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## **Torture of Soldiers Forces a General's Resignation**

by LADB Staff

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Revelations that a group of low-ranking soldiers in the Colombian Army had allegedly been brutalized and tortured by higher-ranking officers shook up the military, leading to the resignation of the head of the Army in February. Bogota newsweekly *Semana* published a report the weekend of Feb. 18-19 with photos showing young recruits who reportedly had suffered torture at a military base after failing a training exercise. President Alvaro Uribe, who learned about the incident from his press secretary shortly before *Semana's* publication and heard nothing about it from his military commanders, removed the head of the Army when the scandal came to public attention.

### *Physical and sexual assault leads to arrests, investigation*

The *Semana* article, based on reports from the investigative wing of the armed forces, said that 21 young soldiers of the Batallon Patriotas were at the Centro de Entrenamiento y Instruccion (CIE) in the Army's Sixth Brigade base in Piedras, Tolima, about 95 km east of Bogota. They were participating in a training course on evasion and escape to prepare for the possibility of falling into guerrilla hands while fighting in hostile regions of the country. In the exercise, 44 other recruits succeeded in avoiding groups of soldiers posing as guerrillas, but the 21 youths, most of them 18 years old and from poor families, were "captured" and then subjected to multiple abuses.

*Semana* reported that the soldiers, hands tied behind their backs and blindfolded, were burned with red-hot pokers, beaten repeatedly with sticks, machetes, and blows from hands and feet, almost drowned in the Rio Honda, strangled, and forced to eat animal feces. One recruit's ears were filled with ants, and others underwent forced sexual contact, after their captors told them, "We're going to rape you, faggot, we're going to rape you," during their beatings. A recruit named Jhon Jairo Cubillos Navarro was burned with a brand by Cpl. Jose Rafael Tarazona Villamizar until a tattoo he had was indistinguishable from his burnt flesh. The captors put ants on the ears of 19-year-old recruit Wilson Orlando Guzman Castellanos and, after the insects had bitten him, they put chili, nettles, and salt on the wounds. All of this is according to the *Semana* report.

Two days later, Jan. 27, military authorities found out about the abuses, and a military criminal judge ordered the Instituto de Medicina Legal to examine the soldiers' wounds. The institute's report concluded that a number of the wounds led to "physical deformity that affected the body in a permanent manner." Six were allowed to leave the military and the remaining 15 were reportedly receiving psychiatric and medical support.

### *Uribe not told by military about incident*

News of the investigation did not come to President Uribe until almost a month later, right before the publication of the *Semana* report, and only then did he hear about it from his press chief. The army announced the investigation hours before the magazine's publication. Four instructors were

arrested by military police, and several high-ranking officers were implicated in the scandal at the base where the abuse reportedly took place. As of Feb. 23, eight officials from the base had been detained and others, including battalion commander Col. Ruben Dario Hernandez, were under criminal investigation.

Gen. Reinaldo Castellanos resigned after *Semana* printed photos of the 21 soldiers apparently being tortured. Castellanos had said earlier that he was ashamed of the allegations and that those responsible would be punished. Correspondents said that, although Gen. Castellanos, 55, immediately criticized his officers, his position had become untenable.

President Uribe named Gen. Mario Montoya, commander of a Caribbean division, to replace Castellanos. Uribe quickly condemned the alleged torture, saying it was "deplorable that the Army, in this crucial moment in our country's history, has engaged in such painful and very serious misconduct." The president also criticized the Army for making the allegations public only a few hours before the magazine came out. The allegations come at a time when the Colombian Army has been trying to improve its poor reputation on human rights.

In an interview with *El Tiempo* newspaper, Gen. Castellanos had acknowledged previous abuses in other military units, but said they were "isolated" incidents. Castellanos told local W Radio he resigned because his higher-ups "told me I have to quit." Castellanos said that Defense Minister Camilo Ospina asked him to resign. "I assume the political cost of the incident," Castellanos said. "We were carrying out the necessary investigations, and I was going to inform the president and the Defense Minister in due time." The Colombian Army the largest in South America with about 200,000 troops has been fighting left-wing guerrillas for more than four decades.

Human rights groups say that, in the past, the military has been tainted by collusion with right-wing paramilitary forces. While the military said it planned to deal with the matter internally, Attorney General Mario Iguaran said that his office had decided to handle the case following Castellanos' departure. He said the military brass told him there would be no objections. "There's no relationship between the alleged crimes and military service," Iguaran said in a statement. Castellanos became the Army's top commander in November 2004. He was well-respected as Army chief, and US military officials in Bogota in the past described him as one of Colombia's most competent and intelligent field commanders.

*Semana* writers and military analysts credited him with breaking rebel formations around Bogota, thus reducing kidnapping rates around the capital, and destroying the guerrillas' hold over the central department of Cundinamarca.

### *Latest turnover of commanders under Uribe*

The head of the Army's fourth division, Gen. Luis Antonio Coronado, resigned over Castellanos' dismissal, saying the removal had been unjust. Senate candidate Alfredo Rangel of the Uribe-allied *Cambio Radical* party also attacked the decision, saying that it was "a pressured, disproportionate, and unjust measure" and that "it was being formally investigated and they had already taken measures against those responsible. That is to say, there was no intent to cover up" the abuses. But

Uribe has previously taken swift action to remove top commanders who were not working according to his standards. "The armed forces and the government must be forthcoming with the truth and not wait for the media to publish what really happened," Uribe said in a statement.

Last year former defense minister Jorge Alberto Uribe resigned after he narrowly survived a no-confidence vote in the Congress (see NotiSur, 2005-07-22). The Chamber of Deputies voted heavily against the businessman-turned-minister after hundreds of soldiers died earlier in 2005 during conflicts with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), but the Senate prevented him from being censured. Uribe was also weakened politically after he attempted to reorganize the command structure of the armed forces, removing four generals and receiving strong opposition from other generals.

El Tiempo reports that the president has removed 11 generals so far, including those opposed to the joint-command structure he set up under a more US-style organizational model. He removed others for operational failures or lack of military results, mismanagement of budgets, for an incident in Guaitarilla where police and soldiers got into a fatal firefight under circumstances that have yet to be clarified, and for another incident in Cajamarca where a patrol gunned down a family of campesinos, including a six-month-old baby. Although officers and politicians said the abuses in Tolima were not typical of military training in Colombia, *Semana* wrote that, since they published the report, "the calls denouncing abuses at other garrisons have not stopped coming in."

Bogota daily newspaper El Tiempo pointed to prior scandals in which it was shown that subordinate troops had been abused. In November 2004, Sgt. Hugo Barrientos threw muriatic acid, a cleaning chemical, in the faces of two recruits, burning their faces and heads and the tongue of one of the men. The sergeant said he had mistaken the solution for water. In 1994, a soldier fatally shot himself in the head after a first lieutenant had mistreated him and unjustly punished him for badly shined boots and an unbuttoned jacket.

On Jan. 9 of this year, a cadet at a military school said he was beaten on the back, kidneys, and legs by an ensign who was the son of a general and was forced to do sit-ups and push-ups after the beating. At a ceremony handing command to Gen. Montoya, Uribe asked, "What happens if human rights are violated internally [in the Army]? They are not going to believe that we respect human rights in combat with the terrorists."

El Tiempo reported that, ironically, four soldiers fainted under the intense Bogota sun during the ceremony where the central theme was the condemnation of mistreatment of soldiers. Montoya also spoke to the troops, saying, "The criminals can violate human rights, but we, the soldiers, make war respecting human rights and there is the great difference." Montoya is a graduate of the US-run School of the Americas and a friend of Uribe. Other high-ranking officers resigned over Montoya's promotion over other, more senior commanders and in solidarity with Castellanos.

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