



AMERICA/COLOMBIA - Rehabilitation center for child soldiers who escaped from the guerrillas

Bogota (Agenzia Fides) - In the last 15 years there have been thousands of children and child soldiers who have managed to escape the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Males are trained to use weapons, while females are used as spies to gather information because nobody would suspect a female child. For females it is much easier to carry money, weapons and drugs. If they get pregnant they are forced to abort. To try to cope with this serious scourge, the Government has started a rehabilitation program in a rural settlement in the western part of Colombia. Official data indicate that, in the first six months of this year, the rate of defection of fighters has increased by 40% compared to the same period last year. The increase coincided with the start of peace talks between the FARC and the government, although it is impossible to say whether there is a relationship. Some of the children 'discharged' are assisted in the governmental structure, which remains a secret to protect them from abandoned rebel factions. To help alleviate the trauma of what they have experienced, the children can stay in the center for several months, until they find appropriate and safe places where to live. They grow vegetables, feed animals and learn to trust strangers. The stories told by the victims represent a small part of the brutality experienced in the Latin American country in the past 50 years of conflict. (AP) (Agenzia Fides 16/01/2014)