



In our Spring newsletter we bring you the most recent news from our projects in Colombia. The following pages highlight the progress of Children of the Andes' work and show how, with your help, we can continue to reach out to the most vulnerable children in this troubled country.



Violence and poverty still affect the lives of millions of children in Colombia. For thousands, life means the brutal reality of the streets. More and more children are seeing their families torn apart by the escalating armed conflict. Sick children in remote and volatile areas cannot reach the medical services which could save their lives.

Here we focus on three of the ways in which Children of the Andes is working to help those at risk, giving them the chance of a life worth living:

- ◆ In the homes we support, street children find a haven of peace, love and security.
- ◆ At nursery school, refugee children rediscover freedom and happiness.
- ◆ Through the flying doctor service, children have the chance of life-saving surgery.

A life worth living? Thousands of children still live and work on the streets of Colombia's cities

Colombia's "Dirty War"

Colin Harding, editor of Latin American Newsletters and author of *Colombia in Focus*, gives the background to the armed conflict in Colombia

The Colombian government is struggling to contain two increasingly confident left-wing guerrilla armies, which are closing in on the capital, Bogotá, and other big cities. The security forces are over-stretched, and anyway have a poor track record against the guerrillas, some of whom have been in the field for decades.

The other side of the guerrilla coin is the growth of right-wing paramilitaries, sometimes known as 'self-defence groups', which take the law into their own hands when they think the security forces are not up to the job. The largest and most notorious of these organisations, ACCU, is regarded by some as a Robin Hood-like organisation, distributing land and money to poor, deserving families. But it has also been held responsible for the deaths of more than 100 alleged guerrilla sympathisers in recent months.

Human rights organisations believe that ACCU and the 140-odd similar organisations operating all over Colombia work hand-in-glove with the military, acting as intelligence gatherers and hired assassins, and receiving equipment and cash in return. The government insists that there is no official policy of conniving with paramilitaries; on the contrary, it is committed to acting with equal vigour against right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing insurgents. It has also agreed to allow the United Nations to open a human rights monitoring office in Colombia - a highly unusual move.

While the good intentions of leading officials are not in doubt, there are many grey areas. In isolated rural areas, where ranchers are vulnerable to guerrilla attacks, the government has encouraged them to form 'security co-operatives' to act as self-defence militias and collaborate with the security forces. There are now more than 500 of these throughout Colombia, about 10% of which are authorised to bear arms. The dividing line between brave self-defence groups and sinister death squads is often a narrow one.

The government has recently put a price on the head of Carlos Castaño, the boss of ACCU. But it is showing no signs of scaling down its activities. On the contrary, the body count is rising. The mayoress of Apartadó, the main town of the banana-producing Urabá region, said recently that there had been 72 violent deaths in her area

in the first 21 days of this year. Most of them were plantation workers, and she put the slaughter down to a 'dirty war' between guerrillas and paramilitaries for control of this most turbulent region of a strife-torn country. *

Caught in the Crossfire

Your generous and committed support enables Children of the Andes to tackle the most urgent problems facing children in Colombia. Since 1995 we have funded work with families who have been uprooted and torn apart by the escalating armed conflict between guerrillas and paramilitary armies. The children, many of whom have lost fathers and brothers in the fighting, bear the deep emotional scars of war.

In response to this desperate need, Children of the Andes is working in partnership with the Colombian charity *Cedavida*. The founder of this organisation is all too familiar with the traumas suffered by refugee children. She tells one boy's story with particular

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poignancy: "When Jairo was on his way home from market with his parents, their bus was stopped by a paramilitary group. All the passengers were forced to get off and stand in separate groups of men, women and children. Having lost sight of his father, Jairo panicked and ran up to a group of paramilitaries. Tugging at one man's trousers he cried 'Where's Papá?' The soldier looked down at him angrily and asked 'Why do you

think your father's with us?' With his eyes full of confusion, Jairo answered 'Because my father sometimes talks to soldiers wearing uniforms like yours'. At once the boy was told to point out his father, who was then marched away and 'disappeared.' The paramilitaries mistakenly took him to be a guerrilla collaborator."



Playtime at the nursery



Happy children at Soacha

Last year Children of the Andes helped to establish a nursery school for refugee children in Soacha, a town just south of Bogotá. Every day, 60 children come to the school while their mothers and older relatives struggle to earn a living. Their behaviour reflects the traumas they have lived through - most are extremely aggressive and disruptive, others cannot speak or show affection. For all of them the school is a haven where they are encouraged to rebuild their shattered confidence.

The teachers have all experienced political violence themselves, which enables them to interpret the children's behaviour and help them to overcome their traumas. One teacher tells of her progress with a boy in her class: "When José's parents first brought him to the school they explained that he was deaf and mute. At two years old he was the right age for my class, so I took him over to the other children who were playing together. He immediately kicked all their toys across the floor and refused to join in. So I gave him some paper and crayons to colour a picture, but he angrily scribbled all over the wall instead.

As the days and months passed, José's behaviour grew calmer but his eyes still burned with pent-up anger and hurt. His pictures always showed people lying by the side of a river so I asked his mother why. What she told me explained the strange drawings. He had seen a massacre when he was an infant, and he had not uttered a sound ever since. We started intensive therapy with him and gradually he learnt to trust us. Now, almost a year later, it is so rewarding to watch José chatting away with the other children while he plays. Next year he will be ready to start primary school."

Please help us to give other children these chances. It costs only £25 per year to buy teaching materials for two children at the nursery.

Changing the Meaning of Life

To live on the streets is to live in a violent, predatory world. For Colombia's street children 'life' simply means survival. With your help, Children of the Andes has changed the meaning of life for hundreds of boys and girls. For these children, *Fundación Niños de los Andes* is their first experience of a secure, loving home. For the first time in their young lives they feel wanted, valued and protected.

Street children have very low self-esteem. Frequently abused by others, they also become accustomed to abusing their own bodies through glue-sniffing and malnutrition. For this reason the staff at the *Fundación* place special emphasis on teaching children to respect themselves and their bodies as the first step in building up their sense of self-worth.



A young boy sniffing glue from a plastic bag

As soon as a child is taken into one of the *Fundación's* homes, he or she is seen by the doctor and dentist. Problems such as skin infections, respiratory difficulties and toothaches are treated immediately. A nutritional and personal hygiene plan is designed for each child, and his or her progress is recorded each month. As new children begin to see an improvement in their appearance, their confidence is boosted and they feel ready to take on greater challenges.

When children begin their rehabilitation they are given their own locker where they can keep their few but cherished possessions - a photo, a baseball cap or a 'lucky' charm - as well as their new, clean clothes. They carry the key themselves, learning to take responsibility for their own belongings and to respect others. On starting school the children are given their own uniform which they wear with pride. For them, it is a clear symbol of achievement. They also move to a new dormitory to mark their passage to the next stage of their rehabilitation.

In the homes the children are given the constant support of the staff - psychologists, social workers and teachers - to help them reach their goals. They also help each other - every new arrival at the homes is welcomed by a 'big sister' or 'brother' who makes sure they are settling in.



Daisy, a new arrival at Subachoque

Many street children come from broken homes where extreme poverty, drug or alcohol addictions and violence have made their lives unbearable. Others have run away from problems which, with professional help and time, may be solved. The staff at *Fundación Niños de los Andes* try to establish contact with every child's family. This helps them to understand the children's background and respond to their psychological and emotional needs.

For the first time in their young lives they feel wanted, valued and protected

A social worker visits the families regularly and encourages them to come to the home at the weekends. This is an ideal opportunity to give parents advice on health, nutrition and childcare so that younger brothers and sisters can be prevented from ever resorting to life on the streets.

EL PATITO LEO



Edilson Robledo

Edilson, a street child, illustrates his favourite story, The Ugly Duckling.

Social workers play a key role in the children's rehabilitation. £250 pays for a month's salary for a social worker at the Fundación.

Message from Colombia



Discovering new talents

To All Supporters of Children of the Andes

¡Hola!

My name is Alberto and I'm 15 years old. Thanks to Fundación Niños de los Andes I've left street-life behind and I'm making plans for the future. I'd love to study languages and travel, to get to know new people and other countries. I really want to be someone in life and to help others make their dreams come true.

Thank you so much for helping us. It's nice to know that people care.

¡Gracias!

Alberto



Top of the class!

Congratulations to Pilar Benítez, aged 15, who came top of her class and had the second best results out of all the children at the local secondary school.

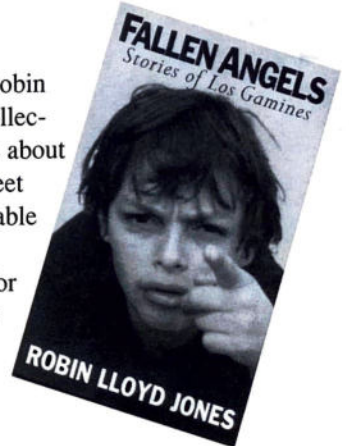


Lending a hand

The maintenance work at Subachoque is now in the capable hands of three teenagers from the *Fundación*. Jairo, Muiller and Nixon are currently learning painting and decorating skills and have been busy practising on their own home!

Book Offer

Fallen Angels by Robin Lloyd-Jones is a collection of short stories about Latin American street children. It is available to Children of the Andes supporters for the special price of £5.



Donation Form

Yes, I would like to help Children of the Andes

Please accept my gift of £

Name

Address

..... Postcode

Telephone

I do / do not require an acknowledgement (delete as applicable)

I wish to make a gift of £250 or more, please send me a Gift Aid form (for tax reclaim purposes)

I would like to make a regular donation which will help Children of the Andes plan for the future. Please send me details of:

Standing Orders Deed of Covenant Payroll Giving

I would like a copy of *Fallen Angels* (price £5 including p+p)

Remember to use our new address:

Children of the Andes, 4 Bath Place, Rivington Street, London EC2A 3DR

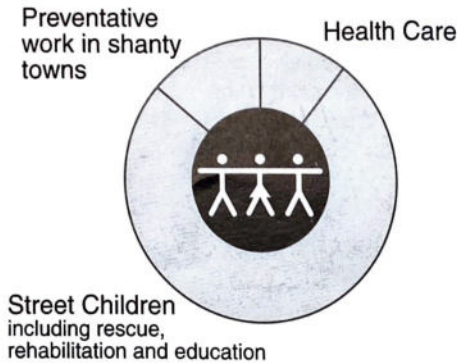
Tel: 0171 739 1328

Registered Charity Number 1002263

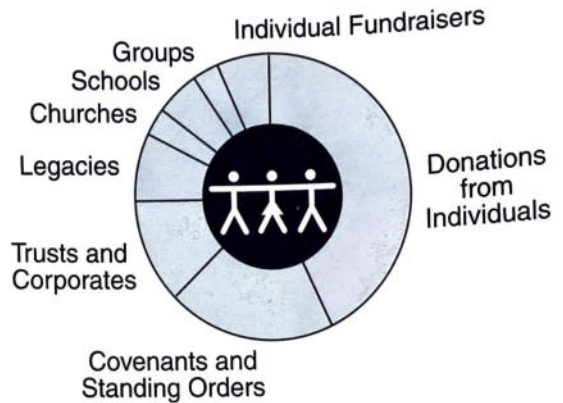
Where Your Money Goes

Over the last year your generous donations have helped fund a wide range of projects in Colombia. The charts below show where our support comes from and how Children of the Andes funds were distributed.

1996 Grants to Colombia



1996 Sources of Income



Thank You !

UK Fundraising News

WALK THE ANDES in the UK



Walk The Andes '97

Once again we are inviting you to put on your walking shoes and get out into the fresh air to raise money for Children of the Andes. The aim of the event is to walk the length of the Andes - 5,000 kilometres. That's all the way from Colombia to Chile! But don't worry, it's a collective effort with the distance you cover being added to the total of all the others taking part. You can arrange your walk for anytime between April and August 1997, so we can report the result in our Autumn newsletter. Last year's event raised over £5,000. This year, with your help, we hope to double that! Remember, you can also cycle, climb or even swim the Andes! Contact the Children of the Andes office for details and a Walk the Andes '97 Pack.

Summer Fairs

If your church, school or club is holding a summer fête then you could organise a stall in aid of Children of the Andes. Selling home baking, handicrafts, plants or bric-a-brac can raise significant amounts of money.

Marathon Madness!

For those of you brave (or foolish!) enough to be running a marathon this year, please consider giving any sponsorship you receive to Children of the Andes.

Latin Dance Extravaganza!

The annual London fundraising party proved once again to be a huge success. Over 300 supporters danced the night away to the sound of the sensational 9 piece band *Conjunto Sabroso*. The evening raised almost £3,000 for Children of the Andes. Many thanks to all who attended and especially to those who worked so hard to make the event run smoothly.

If you have any fundraising ideas you wish to discuss or if you need any leaflets, fliers or other materials then contact Marilise or Martha on 0171 739 1328

Charities Aid Foundation Vouchers

If you made a donation by CAF in October or November 1996 and your account has not yet been debited, please contact the Children of the Andes office.

Changing Priorities, Saving Lives

It's miles to the nearest hospital. Heavy rain has flooded the roads and made it difficult to travel anywhere. Guerrilla activity in the surrounding area makes any journey dangerous. And your child urgently needs to get medical attention.

Such a dilemma is experienced by many families living in the north-west of Colombia, an area where malaria, cholera and other life-threatening diseases are commonplace. One in seven children die in infancy because of the lack of adequate health care facilities. The work of *Patrulla Aérea Colombiana* (Flying Doctor Service) is one of our most remarkable projects which, with your support, provides medical aid to children in this most dangerous and inaccessible area. This means many children with physical disabilities are given the chance of the surgery which will change their lives.

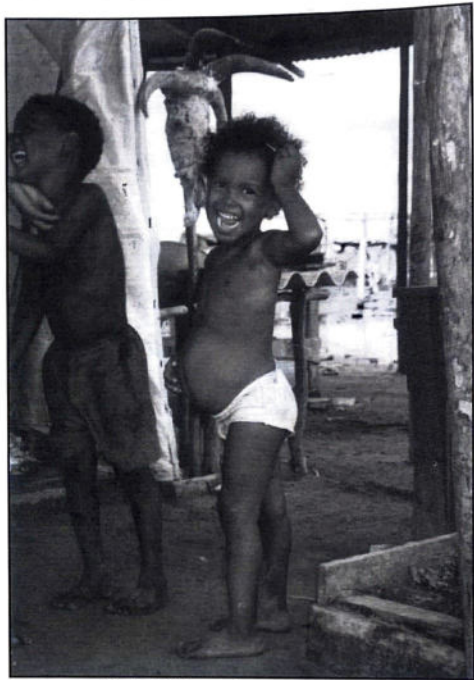
Over the last year, your donations have saved the sight of hundreds of children by funding a Blindness Prevention Programme in the Chocó region of Colombia. Children in this area are particularly vulnerable to diseases which affect their eyesight - and, of course, if children cannot see they are not able to go to school or help their families. However, due to the costs involved, they are the least likely to have the opportunity to see a doctor.

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As Ed Harrison, of the Flying Doctors, highlights "For many families, health care is a matter of priorities. They look after the breadwinner first, then the mother - children come low on the list." By running projects specifically for the youngest family members Children of the Andes is ensuring that health, rather than money, becomes the main priority.



Children queue to have their eyes tested



Sick children often go untreated

The commitment and bravery of the pilots and medical staff who provide the Flying Doctor service is tremendous. Guerrilla activity in the area means that flights have to be re-routed to avoid flying over hostile territory. Nature also poses problems for the team. The dense jungle and mountainous terrain force pilots to land on narrow, uneven grass runways. The surgeons carry portable equipment to operate in makeshift 'theatres' set up in any available buildings.

Despite these hazards the Flying Doctors - many of whom work on a voluntary basis - continue to provide essential medical care to communities that would otherwise have no access to specialist help.

This vital work requires your support if it is to continue to help those most in need. Your donation will make a real difference to the life of a child in one of the poorest and most volatile regions of Colombia.

Just £10 pays for one child to be treated by the Flying Doctor service. Your donation could save a child's sight.