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Violence From Colombian Right-Wing Paramilitary Groups Spirals Out of Control

by LADB Staff

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The conflict in Colombia Latin America's longest running civil war continues to extract a huge toll in deaths and displacement of the civilian population, much of it caused by right-wing paramilitary groups. The government has responded by offering rewards for paramilitary leaders and vowing to wage an all-out military assault on extremists. However, human rights groups charge that the paramilitary is tied to the Colombian military. In a wave of violence during the last 10 days of November, at least 60 campesinos were killed by paramilitary groups for alleged ties to the guerrillas. The private armies have doubled to about 4,000 members in the past two years, and now roam through about 40% of the country.

For more than a decade, the paramilitaries have been vying with the rebels for control of vast areas of rural Colombia. They almost never fight each other, instead targeting civilians believed sympathetic to the enemy. Local residents also say soldiers rarely venture into the mountainous region in northern Colombia where the paramilitary death squads have their stronghold. "Since May, when paramilitaries resumed their nefarious activity, we have had at least 100 victims, the great majority campesinos," said Gabriel Eduardo Gonzalez, the mayor of Dabeiba, site of one of the November massacres.

President offers reward for paramilitary leaders

President Ernesto Samper said last October that he had ordered the military to pursue paramilitaries with the same vigor it employs to fight leftist guerrillas. In a televised speech to the nation on Dec. 2, Samper reiterated that pledge, saying he would not countenance "any type of complicity, coexistence or tolerance" by members of the military or police for paramilitaries.

Samper vowed that the government would do everything in its power to bring an end to the violence against suspected rebel sympathizers. "These private justice groups, wrongly called paramilitaries, are taking reprisals against innocent and unarmed people to settle supposed scores with guerrillas whom they never confront," Samper said. "We will give no quarter in fighting these groups of demented killers. We will pursue them all the way to hell, if necessary, I promise it." The government offered rewards of US\$385,000 for information leading to the capture of six paramilitary leaders. Samper said a special task force, the Search Unit, similar to the one formed to track down members of the Cali drug cartel in 1995, was being created to locate and arrest the paramilitary leaders. He also said "wanted" posters would be distributed nationwide for leaders of groups like the Autodefensas Campesinas de Cordoba y Uraba (ACCU), the country's largest paramilitary group.

Human rights groups claim, however, that the government knows where the paramilitaries are located but has made no effort to arrest them. Carlos Castano, the ACCU's commander and a virulent anti-communist, has had a US\$1 million price on his head for the past year. Despite that,

he has given press interviews and met with congressional deputies and other politicians, including Samper's peace emissaries, in his stronghold in northwest Cordoba province. Four arrests were made the day that the Search Unit made up of police, army intelligence, and secret service agents began operations.

Human rights group charges military complicity

The Search Unit's inauguration also coincided with the publication of a critical report by the New York-based Human Rights Watch/Americas (HRW). The independent group blamed paramilitary forces, operating with the "acquiescence" of the military, for the majority of massacres in Colombia. Leftist guerrillas also committed massacres and killed civilians, it said, adding that they had stepped up use of car bombs. In its report, HRW blamed paramilitary forces for up to 35 massacres this year that left 272 people dead, and it criticized the government for its failure to track down paramilitary chiefs.

Until the four arrests, just 17 death- squad members had been detained in 1997 compared with more than 750 rebels. "The state's failure to arrest paramilitary leaders or pursue their units constituted tacit approval for their violations and meant that paramilitaries waged an unhindered campaign of terror throughout the country," the report said. "The bulk of the carnage was attributable to paramilitary groups, usually working with military acquiescence." American and other diplomats, as well as many human rights organizations, have long charged that the paramilitaries operate with the tacit support of the armed forces. "You can't support the army without getting into bed with the paramilitaries," said Robin Kirk of HRW.

Armed forces chiefs have consistently denied any systematic links between the paramilitary forces and the military. But one senior police officer, who asked not to be identified, told Reuter, "If it weren't for the paramilitaries, the guerrillas would already be in the Casa de Narino [presidential palace]." If credible evidence exists that the Colombian army is helping the paramilitary forces, the Clinton administration would be forced to withhold a portion of about US\$100 million in US military assistance.

After charges earlier this year that US military supplies were landing in the hands of army units accused of abuses, Bogota agreed to require the Defense Ministry to list all units not implicated in the accusations. So far, the Colombian navy and air force have offered such a list, but not the army. Even while voicing shock at the paramilitary killings, Samper has balked at any sort of inquiry into army links to the groups. "State violence does not exist in Colombia," he said flatly. Kidnappings by rebel forces also up Meanwhile, kidnappings have also escalated, including abductions by the guerrillas.

Among those kidnapped was a Catholic bishop, Jose Jesus Quintero, who, along with the mayor and mayor-elect of the town of Tibu, was held by rebels for more than three weeks. In addition, Samper's press secretary William Parra and radio journalist Luis Eduardo Maldonado were captured by the Movimiento Jaime Bateman Cayon, which was formed by dissidents in the M-19 guerrilla movement after the M-19 laid down its arms in 1990. Parra and Maldonado were released on Dec. 14, but the same day four other journalists were kidnapped by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

Moreover, according to government figures, more than 41,000 people have fled their homes this year to escape violence from the clash between guerrillas and the landowner-backed paramilitary death squads. Colombia has more displaced people than any other country in the hemisphere. Nearly 1 million people have fled their homes since 1985, according to Amnesty International, often settling in dangerous slums around major cities. [Source: El Nuevo Herald, 12/03/97; Clarin (Argentina), 12/04/97; BBC, 12/05/97; Inter Press Service, 12/06/97; The Miami Herald, 12/03/97, 12/07/97; Agence France-Presse, 12/02/97, 12/05/97, 12/08/97; El Tiempo (Colombia), 12/09/97, 12/11/97; Associated Press, 12/01/97, 12/02/97, 12/13/97; Reuter, 12/01/97, 12/02/97, 12/04-06/97, 12/09/97, 12/14/97; Spanish news service EFE, 12/15/97; Notimex, 12/08/97, 12/14/97, 12/17/97]

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