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AUD Leader Castano Missing
by LADB Staff
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Confusion reigned after an assassination attempt against Colombian paramilitary leader Carlos Castano left several of his bodyguards dead and his whereabouts unknown. Castano, his family and a troop of bodyguards were reportedly traveling between the villages of Necocli and San Pedro de Uraba, 300 miles northwest of Bogota, when the shooting started on April 19.

Allegations that rival militia leaders perpetrated the attack have placed peace negotiations between paramilitary groups and the Colombian government in jeopardy. The leader, who faces more than one hundred years in prison and extradition requests for murder and narcotics trafficking from the US, had played a pivotal role in peace talks between the Colombian government and the country's largest right-wing paramilitary group, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). With his fate unknown, talks appear to be on the verge of breakdown and President Alvaro Uribe has threatened to annihilate the paramilitary groups if they do not produce Castano soon.

Wife, daughter under army protection

Early reports said Castano, 38 years old, escaped the attack unharmed, while other sources said he was captured and hanged. The AUC's other most prominent leader, Salvatore Mancuso, denied that an attack occurred at all and said Castano was using it as a smokescreen to disappear. Castano's wife, Kenia Gomez, and young daughter escaped the firefight near Castano's ranch in the department of Antioquia and went into army protection.

"I ask respect for his life and his integrity," Gomez read in a message to Radio RCN. "Colombia knows that he led and initiated the peace process with the AUC. This persecution is ruining his determination to return to legality and seek peace." Gomez did not know the fate of her husband. Police searched a mass grave found in Antioquia near the site of the shootout to see if they could find Castano's body, but they had no positive match as of May 6.

An internal power war for narco-dollars?

Former paramilitary leader Rodrigo Franco told the Associated Press he believed Castano was dead. "With the death of Carlos, the drug traffickers have won and Colombia has lost the possibility that Castano could have contributed...to the demobilization process," Franco said.

More than a year ago Castano initiated peace talks with the government aimed at demobilizing paramilitary forces by the end of 2005. He also publicly condemned militia members who continued to traffic in drugs and that may have been his undoing. Castano helped create the paramilitary forces, but many of those loosely allied groups have morphed into drug gangs, which along with their rebel foes control a large share of the cocaine production and smuggling that fund their war against each other. The paramilitary movement is divided over drug trafficking, but those still in
the business in Colombia - by far the world's biggest producer of cocaine - appear to be gaining the upper hand.

Diego Fernando Murillo, one of the most feared paramilitary leaders implicated in drug trafficking, and Castano's own brother Vicente ordered Castano killed because they feared he was going to finger them to US authorities for drug trafficking, Franco said.

But in an interview published April 22, Salvatore Mancuso, the military chief of the AUC, said Castano may have fabricated reports of an attack to pave the way for an eventual surrender to US authorities, or to create "a smoke screen to escape the limelight for a while." "There was no attempt on his life," Salvatore Mancuso told El Colombiano newspaper.

He said the incident was an "exchange of gunfire" between paramilitary fighters and army troops. The military denies involvement in action in the area. Mancuso's comments contradict an earlier account from a leader of a paramilitary faction, who said two other paramilitary figures had sought to kill Castano.

**Church threatens to pull out of talks**

The Roman Catholic Church threatened to pull out as a facilitator in the peace talks between the Colombian government and the AUC unless paramilitary leaders explain who attacked founder Carlos Castano and why. "I believe the paramilitaries must make clear how far they are mixed up in this," Julio Cesar Vidal, the archbishop of Monteria and a church mediator, said in interview with the Bogota daily El Tiempo. "We work in an atmosphere of clarity and truth and when those conditions are not met, we won't have anything to do with it."

The threat of extradition and criminal prosecution against paramilitary leaders has been a key controversy in negotiations between paramilitaries and the Colombian government.

Presumed reasons for an attack against Castano would be a consolidation of power by narcotics traffickers within the paramilitaries or a fear that Castano would allow certain members to be extradited for prosecution in the US. Castano faced extradition and has been sentenced in absentia to more than one hundred years of prison time for drug trafficking and crimes against humanity, including one 38-year sentence for the murder of journalist Jaime Garzon (see NotiSur, 2004-03-19).

The Paris-based journalism group Reporters sans Frontieres (RSF) called Castano one of the world's "predators of press freedoms" in a report they released this year. There have been some gestures towards disarmament on the part of paramilitary forces, including a televised delivery of a small quantity of arms (see NotiSur, 2003-12-19), but critics allege that there is little substantive demobilization on the part of paramilitary groups and, if the conditions they want were met, it would mean impunity for those who committed atrocities.

Myles Frechette, US ambassador to Colombia from 1994 to 1997, wrote in the Miami Herald that "Carlos Castano's disappearance means the Colombian peace process will be delayed, and is
probably no longer viable in its present form. Paramilitary group members involved in drug trafficking will not participate in the peace process unless the Colombian government guarantees they will not be extradited to the United States."

**President Uribe threatens paramilitaries**

President Uribe said there were threats against his life from paramilitary groups and threatened them in return, saying he would disengage from the peace process. The paramilitary groups must agree to concentrate their forces, believed to number from 12,000-18,000 fighters, in specified zones monitored by the Organization of American States, Uribe said. "They must move forward on demobilization," he said. "Otherwise the government will keep combating them until they are annihilated." He also backed US extradition efforts against paramilitary leaders charged with drug trafficking.

Paramilitary leaders facing such charges in the United States have said they see no point in completing a peace process only to wind up in a US prison. "Extradition is not a subject for negotiation," Uribe said. "Those who want to avoid it should demonstrate to the international community their good faith and willingness to redeem themselves."

Human rights groups have repeatedly documented links between paramilitary groups and the Colombian armed forces, leading some critics to doubt whether the military will successfully or faithfully annihilate the paramilitaries, should Uribe give such an order.

A report by Human Rights Watch said that in 2003, "only rarely did military forces take effective action to stop paramilitary advances."

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