

# The Miami Herald

• FARC, FROM 1A

the jungle.

As he worked on a bed-frame in carpentry class, Hector said he'd fallen in love with studying and woodworking.

'KILL OR BE KILLED'

"When you're in the FARC, you have to be resigned to following orders — never seeing your family," he said. "All there was to do before was kill or be killed."

The school is one of four in the country designed to get former underage combatants back on their feet. This one is supported by a local religious organization, the government and Miami's Developing Minds Foundation, among others. The Miami Herald was allowed to visit as long as students' names weren't used or their faces shown. Deserting from the guerrillas can carry a death sentence, and many of these children are on the run.

Colombia's 50-year-old civil conflict has claimed more than 220,000 lives — and dragged the vulnerable, poor and the young into its maw.

No one's sure how many children are in the ranks of FARC and the smaller National Liberation Army, or ELN, but a look at those who have escaped offers a hint.

Of the 1,064 rebel fighters who have been captured or turned themselves in this year, 255, or almost a quarter, were underage — one of them was just 10 years old. Colombia's Family Welfare Institute has registered more than 5,000 child soldiers since 1999.

And those numbers could swell. The government and the FARC are in peace talks in Havana that could bring the conflict to an end. If negotiations are successful, as many as 19,000 guerrillas will need to be reintegrated into society.



ALBERO LOPERA/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

**NEW LIFE:** From their vocational school, former child soldiers look out over the city of Medellín, Colombia. More than 5,000 minors have been rescued from the ranks of guerrilla and other groups since 1999.

Philippe Houdard, a Miami entrepreneur and founder of the Developing Minds Foundation, has been supporting the school in Medellín for seven years. He said programs like it are vital for the prospects of long-term peace.

"I think it will make or break the peace process," he said of the program. "Putting down your arms is the first part of the equation, but to be able to find a place in society is the second part, and it's just as important."

The sprawling campus, run by the Don Bosco religious organization, feels like a well-to-do boarding school. There are hairdressing, graphic design and metal workshops. There's a library and a swimming pool. It also has a medical center, a job-placement program and full-time psychological staff. It costs about \$31,000 per

month to house and train the students, the school said.

The ex-combatants share the campus with a few hundred other needy students — mainly street children, orphans and wards of the state.

**DISPLAY OF DISCIPLINE**

But the former soldiers are different, teachers said. While many struggle with basic skills, like reading and writing, they tend to be extremely patient and obedient. On the frontline, they were used to walking for days with heavy loads on their backs. Disobeying orders was not an option.

Tino, who was recruited by the FARC when he was just 12 years old, described going on guard duty for 12 hours at a time — remaining absolutely motionless except for swiveling his head.

"These kids have no problem getting up at six in the morning," explained Olga Cecilia García, a social worker at the school. In fact, many of them balk when they discover that punishment can be as benign as mopping a floor or losing their internet privileges.

"Some of them demand stricter punishment," she said. "They will tell us things like 'Back there, the punishment would have been a bullet in the foot.'"

Most of the children have seen combat and many have had friends die. Their wounds run deep.

A few years ago, Developing Minds brought a Miami psychologist to test the children for post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. All but one were "off the charts," Houdard said. The exception was a child who had been recruited when he

was just 7-years-old, and left the guerrillas when he was 14.

"He was this super-resilient kid and we just couldn't make heads or tails of it," Houdard said.

But in many ways they're just ordinary teenagers. As they listened to music on oversized headphones and joked with their friends on a recent weekday, they described how boredom, poverty and hunger for adventure had enticed some of them to join the guerrillas.

One 16-year-old said the ELN offered him the equivalent of \$200 a month.

"That was so much money," he said. "But it's only once you're there that you realize how hard life is."

Melissa, a vivacious 16-year-old, said she joined the guerrillas at 14 because a recruiter wooed her.

"He painted this pretty

picture that we were going to live together in the jungle and it was going to be beautiful, and I was dumb enough to believe him," she said. As soon as she was in the ranks of the FARC, she never saw him again. She described the loneliness and isolation of being away from her family. She wondered if her mother — who was unaware of her whereabouts — had given her up for dead. When an air force bombing raid killed her commander, she was devastated.

"That was so hard, because he was like a father to me," she said. "I wanted to leave sooner but the only way out was through the jungle or by boat and I had no idea where I was." She eventually escaped less than a year ago with the help of another guerrilla.

At the campus, the children are encouraged to stay until they've learned a skill and advanced in their formal education. But their long-term success will depend on the Colombia that exists beyond the school grounds.

**VICTIMS OF CONFLICT**

"For these kids to truly be able to make it, they have to be embraced by society," Houdard said. "There is a role for everybody else and that is to recognize that these children are also victims of the conflict; they deserve the chance to be embraced by society and offered jobs and other opportunities."

As he worked on his bed-frame, Hector said the only time he got to use his carpentry skills with the FARC

was to carve wooden rifles for basic training. Now he's dreaming about setting up his own furniture shop and bringing his family to live with him. He can't go home for fear of FARC retribution.

"I've learned so much here," he said, "about things I didn't even know existed."

## COLOMBIA

### Ex-child combatants learn new way of life

At a school in Medellín, former child soldiers are reentering civilian life with help from a Miami-based organization.

BY JIM WYSS  
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MEDELLIN, Colombia — At 14, when children his age might be playing war, Hector lost a finger after an army bullet ripped through his left fist. He'd been a foot soldier in Colombia's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, for less than a year. His commanders patched him up and put him back on the frontlines.

Hector eventually escaped. And now, along with 44 other former child combatants — 11 girls and 33 boys — he lives and works at a hilltop vocational school where he and the others learn trades like auto-mechanics and hairdressing, and the social skills they never needed in

• TURN TO FARC, 2A