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President Uribe Human Rights Record Criticized

by LADB Staff

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Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez has been pushing hard to capitalize on his political strength at home and abroad. In a whirlwind tour of the European Union (EU), the executive, now eighteen months into his term, sought to strengthen economic ties between his country and the fifteen nations on the other side of the Atlantic.

Uribe currently enjoys strong popularity in his home country and solid backing from the US government. But representatives from the EU and prominent human rights organizations have expressed strong criticisms of his security policies. His visit to the EU comes as Europe seeks to extend trade ties with Colombia and its Andean neighbors Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador.

Colombia, meanwhile, wants the EU to continue to allow Andean countries tariff-free or low-tariff access to EU markets. Current preferential trade arrangements run out this year.

EU ministers walk out on Uribe speech

About a dozen European lawmakers walked out of a Feb. 10 speech by Uribe to protest a new law granting sweeping powers to the Colombian armed forces. The law allows the country's forces to detain suspects without warrants, tap phones, and search homes. The UN and civil rights groups say the measures violate international laws on human rights.

Uribe minimized the protest, telling reporters, "After the difficulties we've had in Colombia, the fact that certain political groups may boycott is a minor point." He says the legislation is necessary to bring peace to the country after 40 years of war with leftist rebels. To symbolize their disapproval, many EU lawmakers wore white scarves inscribed with the words "peace and justice in Colombia."

The Associated Press reported that about twenty members of the 626-member assembly walked out as Uribe began to speak. "We consider his visit at this time to be insensitive and inappropriate," said Monica Frassoni, leader of the Green group. "There are too many open questions about human rights violations."

Uribe echoed a rhetorical theme he has used in the past, saying, "Human rights should not be used to cover up terrorist action. You need to get to know Colombia properly." Uribe quickly adopted the vocabulary of the US War on Terror (see NotiSur, 2002-09-20). EU president Pat Cox, a Liberal, welcomed Uribe by saying EU lawmakers support peace efforts in Colombia.

"However there are still fields that need further action," Cox said. "We consider it essential...to develop a fully functioning democratic state. Exceptions with respect to human rights are not acceptable."

As Uribe prepared for his tour of Europe, major human rights groups were urging European lawmakers to pressure Uribe to curtail violations in Colombia.

London-based Amnesty International (AI) called on the EU to abstain "from supporting policies which could exacerbate the human rights crisis in Colombia." The group said that Uribe "does not speak the whole truth" and that in his country "there continue to be threats against human rights advocates and the civilian population."

Human Rights Watch (HRW) called on the EU to postpone a donor's conference planned for later this year until "Colombia fulfills key human rights commitments." HRW called the recently passed legislation "a recipe for an increase in torture and forced disappearance."

Even though Colombian authorities say that their hard-line security policies, dubbed "democratic security," are producing good results and incidents of homicide and kidnapping have diminished, AI has received information that deaths and disappearances are increasing in certain areas. "The policies of the government have not achieved a substantial improvement in the human rights situation; the mechanisms of impunity which permit human rights violations persist, and, instead of being dismantled, have been consolidated," said AI.

European Commission president Romano Prodi, however, gave Uribe political backing for his fight against terrorism, despite the widespread criticism. Prodi said the Commission "reaffirmed its commitment to support the government looking for a solution to the internal conflict," but said a peaceful solution should be found in line with international law.

Richard Howitt, a British Socialist member of the European Parliament, was far less conciliatory, saying, "The Colombian government has deliberately flouted United Nations human rights recommendations which it signed on to." He added that any new EU aid should be "conditioned on full and unqualified compliance with UN recommendations."

US certifies Colombia for military aid

While Uribe is facing some pressure from European parliamentarians, the US government is offering little public criticism and plenty of backing.

On Jan. 23, Secretary of State Colin Powell again certified Colombia as meeting congressional standards for protecting human rights, ensuring that Colombia would receive US\$34 million in aid for security forces, including airborne operations and a US-trained counternarcotics brigade. Jose Miguel Vivanco of HRW said Powell's action "suggests that the Bush administration sees the defense of human rights as a matter of paperwork, not concrete actions."

Eric Olson of AI-USA said the decision was "deeply disappointing." In February, US President George W. Bush proposed giving US\$463 million of his 2005 budget to Plan Colombia, the anti-drug program that consists mostly of military aid. He also called for US\$731 million for anti-narcotics operations in the Andean region. In the 2004 budget Bush asked for US\$744 million.

Groups like AI and HRW called the budget proposals "a blow to human rights." Cooperation between the Colombian and US governments is increasing. The United States Institute for Peace reported that 358 US military personnel could be found working on anti-terror and anti-narcotics missions in Colombia before July of 2003. After Israel, Egypt, and Iraq, Colombia is the top recipient of US foreign aid. There have been a record number of extraditions from Colombia in the past sixteen months, with over 80 Colombians sent to the US, the majority for crimes related to drug trafficking.

While US involvement in Colombia's war has increased (see NotiSur, 2003-04-11), it appears Colombia will not be reciprocating in Iraq, at least for the time being. The commander of the Colombian army, Gen. Martin Carreno, said he was unaware of any government plan to send a military contingent to collaborate with the US occupation of Iraq.

Spain's Secretary of Defense Fernando Diez Moreno had previously said that Colombia and Bolivia wanted to form part of the Ibero-American force in Iraq. Gen. Carreno said that if there were government authorization to move troops there, the most practical move would be to send the small contingent of 700 Colombian troops currently stationed on the Sinai Peninsula.

US backs Uribe's push for consecutive terms

The general decline in kidnapping and other serious crimes has kept Uribe's popularity high, as has his hard-line stance against insurgents. A Gallup poll showed his public-approval rating at a historic level of 80%, more than any Colombian chief of state after a similar period in office. Another recent survey found a backing of 78% for the 51-year-old lawyer. This shows political strength on Uribe's part, even after his attempt to pass a national referendum failed (see NotiSur, 2003-10-31, 2003-11-14). Uribe's allies have been attempting to use his political strength to change the Colombian Constitution, which prohibits presidents from being re-elected after serving one four-year term.

At the end of 2003, a parliamentary initiative to reform the Constitution failed, but the issue is far from dead. A survey commissioned by radio station RCN in Bogota found that 55% of Colombians supported re-election for Uribe after his term ends in 2006, and 19.9% were in favor of lengthening his term two years. Of those polled, 18% said they disagreed with both options.

The possibility of re-electing Uribe or lengthening his stay in office was set forth by Noemi Sanin, the ex-presidential candidate, former foreign minister, and current ambassador to Spain. "If the government goes well, why don't we set out the possibility of making a reform that allows the lengthening of his term?" Sanin asked while visiting Bogota in January. Presidential adviser Fabio Echeverri Correa has also been a proponent of the idea.

US Ambassador Richard Wood has repeatedly weighed in on the issue on Uribe's side. In an interview with radio RCN, he said he saw "nothing anti-democratic" in the idea of re-election, though he claims that "it's only a matter for the Colombians" to decide. He points to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), who have been fighting the government and

paramilitary groups for 40 years. "The presidential term is four years or 10% of that...This group has always had the tactic that when there have been strong and popular presidents, they've looked for a way to wait for the next one to arrive. That's an element the Colombian people, who have the decision to make about re-election, should keep in mind."

Opposition figures against Uribe complained about Wood's repeated support for re-election, calling it "meddling in the internal affairs" of Colombia.

Strongest rejection of hostage negotiations yet

Hopes for renewed negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC on the issue of hostage swapping sunk during Uribe's tour through Europe. While abroad he pronounced his strongest rejection of dialogue yet. The FARC is holding dozens of hostages and demands the release of about 300 jailed rebels. Negotiations have broken down on various issues in recent months (see NotiSur, 2004-01-23).

While visiting the EU head office in Brussels, Belgium, the executive compared the FARC to Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler, saying hostages were being kept in "concentration camps." He called the hostages "good citizens" who cannot be exchanged for guerrillas in jail, whom he again called "terrorists." "If Hitler had not been defeated, there would still be concentration camps," he said at a press conference with Javier Solana, the EU's foreign-policy chief in Brussels. "The Colombian government cannot enter into negotiations that strengthen terrorism."

Yet critics have gone after Uribe for his willingness to conduct negotiations with the right-wing paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (see NotiSur, 2003-12-19) while he cuts off dialogue with the FARC. Currently paramilitaries are getting captured and killed in record numbers, despite peace talks with the government. More than 3,000 paramilitary fighters were captured last year, even though their leaders had declared a cease-fire, according to the Colombian Defense Ministry.

The human rights group Noche y Niebla says paramilitary forces killed some 600 civilians in the first half of 2003. The former husband of a prominent kidnap victim has accused President Uribe of manipulating his family and using a double standard, "refusing to negotiate with the guerrillas while he puts on pressure to sign a peace with the paramilitaries."

Fabrice Delloye, the ex-spouse of the former independent presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt who was kidnapped in February 2002 during a campaign against Uribe, told the French newspaper *Le Monde*, "We have been manipulated by Uribe. It was the president himself who got in contact with Astrid Betancourt, Ingrid's sister, and her mother Yolanda Pulecio in July 2003." Delloye says Uribe then said that he "had received a message from the FARC that they appeared ready to free her, because she was ill." That contact caused "Astrid's departure for the Amazon and the subsequent frustration." The ex-husband of the kidnapped politician, who has citizenship in both Colombia and France, asked whether "Uribe and his services didn't plot all this to make the upcoming contact between the FARC and the UN in Brazilian territory fail."

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