5

Girl Soldiers in Guatemala

Wenche Hauge

Introduction

In 1996, a peace accord was signed between the government of Guatemala and the guerrilla movement Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG). The armed conflict in Guatemala had then lasted for 36 years. Its main character was that of a war fought between a small guerrilla movement and a strongly superior national army. The armed conflict was extremely bloody during the period 1980–1983, when the army carried out its major counterinsurgency campaign and slaughtered large parts of the indigenous population in the western and central highlands. The Guatemalan armed conflict has been fraught with foreign intervention, access to weapons and military training, mainly in the context of the Cold War.

During the demobilization and reintegration process that followed the peace accord of 1996, the URNG elaborated its own survey on the status of its members. The survey revealed that many of the URNG members were still quite young, even after 10–15 years as guerrilla soldiers, indicating that they had entered the movement as children or teenagers (FGT, 2006; URNG, 2007). The long period of their life that these children and teenagers spent as guerrilla members – some of them up to 20 years – provides a unique opportunity to study the long-term social consequences of joining an armed movement at a young age. It also gives possibilities to receive mature and reflective answers to questions about why the now grown-up guerrilla soldiers once joined the URNG. Based on a series of interviews, this chapter seeks to explain why these children and teenagers joined the guerrilla movement and what kind of challenges this type of recruitment poses to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes.
The chapter is structured as follows. It begins by reviewing some of the main theories on the onset of armed conflict – and debating how these apply to the recruitment of children as guerrilla soldiers. After an overview of the methodology, focusing particularly on the selection of interviewees and their background, the analytical part builds on the results of the interviews and on observation of the context within which they were conducted. Finally, the chapter ends with a conclusion.

**Theory and policies on child recruitment**

The body of theory on the causes of armed conflict is rich, spanning from the role of economic development, socio-economic disparities, natural resources, environmental degradation, political system, democratization and ethnic configuration to the role of identity and religion in causing conflict – to mention some of the most important (Gurr and Moore, 1997; Homer-Dixon, 1999; Diehl and Gleditsch, 2001; Stewart, 2001; Hauge, 2003; Gates et al., 2006). In general, the theories may be categorized into two broad groups, depending on whether they refer to push-forces, such as grievances, repression and discrimination, or to pull-forces, for example, that a guerrilla group can provide security, life sustenance, a sense of belonging or group identity and even profit.

However, the question is how applicable these theories on conflict causation and mobilization in general are to the recruitment of child soldiers. The difference between a child and an adult is the adult’s ability to reason and reflect, to understand complicated causalities and to use his or her own life experiences. A child would be more affected by the actual situation, by the immediate threats and obvious possibilities to escape from it. Unless children are recruited by force, or strongly manipulated, it is likely that direct attacks against their family or village, whereby they easily can identify the perpetrator, would be strong push-forces. Direct contact with guerrilla members (if perceived of as positive) or through family members and networks that the children trust could be possible pull-forces. The intensity of the causes is thus relevant here.

The United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) states the following about child recruitment:

Despite wide condemnation and response over the last decade, girls and boys continue to be recruited or used by armed forces and armed groups. Recruitment is defined as the compulsory, forced or voluntary conscription or enlistment of children into any kind of armed