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Criticism of President Uribe After Second Year

by LADB Staff

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Completing his second year in office, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez faced criticism from various sectors of the US political scene, including Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry and more than twenty other senators, US Ambassador to Colombia William Wood, and allegations in declassified intelligence documents from the early 1990s.

While the criticisms hardly reflect a withdrawal of US backing for the Uribe administration or the Colombian government's war against paramilitary and rebel groups, it may be evidence of a slow erosion in the president's foreign support base even as he continues to enjoy high popularity numbers in domestic polls.

Kerry letter criticizes human rights problems

A July 27 letter by presidential candidate Kerry, his running mate John Edwards, and more than twenty other US Senators including Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT) called on the Colombian government to comply with UN recommendations on human rights. The letter did praise the drop in homicides in Colombia since Uribe took office but asked him to cut ties between the armed forces and paramilitary groups.

The UN has also made recommendations to reduce the vulnerability of human rights advocates, journalists, and unionists in Colombia. The Colombian government said it was already addressing the letter's recommendations.

Vice President Francisco Santos said the letter "has valuable issues, but several of them have already been addressed." Santos called the message more of an electoral campaign tactic than something the Democratic candidate was seriously invested in. "They're shielding their left flank," he said.

President Uribe said that Kerry should come to his country to get a "direct look" at the realities and challenges facing Colombia. "Your message is positive for the collective hopes of the Colombian people," said Uribe, responding to the letter. Uribe pointed to a reduction in the incidence of crimes related to the internal armed conflict, though he added that his country "suffers intensely and bitterly from terrorism, which is financed by narcotics trafficking.

There still remains much to do." Kerry is currently running a close race with incumbent President George W. Bush. Bush has been a strong backer of the Uribe administration, sending military funding and troops to the Andean nation (see NotiSur, 2004-06-11 and 2004-04-02). While it seems unlikely that a Kerry administration would militarily disengage from Colombia it was the administration of Democratic President Bill Clinton that originally set the mostly military funding
for Plan Colombia in motion the July letter shows that a Kerry White House might be less tolerant of excesses committed during the Colombian government's prosecution of its war.

If Kerry succeeds in unseating Bush this November, it is possible that he would apply more pressure on Uribe to rein in abuses reported by agencies like Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW). Most of the substantive state-to-state criticism of the Uribe government thus far has come from either the UN or from across the Atlantic as members of the European Union (EU) have called on the president to do more to reduce the civilian carnage in his nation's war (see NotiSur, 2004-02-13).

Kerry's commitment to military disengagement in Latin America and other parts of the world is doubtful at this point in his campaign. He has called for adding 40,000 troops to the US armed services and doubling the number of US Special Forces troops. This comes in response to the increasingly bloody occupation of Iraq, as reports of troop overstretched proliferate.

Former Colombian vice president Humberto de la Calle says the letter is an indication that a Kerry administration would put more pressure on Colombia in human rights. "I would say the message means that if the Democratic Party wins, there will be a turning of the screws regarding the human rights issue," he said.

The Comision Colombiana de Juristas (CCJ) said it thought the US under Kerry would maintain its assistance to Colombia but would force Bogota to review its security policies and respect human rights. CCJ director Carlos Rodriguez said, "We all need security, but what's left to be seen is whether we need state security or the secure space for everyone to exercise their citizen's rights."

US ambassador says "para" speech in Congress "scandalous" Another indication of minor tensions between the US and the Colombian government emerged in late July after paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso and other paramilitary leaders delivered addresses on the floor of the Colombian Congress.

US Ambassador William Wood described the appearance as scandalous. "To listen to Mancuso before the Congress talking about the sacrifice of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) is a scandal for me," said Wood to journalists in Cartagena on July 29. "It's curious that in the Congress there was a meeting yesterday between those who make laws every day and those who break them every day, I don't understand that," said Wood. He called the paramilitary leaders who appeared in Congress Mancuso, Ramon Isaza, and Ernesto Baez "villains" and said their presence in the federal hall was incomprehensible since "they have done so much injury to the people."

The ultraright-wing paramilitary leaders spoke in Congress on July 28 and reiterated their position that they would not accept trial or extradition as part of a peace agreement with the government. Mancuso said the reward to the outlawed groups for fighting guerrillas "cannot be prison." The US seeks Mancuso's extradition on drug and terrorism charges. The AUC is accused of killing more than 4,000 civilians since its creation in the 1980s. Well over fifty Colombians have been extradited to the US for prosecution this year.
On Aug. 2, the Colombian Army found a clandestine runway where a jet belonging to Ernesto Baez was parked in a coca-production complex in the northern part of the country. The US$6 million plane belonged to Baez, according to the Colombian magazine Semana. Baez leads the Bloque Central Bolivar in northern Colombia. The army seized the German-made jet, which has the capacity to travel autonomously for a six-hour flight and could transport up to nine tons of narcotics, about one week after Baez had spoken on the floor of the Congress.

Currently the Colombian government is conducting peace negotiations with Mancuso's AUC, the nation's largest paramilitary faction (see NotiSur, 2004-06-04, 2004-05-07, 2003-12-19), and has taken steps to negotiate a peace agreement with the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), the country's second-largest rebel force (see NotiSur, 2004-06-25).

Declasified 1991 document linked Uribe to drug cartels

On Aug. 2, the independent Washington DC-based National Security Archive (NSA) published a declassified Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) document from 1991 that said Alvaro Uribe had links to narcotics traffickers. The report placed Uribe as No. 82 on a list of 104 "important Colombian drug traffickers." It stated that Uribe had close ties to the powerful Medellin cartel, whose leader was the late drug kingpin Pablo Escobar. "Uribe has worked for the Medellin cartel and is a close personal friend of Pablo Escobar," states the 14-page document, in which Uribe is mentioned in just one paragraph. Also on the list of 104 were former Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega at No. 66 and actor-pop star Carlos Vives at No. 89.

State Department and Pentagon officials quickly moved to discredit the document, closing ranks around Uribe. "We completely disavow the allegations about Uribe. It's not credible information," State Department spokesman Robert Zimmerman said Aug. 2, adding that Uribe has a record of strong opposition to drug trafficking.

"No conclusions can be drawn from it," said Lt. Col. Chris Conway, a Pentagon spokesman, who said the report was raw, uncorroborated information from a single source. The NSA summary stated that the document was "not fully evaluated," according to its own authors.

Luis Alberto Moreno, Colombia's ambassador to the US, told local radio that the report was a rough-draft document prepared by lower-level officials. He said it was never fully evaluated by higher officials in the Defense Department. "Uribe's record on drug trafficking speaks for itself," Moreno said. The document comes from the days when Uribe was a successful politician in Escobar's home department of Antioquia, including two years as mayor of Medellin, during the salad days of the Medellin cartel. When the DIA filed the document, Uribe was a Colombian senator.

US magazine Newsweek published parts of the document, as did The New York Times. On Aug. 2, the Colombian government said it was "evaluating" whether to initiate legal proceedings against Newsweek. "Currently, we are studying this issue [whether to start judicial action] for the damages these kinds of publications can cause," said Moreno from Washington while speaking to RCN radio in Bogota.
The revelation appeared to pose little immediate threat to Uribe's political strength, particularly because the document erroneously described the death of his father as a revenge killing over narcotics, when in fact he died resisting a kidnapping by guerrillas.

Nonetheless, "Mr. Uribe's Teflon may be wearing off," says Adam Isacson of the Washington-based Center for International Policy (CIP). "The revelation comes at a bad time for the popular president. He has lately had to weather the paramilitary leaders' widely condemned appearance before Congress, a sharp rise in FARC guerrilla attacks, and a letter from US Senate Democrats expressing human rights concerns."

**US drug czar sees little drop in cocaine availability**

The drug war that rages amid the decades-old civil war in Colombia received a less-than-ringing endorsement from one of the top US officials charged with perpetuating it. White House drug czar John Walters conceded that cocaine prices on US streets remain unchanged, a sign there is no shortage of the drug. Walters insisted that Washington should keep funding a costly campaign to root out drug traffickers and fumigate coca crops in Colombia even as he conceded that the program has not squeezed the cocaine market in the US. "Thus far we have not seen a change of availability in the United States," Walters said.

Walters said Plan Colombia, the US$3.3 billion, five-year military-aid package, has provided Colombian forces with the necessary training, equipment, and intelligence to turn the tide in the war on drugs. "We have a history in the United States of not following through on programs like this," Walters said in an interview at an anti-narcotics base.

During his three-day visit to Colombia, Walters also met with President Uribe and attended a funeral for nine police officers killed in apparent retaliation for a drug seizure. Plan Colombia has led to a huge increase in drug seizures, with 48 tons of cocaine confiscated in Colombia last year compared to just eight tons in 1999.

Closer judicial cooperation between the two countries has allowed for 120 alleged drug traffickers to be extradited to the US for trial in two years. Walters' observation that there is no visible drop in price or availability of cocaine in the US precisely mirrors the observations of people who condemn the US war on coca production in Colombia.

Analysts like Adam Isacson have previously said that the stable street prices prove that fumigation, coca eradication, interdiction, and military assaults on coca-producing regions are ineffective in reducing drug flow to the US. Critics have said aerial fumigation in particular does significant environmental and agricultural damage (see NotiSur, 2004-06-11, 2002-09-20).

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