

Colombia: Child Soldiers of the FARC-EP

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Summary

*The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (SJP) has been investigating the systematic recruitment and abuse of children by the FARC-EP between 1996 and 2006. Under Case 07, it has identified nearly **18,700 victims**, with thousands formally recognized, including entire Indigenous communities. The **2024** charges against six former FARC commanders' detail severe abuses, including **forced recruitment, torture, sexual violence, and forced abortions**.*

*In response, the accused issued a 453-page statement that admits partial responsibility but **deliberately** omits the most egregious crimes—particularly those of sexual and gender-based violence. Their refusal to fully confront these atrocities undermines their claims of accountability and casts doubt on their commitment to truth and justice.*

*Internationally, a **distorted narrative** has allowed FARC members and former members to resettle as political refugees, often portrayed as victims rather than perpetrators. This trend—actively supported by President Gustavo Petro's administration—has resulted in the marginalization of real victims and the rehabilitation of war criminals' reputations in Europe and beyond. **International aid** has shifted away from survivors, and countries hosting former FARC members risk becoming complicit in denying justice.*

The **2016 Peace Accord** between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP) marked a historic step toward ending over five decades of armed conflict. As part of the agreement, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) was established to investigate and prosecute the most serious crimes committed during the conflict. Among its priorities is the investigation of the FARC-EP's recruitment and use of children between **1996 and 2006** (by mutual agreement, 1970-1995 and 2006-2016 are excluded from scope).

Case 07 was opened on **March 1, 2019**, by SJP to investigate the recruitment and use of children

in Colombia's armed conflict. It remains the only case within the SJP that specifically focuses on violence committed against children. The case is divided into two subcases: one addressing crimes allegedly committed by the FARC-EP, and the other focusing on the Public Security Forces.

In **August 2021**, the Chamber for Acknowledgment of Truth identified a provisional universe of **18,677** unique victims. This estimate emerged from a preliminary process of cross-referencing all available sources within the SJP related to these crimes, which were allegedly committed by the now-defunct FARC-EP under Case 07.

To date, the SJP has officially recognized **9,854** individuals as victims in the FARC-EP subcase. Of these, **951** have been individually accredited—with **54%** having been directly recruited as children, and **46%** being family members of children who were recruited or used in the conflict. Additionally, five Indigenous Peoples have been accredited as collective victims, representing a total of **8,903** individuals.

The five Indigenous communities recognized as victims in this context are the Cubeo, Hitnu, Barí, Koreguaje, and Sikuni peoples. These groups are in the departments of Vaupés, Arauca, Norte de Santander, Caquetá, and Guaviare, respectively. Their inclusion highlights the disproportionate impact the conflict had on Indigenous populations.

Geographically, approximately **90%** of the reported incidents in the FARC-EP subcase occurred in the departments of Meta, Caquetá, Tolima, Guaviare, Antioquia, Norte de Santander, Cauca, Huila, Putumayo, Santander, Cundinamarca, Casanare, Arauca, Nariño, Boyacá, and Vichada. This data reflects the broad territorial scope of the FARC-EP's

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recruitment and use of children throughout Colombia during the armed conflict.

In late 2024, the peace tribunal charged the now defunct FARC-EP's secretariat with war crimes, including the forced recruitment of at least 18,677 children between 1996 and 2006. ***Many of these minors were subjected to forced recruitment, mistreatment, torture, and killings of children; reproductive violence, including systematic forced abortions on underage girls and young women; sexual violence against boys and girls; and violence motivated by prejudice against children with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression (SOGIE).***

The six accused are Rodrigo Londoño (a.k.a. Timochenko), Jaime Alberto Parra (El Médico), Milton Toncel (Joaquín Gómez), Pastor Alape, Pablo Catatumbo (now a senator), and Julián Gallo (Carlos Antonio Lozada, also a senator). Although they had acknowledged in November that minors were recruited into the ranks, this is their first formal admission of responsibility.

On **8 July 2025**, Colombians were informed that the former FARC-EP submitted a 453-page document to SJP in response to the 2024 charges of recruiting and using children – including those under 15 – in armed conflict. While the former commanders acknowledged collective responsibility and referred to their crimes as a “collective wound that left deep scars in the social fabric,” their statement falls drastically short.

They deliberately ***avoided addressing*** the most severe and specific allegations, including *mass forced abortions inflicted on minors, the widespread use of forced stripping, and the systematic sexual violence within their ranks*. Worse still, they downplayed the abuse by claiming many victims were ‘no longer minors’ – a rationale that evades accountability and normalizes ongoing exploitation under FARC control.

This strategic evasion exposes a refusal to confront the full extent of their crimes,

particularly those rooted in gender-based and sexual violence. Such omissions undermine their claims of accountability and raise serious doubts about their commitment to truth, justice, and reparations. In their public statement, former FARC-EP commanders claimed a “duty to contribute a truth” that would promote justice, reparation, and non-repetition.

But their submission fails to live up to that promise. The SJP's case, built on testimony from over 1,000 victims, details widespread and systematic abuses. While the tribunal found no direct evidence that the six accused commanders personally ordered or committed the crimes, it concluded they knew about them – and let them continue.

Juan Manuel Martínez, lead attorney for the victims, called the statement grossly inadequate. “There is a lack of full truth-telling,” he said, arguing that the commanders' tone is defensive and evasive, more suited to a criminal trial than a restorative justice process. He described the 453-page document they submitted as an attempt to deflect accountability rather than confront the truth.

Martínez also criticized the refusal to acknowledge the systemic nature of sexual violence within FARC. “They present these as isolated acts,” he said, “but the evidence – and the victims' accounts – show a pattern the leadership knew about and tolerated.

Meanwhile, the accused have asked the JEP to consolidate all pending cases into a single proceeding, citing “timely justice” and “legal certainty.” The move aims to limit legal exposure before a full reckoning takes place.

The SJP must now decide whether the submission meets the standard for an official acknowledgment of truth. If accepted, it could lead to a public hearing and restorative penalties. But for now, the statement falls well short of the full and unflinching truth that victims – and the country – deserve.

Case 07 and the International Community: A Question of Justice

Since the 1970s, hundreds of FARC-EP members, later former guerrillas, and their families have resettled in Europe and other regions under the pretense of political asylum.

Many host countries have not only accepted them but embraced a narrative—promoted by sectors of the Colombian [far] left and echoed today by President Gustavo Petro—that frames them as victims of Colombia's internal conflict, primarily of right-wing paramilitary groups.

This narrative is dangerously one-sided—and often false. It erases thousands of Colombians who suffered at the hands of the FARC and distorts the reality of a complex conflict. It silences those who challenge this revisionist history, especially civil society actors and victims' groups. What began as political reframing has become a propaganda tool, pushed today by Petro's government and echoed by ideological allies and presidential hopefuls.

Since **August 2022, international aid** meant to support victims has increasingly been redirected to rehabilitate former FARC-EP members' image. They are now featured as protagonists in books, documentaries, films, and forums—not as perpetrators of war crimes, but as misunderstood revolutionaries. This deliberate rewriting misinforms global audiences and undermines prospects for justice and reconciliation.

Petro's "Total Peace" is not peace—it is a political pact that empowers armed groups and criminal organizations. Rather than disarming them, it has legitimized violence, expanded their control to nearly 75% of Colombia, strengthened their illegal economies, *and fueled a surge in child recruitment since 2022 under Petro's peace policies.*

These actors now serve Petro and his allies' political agenda—not the interests of the Colombian people.

Conclusions

Partial Admissions Undermine Justice: *The FARC-EP leadership's submission to the SJP evades critical truths*

and fails to meet the moral and legal standards of full accountability.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Remains Unacknowledged: *The refusal to recognize these crimes as systemic reflects a continued culture of impunity within former FARC ranks.*

Victims Continue to Be Silenced: *Thousands of survivors—especially children and Indigenous populations—remain sidelined, their suffering overshadowed by political narratives and international whitewashing.*

International Complicity is Growing: *Western governments and institutions, by uncritically accepting former guerrillas as refugees or peacebuilders, risk legitimizing impunity and eroding the global human rights framework.*

A Call for Independent Oversight: *It is imperative that European and international legal bodies reassess asylum and legal protections granted to former FARC members implicated in crimes against humanity.*

Peace Cannot Be Built on Evasion: *True reconciliation demands full truth-telling, sincere acknowledgment of harm, and a justice process centered on victims—not on the image management of perpetrators.*