FM, armed groups use WhatsApp and other social media to organize parties where minors are [translation] "indoctrinated" or "forcibly taken" (La FM 11 June 2020). A UN report on children and armed conflict in Colombia states that armed groups use promises of money, protection and jobs in order to recruit children (UN 8 Dec. 2021, para. 23). The *Guardian* states that children are "sometimes" offered up to US\$400 a month by armed groups, which is "almost" double the minimum wage (*The Guardian* 9 Nov. 2020).

Sources indicate that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, child recruitment by armed groups ["substantial[ly]" (Mercy Corps June 2021, 18)] increased due to "pandemic-related disruption and violence" (Freedom House 28 Feb. 2022, Sec. G4) or school closures and economic strain on families (Mercy Corps June 2021, 18). According to the same COALICO researcher cited above, interviewed by the New Humanitarian, "an independent, non-profit news organisation" (The New Humanitarian n.d.), schools are a "key line of defence against child recruitment," since families are "not as skilled as teachers" at identifying "grooming" and, in "some" cases, may "ignore" or "legitimise" child recruitment due to financial need (The New Humanitarian 10 Sept. 2020). In the August 2020 InSight Crime article, the COALICO researcher is cited as stating that for parents facing financial difficulties, having a child working for an armed group while still living at home can give a sense of "security" or "protection" and "some" families receive money, food, or clothing in exchange (InSight Crime 28 Aug. 2020). According to an International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) report, armed groups continue to use new recruitment strategies developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, including organizing sports and social clubs, throwing parties, and hosting video game competitions; families "in areas with a notable dissident and post-paramilitary group presence" report that it is "nearly impossible to avoid some form of capture by these networks" (Crisis Group 27 Jan. 2022).

2.1 Recruitment of Minors by the ELN

Information on recruitment of minors by the ELN was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Colombia's Office of the Ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo) indicates that it has issued 51 warnings naming the ELN as a [translation] "threat factor" in the recruitment or "criminal use" of children and youth in numerous departments, including Antioquia, Arauca, Bogotá D.C., Bolívar, Caldas, Casanare, Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Guainía, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Tolima and Valle del Cauca (Colombia July 2020, 41). According to the COALICO researcher interviewed by InSight Crime, the ELN has recruited children from Bajo Cauca and Magdalena Medio [in Antioquia] (InSight Crime 28 Aug. 2020). According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the ELN recruits children in Arauca (HRW 22 Jan. 2020, 17). The OCCO report on children and organized crime indicates that the ELN was involved in 178 cases of illegal recruitment (17.45 percent of the total) between 2017 and 2020, the most of any group (Charles, et al. Feb. 2022, 14, 28).

According to a "key informant" cited in a report on Chocó department from ACAPS, an "independent information provider" that specializes in "humanitarian needs analysis and assessment" (ACAPS n.d.), the ELN "tends" to use forced recruitment and "mainly" targets members of the Indigenous community (ACAPS 22 Dec. 2021, 6). However, other sources report that the ELN recruits children with [translation] "economic incentives" that "often" turn out to be "false promises" (Charles, et al. Feb. 2022, 24) or offers of money, motorcycles and guns (HRW 22 Jan. 2020, 18).

2.2 Recruitment of Minors by the Gulf Clan

Information on recruitment of minors by the Gulf Clan was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The OCCO report on children and organized crime states that the Gulf Clan was involved in 174 cases of illegal recruitment (17.06 percent of the total number) between 2017 and 2020, second only to the ELN (Charles, et al. Feb. 2022, 28). The ACAPS report on Chocó indicates, citing the same key informant interview, that the Gulf Clan "often outsources recruitment through criminal gangs in urban areas and recruits young people through job offers in rural areas" (ACAPS 22 Dec. 2021, 6). The OCCO report states that the Gulf Clan's recruitment methods involve threats and [translation] "other coercive acts" (Charles, et al. Feb. 2022, 24).

2.3 Use of Non-Members to Recruit Minors

Information on the use of non-members to recruit minors was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior analyst with Crisis Group stated that both the ELN and Gulf Clan have members who are "integrated" into communities and that it is "possible" that a civilian "could be involved in the facilitation of recruitment" (Senior Analyst 9 May 2022). In an interview with the Research Directorate, a professor at the University of the Andes in Bogotá whose research focuses on conflict, violence and peacebuilding in Colombia, indicated that both the ELN and Gulf Clan are "very unlikely" to use non-members for the recruitment of minors (Professor 31 May 2022). However, the same source stated that the distinction between members and non-members is "fluid," and that individuals may "move back and forth" between membership and non-membership (Professor 31 May 2022).

3. Use of Non-Members to Carry Out Bombings

Information on the use of non-members to carry out bombings was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, in recent years explosives have caused "increasing numbers of casualties" (ICRC 13 Mar. 2021) or their use has "increased significantly" (Senior Analyst 9 May 2022). In 2020, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) documented 148 casualties [injured or killed] of control-detonated and launched explosives (ICRC 13 Mar. 2021), while that number was 278 in 2021 (ICRC 23 Mar. 2022). The Senior Analyst stated that they would be "surprised" if the ELN used non-members to carry out bombings as it "generally" does not pay salaries and works "within its network of militants and collaborators," but "it is possible that civilians within their network are instrumentalized to plant explosives" (Senior Analyst 9 May 2022). The same source added that the Gulf Clan "often" pays civilians to engage in violence and that "it is very possible that they would pay someone to place a bomb" (Senior Analyst 9 May 2022). However, the Professor indicated that while the ELN and Gulf Clan may "outsource" a number of tasks to non-members, it is still "very unlikely" that a bombing would be carried out by a non-member (Professor 31 May 2022).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Youth in the Armed Conflict in Colombia (Coalición contra la vinculación de niñas, niños y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia, COALICO) is made up of seven children's rights organizations from civil society (COALICO n.d.a). These organizations are Justapaz, Benposta Nación de Muchach@s, Corporación Vínculos, Defence for Children International-Colombia (DCI-Colombia), Jesuit Refugee Service Colombia, Fundación Creciendo Unidos (FCU), and the Centre for Psychosocial Consultation and Development (Centro de Desarrollo y Consultoría Psicosocial) – Taller de Vida (COALICO n.d.b).

[2] The Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime (Observatorio Colombiano de Crimen Organizado, OCCO) is a "partnership" between InSight Crime and the Universidad del Rosario's Faculty of International, Political and Urban Studies that works to "advance understanding" of organized crime in Colombia and Latin America (Charles, et al. Feb. 2022, 2).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Centro de Recursos para el Análisis de Conflictos; conflict and development researcher at a Colombian university; conflict response analyst in Colombia; Council on Foreign Relations; fellow at a UK university whose research focuses on non-state armed groups in Latin America; Human Rights Watch; lawyer in Colombia who focuses on peace development; Norwegian Refugee Council; organized crime researcher at a Colombian university; professor of community and social development at a Canadian university with a research focus on communities in Colombia; professor of political science at a Canadian university who researches violence in Colombia; professor of political studies at a Colombian university; professor of modern Latin American history

at a Canadian university; professor of sociology at a Canadian university studying displaced populations in Colombia; professors of political science at Colombian universities (2); UN – International Organization for Migration; US – US Agency for International Development.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Amnesty International; Australia – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Austrian Red Cross – ecoi.net; Belgium – Commissariat général aux réfugiés et aux apatrides; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Brookings Institution; Center for Strategic and International Studies; Centro de recursos para el análisis de conflictos; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica; CeroSetenta; Colombia – Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz; Comisión Colombiana de Juristas; Council on Foreign Relations; *El Espectador*; EU – EU Agency for Asylum; Fédération internationale pour les droits humains; France – ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Fundación Ideas para la Paz; Fundación Paz & Reconciliación; Germany – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack; Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; La Silla Vacía; Médecins sans frontières; Norway – Landinfo; Observatorio de Memoria y Conflicto; Oficina Internacional de los Derechos Humanos – Acción Colombia; Organisation mondiale contre la torture; Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; Organization of American States – Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; Programa Somos Defensores; Reuters; Stanford University – Mapping Militants; *The Telegraph*; UK – Home Office; UN – Human Rights Council, International Organization for Migration, General Assembly, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ReliefWeb, UNDP, UN Women; Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona – Escola de cultura de pau; US – CIA, Department of Labor, US Agency for International Development; Víctor de Currea-Lugo; Washington Office on Latin America; Wilson Center.

ecoi.net summary:



Query response on
Colombia: Use of external
individuals by armed groups to
carry out bombings and
recruitment of minors (2018 -
May 2022)

Country:

Colombia

Source:

[IRB – Immigration and Refugee
Board of Canada](#)

Original link:

[https://irb-
cisr.gc.ca/en/country-
information/rir/Pages/index.as
px?doc=458661&pls=1](https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=458661&pls=1)

Document type:

Response

Language:

English

Published:

16 June 2022

Document ID:

2077955

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

