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LADB Staff

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President Uribe to Restrict UN Human Rights Group

by LADB Staff

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Foreign diplomats and rights activists have alleged that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has sought to restrict the activities of the UN human rights office that has been stationed in Bogota since 1997. Diplomats cited by the Associated Press said that Uribe was trying to remove the UN agency's right to publicly criticize human rights abuses in Colombia and to publish an annual report on the hemisphere's quantitatively worst zone for human rights violations. Diplomats say the agency is particularly vulnerable to pressure from the Uribe government since its four-year mandate expires in October. As human rights groups have heightened their criticism of his administration, the president and those close to him have expressed greater hostility to those groups.

UN group's need for charter renewal makes it vulnerable

The Bogota office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), one of 34 such missions around the world, has verified 8,100 human rights abuses in Colombia since it was founded by a convention that the government of Colombia signed in Geneva in 1997, implicating rebels, paramilitaries, and government forces alike in Colombia's four-decade-old civil war. The agency recently revealed details of the killings of 29 civilians in the last 18 months, including pregnant women and children, by security forces who claimed the victims were rebels (see for example NotiSur, 2005-03-18).

Rights groups say the UN's work helped lead to the arrest of 18 soldiers, an embarrassing development for the hard-liner Uribe. Now Uribe's government has been lobbying foreign governments to drop the agency's independent monitoring role and limit its work to technical support for the Colombian government, according to the diplomats who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue. Washington, meanwhile, stands out in its support of Uribe, its firmest ally in South America. Despite a March letter from 61 foreign and Colombian human rights and development organizations asking US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to support the agency's current mission, US Embassy officials in Bogota said Washington will not get involved.

A group of 80 US Congress members also sent a letter on Aug. 3 to Secretary Rice, saying the UNHCHR should not leave Colombia and calling for the State Department to "express to the Colombian government, with strength and firmness, that the State Department fully supports the renewal of the UN's mandate in Colombia." Congressional representatives like Tom Lantos (D-CA) and Frank Wolf (R-VA) signed the letter. European diplomats say Uribe's government has intensified its campaign recently by rejecting the top choice to take over the agency Scott Campbell, deputy director of Washington-based advocacy group Global Rights, who did field work in the Congo for the UNHCHR. Instead, the UNHCHR named Uruguayan sociologist Juan Pablo Corlazzoli to the post in the first week of July. Neither Campbell nor Corlazzoli returned phone calls

and emails seeking comment, and Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos refused to confirm the veto.

But one diplomat familiar with the selection process said Santos told him that Campbell was perceived as biased because he worked for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have criticized Uribe's rights record. Corlazzoli, who took office in August, has experience with the Mision de Verificacion de las Naciones Unidas para Guatemala (MINUGUA) and played a role in the implementation of the Guatemalan Peace Accords (see NotiCen, 2001-01-18 and 2004-12-02). He succeeds Michael Fruhling, who had prior conflicts with Uribe.

Bogota daily El Tiempo quoted a government source as saying the UN office should not "limit itself to pointing out errors and assuming a critical position, but should bring solutions." The Colombian government has complained the UN rights reports are unduly harsh and fail to give enough credit to Uribe's get-tough security policies for a sharp drop in reported ransom kidnappings and homicides, a common political defense Uribe makes of his "democratic security" policy.

In its most recent annual report in February, the UN rights office cited a "series of grave violations" in Colombia including torture, executions, and forced disappearances by leftist rebels, illegal right-wing paramilitary groups, and, to a lesser extent, government security forces. And while it did not accuse Uribe's government of deliberate involvement in the violations, the UN office decried an "inadequacy of remedial action," a trend also documented in the US State Department's annual human rights report. Uribe's administration will not comment on its lobbying around the UN agency and other groups but clearly has developed a distaste for the human rights groups.

In 2003, Uribe called them "politickers for terrorism" and challenged critics of his crackdown on rebel-linked criminals to "take off their masks...and drop this cowardice of hiding their ideas behind human rights." Vice President Santos has repeatedly complained of bias, telling the UNHCHR in June that UN officials in 2002 had smeared then-candidate Uribe as a "leader of the extreme terrorist right wing." He stood by the comments in July, telling the Associated Press that Mary Robinson was behind the smear campaign. Amerigo Incalcaterra, now running the UN office in Bogota, denied any such comments by UN officials.

UN seeks mandate renewal for human rights office

The European Union (EU) and rights activists have called for extending the UN office's current broad mandate, since Colombia remains mired in civil war. "We fought for the office's establishment, with its current mandate, because of the near total impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of human rights abuses," said Eduardo Carreno of the Colectivo de Abogados Alvear Restrepo, a Colombian rights group. "Sadly, a decade later, that hasn't improved much, regardless of what the government would like people to believe." In a Sept. 7 report, Amnesty International (AI) said Colombia's government has contributed to the hostility to human rights workers. Echoing findings by the UN, the report highlighted "a coordinated strategy by security forces and paramilitary groups" to undermine and discredit through threats and public rebuke the work of human rights defenders who are often a lone voice for millions of victims.

"By not investigating threats, and discrediting their work publicly, the government is essentially giving a green light to their continued persecution," Sofia Nordenmark, author of the Amnesty report, told the Associated Press. Last year, 554 human rights workers received some government protection, more than double the number a few years ago, according to the Interior Ministry. But more than bulletproof vests and armored vehicles, rights workers say they want political guarantees so that authorities will respect their work. The situation is even more dire in Colombia's far-flung provinces, where government presence is weak. "The bigger problem is the culture of impunity that tolerates that threats are never resolved," said Carreno.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) made similar complaints when it released an evaluation of Uribe's just-ended first four-year term as president. "Lamentably, during his first term, there has existed a profound and worrying inconsistency between his speech and the policies advanced by the government. The ideals in which they have said he believes have not been translated into a reality," said HRW Americas chief Jose Miguel Vivanco. In particular, Vivanco criticized the demobilization process to disarm right-wing paramilitary groups that have terrorized many regions for years (see NotiSur, 2005-06-17, 2005-07-22 and 2006-06-16). HRW and others have said there is no serious "incentive for paramilitary leaders to really demobilize," with many not confessing their crimes and criminal organizations remaining intact.

HRW also pointed to the large majority of murders of human rights defenders, journalists, union leaders, and academics remaining unsolved, saying there was frequent collaboration between the armed forces and the paramilitaries. By "offering [paramilitary leaders] a reduction in sentences to the few people who have been sentenced in Colombia for their atrocities, the government is reinforcing the message that abuses are almost never sanctioned," said HRW. The group also criticized the government effort to pressure against the UNHCR office's activities and against mandate renewal.

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