

COLOMBIA

Some 140 school teachers were murdered and more than 1,000 school teachers received death threats in 2009-2012, with threats increasing in 2013. Children were recruited from school by armed groups and there continued to be reports of public security forces using schools for military purposes, despite legal curbs.

CONTEXT

Violence and abuses associated with Colombia's internal armed conflict, which has continued for nearly half a century, have displaced more than 5 million people.⁵²⁷ Approximately 220,000 people have died, according to the government-created National Center for Historical Memory.⁵²⁸

The main actors involved in the fighting have included government armed forces and the police; left-wing armed groups, notably the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN); and right-wing paramilitaries, especially the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), which underwent a deeply flawed official demobilization process during the administration of President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010). New paramilitary successor groups, led largely by former paramilitaries, emerged after the demobilization process.⁵²⁹

Juan Manuel Santos replaced Álvaro Uribe as president in 2010 and initiated peace talks with the FARC in November 2012.⁵³⁰

Human rights defenders, community leaders, trade unionists, journalists, indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders, and displaced persons' leaders have all faced death threats and other abuses during the conflict.

According to the teachers' trade union the Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE), 360 teachers were murdered and 342 threatened in the decade up to 2009.⁵³¹ The president of the National University of Colombia is reported to have stated that the university registered 312 reports of threats in 2007 and 2008.⁵³² At least twelve Colombian university students were killed between 2006 and 2008, most of whom were well-known student leaders, according to a report by the UK's National Union of Students, University and College Union and UK-based NGO Justice for Colombia.⁵³³

In 2011, net enrolment in primary school was 87 per cent, net secondary enrolment 76 per cent and gross tertiary enrolment 43 per cent.⁵³⁴ Adult literacy was 93 per cent (2009).⁵³⁵

ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

At least two schools were directly targeted. In one case, a school was attacked both by armed groups and armed forces. In February 2010, for instance, FARC combatants forced their way into a rural school in Nariño department during a meeting of the indigenous community, according to the UN. The Colombian armed forces attacked the FARC members inside the school. Suspected of collusion with the enemy by both sides, 300 members of the indigenous community reportedly fled.⁵³⁶ In the other case, in June 2010, a bomb blew up in a school in rural Cauca, allegedly targeting Colombian military forces while they were inside it.⁵³⁷

The International Committee of the Red Cross registered five incidents of education facilities destroyed in hostilities and 10 more affected by nearby explosives and ordnance from 2009 to 2012.⁵³⁸

The UN reported three incidents of mines left near schools during the reporting period. For example, in Valle del Cauca, the FARC left behind mines after using a school as a shield, causing lessons to be suspended for six months.⁵³⁹ A 2012 Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict report also warned that guerrillas were increasingly planting landmines without a record of their location, preventing children from walking to school.⁵⁴⁰

ATTACKS ON SCHOOL STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND OTHER EDUCATION PERSONNEL

Figures for the number of teachers murdered vary. According to teachers' union FECODE, the number of its members killed remained steady for the first three years of the reporting period (27 in 2009, 27 in 2010, 21 in 2011), then dropped to 13 in 2012.⁵⁴¹ The Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS), a prominent Colombian NGO monitoring labour rights, reported 21 murders of unionized teachers in 2009, 28 in 2010, 16 in 2011 and just four in 2012.⁵⁴² The Ministry of Education's numbers, which include both unionized and non-unionized teachers, were higher overall but with lower totals for unionized teachers: 34 (of whom 15 were unionized) were killed in 2009, 40 (21) in 2010, 36 (17) in 2011, and 30 (9) in 2012.⁵⁴³

Compared with the number of teachers killed, five to 10 times as many death threats were reported. Ministry of Education figures (for all teachers) and ENS figures (for unionized teachers only) differ, but both exceed 1,000 death threats in 2009-2012. The breakdown by year is set out below:

Death threats against teachers⁵⁴⁴

Year	MoE data	ENS data
2009	135	243
2010	334	284
2011	310	299
2012	287	181
Total	1,086	1,007

By comparison, FECODE's figures were much higher: more than 3,000 teachers reported threats against them in 2011 and 2,000 reported threats between January and September 2012.⁵⁴⁵

Teachers may be targeted for a number of reasons. Some teachers in remote areas, where armed non-state groups are strong and schools are the only visible presence of the state, are accused by illegal armed groups of collaborating with the enemy. Teachers have also been targeted for playing an important social and leadership role in the community. Armed groups have threatened teachers for trying to lead community efforts to protect children from sexual violence and child recruitment and other efforts that challenge the groups' activities.⁵⁴⁶

Teacher murders can prompt wider community instability. According to the UN, in June 2009, an entire indigenous community was forced to flee their homes in Arauca province after suspected members of the FARC shot a teacher from their village in front of his pupils. In Cauca in 2010, the FARC allegedly killed two teachers and then threatened all the teachers in one rural area of that department, forcing all teachers to flee the area and leaving 320 children without schooling.⁵⁴⁷

According to ENS, 305 unionized teachers suffered forced displacement in 2009-2012.⁵⁴⁸

In 2010, the government strengthened protections for teachers at risk of violence by a decree offering such teachers 'provisional status' so that they could relocate rapidly while they waited for police to carry out a risk assessment. A year later, another decree added another teacher trade union representative to the 'Threatened Teachers' Committee' in territories that had more than 5,000 teachers, and the period of provisional status was increased from three to six months in cases where the police could not complete their investigation in time.⁵⁴⁹

According to a report by the National Ministry of Education, of the 600 teaching staff who reported receiving death threats in 2011, 38 left the country, 282 were given temporary transfers and 38 were transferred permanently.⁵⁵⁰

The International Trade Union Confederation reported that on 9 September 2010, Segundo Salvador Forero, a member of the teachers' trade union EDUCAL, was killed in Anserma, Caldas, after the local education ministry rejected a request made to them by his union to grant him 'threatened person' status, which would have given him the right to transfer to a safe location.⁵⁵¹

Paramilitary successor groups and affiliated criminal gangs also attacked students on their way to and from school. In Medellín, the Ombudsman registered the murder of 11 students while they were going to or returning from school in 2009 and four more in 2010.⁵⁵² These killings occurred almost exclusively in the violence-wracked poor neighbourhoods known as 'comunas'⁵⁵³ where criminal gangs, which often acted as local franchises of paramilitary successor groups, fought for territorial control.⁵⁵⁴ In 2011, the Ombudsman's Office declared that 23 schools in Medellín were at risk from armed groups because they were situated on the invisible boundaries between gang territories, according to UNHCR. That

same year in Medellín, 965 students transferred from, or simply dropped out of, six education institutions after being threatened or because one of their classmates was killed, according to the Ombudsman.⁵⁵⁵

MILITARY USE OF SCHOOLS

Colombia is one of the few nations that explicitly limits or prohibits the use of schools and other education facilities by their armed forces.⁵⁵⁶ Nonetheless, there continued to be reports of security forces using schools during the reporting period. The UN reported serious concerns over the occupation of schools by national security forces in the departments of Antioquia, Arauca, Cauca, Córdoba and Norte de Santander in 2010,⁵⁵⁷ and by the Colombian National Army in those same departments plus Huila, Nariño and Valle de Cauca in 2011.⁵⁵⁸

The ICRC recorded 75 cases of occupation of school facilities by all armed actors from 2009 to 2012.⁵⁵⁹

On 2 June 2012, the FARC attacked a police outpost located on the grounds of the Chilví Education Institution, Nariño department, according to CINEP, a Colombian human rights organization.⁵⁶⁰ The police reportedly left their outpost, which was constructed out of wood, and fled to the neighbouring school, which was made of brick. In the firefight, about 70 per cent of the school was damaged, according to CINEP. Public concerns had previously been raised about the risks involved in locating a police station close to the civilian population. CINEP reported that the police had stayed years longer than the originally agreed three months and the Tumaco Secretary of Education had specifically asked for the station to be relocated. After the attack, students had to be moved to schools in neighbouring areas and teachers did not

want to teach in Chilví due to the lack of security. A day after the school rector asked the police to relocate during a public meeting, he received death threats and was forced to flee, according to CINEP.⁵⁶¹

The 2012 Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict report described police in Putumayo using schools as a base for operations against guerrillas or failing to comply with a requirement to stay at least 200 metres away from schools. Police presence led to schools being attacked by guerrillas; and police reportedly sexually harassed female pupils and stole school food supplies, according to Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict.⁵⁶²

CHILD RECRUITMENT FROM SCHOOLS

The Early Warning System of the Ombudsman's Office identified the FARC, ELN, El Ejército Popular Revolucionario Antiterrorista de Colombia (ERPAC),⁵⁶³ Los Paisas, Los Urabeños, Águilas Negras and Los Rastrojos as groups recruiting children during the reporting period.⁵⁶⁴ According to the UN, some of this recruitment took place in schools.⁵⁶⁵

The 2012 Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict report confirmed guerrilla and paramilitary successor groups used schools for recruitment.⁵⁶⁶

According to the UN, a teacher in Chocó intervened in the attempted recruitment of two teenage boys on school grounds by the ELN guerrilla group in April 2010. Both the teacher and the students then fled, fearing retaliation.⁵⁶⁷ In 2012, the Ombudsman reported that in Vichada Department FARC members approached two students of the Escuela Santa Teresita del Tuparro on their way to school to obtain information about the school for recruiting purposes.⁵⁶⁸

The national Ombudsman reported that both the FARC and paramilitary successor groups were using

schools to indoctrinate students as a first step towards recruitment.⁵⁶⁹ Rural boarding schools were particularly targeted for recruitment purposes by armed groups because of their isolation. For instance, recruitment was carried out by suspected guerrillas in education centres and boarding schools in rural Vista Hermosa and Puerto Rico municipalities. Other boarding schools were targeted by paramilitary successor groups.⁵⁷⁰ In 2012, a teacher in Putumayo was arrested for teaching FARC ideology to children at school, including making them sing the FARC anthem.⁵⁷¹ In Vista Hermosa, Meta, during the week of 12-18 March 2012, guerrillas believed to be part of FARC's 27th Front called meetings with students at several rural schools in the area, offering them snacks for their attendance, and appeared to attempt to indoctrinate them.⁵⁷² According to the Coalition Against Involvement of Children and Youth in Armed Conflict (COALICO), other cases of recruitment activities by armed groups in schools were reported in the departments of Antioquia, Arauca, Bolívar, Caldas, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Sucre and Valle del Cauca.⁵⁷³ According to the national Ombudsman, also in 2012, in Tierradentro, Cauca, young children and teenagers were used in surveillance and intelligence work for Águilas Negras, as well as to recruit other children by offering bribes in educational institutions.⁵⁷⁴

COALICO reported that paramilitary successor groups waited outside schools to talk to children, find out information, and recruit and control them.⁵⁷⁵ COALICO also reported that armed groups used school students to run their drug business inside schools which in many cases led to children being recruited by the group. Boys and girls were also used as spies or to transport arms or pass on messages to other students in schools.⁵⁷⁶

ATTACKS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Paramilitary successor groups and guerrillas threatened students and student and university leaders as they sought to exert influence over university campuses.

Attacks on higher education facilities

According to media reports, in May 2010, 50-60 armed persons in ELN uniforms entered the central square of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá, and made a political speech.⁵⁷⁷

Attacks on higher education students, academics and personnel

Four university students were murdered between March and May 2009, according to a report by the UK's National Union of Students (NUS), University and College Union (UCU), and Justice for Colombia.⁵⁷⁸ The victims included Enrique Sierra, a student of ethnic education of the University of La Guajira who was active in the Association of Colombian University Students. He was shot in the head by motorcyclists while he made his way to university on 9 March 2009.⁵⁷⁹ NUS, UCU and Justice for Colombia reported three additional cases between March and May 2009.⁵⁸⁰

Also in March 2009, 30 student leaders from the University of Antioquia were threatened in an email signed by the 'Bloque Antioqueño de las Autodefensas'. The students were told to leave the university and the region or face assassination.⁵⁸¹

A UNHCR report issued on 27 May 2010 said that college and university professors viewed as politically active faced risks to their safety.⁵⁸²

In 2011, the Santos government drew up reform plans which students feared would lead to further privatization of higher education but later withdrew

them in the face of widespread student-led protests.⁵⁸³ In October 2011, the FARC allegedly sent messages to six university leaders in the department of Antioquia identifying them as 'military targets' for continuing their classes during the ongoing strike by students against the proposed higher education reforms.⁵⁸⁴ In July 2012, the administrative body of the National University of Colombia denounced threats which had been issued to students who were looking into alternatives to the proposed higher education reforms.⁵⁸⁵

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION IN 2013

Some 350 teachers were threatened⁵⁸⁶ between January and September 2013, according to the Ministry of Education, which was the highest number threatened in any year during the 2009-2013 period and represented a steep rise from 2012.⁵⁸⁷ According to a report by the Early Warning System of the Ombudsman in November, teachers in Córdoba department faced continued intimidation by guerrilla and paramilitary successor groups.⁵⁸⁸ In July, as death threats spread through the municipalities of Sucre, four teaching staff received text messages to their phones, claiming to be from the paramilitary successor group Los Rastrojos, stating that the teachers 'had been declared a military objective'.⁵⁸⁹ In September, the government passed Decree 1782, which sought to ease teacher transfers through more detailed procedures. It also led to the establishment of a committee to monitor the incorporation of teachers into new schools.⁵⁹⁰

Armed groups attacked four schools in the first half of 2013, affecting 67 students, according to COALICO.⁵⁹¹ For example, on 1 February, a blast levelled dormitories and classrooms at Guillermo Ruiz Mejía boarding school in Balsillas village, Caquetá department, in an apparently intentional attack attributed to the FARC. No injuries were

reported. The armed forces reportedly helped construct the school in 2011 and the project received funding from the American Embassy and the Caquetá government. The military said the school was attacked in retaliation for military operations against the guerrillas. Some locals believed the guerrillas were against the US and the army being involved in building schools in the region, according to a report in El Tiempo newspaper.⁵⁹²

'Invisible borders' between territories disputed by rival armed and criminal groups were a key cause of school dropout in Medellín, according to the Association of Instructors of Antioquia and the Medellín human rights Ombudsman. On 20 February 2013, residents in Bello Horizonte and Villa Flora, District 7, received an anonymous leaflet telling them not to take their children to four specific schools because there was going to be a war; as a result, 4,000 children missed school for a day.⁵⁹³ In certain areas such as Villa Hermosa, District 8, Medellín, the drop-out rate reportedly rose to nearly 40 per cent.⁵⁹⁴

In higher education, teachers and staff at the University of Córdoba reportedly faced threats from Los Rastrojos in April.⁵⁹⁵ On 14 June, professors at the University of Antioquia went on strike to protest against harassment by illegal armed groups within the institution. The strike followed an incident the day before in which 15 masked men reportedly broke into lecturers' offices and a laboratory, stole equipment, raised a FARC flag and addressed a crowd of 200 students on campus about the peace process. The university reported the presence of the FARC at the institution. The Government Secretary of the Department of Antioquia said 12 arrest warrants had previously been issued against members of the university community in 2013.⁵⁹⁶

In November, a paramilitary successor group threatened to kill 11 students at the University of Córdoba.⁵⁹⁷

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⁵²⁸ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/informeGeneral/d...>

⁵²⁹ The government implemented a demobilization of paramilitary groups between 2003 and 2006. Since then, elements of former paramilitary groups and new groups have continued to use violence, including in relation to drug trafficking and other criminal activities. These are referred to here as paramilitary successor groups. See HRW, *Paramilitaries' heirs: The new face of violence in Colombia* (New York: HRW, February 2010), 18-36.

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⁵³³ *Colombia: Students in the Firing Line – A Report on Human Rights Abuses Suffered by Colombian University Students* (National Union of Students, University and College Union and Justice for Colombia, 2009), 6.

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⁵⁴² Figures supplied by ENS, February 2013.

⁵⁴³ Figures supplied by the Ministry of Education, using figures from the Labour Ministry, processed by the Presidential Programme on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, April 2013.

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⁵⁴⁵ "Más de 2 mil maestros han sido amenazados de muerte en el 2012," *RCN Radio*, 14 September 2012.

⁵⁴⁶ *Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y DIH, 2010*, 77, 87; UNSC, *Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia, S/2012/171*, 6 March 2012, para 41; UNSC, *Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia, S/2013/245*, 15 May 2013, para 177; Viviano Colarado, ENS, interviewed by Sibylla Brodzinsky, February 2012; Vice-President of FECODE, interviewed by the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, see *Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, No one to trust: Children and armed conflict in Colombia* (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, April 2012), 30.

⁵⁴⁷ UNSC, *Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia, S/2012/171*, 6 March 2012, 10.

⁵⁴⁸ Information supplied by ENS, February 2013.

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⁵⁵⁸ UNSC, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/66/782–S/2012/261, 26 April 2012 para 134.

⁵⁵⁹ Information provided by ICRC, April 2013.

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⁵⁶³ Sibylla Brodzinsky, “After Failed Demobilization, ERPAC Factions Join Colombia’s Larger War,” *Insight crime*, 8 June 2012.

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⁵⁶⁵ UNSC, *Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia*, S/2012/171, 21 March 2012, para 19.

⁵⁶⁶ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *No One to Trust: Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia* (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, April 2012), 29.

⁵⁶⁷ UNSC, *Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia*, S/2012/171, 21 March 2012, para 19.

⁵⁶⁸ Defensoría Del Pueblo Defensoría Delegada para La Prevención de Riesgos de Violaciones a Los Derechos Humanos y DIH Sistema De Alertas Tempranas, *Informe Especial de Riesgo sobre Reclutamiento y Utilización Ilícita de Niños, Niñas, Adolescentes en el Sur Oriente Colombiano: Meta, Guaviare, Guainía Y Vichada* (Bogotá: Defensoría del Pueblo, November 2012), 65.

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⁵⁷³ *Informe Alternativo al Informe del Estado Colombiano sobre el Cumplimiento del Protocolo Facultativo Relativo a La Participación de Niños en Los Conflictos Armados* (COALICO y Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, 2010), 54.

⁵⁷⁴ Sistema de Alertas Tempranas – SAT, Defensoría delegada para la prevención de riesgos de violaciones de derechos humanos y DIH, Informe de Riesgo No 015-13, Fecha: 2 May 2013, 42.

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⁵⁹³ Sistema de Alertas Tempranas (2013), Defensoría del Pueblo, Informe de Riesgo 008-13-Antioquia, 6 March 2013, 23-24; “Evacúan cuatro colegios en Medellín por balaceras y amenazas” *RCN Radio*, 21 February 2013; and Javier Alexander Macías, “Evacuados colegios de Robledo por amenazas,” *El Colombiano*, 21 February 2013.

⁵⁹⁴ Sistema de Alertas Tempranas (2013), Defensoría del Pueblo, Informe de Riesgo 008-13-Antioquia, 6 March 2013, 23.

⁵⁹⁵ “Nuevas amenazas a profesores de la Universidad de Córdoba,” *El Universal*, 10 May 2013; and Nidia Serrano M., “Reparación colectiva sería la causa de amenazas en Universidad de Córdoba,” *El Universal*, 21 May 2013.

⁵⁹⁶ Paola Morales Escobar, “Docentes de la Universidad de Antioquia continuarán con paro,” *El Tiempo*, 19 June 2013. “Presencia de Las Farc en La U de Antioquia Genera Reacciones,” *Vanguardia.com*, 16 June 2013; “Las Farc hicieron una ‘toma militar’ de la Universidad de Antioquia: Fajardo,” *El Colombiano*, 14 June 2013.

⁵⁹⁷ Defensoría del Pueblo Colombia, Defensoría del Pueblo denuncia que 1,117 maestros del país están amenazados, 27 November 2013.