

Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

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El Salvador

Children in the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Armed Forces of El Salvador (FAES)

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El Salvador, like many other countries in Latin America, is characterized by a large economic gap between the politically-empowered classes and the majority of the population, many of whom are farmers and small producers living on the edge of extreme poverty in rural areas.

The civil war that officially lasted from 1980 to 1992 had its roots in more than one hundred years of repressive and brutal rule by the landed classes and the army. Historically, demands for political and economic rights, including land rights, by popular movements of peasants, students, workers and minorities were met by terror and violence.¹

During the 1930s economic depression, coffee prices dropped and coffee growers laid off workers and reduced the wages of the remaining few even further. Desperate to ensure their survival, the *campesinos* (farmers) began to organize to defend their rights and to demand better employment conditions. Opposition political parties emerged under the leadership of several local leaders, including the communist peasant leader Agustín Farabundo Martí.

When Martí led an insurrection of the rural poor in 1932, the army responded in pre-emptive retaliation by killing 30,000 people in what became known as *la matanza* (the slaughter). Agustín Farabundo Martí was one of those killed.²

La matanza discouraged popular resistance for some time, but during the following decades popular movements continued to organize protests for land rights, better wages and genuine democratic reform. A small land-owning elite and the military controlled the economy and the mostly rural majority lived in poverty as agricultural labourers. For a period of about 50 years, military presidents succeeded

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¹ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: El Salvador Case Study*, World Bank, 2001, [http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvext.nsf/67ByDocName/EISalvadorCaseStudyTheDemobilizationandReintegrationofChildSoldiers/\\$FILE/elsalvadorcasefinalwannex.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvext.nsf/67ByDocName/EISalvadorCaseStudyTheDemobilizationandReintegrationofChildSoldiers/$FILE/elsalvadorcasefinalwannex.pdf), p. 7.

² Néstor Martínez, "Los orígenes de la matanza indígena de 1932", *Diario CoLatino*, 24 de enero de 2005, <http://www.diariocolatino.com/reportajes/detalles.asp?NewsID=2>.

one another. During the Cold War, the government of El Salvador began to take advantage of military investments from the United States aimed at preventing the spread of communism in the region, exacerbating the conflict.³

During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of armed opposition groups began emerging and carrying out attacks against the military governments. As opposition groups grew stronger, so did too the governmental repression. Death squads linked to the government began targeting anyone in opposition in an effort to curtail anti-government activities and protests, and unarmed demonstrators were fired upon by the military. Flagrant ballot manipulation by the government was rampant during presidential elections. In 1972, a broad coalition of political parties won electoral victory by a large majority, only to be immediately overturned by the military. This “convinced many would-be democrats that reforms could only be achieved through extralegal methods. This closing off of the possibility of democratic change was crucial to expanding the viability of the revolutionary option.”⁴

During the 1970s, a group of workers and students joined forces to create the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí* (Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces, FPL), while a group of farmers organized as the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (Popular Revolutionary Army, ERP). In 1972, several members of the ERP left to form the *Resistencia Nacional* (National Resistance, RN) and in 1973, a new group emerged as the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos* (Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers, PRTC). In 1979, the *Partido Comunista Salvadoreño* (Salvadoran Communist Party, PCS), founded by Farabundo Martí in 1930, established its own armed wing, the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación* (Liberation Armed Forces, FAL).⁵

These leftist armed opposition groups attempted to coordinate their actions, first through the creation in 1979 of the *Coordinadora Político Militar* (Political Military Coordination, CPM) and later through the *Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) in 1980. The FMLN became the unified guerrillas’ military front.

The trigger to the civil war is generally considered to be the assassination of Archbishop Romero on 16 March 1980, while saying mass, by a death squad in the capital, San Salvador. The FMLN launched its first mass attack ten months later in January 1981.⁶

The twelve-year civil war was marked by FMLN guerrilla tactics in urban areas, while the *Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador* (Armed Forces of El Salvador, FAES) and death squads targeted the FMLN’s civilian support base. Around 75,000 people died during the civil war. There were massive human rights violations

³ William Deng and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *A Survey of Programs on the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers*, 2001, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/human/child/survey/index.html>

⁴ Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador’s Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, London: Lynne Rienner, 1996, p. 25, quoted in Sonia Mungal, “When Social Capital doesn’t Impact Political Participation: A Case Study in Social Capital Theory in El Salvador”, Makkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University, no date, <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/submitted/mungal/social-capital-theory.html>.

⁵ Oscar Martínez Peñate, *El Salvador – Del conflicto armado a la negociación 1979-1989*, First edition in USA, 1995. First edition in El Salvador, 1997. Fourth Reimpression, 2004.

⁶ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. p. 7.

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including over 17,000 extrajudicial executions and unlawful killings by both sides between 1981 and 1983. Seventy thousand Salvadorans had fled to the Mesa Grande refugee camp in Honduras by 1983; nearly 900,000 had fled to Guatemala, Mexico and the United States during the early years of the war and about 500,000 were internally displaced.⁷

By 1990 both parties to the conflict “realized that neither side could win by military victory”.⁸ The leadership of the FMLN and the government of El Salvador had formally requested help from the UN and in September 1989 the UN Secretary-General “began assisting in talks aimed at ending the civil war”.⁹ Through the mediation of the UN, negotiations progressed on political, social and economic reforms.

The San José Agreement on Human Rights (1990) was a substantive agreement in which both parties pledged respect for international human rights and in April 1991 the parties agreed to reforms to the armed forces, public security and the judicial and electoral systems.¹⁰

Negotiations continued throughout 1991, with the creation of the UN Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) and the signing of a ceasefire in New York on 31 December 1991. The final peace agreement was signed at the Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City on 16 January 1992. The Chapultepec Peace Agreement included a full plan for the disbanding of the FMLN which, despite delays, was completed by the end of 1992:

“...by the scheduled completion date, 15 December 1992, the approximately 8,000 strong FMLN military structure had been dissolved and the FMLN formally became a legal political party. The reductions in the armed forces from 60,000 to 30,000 was complete by March 2003 [...]. Though the armed conflict had finally ended [...] a month and a half later than originally scheduled, the peace process was far from complete.”¹¹

The UN Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, created by the Peace Accords to investigate “serious acts of violence that have occurred since 1980 and whose impact on society urgently demands that the public should know the truth”,¹² presented its findings in 1993. The Commission’s report examined 15 cases of serious human rights violations attributed to government forces, five to death squads, eight to the FMLN and two cases where there was no conclusion as to responsibility. According to Human Rights Watch, “...one contribution was completely

⁷ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. p. 7; Deng, *A Survey of Programs*, op. cit.

⁸ Denise Spencer, *Demilitarization and Reintegration in Central America*, Bonn International Centre for Conversion, (BICC), 1997, p. 10, <http://www.bicc.de/publications/papers/paper08/paper8.pdf>.

⁹ UN Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL), “El Salvador, Background (Summary)”, http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co_mission/onusalbackqr1.html.

¹⁰ Denise Spencer, *Demilitarization and Reintegration in Central America*, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

¹¹ Denise Spencer, *Demilitarization and Reintegration in Central America*, op. cit., p. 39.

¹² The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope: The 12-year war in El Salvador – Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, <http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/salvador/informes/truth.html>.

unprecedented: that of giving official acknowledgment to the truth, a way of affirming, as the report's preamble states, that 'all these things happened among us'.¹³

Current political context

Ten years after the Peace Accords, Amnesty International reported that the highest degree of implementation had been reached in relation to the armed forces, which were no longer directly involved in public security and were reduced in number to fit a peacetime situation, but that the judicial system had a long way to go "to fulfil its important tasks and provide fair and prompt justice to all".¹⁴

While many of the reforms outlined in the Peace Accords were successfully implemented, many Salvadorans consider their current situation to be now no better than it was before the civil war. One in five people live in extreme poverty,¹⁵ remittances from Salvadorans working abroad now account for nearly 70 per cent of all foreign exchange, surpassing income from coffee and other traditional agro-exports,¹⁶ and the proliferation of guns has led to high homicide rates. The lack of environmental protection laws has resulted in increased pollution and refuse and sewage problems in urban areas, while the economies of coffee and sugar plantations continue to have a detrimental impact on the environment.¹⁷

In 1994, El Salvador held its first democratic elections for more than six decades, with candidates from the FMLN and other parties. The right wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) won. Although it has not yet succeeded in winning presidential elections, since the Peace Accords the FMLN has increased its parliamentary representation and gained political control of San Salvador and key municipalities throughout the country.¹⁸

In June 2004, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the authorities assume a more active role in efforts to trace children who "disappeared" during the armed conflict.¹⁹ In October of the same year the government unexpectedly issued an Executive Decree to create an "Inter-institutional Commission for the Search of Children who disappeared as a result of the armed

¹³ Human Rights Watch, *El Salvador: Accountability and Human Rights: The Report of the United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, 10 August 1993, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/e/elsalvdr/elsalv938.pdf>.

¹⁴ Amnesty International, *El Salvador: 10th anniversary of Peace Accords, still no justice for victims of human rights violations* (AI Index: AMR 29/001/2002), 16 January 2002, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/engindex>.

¹⁵ Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio de El Salvador, *El Salvador: Primer Informe de Pais sobre el Avance en los ODM*, May 2004, http://www.odm.org.sv/informes/milenio_parte_II.pdf, p. 11.

¹⁶ Hermán Rosa, *Economic Integration and the Environment in El Salvador*, Working Group on Development and Environment in the Americas, Discussion Paper No. 7, June 2004, <http://ase.tufts.edu/gdae/Pubs/rp/DP07RosaJuly04.pdf>, p. 4.

¹⁷ Hermán Rosa, *Economic Integration and the Environment in El Salvador*, op. cit., pp. 8-12.

¹⁸ BBC, "Left claims El Salvador victory", 17 March 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2855109.stm>.

¹⁹ Some 2,600 children "disappeared" during the civil war in El Salvador. Their families have been searching for them ever since. See Amnesty International, "Where are the children who 'disappeared' in El Salvador and Guatemala?", *The Wire*, October 2004, <http://web.amnesty.org/wire/October2004/ElSalvador>.

conflict in El Salvador". NGOs in El Salvador welcomed the decision but regretted that the government's decree did not have the force of a legislative decision and did not include the participation of relatives.²⁰

Child recruitment and use²¹

Salvadoran law requires 18 year olds to do compulsory military service, but during the civil war emergency legislation allowed the voluntary enlistment of children from the age of 16.²²

Although both the FAES and the FMLN recruited children, the FAES has been reluctant to acknowledge the participation of children. FAES veterans estimate that up to 80 per cent of new recruits during the war were under 18 and that most were recruited during mass conscription drives from buses, schools, and urban gathering places such as cinemas and football grounds. In some cases, families who resisted the recruitment of their sons were killed.²³

Women and girls were rarely recruited into the FAES. There is only one report of a FAES battalion of 160 women, including some girls under 18, which formed voluntarily in 1983 in San Miguel and was quickly disbanded due to health problems and pregnancies.²⁴ FAES units also used children as messengers and informers, and senior FAES officers were implicated in supplying children to illegal adoption rings abroad.²⁵

Children's participation in the FMLN is much more openly acknowledged. ONUSAL calculated that approximately 1,500 to 1,600 FMLN forces were under 18 years of age at the time of the conflict, while the *Fundación 16 de enero* (F-16), an NGO linked to the FMLN, estimated that as many as 2,000 FMLN combatants were under 18.²⁶

Throughout the armed conflict the FMLN enjoyed wide popular support and at times it was difficult for observers to differentiate between people's support for the armed conflict and their support for the social policies advocated by the FMLN.²⁷

The armed conflict was extensive and the FMLN's presence felt everywhere in the country, with the exception of the northwestern region. Children's lives were severely affected and many joined the rebel groups for a number of reasons: government repression of the local population, lack of opportunities and also for

²⁰ Amnesty International Report 2005, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/engindex>.

²¹ Beth Verhey's detailed survey on child soldiers in El Salvador, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. is used throughout this section, as well as information compiled by a Child Soldiers Coalition consultant who travelled to El Salvador in December 2005 and carried out interviews with former FMLN combatants and commanders.

²² Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. p. 7.

²³ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. pp. 7-8.

²⁴ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. p. 8.

²⁵ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. p. 8.

²⁶ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. p. 8.

²⁷ Interviews with former armed opposition group members, El Salvador, December 2005.

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revenge at the killing of a relative or friend.²⁸ “Many youth ‘grew up’ with the FMLN, helping with food preparation, sanitation, nursing, messenger services, and other support functions.”²⁹

In 1998-1999 the *José Simeón Cañas Universidad Centroamericana* (UCA) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) carried out a survey of nearly 300 former FAES and FMLN child soldiers and found that three quarters of the FMLN respondents had been recruited between the ages of 10 and 14, while 80 per cent of FAES recruits had been 15 years or older at the time of joining.³⁰

In late 2005 the Child Soldiers Coalition conducted interviews in El Salvador with former members of armed opposition groups which had been part of the FMLN. They all admitted that their groups had recruited children, but that each group had had its own child recruitment policy, as they had responsibility for a specific geographical area and adopted different measures on “child protection”. The differences in policies related to the ages at which children would be recruited or allowed to volunteer to join the group, when they would be allowed to participate in armed combat and which functions they would be allowed to carry out.³¹

Only one group within the FMLN recruited children under the age of 15 as a matter of policy, but all the interviewees agreed that, in spite of the “rules”, the armed conflict was at times so intense that children under 15 were also used.³²

“I remember once, the army had attacked a village and we were trying to reach the mountains to save some of the civilians. We were closely followed by the soldiers. There was a 10-year-old boy who had lost his parents. When all the civilians moved on with their families to safer places he told me that he did not have any family to go with and that he wanted to stay with us. I tried to find a solution because I really considered he was too small to be fighting, but I had no-one to take care of him [...] I had planned to ask a family I knew in a village that we were heading towards, to take care of him, send him to school and all that. Unfortunately we were attacked with rockets on our way to the village. I was the only survivor.”³³

According to the interviewees, as the conflict worsened, the number of child fighters increased and their ages diminished. Their tasks changed from supporting functions in the kitchen, as medical assistants and as messengers, to fighting in the front.³⁴

²⁸ Interviews with former armed opposition group members, El Salvador, December 2005.

²⁹ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. p. 8.

³⁰ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. See “Table 1: Recruitment patterns of FAES and FMLN,” p. 9.

³¹ Interviews with former armed opposition group members, El Salvador, December 2005.

³² Interviews with former armed opposition group members, El Salvador, December 2005.

³³ Confidential interview with a former armed opposition group “commander”, El Salvador, December 2005.

³⁴ Interviews with former armed opposition group members, El Salvador, December 2005.

Recruitment into FMLN units was forcible as well as voluntary. The methods mentioned by a number of interviewees were:³⁵

- Forced recruitment: during the 1980-1982 period some of the groups forcibly recruited adults and one group within the FMLN forcibly recruited children, often when these children's parents had died in an attack by the army or had left them behind when fleeing. These children were incorporated into "minors' schools" (see below) for training and military instruction and afterwards were integrated into the fighting units.
- Recruitment "by conviction": villagers were called to meetings where they received "ideological instruction" and asked to contribute to the revolution. After these speeches, groups of young boys and girls were forced to call on communities to join the armed insurgents.³⁶ Follow-up meetings were later held asking parents to hand over one of their children to the FMLN. Some of the children joined as full members while others only acted as *milicianos* (members of a militia), carrying out only a number of defined functions.³⁷
- Voluntary recruitment: children decided to join because there was no alternative, because they were orphans or because they had been left behind when their families had fled. "The guerrilla became the only alternative for children to 'belong' to a social group and survive in the middle of the conflict."³⁸

The voluntary recruitment of children was by far the most common method. Thirty per cent of FMLN respondents in a 2001 study for the World Bank on child demobilization and reintegration stated that they had joined voluntarily "to fight for a better life", while an additional 20 per cent declared they were fighting "for a fair society".³⁹

Initiatives to protect children from the armed conflict

Many local officials and organizations knew child recruitment was against Salvadoran law and international humanitarian law, but that the conflict had created "too many other things to worry about".⁴⁰ However, some organizations tried to protect children from the fighting and protested against their recruitment, either using denunciation or direct humanitarian intervention with FAES and FMLN officers to obtain the release of the children.

The non-governmental *Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador* (Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, CDHES), COMADRES, a mothers'

³⁵ Information supplied by former armed opposition group members to Coalition consultant, El Salvador, December 2005.

³⁶ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 12.

³⁷ Interviews with former armed opposition group members, El Salvador, December 2005.

³⁸ Interviews with former armed opposition group members, El Salvador, December 2005.

³⁹ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. See "Table 2: Motivations for joining," p. 10.

⁴⁰ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 11.

association, and CODEFAM, a women's rights association, gathered testimonies from mothers whose sons had been forcibly recruited, organized demonstrations and hunger strikes, and appealed to the Parliament and the army leadership. In 1991, 50 minors who had been forcibly recruited by the FAES were liberated thanks to the COMADRES.⁴¹

The Catholic Church helped many individual families protest against the forced recruitment of their underage sons. The *Tutela Legal* (Legal Protection Office) of the Archbishop of San Salvador documented cases of human rights violations, promoted awareness and made site visits to barracks. It primarily intervened directly with the FAES officers to free underage conscripts recruited in mass drives. Their case files became an invaluable source of objective and accurate human rights reporting for the UN Truth Commission in 1993.⁴² However, the *Tutela Legal* undertook fewer interventions with the FMLN, as access to the FMLN leadership was difficult. It did intervene in cases of recruitment from areas with populations of internally displaced people, where it was felt the FMLN had been forcibly recruiting children.⁴³

The Church launched public campaigns to “humanize” the conflict, promoting humanitarian principles, human rights and Christian ethics about protecting the lives of civilians, helping raise popular awareness of the provisions of the Geneva Conventions on children's participation in hostilities.⁴⁴

The Church also established “schools” for boys from the conflict zones at risk of being recruited by the army or the FMLN. Formal education and training in technical professions were offered. These institutions were like temporary homes where boys could stay while the fighting went on, returning to their homes when it was over.⁴⁵

However, the armed conflict predated the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and most organizations and the Church did not take a general stand against the participation of children as soldiers in itself; they only protested against cases of forcible recruitment of minors.⁴⁶

Popular support for the FMLN's messages did not always translate into support for its methods, and few joined unless they felt directly threatened by the army. Some communities became eventually resentful and angry at the FMLN's practice of forcing groups of youth to join them.⁴⁷

The advocacy efforts against forcible recruitment generated a policy shift within the FMLN and in 1987 at least one faction of the FMLN “took a policy decision

⁴¹ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁴² Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁴³ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁴⁴ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁴⁵ Interviews with former armed opposition group members, El Salvador, December 2005.

⁴⁶ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁴⁷ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 12.

to stop forcible recruitment and offered unconditional release to all youth”.⁴⁸ However, they did not take a position on the voluntary recruitment or participation of children in the armed conflict. Moreover, many of the FMLN youth who were offered a chance to leave the armed group “were fully indoctrinated about the need for armed struggle against what they saw as social and personal injustices” and did not accept the release offer.⁴⁹

According to former members of the FMLN, the armed groups offered other measures of child protection, including “*escuelas de menores*” (“minors’ schools”) in areas they controlled, where children who had lost their parents, or whose parents could not take care of them because of the armed conflict, were given accommodation, food and an education. These schools were part of the FMLN’s “social program” and mostly were controlled by the political wings of the different groups. According to the interviewees, the schools offered the children some form of physical protection, preventing them from being killed by the army and from enrolling into the ranks of the FMLN too early. However, as the children also received ideological instruction, and in some cases military training, attending the minors’ school most often meant that they would join the armed conflict later on.⁵⁰

The opening of refugee camps in the border areas of neighbouring countries also contributed to temporarily protecting some children from the ongoing war. In some camps, however, refugee children were also recruited to join the FMLN. Some interviewees consulted for the World Bank 2001 survey, reported that Salvadoran children in Honduran refugee camps were singled out by the FMLN, waiting for them to get older before recruiting them to join the struggle (a process described as “ageing in”).⁵¹

In 1986, the *Frente Democrático Revolucionario* (Democratic Revolutionary Front, FDR) and the FMLN announced an 18-point proposal to “humanize” the conflict and reduce the economic, social and political impact of the war, including the suspension of aerial warfare, freedom for political prisoners, respect for prisoners’ lives and their physical integrity and the suspension of forcible recruitment by both parties to the conflict.⁵² Although the proposal did not include any provision on voluntary child recruitment, it constituted a first step by the FMLN in their search for a negotiated end to the conflict.

Initiatives by the international humanitarian and human rights community

During the war, international agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) tried to address the use of children. The ICRC denounced cases of child recruitment in the course of their visits to people detained in connection with the

⁴⁸ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁴⁹ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁵⁰ Interviews with former armed opposition group members, El Salvador, December 2005.

⁵¹ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 13.

⁵² Jorge E. López Padilla, *Hacia la conformación de un movimiento de amplia participación para alcanzar la paz en El Salvador*, Universidad Nueva San Salvador, August 1989, <http://www.csj.gob.sv/BVirtual.nsf/1004b9f7434d5ff106256b3e006d8a6f/72d2c2daa8bf1f9c06256b3e00747a08?OpenDocument&Click>.

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armed conflict, specifically when children had been detained on suspicion of helping the FMLN. In some cases, these children had been intimidated and tortured for information by members of the armed forces.⁵³ UNHCR advocated for refugee status in other countries for those fleeing recruitment, and supported those in refugee camps resisting recruitment, but their actions were based on individual families' requests and were not pursued as a child protection measure.⁵⁴

In 1987, Americas Watch (now Human Rights Watch/Americas), reported on the forced recruitment of children by the FAES and the FMLN. The FMLN at the time had given Americas Watch researchers several explanations for the presence of children as young as 11 in their camps, including that these were orphans being cared for by the FMLN, or were children of FMLN parents. They also claimed the children were not combatants and that in the countryside, where these children lived, they were used to performing adult tasks early in life.⁵⁵

Following the 1990 San José Agreement on Human Rights, ONUSAL verified and protested against many cases of child recruitment and undertook a special investigation of imprisoned youth. Both sides to the conflict were trying to improve their international image and following the Agreement, they consented to be monitored on their commitments to human rights and humanitarian principles.⁵⁶

After the Peace Accords, UNICEF raised the profile of children's concerns through a mine-awareness program, the *Proyecto de Prevención de Accidentes por Minas y Artefactos Explosivos* (Program for the Prevention of Accidents by Mines and other Explosive Artefacts, PAM), involving military leaders from both FAES and FMLN: "ONUSAL led mine mapping and placing warning signs for the PAM project while UNICEF developed an awareness campaign featuring classroom materials, radio and television messages, and a mobile team of trainers."⁵⁷

Despite the considerable support of the international community for post-conflict reconstruction and demobilization of the fighting forces in El Salvador, the specific needs of former child soldiers were largely ignored. One of the reasons given was the need for political expediency and a desire to minimize support obligations. Less than 40 per cent of former FMLN child soldiers surveyed for the 2001 World Bank report had been sent to the FMLN concentration areas to participate in the formal demobilization process.⁵⁸ FAES child soldiers were never formally listed and were released before official demobilization. This was believed to be due in part to the obligation on the FAES to pay demobilized soldiers one year's salary as indemnity.⁵⁹

⁵³ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 13.

⁵⁴ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 13.

⁵⁵ Americas Watch (now Human Rights Watch/Americas), *The Civilian Toll 1986-1987: Ninth Supplement to the Report on Human Rights in El Salvador*, 1987, p. 153, <http://www.hrw.org>.

⁵⁶ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 13.

⁵⁷ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 20. See also, Land Mine Monitor, *Report 2002*, El Salvador, http://www.icbl.org/lm/2002/el_salvador.html#fnB1537.

⁵⁸ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 29.

⁵⁹ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 29.

“When asked if there was anything positive about their participation, 16.4 percent mentioned comradeship or having met their spouse, and 13 percent said that they ‘learned something’ or gained experience. However, most former child soldiers cited nothing, or said that ‘staying alive’ was the only positive aspect of their experience.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit., p. 35.

Further points for discussion

- The war in El Salvador was widespread and severely affected children and their families. Few children were able to escape recruitment by the FAES or the FMLN, seeking temporary protection through internal displacement, fleeing to refugee camps in neighbouring countries or in Church or armed groups' "schools".
- The debate about children's participation in armed conflict was far less developed nationally and internationally than it is nowadays. During the conflict, few NGOs advocated for an end to all recruitment of children into the FAES or the FMLN. Most NGOs and the Church were opposed to the forcible recruitment of children, but had taken no position on children's "voluntary" engagement with the conflict.
- Advocacy by the NGOs and the Church had a direct influence, however, on at least one of the FMLN's groups, changing its practice of forcible recruitment of children, while increasing grassroots awareness of child protection issues and children's rights.
- International humanitarian organizations' efforts at protecting children from forcible recruitment was limited to specific cases, often after families of recruited children had asked for help. Mass awareness of children's rights was raised in the later stages of the war and initial years of the Peace Agreement by agencies working on other issues, such as landmine clearance.
- In the end, children were no longer recruited because the war was over. Although the Forum will not focus on the demobilization of children in post-conflict societies, there are lessons to be learned from the El Salvador example when negotiating peace agreements in conflicts where child soldiers are involved:

"The lack of follow-up to efforts by some UN human rights team members and the lack of attention to key recommendations illustrate the importance of high level political commitment to ensure that child soldiers' needs and rights are included in peace agreements and demobilization and reintegration programs. In El Salvador, political expediency overwhelmed efforts on the rights and practical needs of child soldiers for reintegration."⁶¹

⁶¹ Beth Verhey, *The Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, op. cit. See "Lesson Learned: The importance of political commitment and specific attention to child recruitment", p. 14.