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LADB Staff

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Colombian Paramilitaries Arrested Near Caracas

by LADB Staff
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On May 9, the Venezuelan government arrested several dozen men it alleged were paramilitary fighters from Colombia who were camped out on the outskirts of Caracas. Venezuelan authorities arrested the unarmed Colombians wearing Venezuelan army uniforms at a country home on the outskirts of the capital that belongs to a radical member of the opposition, Cuban-born Venezuelan Robert Alonso, whose whereabouts is unknown but who may be living in Miami. Venezuelan authorities later found the bodies of two men near Alonso's house and believe they were members of the group who were killed by their fellow paramilitaries.

President Hugo Chavez charged that dozens of suspects arrested in the raid are Colombian insurgents involved in a plot against his government. He said 53 Colombian right-wing paramilitary fighters were arrested at the house and another 24 recruits were caught after fleeing into the countryside. More arrests were made in subsequent days.

In his weekly broadcast, Chavez said the suspects were training to strike at his government. Chavez has frequently claimed that Venezuela's opposition, including a number of military officers who supported the April 2002 coup, has conspired to overthrow his government, with Washington's backing (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19 and 2002-05-03).

The US government rejects the charges. Daniel Fonseca, a neighbor living near the farm where the paramilitaries were arrested, said the men had been at the farm for about 15 days. "I saw them twice when riding horses," Fonseca told the Associated Press (AP). "They were dressed as civilians, and I saw some of them with 9 mm pistols." An AP reporter saw abundant amounts of food, provisions, clothes and about one hundred thin mattresses at the rustic house where the alleged paramilitary members were captured.

Chavez calls group US-supported coup plotters

Venezuela "has been invaded. We are facing a serious threat to the peace, integrity, and security of this republic," President Chavez said May 12 in a nationally broadcast radio and TV address, referring to the capture of the alleged Colombian paramilitaries. The aborted plan entailed an invasion that was "thought up, planned, and led by an international network two of whose hubs are Miami, Florida, and Colombia with the complicity of unpatriotic Venezuelans," said Chavez. "Traitorous officers in Venezuela's armed forces, both active and retired, helped bring the terrorists from the border to Caracas," he added.

Since the May 9 raid, 16 other Colombians have been detained, properties of members of the business community and politicians with links to the opposition have been searched, and the
arrests of around 10 National Guard and Air Force officers, including four on active duty, have been ordered.

**Colombia condemns presence of fighters in Caracas**

In Colombia, President Alvaro Uribe praised Venezuela for the arrests. But right-wing Colombian paramilitary leader Salvador Mancuso denied that his Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) were involved. Colombian Foreign Minister Carolina Barco planned to travel to Caracas to cooperate in the investigation of the incident and said she would "reiterate to the Venezuelan government the desire to achieve clarity with respect to [May 9's] events."

Colombian Ambassador to Venezuela Mariangel Holguin urged that the case be dealt with through diplomatic channels, far from the "microphones." "We must return somewhat to the route of diplomatic and judicial dialogue, rather than so many statements in the press," Holguin said. With regard to Colombian President Uribe, Chavez said, "We have been pleased to hear that he criticizes this incident, and we believe we can expect full collaboration from him."

But Chavez also said he had reason "to doubt the good faith" of Colombia's military-intelligence apparatus, and he accused Colombian army chief Gen. Martin Carreno of being opposed to his government and of "brazenly lying." Carreno denied allegations by Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, who said the Colombian Army chief had met in March with members of the opposition who were plotting actions to destabilize the Chavez administration.

Rangel who handles relations with the US and Colombia in the Venezuelan government's division of labor met with Holguin and with US Ambassador Charles Shapiro in the days immediately following the arrests. Uribe told family members of the arrested men to have "patience" as dialogue with the Venezuelan government progressed. Spokespeople for both governments announced that the two presidents would be meeting on an as-yet-unspecifed date.

**Opposition calls arrests a diversion**

Opposition leaders said the raids were a government-hatched scheme meant to divert attention from their presidential recall effort, which is entering a decisive phase. They have called for hard evidence, after it was revealed that the only weapon found in the raid was a single handgun. "They didn't even have a nail clipper, their boots were all polished, and their uniforms were ironed," opposition leader Antonia Ledezma told the AP. The Coordinadora Democratica (CD), an opposition coalition conducting the referendum push against Chavez, accused the president of "trying to drag the country into an international conflict."

CD spokespeople also said their group had nothing to do with the presence of the paramilitaries, and they demanded a full investigation into the matter and reliable information. Venezuelans are divided between those who accuse Chavez of trying to perpetuate his rule by moving toward a Cuban-style dictatorship and his followers who applaud his social programs targeted to the poor majority.
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