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Children Wield AK-47s for Colombia's Rebels to Escape Poverty

By Helen Murphy

April 17 (Bloomberg) -- Struggling through the tangled jungle with his AK-47 rifle loaded and ready, 16-year-old Juan thought only of his mother, a clean bed and freedom as 15 armed guerrillas closed in to kill him.

Just an hour earlier, he had been their comrade, fighting alongside them as a member of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. As a deserter, he faced execution.

"I couldn't take the fear and hunger any more," recalls Juan, a physically and emotionally scarred former child soldier who turned himself in to Colombia's military in 2008 after escaping from two years with the drug-funded rebels. "The army bombed us every night and I was afraid."

As the world seeks to prevent the use of minors in armed conflict, thousands -- some as young as 11 -- bear arms in Colombia's illegal forces, according to New York-based Human Rights Watch. The global financial crisis may increase the pool of willing recruits: With more rural Colombians facing poverty, it may be easier for the rebels to replace members killed or captured in President [Alvaro Uribe](#)'s attacks against them.

Young prospects "come from poor and brutal backgrounds, where even armed combat seems a better option, and the FARC is happy to take them in," says Philippe Houdard, whose [Developing Minds Foundation](#) in Miami Beach, Florida, helps fund a home in Colombia for former child combatants, some of whom were forced into service.

'Appalling' Abuses

While the scope of the problem worldwide is impossible to gauge, Lucia Withers, acting director of the London-based [Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers](#), says youngsters are always involved in wars in some way. United Nations Secretary General [Ban Ki-moon](#) on Feb. 12 said the use of child soldiers is "one of the most appalling human-rights abuses in the world today."

Once the killing starts, "they are thrown into extreme stress," says [Maggie Mauer](#), a Coral Gables, Florida, psychologist who has studied Colombia's former young fighters. "Some told me they lost control of their bowels in combat. But they are not allowed to be afraid; they would be ridiculed by those they depend on for survival."

Juan, who bears a deep gouge down his left cheek, joined the FARC, Colombia's largest illegal armed group, when he was 14. Like most young recruits, he came voluntarily with the promise of adventure and a better life away from destitution. He also wanted revenge on the army for killing his older brother, another child soldier.

His name and the names of other former young combatants have been changed to protect their identities.

Tricking Families

Poverty and parental abuse are the overriding reasons for joining the FARC, says Beatriz Linares, who [heads](#)

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the government's effort to prevent child recruitment. The group often tricks families into believing they will be paid if their sons and daughters enlist, she says.

Some 45 percent of Colombia's 44 million inhabitants lived below the poverty line of 232,000 pesos (\$97) a month in 2006, according to the most recent data from the [national planning department](#).

The FARC was founded in 1964 as a peasant-based, Marxist group. According to [defense ministry](#) estimates, its ranks have been halved to about 8,000 since Uribe took office in 2002. That's partly because of his commitment to defeat drug-funded rebel groups and partly because of desertion.

"It seems to be difficult for the FARC to recruit adults at the moment, but children, who know less about what they're getting into, are much easier targets," says Maria McFarland, senior researcher for Latin America at [Human Rights Watch](#).

Picking Coca Leaves

Miguel, 18 years old, left his parents' coca farm at 13 to join about 300 FARC fighters in Guaviare, [central Colombia](#). He says he "was bored" working with his father picking coca leaves, the raw material for making cocaine, and processing them into base before selling it to the FARC.

"The militia passed our farm all the time, and I dreamt of joining them and getting a gun," he says.

The local FARC leader, accustomed to the attraction of holding a weapon, gave Miguel eight days to consider his decision -- warning that, once in the ranks, there was no way out except death, Miguel says.

He decided to march 10 days into the mountains to join the guerrillas that would be his family for the next three years. They gave him camouflaged fatigues, a pistol and a space on the jungle floor to sleep. Months later he would get his prized AK-47 and lessons on how to kill with it.

Burying Land Mines

Life the first few months was good, he says. He was split off from the main FARC front into a smaller command of 60, at least half of whom were under 16. He got an alias -- a way of remaining anonymous and protecting the group -- a 75-pound equipment backpack and a plastic sheet to protect him from the rain. He was trained in making and burying land mines, running drugs and standing guard.

"At the beginning, the only thing that bothered us was the mosquitoes," Miguel says. "Then I got homesick, as most do, and the commander watched us like a hawk. If he suspected we were going to escape, he would have us shot. We lived in terror."

One friend was just 15 when the FARC riddled him with 50 bullets for trying to flee.

"That hit me hard," says Miguel, who was shot in the chest and lost the use of his left arm in combat. "I wanted him to escape so he could tell my mother I was okay." He surrendered to the army when he was 16 after being surrounded in a gun battle.

Dig His Own Grave

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Juan, who is learning to machine stitch garments at a safe house in Colombia, says he was made to watch as a 17-year-old comrade dug his own grave and was shot by a 19-year-old female rebel for a series of infractions that included falling asleep on guard duty.

While the FARC calls itself the people's army, fighting for the rights of the rural poor, Juan, now 17, says ideological training was scarce.

"We were narcos," he says, biting his gnarled fingernails and wringing his hands. "We marched, we cooked, we fought, but we never did anything for the Colombian people."

With young men and women in the ranks, romance and pregnancy is discouraged. While overt sexual abuse isn't tolerated, underage female guerrillas are often pressured into sexual relations and forced to use contraceptives. Many babies are aborted.

"The girls are just too young to consent," says Human Rights Watch's McFarland.

Return to Society

Since 1999, Colombia's government-run social services have helped almost 4,000 young fighters who left illegal rebel groups. In addition to providing job training, the services also assist in their return to society, which can be difficult, according to Developing Minds' Houdard.

"They are psychologically battle-scarred and know only violence," he says. "Encouraging them to stay away from crime and violence once they leave is the biggest challenge of all."

Carlos, 17, hopes for "a better life" after spending four years with the FARC. "But if I have to go back again, or into another criminal band, I will. I really haven't got too much choice."