

Honduras: Children and the military

Pre-session

Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the
combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Honduras
(October 2023)

Summary

- **Deficient reporting.** The state party report devotes c. 100 words to OPAC, without addressing any of the recommendations of its initial OPAC review.
- **Wartime child recruitment.** While only adults from age 18 are normally recruited for military service, as of 2015 domestic legislation still provided for the recruitment of children from age 15.
- **Military schools.** The OPAC review revealed that children from age 11-12 at the state party's only military school were routinely put through elements of military training, including the use of weapons.
- **Military youth activities.** As of 2020, the long-running militarised youth programme, Guardians of the Fatherland (*Guardianes de la Patria*), was still engaging approximately 30,000 children annually, despite the Committee on the Rights of the Child's (the Committee) strong recommendation to close the project down. Concerns have been raised widely about the programme's indoctrination of children from age seven, and various risks to their safety. The programme was suspended during the Covid pandemic but has not been formally closed down.
- **Suggested questions.** The submission closes with three suggested questions for the List of Issues.

Introduction

The Child Rights International Network (CRIN) and Conscience and Peace Tax International (CPTI) present these comments as part of their project to monitor progress made by states parties in implementing the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC).

Country situation

Population (2022): 9.5 million.¹

Armed forces personnel (est. 2022): 14,950.²

Military service: Voluntary from age 18.

OPAC ratified: 2002.

Responsible government entity: Directorate for Children, Adolescents and Family.

OPAC report: [Received 2012](#) (with subsequent [reply to List of Issues](#)), [reviewed 2015](#).

CRC reviews since OPAC report: None.

Issues arising

Deficient reporting

This is the Committee's first opportunity to review the state party's implementation of OPAC since its initial report under the treaty in 2015.

In 2015, the Committee made a wide range of recommendations, none of which has been addressed in the state party report for the present reporting cycle. The report devotes only 100 words to OPAC.

Minimum recruitment age

Peacetime

The state party's constitution, OPAC binding declaration, and initial OPAC report all declare 18 as the minimum age for military recruitment. The initial OPAC report also specifies 18 as the minimum age for enrolment into the police force. Enlistment is conditional on a birth certificate or national identity card.³

We have no evidence to suggest that these standards are not observed in practice.

Time of war

As of 2015, domestic law still allowed for the compulsory recruitment of children from age 15 in a time of war, while also giving the Optional Protocol legal precedence, thereby establishing a conflict of legal standards.

The state party's OPAC report noted that a new draft constitutional amendment was in process, which 'would unequivocally prohibit the involvement of children outside of peacetime'.⁴ We recommend that the state party be asked whether this amendment has now passed into law.

¹ Institute for Strategic Studies, *The military balance 2023*.

² Ibid.

³ CRC, [Initial report of Honduras under OPAC](#), 2012.

⁴ Ibid., para. 63.

Military schools

According to its reply to the List of Issues at its OPAC review, the state party's armed forces manage one school: the **Northern Military School** (*Liceo Militar del Norte*).

In its reply to the CRC's List of Issues under the initial OPAC report, the state party noted that some students at the *Liceo* were trained from the sixth grade (age 11) in military discipline, drill, and the use of weapons.⁵

The state party also made clear that students may leave the military training course without penalty at any time.

In 2015, the CRC urged the state party to end the practice of training *Liceo* students in the use of weapons, and to establish an independent mechanism for raising complaints. The state party has not replied.

More information on military schools in Honduras is available in COIPRODEN's OPAC submission to the committee.⁶

Military youth activities

Honduran civil society has raised concerns about the progressive militarisation of public services, particularly policing.⁷

One consequence for the education system has been the foundation of **Guardians of the Fatherland** (*Guardianes de la Patria*) in 2010.⁸ Though suspended in 2021 for the duration of the Covid pandemic and not yet restarted in 2023, the programme has not been formally abolished, according to the COIPRODEN network.⁹

The *Guardianes* programme sends infantry soldiers into schools to run day-long training sessions with girls and boys to inculcate selected moral principles and introduce elements of military values and discipline.¹⁰ The programme focuses on youth at 'social risk', according to the state party,¹¹ which in practice has been reported to mean that low-income neighbourhoods are targeted for intervention.¹²

⁵ CRC, [Responses of Honduras to the List of Issues](#), 2015.

⁶ COIPRODEN, *Honduras alternative report (OPAC) 2015-2023* [submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child], 2023.

⁷ C Mendoza, [Desmilitarización y reforma del sector Defensa: los desafíos de Castro para revertir el autoritarismo y fortalecer la democracia en Honduras](#), 2022.

⁸ SEDENA, Honduras, ['Parents accompany Guardians of the Homeland'](#), 2020 and ['Comprehensive training with leadership through "Guardians of the Homeland"'](#), 2020.

⁹ COIPRODEN, *Honduras alternative report (OPAC) 2015-2023* [submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child], 2023.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ CRC, [Responses of Honduras to the List of Issues](#), 2015.

¹² *Tico Times*, ['Honduran military aims to fill in for 'absent' parents with program targeting at-risk kids'](#), 23 January 2015.

As of 2015, the official minimum age limit for participation was seven years;¹³ one report suggests that the programme has been targeting children as young as five.¹⁴

The programme's 'moral' training focuses on patriotic service, religious adherence, and 'family values'.¹⁵ Military training includes talks on military values and practice of elements of military drill, such as saluting, forming-up,¹⁶ as well as military techniques such as crawling under barbed wire, according to one report.¹⁷ Although the armed forces state that the use of weapons is excluded, images online do show Honduran primary-school-age children holding military rifles.¹⁸

Child participants have reported that soldiers leading *Guardianes* training record the contact details of children who express an interest in joining the military later.¹⁹ Children have also been asked to act as spies for the armed forces by reporting to *Guardianes* soldiers the locations of local residents suspected of crime.²⁰

The programme is operated entirely by the Ministry of Defence (*Secretaria de Defensa Nacional - SEDENA*). SEDENA claims that *Guardianes* training sessions 'boost patriotic fervour'²¹ while improving engagement in education and protecting children from gangs and drugs.²² Other Honduran voices disagree. Carlos del Cid, of the Honduran National Human Rights Commission, is reported as saying that the *Guardianes* programme is 'indoctrinating kids' minds' with a view to boost military recruitment.²³ A primary school teacher who witnessed the programme in his school described it as 'brainwashing'.²⁴

The programme claims to have trained 200,000 children since 2002.²⁵ Since 2014, the programme has grown to train around 28,000 children annually until at least 2019 (no information is available for the period since then, which included the Covid pandemic).²⁶

With chronic child malnutrition in Honduras running at 23%, according to the World Food Programme,²⁷ the military is able to incentivise participation in *Guardianes* by providing children

¹³ CRC, [Responses of Honduras to the List of Issues](#), 2015.

¹⁴ *Tico Times*, ['Honduran military aims to fill in for 'absent' parents with program targeting at-risk kids'](#), 23 January 2015.

¹⁵ SEDENA, Honduras, ['Parents accompany Guardians of the Homeland'](#), 2020 and ['Comprehensive training with leadership through "Guardians of the Homeland"'](#), 2020.

¹⁶ CNN, ['El programa Guardianes de la Patria'](#), 2014.

¹⁷ Karla Zabudovsky, ['For many kids in Honduras, the options are: flee, join a gang, or train with the military'](#), *BuzzFeed*, 23 May 2018.

¹⁸ For example, see *Tico Times*, ['Honduran military aims to fill in for 'absent' parents with program targeting at-risk kids'](#), 23 January 2015.

¹⁹ Karla Zabudovsky, ['For many kids in Honduras, the options are: flee, join a gang, or train with the military'](#), *BuzzFeed*, 23 May 2018.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² SEDENA, Honduras, ['Parents accompany Guardians of the Homeland'](#), 2020 and ['Comprehensive training with leadership through "Guardians of the Homeland"'](#), 2020.

²³ Cited in Karla Zabudovsky, 'For many kids in Honduras, the options are: flee, join a gang, or train with the military', *BuzzFeed*, 23 May 2018.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ SEDENA, Honduras, ['Parents accompany Guardians of the Homeland'](#), 2020 and ['Comprehensive training with leadership through "Guardians of the Homeland"'](#), 2020.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ World Food Programme, [Honduras: Country brief](#), 2023.

with a free lunch and snacks.²⁸ The army general in charge of the programme is reported as saying in 2018, 'Children leave happy because we give them candy, we give them a sandwich. That is what's important.'²⁹

In 2019, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights described the Guardians programme as 'not adequate to the objectives that education should pursue and promotes in the country a military culture contrary to a culture of peace, in addition to stigmatizing and putting at risk children from certain social sectors'.³⁰

Having reviewed the report of Honduras under OPAC in 2015, the CRC concluded that the *Guardianes* programme was 'incompatible with the purpose and aims of the Optional Protocol, and can only result in increased violence among children and adolescents, and further militarization of Honduran society'.³¹ The Committee urged the state party to bring the programme to an end. The state party report is silent on the matter.

Criminalisation

The Committee has also urged the state party to criminalise child recruitment, including recruitment by non-state armed groups. The present report of the state party does not mention this, and we have no information on whether the Committee's recommendation has been implemented.

COIPRODEN's submission contains additional information on legislative reforms since the State party last reported to the committee.³²

Suggested questions for the List of Issues

- 1. Please provide full responses to the recommendations contained in the Concluding Observations on the State party's initial report under the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict CRC/C/OPAC/HND/CO/1.**
- 2. Please provide an update on plans to amend domestic legislation to prohibit and criminalise all recruitment of persons under the age of 18 in all circumstances, including in a time of war.**
- 3. Please clarify whether the government intends to make permanent the current suspension of *Guardianes de la Patria* programme. Please provide information on the number of children involved since 2015, disaggregated by age, gender, and location. Please also provide information on the number of complaints of maltreatment, including how many such complaints were investigated and how many resulted in a finding of wrongdoing.**

²⁸ *Tico Times*, ['Honduran military aims to fill in for 'absent' parents with program targeting at-risk kids'](#), 23 January 2015.

²⁹ Cited in Karla Zabludovsky, 'For many kids in Honduras, the options are: flee, join a gang, or train with the military', *BuzzFeed*, 23 May 2018.

³⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, [Situation of human rights in Honduras](#), 2019.

³¹ CRC, [Concluding observations on the report of Honduras under OPAC](#), 2015.

³² COIPRODEN, *Honduras alternative report (OPAC) 2015-2023* [submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child], 2023.