



## PRESS RELEASE

### Colombia: Child Soldiers risk being left out of the peace process.

**19 February, 2015** – **Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict** is concerned that the peace process between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC–EP) in Havana, still falls short of recognizing child soldiers as victims of the conflict. “Despite recent efforts to include the issue of child soldiers in the negotiation, parties to the peace process should not turn a blind eye to the thousands of child soldiers who have yet to be recognized as victims and are entitled to effective remedies for the violation of their rights.” said Gilles-Philippe Pagé, Partnerships Program Officer at Watchlist.

The FARC-EP is a persistent perpetrator of recruitment and use of child soldiers and has consistently been listed in the UN Secretary-General’s annual reports on children and armed conflict since 2003. For half a century, the FARC-EP has recruited and used thousands of girls and boys, as young as 12 years old, for conflict-related activities as well as drug trafficking. Children have served as fighters, messengers, porters, *raspachines* (for scraping coca leaves) and some have been victims of sexual exploitation.

On 3 February, the FARC-EP published a [proposal for a recognition of the rights of the victims of the conflict](#) which identifies women, rural communities, social and political organizations and political prisoners as victims of the conflict. Crucially, this proposal falls short of recognizing child soldiers as victims, undermining efforts to protect their right to reparation and fostering further impunity.

The situation is reminiscent of previous failure to fully recognize child soldiers during the 2003-2006 demobilization of the paramilitary umbrella group the United Self-Defense Force of Colombia (AUC). Despite an estimated 5,000 children associated with the group, only [450 children](#) went formal reintegration implemented under the auspices of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar*, ICBF). The rest of the children never had access to the assistance necessary to ensure safe and sustainable reintegration into civilian life. “Colombia must not repeat the mistake of the past and ensure that the demobilization of underage recruits will be conducted in a transparent and accountable way that will ensure that the rights of victims will be protected,” said Pagé.

After decades of internal armed conflict, recognition is also an important first step towards accountability for victims and addressing long-standing impunity. “The thousands of children whose childhood have been stolen must receive justice. Those responsible for grave violations against children must be held to account. This peace process must not grant amnesty or *de facto* impunity for alleged perpetrators,” said Pagé.

The ability of the peace process in Colombia to effectively integrate issues related to the protection of children will to a large extent determine the future of thousands of children victims of underage recruitment. The first necessary step is to recognize their rights as victims of the conflict.

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**Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict**, established in 2001, is an international network of human rights and humanitarian non-government organizations striving to end violations against children in armed conflict and to guarantee their rights. As a global network, Watchlist builds partnerships among local, national and international NGOs, enhancing mutual capacities and strengths. Working together, we strategically collect and disseminate information on violations against children in conflict to influence key decision-makers to create and implement programs and policies that effectively protect children. Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict is a project of Tides Center, a non-profit public charity.

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