

## Colombia's Escalating Child Soldier Crisis

By [www.360geopolitica.org](http://www.360geopolitica.org)

Colombia is confronting a rapidly escalating crisis involving child soldiers, human rights abuses, and humanitarian suffering. President Gustavo Petro's Total Peace initiative has strengthened illegal armed groups, expanded criminal networks, and left thousands of children vulnerable to recruitment, sexual exploitation, and death.

This policy environment enables armed groups and criminal organizations to continue sexually enslaving children, forcibly recruiting them as soldiers, and coercing them into drug trafficking and violent conflict against both the State and civilian populations.

At its core, this reflects a political approach that prioritizes negotiation with these actors, even in the face of grave human rights violations. It exposes a mindset that treats children and youth not as full rights-holders but as pawns in a political strategy—sacrificing their safety and future for political aims.

### Total Peace

The scale of Total Peace is far larger than commonly recognized. The UK government reports that Petro's administration is negotiating with approximately 25 armed groups and criminal gangs, while ACAPS notes that at least 22 groups have formally expressed interest, with 10 smaller factions agreeing to a multilateral ceasefire. Four principal armed groups—the ELN, Clan del Golfo, Estado Mayor Central (EMC), and Segunda Marquetalia—alongside 23 criminal gangs, are allegedly actively participating in negotiations.

The initiative is presented as a dual-track process, separating politically motivated guerrilla groups - which Colombia has none- from criminal structures “required to submit to justice.” Yet experts warn that the sheer number and diversity of participants have created a highly fragmented and unstable process, raising serious questions about oversight, enforcement, and the ultimate viability of the strategy.

Since Petro's election—still legally contested—the government *has decreed ceasefires that have favored dramatic surges in Colombia's illegal*

*armed groups and organized crime.* FARC dissident factions grew from 3,275 to 9,634 members, the Clan del Golfo nearly doubled from 4,061 to 8,945, and the ELN expanded from 5,885 to 6,699 (Semana magazine November 8, 2025).

These numbers make it clear: rather than reducing violence, Total Peace has strengthened the very actors perpetuating it, consolidating support for Petro and political allies. At the same time, other criminal gangs have surged dramatically, intensifying insecurity across the country.

### Child Forced Recruitment

The most vulnerable victims of Total Peace are Colombia's children and youth. Between 2022 and 2024, the United Nations verified at least 474 cases of child recruitment, while UNICEF reported a 64% increase in 2024 alone. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are disproportionately affected, and girls represent nearly 40% of victims.

NGOs estimate that at least 1,800 children were drawn into armed conflict between 2022 and 2023, with the Defensoría del Pueblo documenting 625 cases in 2024 and 162 in 2025. Non-state armed groups reportedly recruited 919 children per year during 2023-2024, and the Colombian government rescued 447 children in 2024—efforts that cover only a fraction of those at risk.

Structural vulnerabilities—including poverty, displacement, lack of education, and weak state presence—create fertile ground for recruitment, often facilitated via social media. Cases surged from 37 in 2021 to over 600 in 2024, exposing systemic failures in protecting children despite reintegration programs.

Thousands of children remain coerced into criminal groups, with devastating consequences for their safety, development, and futures. In some cases, they are used as sexual slaves.

### Child Soldiers as Victims of Military Action

Tragically, children and youth are not only recruited by armed groups/organized crime—they are killed in military operations. In early November 2025, the Ombudsperson's Office reported that Colombian army bombings had killed eight children in the Vaupés region, later revised to fifteen by forensic authorities

apparently taking in consideration bombings in Cauca and Caquetá as well. NGOs expressed outrage—the first in over three years and a half.

*President Petro's government has consistently misrepresented the number, location, and targets of bombings, obscuring the full scale of civilian and child and youth casualties.*

The ICRC (CICR) has warned that children in Colombia are increasingly caught in armed conflict, exploited by both state and non-state actors. They face recruitment, exposure to explosives, disappearances, and the collapse of protective community structures. Through confidential dialogue and advocacy, the ICRC calls on all parties to respect international humanitarian law, adopt “special agreements,” and create protected spaces such as schools. Despite these measures, children remain trapped in a cycle of violence, highlighting the urgent need for decisive humanitarian and legal action to protect their lives, safety, and future.

Either the Ombudsperson's Office, NGOs, nor international actors—including the UN, the EU, and Sweden, which is legally required to conduct a humanitarian and human rights assessment before selling 17 Gripen aircraft to Colombia—have provided the public with an accurate account of the situation. Political and economic interests appear to dictate this silence, overshadowing transparency and accountability.

However, the international community has largely turned a blind eye to these atrocities. COP16 (October–November 2024) and CELAC-EU (November 2025) went ahead in Colombia, despite the fact that illegal armed groups and organized crime control nearly 75% of the country—including regions such as Catatumbo, Cesar, Cauca, Antioquia, Guaviare, Vaupés, Caquetá, Nariño, Huila, Chocó, La Guajira, and Putumayo—where criminal networks thrive and millions of Colombians endure forced recruitment, sexual exploitation, and child marriage.

To accommodate these events, vast territories were left undefended, with police and military redeployed ostensibly to protect visiting dignitaries—a move that constitutes an apparent violation of international humanitarian law.

Since **July 2024**, the Colombian army has carried out at least fourteen bombardments against armed groups, yet it has provided no transparency regarding civilian or child and youth casualties (El Tiempo, El Espectador, Semana).

In just three bombings since **August 2025**—information that only emerged through leaks—fifteen children were reportedly killed. Critical questions remain unanswered: what were the civilian impacts of the other operations, and why has the international community largely turned a blind eye to these actions?

The tragic reality is clear: Colombia's children and youth are caught at the intersection of armed conflict and government inaction, and the international community's failure to act is compounding a human rights and humanitarian crisis of immense proportions.

In November 2019, the Colombian military carried out an airstrike against a FARC dissidents' camp in Caquetá. Intended to target armed combatants, the operation tragically resulted in the deaths of at least eight children, some reportedly recruited by the group.

Human rights organizations condemned the strike, highlighting the failure to safeguard minors and underscoring the broader problem of child recruitment by armed groups. Politically, the incident led to the resignation of Defense Minister Guillermo Botero and ignited a national debate over military tactics and adherence to international humanitarian law.

At the time, government reports stated that no civilians or children were present. Subsequent investigations, however, revealed that civilians and children had been deliberately hidden by armed groups and used as human shields to undermine the government's credibility.

Political actors, including President Petro (then Senator in 2019) and allies such as Iván Cepeda, Claudia López, Angélica Lozano, and Juanita Goebertus, once amplified the incident into a nationwide campaign—but today, they remain conspicuously silent. Backed by coordinated online activity linked to Maduro's regime, they helped spark protests that escalated into

the *Estallido Social*, mobilizing the public under the slogan “*Nos están matando*” (“They are killing us”).

Since August 2022, armed groups tied to Petro's Total Peace initiative have repeatedly used civilians as human shields in *asonadas*, sudden mob attacks meant to obstruct military operations. In several cases, the mobs materialized by surprise, seemingly in concert with criminal groups to block the Colombian army like in November 2019.

Investigations by *Semana* magazine document at least 55 such incidents to date, with over 44 occurring in 2025 alone. The Attorney General's Office confirms 52 *asonadas* this year, many targeting military personnel directly.

President Petro has defended these gatherings as expressions of civilian support for criminal groups and the Total Peace negotiations. Yet the pattern reveals a far more disturbing reality: civilians—including children and youth—are being deliberately placed in harm's way. Social support is being weaponized, raising urgent questions about both the safety of Colombia's military and the effectiveness of the Total Peace strategy.

This tactic, employed by Petro, his allies, and today's Total Peace actors, has also been used to discredit previous governments, turning complex security challenges into political leverage.

The actions of Petro, his political allies, and figures associated with the Total Peace initiative demonstrate a *consistent disregard* for the safety of children, youth, and other civilians. Their conduct appears driven less by public security or justice concerns and more by efforts to consolidate political influence ahead of the 2026 legislative and presidential elections.

*Through this alliance, Petro, the Pacto Histórico, and Total Peace actors would wield control over elections in territories where opposition and civil society are intimidated, undermining democratic participation across large swaths of the country.*

#### Conclusion and Recommendations

Colombia's children and youth are trapped at the deadly crossroads of armed conflict, criminal

enterprise, and government inaction. The Total Peace initiative has, on one hand, empowered criminal groups, fragmented law enforcement, and exposed civilians to severe risks.

On the other hand, it has succeeded in intimidating opponents—some reportedly requiring up to 15 bodyguards—and the broader Colombian public. In a statement, the Minister of Health addressed Colombians with an implicit warning to comply: “*Do you want another Estallido Social?*”

Fortunately, the CICR has consistently upheld and operated within the full scope of its mandate

Immediate action is required:

1. Transparency and accountability: The Colombian government must fully report casualties, locations, and the true scope of military operations.
2. Protection of children and youth: Urgent national and international programs must prevent recruitment and ensure safety for vulnerable populations.
3. Well-resourced reintegration programs are needed to provide former child soldiers with education, psychological support, and livelihoods.
4. International oversight: UN, EU, and other actors must protect civilians, particularly children and youth.
5. Targeted enforcement: Illegal armed groups exploiting Total Peace concessions must be held accountable for child recruitment, sexual exploitation, and other crimes.

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