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## **Paramilitary Abuses Delay U.S. Aid to Colombia; Peace Talks on Hold**

by LADB Staff

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The Colombian government has not succeeded in curbing paramilitary violence, raising new questions about US aid. Meanwhile, the war grinds on, despite sporadic calls from the government and the guerrillas for peace. Charges that right-wing paramilitaries estimated by nongovernmental organizations to be responsible for 76% of the human rights violations in Colombia are backed by the military erupted again in early January.

A Jan. 3 editorial in The New York Times called on the US government to exert its influence on the Colombian military to arrest the paramilitaries. In response, Colombia's ambassador to the US, Juan Carlos Esguerra, denied any link between the military and paramilitary groups. The editorial came after the Clinton administration announced in late December a US\$46 million aid package for the Colombian armed forces in 1998. Approval had been delayed following complaints by US human rights organizations of links between members of the armed forces and paramilitary groups. On Dec. 26, The Washington Post reported that the Clinton administration had agreed to allow US aid to be used by the Colombian military for counterinsurgency activities.

Administration officials said they are concerned that the guerrillas pose a growing threat to the government. "About 50 percent of the territory is not under government control, and there is a growing nexus between the narcos and many fronts of the guerrillas," an unnamed senior administration official was quoted as saying. "The government is in trouble." US aid is primarily for anti-drug operations, and the money has flowed steadily in recent years despite cutbacks in other aid and two consecutive decertifications by the Clinton administration labeling Colombia as not cooperating with US anti-drug trafficking efforts.

### ***Government commitment to end paramilitary violence questioned***

Meanwhile, Colombia's ombud, Jose Fernando Castro, said the army has not done enough to control paramilitary violence. Castro said that, although it is not government policy, "it has been proven the military and paramilitary work together" and are responsible for the forced displacement of large rural populations. Armed forces commander Gen. Manuel Jose Bonnett called Castro's accusations "partial, unsubstantiated, and unjust," and said Castro did not care about human rights violations when the victims were members of the military.

More than 60 people were killed during a paramilitary killing spree in the last two months of 1997. Although the groups have existed for decades, today they are bigger, better armed, and more organized, with as many as 5,000 members. Despite more than 200 warrants, and a vow from President Ernesto Samper to pursue the paramilitaries "all the way to hell if necessary," few arrests have been made. Once before, following several massacres in 1996, Samper offered a reward for paramilitary leader Carlos Castano. The reward went unclaimed, although Castano's whereabouts is widely known, and he frequently gives interviews to journalists. Castano, who has a new US\$775,000

price on his head, has said in interviews that he ordered a massacre in Mapiripan and that those slain were all rebel collaborators (see NotiSur, 07/25/97).

US and Colombian officials have also linked Castano to drug trafficking, and say the paramilitaries are trying to seize control of the drug trade in the southeastern plains. Some US aid frozen because of army tolerance of death squads Just as Washington was prepared to release the military aid, new allegations arose of military complicity in the torture and killings by paramilitary death squads. Colombian prosecutors, judicial investigators, and human rights officials have strong evidence in two massacres. While the military has not acknowledged any wrongdoing, several officers have been transferred or disciplined.

One massacre, in the town of Miraflores in October, came just a day after US drug czar Barry McCaffrey visited the area and praised the military's anti-drug efforts. Access to the jungle town is primarily by air, and anti-narcotics police register everyone who steps off a plane. Army and police officers in Miraflores say it would be impossible for anyone to enter the town without the knowledge of the military. Hector Guavita, a jeep driver, witnessed the arrival of six paramilitaries in Miraflores and said three victims were executed in sight of the local military base. Residents said the paramilitaries were taken to the military base when they arrived. They also said anti-narcotics police were present at the time of the massacre. Until now their human rights record was relatively good.

On Jan. 10, US Embassy officials in Colombia said an initial US\$10 million in nonlethal military aid approved by Congress was being held up. "The decision whether to cut off military aid in full or in part will be made after it is determined whether the Colombian government is fully prosecuting," said a Clinton administration official in Washington. However, tracking US military aid allocations is not easy. Aid comes through many programs, all subject to different regulations, resulting in a confusing maze of figures. "I doubt anybody really knows how many different programs result in the transfer of military equipment and assistance to Colombia," says Carlos Salinas of Amnesty International. Government sends mixed messages on talks with guerrillas

Meanwhile, efforts toward peace with guerrilla forces is at a standstill. The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) had both said on many occasions they would not negotiate with Samper, whom they accuse of corruption. In a communique sent to a local television station on Jan. 15, however, FARC leader Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda said his group is willing to dialogue with the government if a large area in central and southern Colombia is demilitarized. He also said the guerrillas would not sit at the negotiating table with paramilitary groups, which he called "state terrorists."

Also in mid-January, Gustavo Alvarez Gardeazabal, governor of the department of Valle, said he had the president's authorization to talk with guerrilla groups. "We have spent years talking about peace," said Alvarez. "The political and social sectors have only engaged in rhetoric but have done nothing effective to achieve peace. Colombia is at war and the dialogue has to be about the war." Alvarez said he and leaders of the FARC agreed to set up talks to create a climate for formal negotiations. Alvarez said he enlisted the participation of the ELN as well. Later, the ELN said it had agreed to meet with the Red de Iniciativas contra la Guerra y por la Paz (REDEPAZ), a Colombian

nongovernmental organization spearheading citizen peace efforts. REDEPAZ led the initiative coinciding with the October elections in which more than 10 million people cast a ballot for peace.

On Jan. 24, however, Samper said the government would not recognize any contact with the guerrillas that was not the direct initiative of the government. "Negotiations regarding the armed conflict are exclusively and uniquely the president's responsibility," said Samper. The president's peace representative, Jose Noe Rios, said the FARC statement was in the hands of the president, who would respond in early February when he signs the law creating the National Peace Council. (Sources: Reuter, 12/27/97; The New York Times, 01/03/98; Associated Press, 01/09/98; Inter Press Service, 01/06/98, 01/11/98; The Christian Science Monitor, 01/16/98; Spanish news service EFE, 01/07/98, 01/24/98, 01/25/98; Notimex, 01/06/98, 01/07/98, 01/20/98, 01/27/98)

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