Political Violence, Child Soldiers, and Neo-Liberal Globalization: The Cases of Indonesia and Columbia

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The paradigm of war has been the most constant and destructive aspect of human civilization throughout history. The horror of war, carried out by two opposing sides each proclaiming moral authority, is perhaps the most haunting and paradoxical of human capabilities. In many modern wars, however, “tactics of ethnic cleansing and genocide have replaced the strict codes of conduct and chivalry” that had protected the innocent from violent conflict over past centuries from Africa to China. (Singer 2006:4) Crimes such as rape, torture, and the recruitment of children as soldiers have increasingly become regular weapons of war in the most deprived regions of the Third World. In Africa and the war in the Balkans during the 1990’s, over 90 percent of casualties were civilian, compared to 50 percent in World War 2 and 10 percent in World War 1. Disturbingly, moreover, there are hundreds of thousands of child soldiers in the world today. (Singer 2006:4-5)

This result has not been born of an innate human dissolve in moral fabric or of moral deficiencies between cultures. The cause is rather predominantly centered in socially constructed phenomena on a global scale; a construct of transnational power elite whose prerogatives lie in the concentration of wealth and power, and who overlook the necessary obligations of power must yield to those who bear the unwanted affects of a steep, global, hierarchal structure. The aim of the author is to uncover the systemic implications of corporations, governments and international financial institutions and how they have worked correspondingly to cause and exacerbate poverty, violence, and political and social unrest by promoting a unilateral agenda of global capitalism. This paper hopes to clarify how the collective actions of these entities has worsened simultaneously both abysmal poverty and political violence in the developing world. I will focus on two countries in different hemispheres, Colombia and Indonesia, to reflect the global pervasiveness of this problem.

Martin Wolf (2005:16), a proponent of neo-liberalism, states: “Because space always matters, so does territorial control. Because territorial control matters, so do states. For this simple reason, economic processes will not compel the death of states, unless a state is expunged, whether voluntarily...or forcibly [emphasis added].” However, because “the [current] state of war has...become our permanent global condition...war has become regulating by constructing and imposing its own legal framework...” (Hardt and Negri 2004:22) In other words, the truncated possibilities of national stability and the killing of many are
in accord with such economic processes. As such processes cause instability, those who threaten the stability of the destabilizing order, as is only a rational conclusion, must be forcefully cut down through military means.

The Arms Trade

The neo-liberal system of our time has allowed almost all aspects of civilization, both material and immaterial, to become subject to international trade, including arms (assault rifles, grenades, mortars, etc). Easy and cheap access to small arms due to constant expansions of international ‘free-trade’ fuels internal conflict throughout the developing world. (Singer 2006) These weapons likely end up in the hands of rebel groups as well as state armies and paramilitaries, some of which are hired by governments and multinational corporations to protect petroleum, coal, and natural gas extraction sites. (Chomsky 2006; Aviles 2006; Pilger 1996; 2005) Companies such as Exxon Mobil in Indonesia, Shell in Nigeria, BP and Occidental Petroleum in Colombia, and Total and Unocal in Burma, among others, have partnered with the brutal governments of these countries. (Vogel 2005; Pilger 1996, Aviles 2006) Meanwhile, as one of many unfortunate examples, rebels that infiltrate the Kenyan border from surrounding war torn African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi can purchase an AK-47 for roughly the price of a goat, $5 U.S. (Singer 2006:48) Peter Singer (2006:47) also clarifies that “the consequences [of the “glut of the market” in small arms] is that the primary weapons of war have steeply fallen in price over the last few decades. This has made it easier for any willing organization to obtain them and then turn children into soldiers at a minimal cost.” Meanwhile, more than 60 percent of arms worldwide stem from 38 U.S companies, with many newer, lighter models easier to operate being placed in the hands of children. (Chomsky 2006; Singer 2006) Bever (1996:252) claims, in the case of Africa, that little access to sufficient land and food has engaged many young men and boys to take up arms and ignite guerrilla or tribal warfare. Meanwhile, there is more than enough food in the world to feed everybody with plenty left over. (Gallagher 2006) Further, as pointed out by Singer (2006), many rebel groups who otherwise would not have the resources and numbers to effectively wage war against the state, can, however, when the recruitment of children is exercised. While basic foodstuffs, infrastructure, and sanitation is extremely lacking in many developing countries, the high availability of sophisticated weapons at cheap costs allows disgruntled and impoverished groups to wage hate-mongering, destructive wars. While a child may not have access to basic sanitation or be able to overcome malnutrition, he or she may still have access to a gun.

Anderson, Cavanagh and Lee (2005:64) claim that “the U.S government has used globalization as an excuse to loosen restrictions on arms exports, arguing that U.S weapon makers need to export more to stay globally competitive.” U.S arms exports doubled between 1987 and 2000. (Anderson, Cavanagh, Lee 2005:64) Though 96 percent of the U.S population opposes the free-sale of arms, such an international market is “strongly supported by high-tech industry,” apparently overriding public opinion. (Chomsky 2000:128) This shows who the workings of policy at the highest levels primarily serve, even while helping to fuse violence and oppression abroad. Meanwhile, a mere 80 billion dollars, one-half of one-percent of global income, can provide sufficient food and basic housing, health services, and education to all poor children in the developing world. (Gallagher 2006) Priorities of those in power are evidently backward.

Indonesia

The poor of Indonesia have long been subject to a brutal and corrupt military, supported tacitly by much of the West. The arms trade has been disproportionately favorable to the British and U.S economies, as the allies sharply escalated their arms exports throughout the last two-and-a-half decades. Indonesia became the number one recipient of British arms throughout the 1980s, gaining access to U.K aircraft, tanks, and machines guns, all used in the illicit invasion of East Timor. (Pilger 1998; Chomsky 2003) Blum (2005:188) clarifies, moreover, that illegal embargos containing U.S military arms increased throughout the late 1990’s as the number of Indonesian atrocities in East Timor correspondingly accelerated. Between 1975 and 2000, the Indonesian military slaughtered well over 200,000 out of a population of 700,000 East Timorese, using British and American arms. (Pilger 1998; Chomsky 2003; Blum 2005; Parry 2005) At the same time, Indonesia has long been considered by many U.S elite as “the greatest prize of Asia,” in the words of Richard Nixon, for its rich supply of natural resources reaped by Western companies. (Pilger 1998; 2001; Blum 2005) An unfathomable amount of political violence abroad has become apparently acceptable when appropriated to the interests of Western business. Though it is unfortunate that many developing regions, holding a disproportionate amount of the world’s natural resources, have politically corrupt and often violent leadership, it can not be considered acceptable to rationalize tacit cooperation and support for brutality for national capital interests of the West.

Today, there are at least 1,000 active child combatants in Indonesia. The ethnic conflict currently engulfing the Indonesia province of Java, where Islamic rebels are violently pursuing autonomy from the State, has involved the use of child soldiers by both sides, equally brutal. Children as young as seven years old have even been sent to the battlefield with firebombs in their backpacks.3 (Singer 2006:26,120) Despite the human rights abuses and atrocities that have been carried out for over four decades by the brutal Indonesian military, the TNI, the Bush Administration has recently asked for $6.5 million in military aid
for Indonesia, and, without consulting Congress, has invoked a national security waiver to override longstanding human rights restrictions on aid to the Indonesian military. Such action is simply unconscionable given the Indonesian regime’s irrefutably horrendous record of human rights violations. Instead of urging a diplomatic resolution, the Bush administration continues to stand behind unilateral ideological rationalizations for violence. Yet violence is rarely, if ever an acceptable solution to violence, especially when principles of justice are ignored by the world’s most powerful government supporting a brutally oppressive regime they consider allies.

Conditions brought on by the IMF in Indonesia have been largely implicated as causal factors of the East Asian Economic Crisis which decimated the Indonesian economy, preceding widespread outbreaks of ethnic conflict in the country. (Stiglitz 2002:18) Nouri Abdul Razzak of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization stated that “the [neo-liberal] policies of the international financial institutions are contributing to the impoverishment of the world’s people, the degradation of the global environment, and the violation of the most fundamental human rights.” (Chomsky 2000:136) Such liberalization policies include the privatization of state owned enterprises; devaluation of currency; reduced taxes on imports; and weakening of labor standards, among others. (Gallagher 2006) “The majority of local [Indonesian] companies [were] devastated by interest rates of up to 50%” resulting from the banking structure implemented by the IMF in the country. According to Kingsbury (2002:75), Indonesia’s debt in June of 1997 was US $115 billion, more than 60% of the country’s GDP. By mid-2000, such debt had reached a high of $140 billion. Moreover, during the economic collapse in Indonesia, 20 million more people began earning less than a $1 a day. The number of Indonesians living in poverty doubled, and the effects are still felt, disproportionately, by women and children. When hungry populations then rose-up amidst the economic collapse, the Suharto regime ordered numerous offensives to violently cut-down the mostly non-violent protests. People of all ages were murdered in mass executions. 39,000 people were killed in such operations during the latter half of the 1990’s and the Suharto regime faced no international penalties. (Simons 2000:226; Parry 2005) Loans continued to flow from the IMF and World Bank partnership into the hands of the Suharto regime amidst obvious corruption and atrocities, without changes in distribution methods to better reach the poor. (Pilger 2001; Stiglitz 2002)

While the country is still recovering slowly from the economic collapse, a great deal of state terrorism is sanctioned in Indonesia today as an efficient way of initiating profitable projects on land inconveniently home to thousands of poor Indonesians already in desperate economic situations. These projects, in turn, have generated little wealth back into areas of the economy where it is needed most, like education and health care, as foreign capital often leaves the country as fast as it enters. (Pilger 2001; Kingsbury 2002:70)

An Amnesty International report notes that in January of 2007, a child and two others were shot and killed when security forces working under government control opened fire on the village of Wagheti. There were a total of six other incidents around the same period of time where security forces shot unarmed civilians during forced, large scale evictions. These “evictions” are government ordered operations where police, military officials, or gangs hired and armed by the government use force to clear out slums for building or oil exploration performed by a majority of foreign companies.

Exxon Mobil is one company taking part in such oppression in Indonesia. The massive U.S oil and coal company has been reported by several sources as having directly employed Indonesian military units to provide “security” for their oil and gas extractions and liquification projects. These forces have committed gross human rights abuses such as destruction of property, torture, rape and murder. Exxon has even provided equipment and grounds for the Indonesian military which was used to dig mass graves and facilitate torture. Meanwhile, Exxon has generated over $40 billion from its operations in Aceh, Indonesia. Ironically, the massive energy company had the 26th largest economy in the world in 2005, surpassing the economy of Indonesia, ranked 31st. (Anderson, Cavanagh, Lee 2005)

Instead of choosing to redirect actions toward thwarting such oppression as a necessary reciprocal condition of investment, companies chose to work with the violent regime. Although rebels do threaten the extraction operations of multinationals in Indonesia and elsewhere, such companies are not exempt from moral obligation to all people presiding in the areas which they operate. Further, investment and international loans must be carried out in a way by which they can reach those who need the most economic assistance, which with today’s technological capabilities is certainly achievable. Instead of attempting to enervate violent governments and promote peace through financial incentives, many of the most powerful corporations and governments have decided to appropriate violent cycles for their own gains and institutional objectives. Meanwhile, violence ensues and spreads among and between civilian groups and militants alike. (Parry 2005; Kerbo 2006; Pilger 1998)
Colombia

The implications of armed conflict in Colombia are perplexing, and, almost in equivalence to the situation in Indonesia, correlate positively and disproportionately with increasing neo-liberal conditions. The Colombian Constitution of 1991 documented a transition into what Aviles (2006:19,125) refers to as a form of “low-intensity democracy” implemented by a “transnational elite” of Colombian and US allies both seeking economic liberalization in Colombia. Such liberalization has occurred in order to primarily enhance the wealth of the Colombian elite and open up access for transnational corporations, mostly in extractive sectors. (Aviles 2006) As in the case of Indonesia, the “reforms” implemented since 1991 have included privatizing state-owned businesses, liberalizing financial markets and foreign exchange, and weakening labor protections. (Aviles 2006:1) Elite capitalists, both foreign and Colombian, have profited much off the “ruin of farmers through low tariffs on imports.” (Hylton 2006:79) Further, like in Indonesia, such changes would be enforced through a stream of violence that continues today. (Aviles 2006; Hylton 2006) Amid the economic changes of 1991, Colombia witnessed the highest homicide rate in the country’s history. (Hylton 2006:79) People who quickly became impoverished as a result of these changes often took to crime to generate needed income that was lost as a result of economic liberalization, sometimes turning violent, while leaders of the opposition were systematically removed by state-sanctioned force. (Arboleda et al. 2004; Hylton 2006) The U.S and its home-based companies were able to avoid condemnation by the international community for supporting violence by simply referring to Colombia as a democracy, meanwhile generating revenues in collaboration with the Colombian elite that had no inclination of moving toward real democratic reform. (Aviles 2006; Hylton 2006)

Neo-liberal conditions were further promoted in the mid-1990’s when then President Pastrana signed a structural adjustment contract with the IMF requiring deep cuts in government spending, reducing restrictions upon foreign investment, and further accelerating the privatization of public enterprise. (Aviles 2006:124) Meanwhile, as state-supported violence increased in Colombia, the U.S correspondingly increased military aid. In 1991, amidst the origin of the vast economic liberalization of Colombia, the number of youths murdered increased by 70%. By 1999, U.S. military aid to Colombia had increased from $50 to $290 million, while in 1998 there were 1,332 killed in 201 massacres and 2,500 individual assassinations. In 1998 alone, 10,000 farmers and peasants were displaced by a combination of coal mining and paramilitary force. Oxfam has claimed that “deepening poverty [compounded by neo-liberal impositions] is one of the main driving forces behind the civil conflicts which are creating unprecedented numbers of refugees [in Colombia].” Colombia had the second largest number of internal refugees in 2003 after Sudan at around 3 million. (Chomsky 2003:52-53) The negligence the U.S government has shown in recognizing atrocities committed by the Colombian government and the violent groups it endorses allows it to continue rationalizing a pro-violence policy centered distinctly in gaining access to land rich in oil and coal, even while millions of Colombians suffer as a direct result. Pretexts of fighting terrorism in Colombia are obviously only attributable to guerrilla terrorists, not to state militias operating under revenue largely provided by Washington.

Despite a 52% increase in total GDP of Colombia from 1980 through 2000, both inequality and poverty increased drastically. (Aviles 2006:14) Moreover, equivalent to what happened in Indonesia, deregulation of the Colombian economy resulted in short-term capital flow which in turn led to a national economic crisis and banking collapse during the latter half of the 1990’s. (Aviles 2006:13; Kingsbury 2002) After significant economic growth from 1978 to 1995, the economy began to decline in 1997 and turned to negative 4.5% in 1999. Unemployment than doubled to 20 percent, inequality rose, and macroeconomic performance declined. (Arboleda, Petesch, Blackburn 2004:3) As was the case of Indonesia, the economic conditions brought on by IMF policies were direct causes of the economic crisis in Colombia. (Hylton 2006:79; Pilger 2001) In 1998, further exacerbating Colombia’s financial instability, the IMF stepped in to sort out the Colombian economic crisis through the same conditions that primarily caused it. Meanwhile, the poverty resulting from the economic collapse only worsened the hostile situation of Colombia’s civil war, creating an inescapable paradox of misery for the disproportionate amount of Colombians in poverty. (Aviles 2006; Hylton 2006; Arboleda et al. 2004) The national Colombian poverty rate in 2006 was 65 percent, while the rural rate was an unbelievable 85 percent. (Arboleda et al. 2004; Aviles 2006; Hylton 2006) The economic liberalization the U.S successfully helped the Colombian elite implement has increased levels of poverty in the country, becoming a main driving force of the conflict the U.S has become willingly embedded to, which will be detailed shortly. (Arboleda et al. 2004; Aviles 2006; Hylton 2006)

Amidst the country’s economic decline, foreign direct investment as the percentage of Colombia’s GDP ironically doubled between 1996 and 2002, mostly from energy and finance sectors. (Aviles 2006:91, 57) This was largely a result of the formation of the U.S.-Colombia Business Partnership, which was a lobbying group made up of Occidental Petroleum, GE, Enron, Texaco, and Colgate-Palmolive. This group successfully lobbied President Clinton to sanction trade with the Colombian government. (Aviles 2006:79,131)
The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN), the two largest and most active rebel groups in the country, have greatly opposed the neo-liberal conditions that have engulfed Colombia. The FARC and ELN promote a nationalistic and socialist agenda. As unregulated economic liberalization has been implemented in the country, the operations of both the FARC and ELN have become more brutal. (Aviles 2006:23) It was not until the early 1990's, simultaneous to neo-liberal impositions of deregulation, privatization, and weakening of labor protections that the use of child soldiers became a huge problem in Colombia. The number of guerrilla fighters in Colombia more than doubled from 1994 to 1999, due largely to the excessive recruitment of child soldiers from less than 10,000 to more than 20,000 combatants. (Aviles 2006:92)

Colombia has the fourth largest number of child soldiers in the world. The UN has estimated such numbers to be as high as 14,000, with at least two-thirds being under fifteen years old. A quarter of all combined soldiers in Colombia are less than eighteen years old. Children as young as seven years old have been recruited by the FARC and by age eight are trained to use assault rifles and forced to engage in combat. Many times, the youngest units, known as "small boy units," are put in the front lines. These young children, being considered expendable by rebel leaders, have even been sent to the front lines naked in an attempt to confuse and create sympathy from the enemy and are often the first killed. (Singer 2006:16-18) Also, if a child loses a weapon, he or she is often forced to enter combat without one until able to retrieve a replacement from the enemy. 40 percent of all killed rebels in Colombia are less than eighteen years old.

Rural poverty and inequality resulting from neo-liberal impositions have stabilized a "market for recruits" of child soldiers for both sides. (Aviles 2006:104) "Social disruptions and failures of development caused by globalization, war, and disease have led not only to greater global conflict and instability, but also to generational disconnections that create a new pool of potential recruits," including, disproportionately, children. (Singer 2006:38)

Another change that came with Colombia's "low-intensity democracy" reform and economic liberalization in the early 1990's was the formation of armed civilian paramilitary groups funded and supported indirectly by the Colombian government and military and directly by agro-exporters, narco-traffickers, cattle ranchers and agrarian elites. Such paramilitary groups are hired to forcefully maintain the present order in Colombia, terrorizing the civilian population and violently ridding the country of non-supporters of the current order. The paramilitaries, collectively known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), have proven to be as brutal as the guerrilla groups. 70 percent of all political killings in Colombia during the 1990's were attributed to paramilitary factions. Yet these groups have also murdered trade unionists, human rights leaders, priests, homosexuals and children living on the street or belonging to political dissidents. (Chomsky 2003; Hylton 2006; Arboleda et al. 2004) One case in February, 2005 involved the murder and dismemberment by a paramilitary group using machetes of three children belonging to a political subversive, aged 2, 6 and 11, and one 17 year old boy. (Hylton 2006:123) Such atrocities are funded indirectly by the U.S government, as it has invested well over $3 billion in the Colombian Military since 1999. (Blum 2005; Aviles 2006; Hylton 2006) These paramilitary groups have become contract-killers. (Hylton 2006:12-13; Arboleda et al. 2004:30) Among numerous companies, Coca-Cola has been accused of being complicit in paramilitary executions of several union leaders in the company's Colombian bottling plants. Such cases give evidence to an unfortunate phenomenon: while "civilians have always suffered in war... the difference is that in many present day conflicts they are the primary target." (Singer 2006:4)

As stated by Chomsky (2003:60), "the proportion of atrocities attributed to the paramilitaries has been increasing as crimes are privatized in accord with neo-liberal practice..." As a result of rebel attacks, companies have signed contracts with military and paramilitary personnel to provide security for oil and coal extraction. Yet human rights abuses have steadily increased in Colombia since these companies have signed contracts with military personnel in 1996. The same unit hired by Occidental Petroleum is known for the brutal massacre of ten civilians in 1994. Though Occidental's pipelines have been attacked a total of about 500 times and as much as up to 50 times in one year, costing the company as much as $3 million a day for ten days of forced closure, it has generated hundreds of millions in Colombia annually. (Coghlan 2004:134-135) In Casanare, where British Petroleum operates, the army killed at least two civilians peacefully protesting the company. Moreover, on August 5, 2005, the Colombian paramilitary brigade employed by Occidental assassinated three union leaders, Jorge Priesto, Leonel Goneyche, and Hector Alirio Martinez. Since that time, the company has only employed sixty individuals who are members of a union. Thus, the violence serves at least three functions in this case: maintaining the current order in Colombia, ensuring successful extraction operations, and saving labor costs for disproportionately foreign companies.

Colombia has proven invaluable to a multitude of foreign, especially U.S., firms, and has even been called a "trial-run for private war contractors." U.S. defense contractors are currently receiving half of the money given by Washington to combat
the FARC and ELN and fight the “war on drugs.” In 2006, $300 million was spent by the U.S. State and Defense Departments on home-based private contractors. DynCorp is the largest private military contractor working in Colombia, described by some as performing “mercenary” operations. Furthermore, the Colombian National Police are the world’s largest user of Bell’s Huey II Helicopters, used to patrol Occidental Petroleum’s pipelines in Colombia. Thus, the ulterior motive of U.S involvement in Colombia is clear when one US-company is generating revenue protecting the operations of another U.S-based company in a foreign country that is literally torn apart. Moreover, the Lockheed Martin Corporation, another U.S.-based enterprise, does much work on Colombian aircraft, and has seen profits triple between 2002 and 2006 to over $80 billion. A main objective of U.S involvement in Colombia has clearly been to appropriate tactics of the civil war to the benefit of U.S companies, even at the expense of innocent, impoverished Colombian lives.

Instead of withholding investment in Colombia until something positive is done about the violence, the multinational companies and U.S government have continued to comply with business as usual. The companies, governments, and military contractors seemingly consider themselves above the rule of international law, and the innocent people caught in the middle of a hellish war zone are ignored by the state, the complicit corporations, investors and financial institutions, and the international community alike. The failure of these entities to sufficiently acknowledge the suffering in Colombia and elsewhere has contributed to a worsening in the types of violence prevalent in impoverished, war-torn regions, as people become increasingly desperate while on the edge of survival. While the morale of the impoverished is bled through their macroeconomic and political repression, the “higher immorality” of the transnational elite has held strong.

**Conclusion**

While valuable natural resources are extracted and exported West by mostly Western companies, impoverished masses in places like Colombia and Indonesia are denied their most fundamental human rights. Meanwhile, incompetent and/or negligent policies of international financial institutions engulf these regions in debt through skyrocketing interest rates, and powerful Western governments and arms industries provide the diplomatic and physical means of oppression to corrupt and brutal regimes. These regimes, in Indonesia, Colombia and elsewhere, while enriching themselves, violently exacerbate the misery of millions of their poor, already plagued with malnutrition and unemployment. Meanwhile the violent cycle between rebel groups that originally sought justice and corrupt state armies creates an atmosphere of all-out chaos where civilians are caught in the middle and often targeted directly. Violence becomes normalized as the purpose of war is mutated toward criminality and inequality expands.

Arms industries and military contractors generate notable profits while supplying high-wage jobs in high-tech Western industries and investors in the U.S and elsewhere also benefit. Yet millions suffer in the developing world as they are denied basic resources necessary for survival (which are plentiful in the world) and face the constant threat of indescribably horrific violence, cementing their oppressed existence multilaterally through dangerous unilateral policies and ideologies of the transnational power elite. The objectives of war have been seemingly altered throughout much of the globe, reflecting those which aim not to secure a means toward peace, but enable a perpetual state of conflict, maintaining the current global power structure. (Singer 2006:4) While the distribution of resources is becoming ever more skewed in favor of the world’s dominant powers, those within weak states, and seemingly even the most self-acclaimed ‘civilized’ of states, have become more neglectful of the global poor. Further exacerbating this global trend, rapidly growing technology has insofar enabled not the equitable dissemination of wealth and resources to a majority of the world’s inhabitants, but rather more efficient ways for groups to kill, plunder, and dominate entire societies. The main imperative of those of power must shift; only through the stabilization of present war-torn and decimated states can those such as the U.S secure indefinite peace for its populations, and, concurrently, the world.
Endnotes


18. “You’ll Learn Not To Cry”- Child Combatants in Colombia 2003. (Book)

19. “You’ll Learn Not To Cry”...

20. “You’ll Learn Not To Cry”...


