

Colombia's President Uribe implicated in paramilitary death squad probe

By Bill Van Auken and Ascher Brum
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The arrest in Bogota of ex-Senator Mario Uribe Escobar, the cousin of Colombia's president, on charges of involvement in the country's paramilitary death squads has deepened the political crisis of Bush's closest political ally in Latin America.

Colombian President Álvaro Uribe has also admitted to the media that he himself is a target of an investigation implicating him in the organization of a massacre by the paramilitaries.

Uribe Escobar, the former head of the Colombian Congress, is not only President Álvaro Uribe's relative, but was also one of his closest political collaborators. He was arrested Tuesday as he left the Costa Rican embassy, where he had sought political asylum.

The Costa Rican government rejected the appeal as "inappropriate." Protesters, who had gathered outside the embassy hanging the names and pictures of death squad victims on its gates, jeered and jostled the ex-senator as he was led away.

Colombian prosecutors announced that Uribe Escobar is wanted in connection with a probe into his meetings with paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso in advance of the March 2002 elections that brought his cousin to power. The former senator played a key role in getting Álvaro Uribe elected, and apparently mobilized the country's death squads to help secure political victory.

In an interview with Colombia's Radio Caracol Tuesday, President Álvaro Uribe confided that he had "spent Easter week talking with lawyers" defending him against charges made by a paramilitary in custody. The death squad member has testified that the Colombian president helped plan the infamous 1997 El Aro massacre in the state of Antioquia, when Álvaro Uribe was governor there.

The president has denounced the charges as "slanders" and urged prosecutors to be "very careful" with the testimony of "a bandit with a desire for vengeance against an honorable citizen."

Included in the evidence against him is a message left on the beeper of one of the paramilitaries by another, asking

him to "call the governor" and inform him that he would visit him the next day. Uribe dismissed the message, claiming that "governor" could have been slang used by death squad members to describe one of their leaders.

In its book on atrocities in Colombia, "War without Quarter," Human Rights Watch provides a description of the El Aro incident.

While soldiers maintained a perimeter around El Aro, an estimated 25 ACCU (one of the main paramilitary death squads operating in the north of Colombia) members entered the village, rounded up the residents and executed four people in the village plaza...Storeowner Aurelio Areiza and his family were told to slaughter a steer and prepare food from their shelves to feed the ACCU members on October 25 and 26, while the rest of Colombia voted in municipal elections. The next day, Areiza was taken to a nearby house, tied to a tree, tortured and killed. Witnesses say the ACCU gouged out his eyes and cut off his tongue and testicles...Over the five days they remained in El Aro, ACCU members executed at least eleven people, including three children, burned forty-seven of the sixty-eight houses, including a pharmacy, a church, and the telephone exchange, looted stores, destroyed the pipes that fed the homes potable water, and forced most of the residents to flee. When they left on October 30, the ACCU took with them over 1,000 head of cattle along with goods looted from homes and stores. Afterwards, thirty other people were reported to be forcibly disappeared."

Last Friday new evidence emerged of the involvement of several other members of the Colombian government and armed forces in the right-wing paramilitary groups linked to drug trafficking and organized crime.

The number of top officials implicated in the scandal rises daily, revealing the morass of corruption in which the Colombian state and army are mired. The links reach from mayors and city councilmen, to governors and ex-congressmen, generals and the president himself.

According to the Colombian state, the majority of the paramilitary groups have demobilized under a peace accord

brokered by Álvaro Uribe. Some 31,000 members of these right-wing terror groups laid down their arms, while the government has granted them impunity for massacres, assassinations, kidnappings, drug trafficking and other crimes that they carried out.

Meanwhile, however, the links between them and congressmen as well as the upper echelons of the armed forces continue coming to light, giving rise to a crisis that the Latin American press has dubbed the “parapolitica scandal.”

Last week, the denunciations reached deeper into the heart of the Colombian state, implicating the current president of the Congress, Nancy Patricia Gutiérrez. Also charged was the parliamentary deputy, Javier Ramiro Devia, together with an army colonel and six other officers.

Altogether 32 members of Congress have been arrested and another 30 are under investigation. Out of these, 54 are drawn from Uribe’s ruling coalition. Eighteen of these renounced their parliamentary immunity in order to shift their investigations to the Colombian attorney general’s office, rather than the country’s high court. At this point, nearly one third of Colombia’s lawmakers are facing judicial charges or investigations over their connections with paramilitary death squads and drug traffickers.

There are parties, such as Colombia Viva, part of the ruling coalition, in which 100 percent of their elected lawmakers are either in jail or under investigation. In Mario Uribe’s Colombia Democrática party, five out of its six members in the senate are accused of collaborating with the paramilitaries, with one, Senator Álvaro García, charged with helping to organize a massacre.

“What we’ve seen happen is a de facto alliance between powerful economic interests and narco-traffickers, and the motives were to co-opt institutions and convert Colombia itself into a criminal enterprise,” said Senator Gustavo Petro, leader of the main opposition party and a former member of the disbanded M-19 guerrilla movement. “Congress is one of the institutions that have been co-opted.”

Rafael García, the former director of information in Colombia’s Central Intelligence agency, declared before the country’s Supreme Court that the former rightist death squads are infiltrated into government ministries and other state agencies. The ex-official—who was the first to publicly expose the links between the congressmen and the paramilitaries—insisted that, in addition to the congress, these other institutions should also be investigated. García, who is jailed on charges of suppressing the criminal records of drug traffickers and paramilitaries, charged that these groups were operating inside Colombia’s ministries of Interior, Communications, Environment, Agriculture, Foreign Affairs and Transport, the Army and even the

attorney general’s office, the agency that is responsible for investigating these criminal links.

As the latest charges against the Colombian president make clear, the ties between Uribe and the paramilitary groups and drug traffickers go back many years. As the US magazine *Newsweek* revealed in an August 2004 report, the US Central Intelligence Agency uncovered ties between Álvaro Uribe and Pablo Escobar, chief of the Medellín drug cartel, who was killed by security forces in 1993.

The protection given by Álvaro Uribe and other members of his government to the paramilitaries and drug traffickers has gone hand-in-hand with their reliance on these groups to carry out savage repression against the Colombian working class.

Under the Uribe government, nearly 400 trade unionists have been assassinated and 1,300 more have been the subjects of death threats. Less than three percent of these murders have been prosecuted. Uribe, for his part, has exhibited absolute indifference to this right-wing violence, concentrating his efforts on vilifying individuals and judges seeking to get to the bottom of the assassinations.

The ever widening exposure of the criminality of the Uribe regime takes place in the context of President George W. Bush’s public campaign to shame the Democratic-led Congress into approving a free trade agreement with Colombia.

In his weekly radio address last Saturday, Bush praised Uribe as “a steadfast ally of the United States,” who has “transformed his country from a near-failed state to a stable democracy” and “partnered with America in the fight against drugs and terror.”

In reality, the prosecution and jailing of one Uribe ally after another, together with the investigation of the Colombian president himself, exposes the US-backed regime in Bogota as a criminal enterprise guilty of rampant state terror. These are precisely the qualities that make it an ideal partner in Washington’s “global war on terrorism.”

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