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Guest Author

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Colombia Sets Up Paramilitary Haven

by Guest

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[The author is a Bogota-based radio and print reporter and an editor of Colombia Week (www.colombiaweek.org).]

As a result of US-backed peace talks, 10 paramilitary commanders are preparing to relocate to a 228-sq km haven where the government has promised to protect them from US extradition. The plan has encountered widespread criticism, especially since last week's assassination of a dissident paramilitary leader who accused his former colleagues of drug trafficking. The relocation is part of a May 13 agreement between President Alvaro Uribe Velez's government and the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the nation's main paramilitary federation.

The pact calls for the AUC commanders and 400 of their troops to gather in the haven, which includes the town of Santa Fe de Ralito, about 450 km northwest of Bogota. The commanders, including some wanted in the US on drug-trafficking charges, will be able to keep their weapons and bodyguards and move freely in the area, part of the department of Cordoba.

Representatives of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Roman Catholic Church are supposed to monitor them. Other AUC members will remain at large around the country. A May 19 AUC statement proposed three other havens, calling the Cordoba area "a decisive leap for starting to build national peace." The negotiations seem to hinge on whether the government will grant US extradition requests.

A US Justice Department official visiting Bogota on May 18 asked Colombia to hand over six paramilitary leaders, including AUC chief Salvatore Mancuso. But Colombian Attorney General Luis Camilo Osorio responded that the government wouldn't arrest any paramilitaries in the haven.

Alfredo Rangel Suarez, director of a Bogota think tank called the Fundacion Seguridad y Democracia, said such protection is a powerful tool for demobilizing the paramilitaries. "If they collaborate enough with the authorities, if they show good faith in the conversations, and if they have a serious commitment to abandoning crime and drug trafficking, these people could instead be judged and punished under Colombian laws," said Rangel Suarez.

Paramilitary groups began forming in the early 1980s at the behest of drug traffickers, ranchers, and businesspeople to ward off leftist guerrilla attacks. Since then, Colombia's war has killed tens of thousands of civilians and displaced an estimated 3 million. The paramilitaries have carried out most of the killing, often with assistance from the nation's official security forces.

Uribe, who took office in 2002, has focused on military efforts against the guerrillas while opening the paramilitary negotiations. After months of talks, the AUC agreed last July to demobilize its estimated 15,000 troops by the end of 2005 (see NotiSur, 2003-12-19).
The demobilization will require up to US$150 million in international aid, chief government negotiator Luis Carlos Restrepo said on May 19. Washington provided at least US$2 million for a November demobilization of 800 paramilitary fighters in the northwestern city of Medellin. While protecting the paramilitaries from extradition, the Uribe administration is pushing "alternative sentencing" legislation that would rule out long prison terms in Colombia for illegal combatants who disarm, even for those who have committed crimes against humanity.

A bill the government unveiled April 6 would put the former combatants in unspecified "detention centers" for 5-10 years, a prospect rejected by paramilitary leaders as too tough and by human rights advocates as too lenient. A coalition called Planeta Paz on May 17 said the bill failed to provide reparations, truth, or justice.

The paramilitary talks have come under increased fire since the assassination of Medellin-based paramilitary commander Carlos Mauricio Garcia Fernandez, also known as Double Zero and Rodrigo Franco, shot in the head five times May 28 as he left a supermarket in the Caribbean city of Santa Marta.

Garcia broke from the AUC in 2002, saying its leaders were more interested in trafficking drugs than defeating guerrillas. His unit, the Bloque Metro, withered last year under attack by an AUC group led by Diego Fernando Murillo Bejarano, also known as Don Berna and Adolfo Paz, an associate of the late drug kingpin Pablo Escobar. Before his assassination, Garcia had criticized the pact for the Cordoba haven.

The only other paramilitary leader who has spoken out against AUC drug trafficking, Carlos Castano Gil, disappeared April 16 after an attack on his northwestern ranch by suspected paramilitary rivals (see NotiSur, 2004-05-07). In recent months, the US has distanced itself from the paramilitary talks.

In March, US Ambassador William Wood noted that the whereabouts of the fighters who supposedly demobilized in November are unknown. On May 31, he told reporters the process doesn't seem to be "in favor of peace, but rather in favor of drug traffickers."

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