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Former Defense Minister Latest Victim of Political Violence in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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Colombia's former defense minister, retired Gen. Fernando Landazabal Reyes, was killed near his apartment in Bogota on May 12. The third major political assassination this month has raised security concerns as general elections near. Human rights workers, who are also frequent targets of attacks, say widespread impunity contributes to the escalation of violence.

Criticism of abuses by security forces has intensified following a raid on the offices of a Catholic Church human rights office. Gen. Landazabal was one of the most outspoken opponents of peace talks with the Colombian guerrillas. He was forced to resign as defense minister during a 1984 peace initiative by then president Belisario Betancur (1982-1986). He was an informal advisor to retired Gen. Harold Bedoya, a right-wing former military commander and candidate for president in the May 31 elections.

Bedoya blamed Samper for the killing, saying he allowed the deterioration of law and order. "This is a government that can't protect the lives of Colombians," said Bedoya, a distant fourth in pre-election preference polls. In addition to the high-profile killings, at least 65 people were killed in guerrilla and paramilitary violence during the first week in May.

Some candidates, including Partido Conservador presidential candidate Andres Pastrana, have canceled some campaign activities because of threats. Partido Liberal candidate Horacio Serpa has said repeatedly he hopes to make it to election day alive. On May 14, the helicopter in which Serpa was traveling was fired on, but no one was injured. The office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) reported in February that paramilitaries are responsible for the majority of human rights violations in Colombia. Its report called the abuses "grave, massive, and systematic."

"Colombia is being ripped apart, its people butchered and uprooted by sweeping violence associated with multiple conflicts: rampant institutionalized human rights abuses, impunity, private groups' including narco-traffickers efforts to expand their economic power and lawlessness," said Hiram Ruiz of the US Committee for Refugees.

Killers target both right and left

Authorities suspect that Landazabal's death may have been a left-wing reprisal for recent killings blamed on right-wing death squads. Jesus Maria Valle Jaramillo, a lawyer and founder of the Antioquia human rights commission, who had accused the military and local politicians of encouraging paramilitary death squads, was assassinated in Medellin in February. On April 16, 60-year-old former Communist Party leader and human rights activist Maria Arango Fonnegra was killed in Santa Fe de Bogota, and two days later, respected human rights attorney Eduardo Umana Mendoza was killed, also in Bogota.

While authorities accused paramilitary groups and the extreme right of responsibility for the deaths, union and political leaders decried what they called an "extermination campaign" against the left.

Human rights workers are becoming more frequent targets of violence. Last year, 27 human rights activists were killed and two dozen were threatened, according to the Comision Colombiana de Juristas (CCJ). "We have become the objects of our own work," said Agustin Jimenez, a lawyer with a public-interest law firm. "We have gone from protecting others to protecting ourselves."

After Umana's killing, President Ernesto Samper met with human rights groups to offer them a US \$1.2 million security program. Human rights workers say what is more important is that politicians and military officers stop making irresponsible accusations against them, including charges that they overlook abuses committed by insurgents and focus on the army's mistreatment of civilians. The rights workers say such charges are a green light for assassins. London-based Amnesty International has closed its Bogota office because of threats.

Although the decision was just announced, it was made after Mario Calderon and his wife Elsa Alvarado, investigators with the Jesuit-backed human rights group Centro de Investigacion y Educacion Popular (CINEP), were machine gunned to death in their Bogota apartment last May. CINEP staff recently confirmed that the institute's director, Gabriel Izquierdo, a Jesuit priest, had left Colombia and may remain abroad for the foreseeable future. "There's been a very deliberate pattern of violence against Colombian human rights monitors that has intensified over the past year," said Coletta Youngers, senior associate at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a group advocating human rights and democracy.

On May 13, security forces raided the Comision Intercongregacional para la Paz y la Justicia, a leading Bogota human rights group associated with the Catholic Church. They conducted a two-hour search, carting away files and photographing everyone in the office. Office workers, including two Catholic nuns, said they were forced to kneel on the floor while police pointed machine guns at their heads. Spokespersons for the organization, headed by sociologist Orlando Fas Borda, said the raid was carried out by members of the army, the Division Tecnica Judicial of the police, and staff from the attorney general's office.

Deputy Prosecutor Jaime Cordoba Trevino said the search was carried out at the request of the armed forces, which said it was looking for evidence related to Landazabal's killing. The organization had been compiling testimony on human rights abuses in Colombia, and the staff fears lives of witnesses could be endangered if its records fall into the wrong hands. Immediately church officials and international human rights organizations condemned the raid.

Robin Kirk with the New York-based Human Rights Watch/Americas said the search would "clearly be seen as another attempt to silence or to force human rights groups to stop their work." Military angry at US criticism The commander of the Colombian armed forces, Gen. Manuel Jose Bonett, denounced the recent killings as part of a campaign to destabilize the country. "I am convinced that the recent assassinations in Colombia are part of a masterful campaign to destabilize our country," said Bonett. "This could be the product of a campaign carried out against us recently, accusing us of crimes and violations of human rights." Bonett was referring to a recent Washington Post article, citing police and judicial sources, that implicated the army's 20th Intelligence Brigade in the assassinations of the human rights leaders.

Gen. Bonett defended the unit, saying, "I trust this organization. No member of military intelligence...who commits a crime would do it as a member of the institution. He would do it on his own, as an individual." Besides reports directly linking the military to paramilitary death squads, the

armed forces have been criticized for not preventing several massacres by paramilitary bands that have left more than 50 dead in recent weeks (see NotiSur, 12/19/97, 01/30/98, 04/04/98).

Meanwhile, the recent release from jail of six members of a band of drug traffickers who committed 107 homicides in western Colombia between 1989 and 1990 called attention to additional problems with Colombian justice. The killings took place in Trujillo and the dismembered bodies were thrown into the Rio Cauca. The six were released because they had been in jail the maximum time allowed without being sentenced. The release of the killers prompted the Tribunal Nacional, the highest authority for drug-related crimes, to ask the Consejo Nacional de la Judicatura to investigate the judge responsible for the delay.

A 1994 report showed 98% of crimes go unpunished in Colombia. Meanwhile, the Asociacion Nacional de Industriales (ANDI) and the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) announced a 30-minute work stoppage May 19 in a "pause for peace." Other activities that day, sponsored by the Catholic Church and various nongovernmental organizations grouped in the Frente Amplio por la Vida, will include a forum on impunity and peaceful marches in various cities calling for an end to the violence. [Sources: Inter Press Service, 04/06/98, 04/10/98; The Washington Post, 05/10/98; Notimex, 02/16/98, 05/12/98; CNN, 02/28/98, 05/12/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), The Los Angeles Times, 05/12/98; The Miami Herald, 03/03/98, 04/20/98, 05/12/98, 05/13/98; Associated Press, 05/12/98, 05/13/98; Reuters, 02/10/98, 04/18/98, 05/14/98; Spanish news service EFE, 03/02/98, 03/05/98, 04/17/98, 05/12/98, 05/15/98]

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