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**COLOMBIA**

# SUCCESS STORY

## Fresh Start for a Child Ex-Combatant

### A young Colombian woman overcomes war wounds



Photo: IOM/Karen Mora

Tania, who now works for a clothing producer in Bogota, inspects baseball caps before they are packaged and sent to retail stores.

***“I have fallen down and have been crushed, but I have overcome. It is not easy to start from nothing but I have a great desire to become a better person,” says Tania, a child ex-combatant.***

Telling Our Story  
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At 13, Tania fled home and an abusive stepfather to join an illegal armed group. Hoping to find a better life, Tania soon became disillusioned. Forced to work as a “bearer,” Tania carried heavy loads of equipment, often for several days and nights on end. With no permanent place to live or income, she ate only what she could scrounge up. Tania considered running away, but lost hope and resigned herself to spending the rest of her life as a slave. At the age of sixteen, she was shot during a battle and hospitalized. Deeply frightened, she sought help from a nurse to escape from the armed group. The nurse contacted her family.

“Although the family had some difficulty accepting their daughter’s participation in the illegal armed group, the family eventually welcomed her back. They sought assistance from a USAID-supported program run by the Colombian Family Welfare Agency to help with Tania’s reintegration back into her family, school, and community. The program provides educational support and vocational training to help girls like Tania make up for years lost and get back on track. The program also helps child ex-combatants overcome the trauma associated with the life they fell into at so young an age.

Tania’s days are long. Each morning she gets up at 5:30 to go to work. Twelve hours later, she returns home, has a break and does her homework. Her evening school program runs from 6:30 to 10:00. Her hard work is paying off. Thanks to the program’s tutoring, Tania is catching up academically with her peers and has reached the tenth grade. In addition, she attends vocational training courses, which she hopes will advance her career. “I have fallen down and have been crushed, but I have overcome,” Tania says. “It not easy to start from nothing, but I have a great desire to become a better person.”

Now 18, Tania will join a reintegration program run by Colombia’s Interior and Justice Ministry. Her goal after graduating from high school is to find a career in which she can help children and youngsters who experience hardships similar to her own. Tania is confident that through hard work, honesty, and a little help, it is possible for these youngsters to return to society. She is living proof of it.