Castano's Brother Accused of His Murder

LADB Staff
Castano's Brother Accused of His Murder

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 2006-09-22

Government authorities in Colombia have found the corpse of Carlos Castano, founding leader of the ultraright-wing paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), who has been missing since a shootout on his land in 2004. Prosecutors have accused his brother, Jose Vicente Castano, of ordering Carlos' murder and called for him to turn himself in to authorities to face trial. The allegation roughly coincided with the government's arrest of 14 former prominent leaders of paramilitary groups, a group arrest that took place during a US anti-narcotics official's visit to Colombia.

Carlos Castano's body found after denunciation

Carlos Castano went missing after a violent assault on his compound in April 2004 left several of his bodyguards dead (see NotiSur, 2004-05-07). He had been a central figure in negotiations with the government to demobilize paramilitary fighters, have them turn in weapons, and move the disarmed fighters to havens (see NotiSur, 2004-06-04, 2005-06-17 and 2005-07-22). With his disappearance there were fears that talks would fall apart, but they subsequently moved forward to the satisfaction of government officials, although not to the satisfaction of human rights groups and US government representatives.

The skeletal remains of 14 people believed to be victims of right-wing paramilitaries were unearthed in a mass grave in southwest Colombia, authorities said Aug. 31. By Sept. 4, they had confirmed that one of them was Carlos Castano, a founder of Colombia's brutal far-right militias. He was 39 when he died. The office of chief federal prosecutor Mario Iguaran said Iguaran visited the grave in a rural area near La Hormiga, in Putumayo province, 530 km southwest of the capital.

"The federal prosecution has the full identification that this is Castano," Iguaran said, pointing to a 99.99% match between Castano's DNA and that of the skeleton. A militia gunman who confessed to killing Castano in April 2004 led investigators to the shallow grave where he said he had buried the warlord. Forensic experts suspected they could find more victims as they continued to search the area around the grave in an investigation into a paramilitary militia known to operate in the area and accused of killing civilians.

In the last 18 months, as a peace process with paramilitary groups has advanced, investigators have discovered more than 400 corpses. More than a quarter of those have been found since June at 20 mass graves scattered across the country. The AUC has been implicated in the vast majority of those crimes. The AUC entered a peace deal with the government in 2003, bringing a partial lull to the violence associated with Colombia's four-decade civil war. The country's homicide rate among the world's highest dropped sharply, as did the number of civilian massacres.
More than 30,000 right-wing fighters have demobilized as part of the peace process, according to government figures. The confirmation put to rest a mystery that had haunted Colombia. Even as suspicions were abundant that his comrades had killed Castano, leading paramilitaries insisted he had simply disappeared, suggesting he had moved to the US, where he was wanted on drug charges.

In August, Colombia's chief prosecutor accused Carlos' older brother, Jose Vicente, of ordering the killing, saying he feared Carlos was planning to provide evidence of Jose Vicente's drug trafficking in exchange for leniency as he negotiated his surrender to US authorities. Both Jose Vicente and Carlos had been indicted in the US on cocaine-trafficking charges and were candidates for extradition. Jose Vicente, known as El Profesor, remains on the run and has denied the charges from hiding.

This modern-day tale of Cain and Abel has fascinated the nation, largely because Carlos fell victim to Colombia's vicious civil conflict that he helped inflame (see NotiSur, 2004-03-19), dying in a manner similar to the thousands of victims of his organization. Like others, Carlos originally joined Colombia's conflict for revenge. He was a teenager when rebels of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) kidnapped his father, a cattle farmer, in 1979. Despite a ransom payment, the rebels killed the family patriarch, setting Carlos and another brother, Fidel, on a journey of retribution that created the far-right militias known as paramilitaries.

At the pinnacle of his power in 1997, Carlos united 18 local blocs to form the AUC, a national umbrella group, leading to the deaths of thousands of Colombians. In their early days as paramilitaries, the Castano brothers worked with the Medellin cocaine cartel, then run by Pablo Escobar. They were among a group that later turned on Escobar, helping lead a hunt for the drug lord that ended with his death in 1993 at the hands of police. Fidel Castano, known as Rambo, disappeared in 1994. Carlos claimed he was killed in a firefight with rebels. Rumors persist that Fidel staged his own death and fled the country.

Landowners and businesses eagerly funded the AUC, wagering that the vigilante force could protect them from leftist rebels, which the state had failed to do. Under Carlos' guiding hand, the AUC went on a national offensive in the late 1990s. Thousands suspected of collaborating with rebels were slaughtered as the country's civil conflict entered its most vicious phase. The AUC targeted human rights workers, journalists, and trade unionists. In his book, Carlos detailed how he arranged the assassination of two presidential candidates, leftist politicians, and even a television celebrity.

In 2002, an internal war broke out in the AUC, with a renegade commander declaring war on the drug-trafficking faction. His bloc was crushed and the drug-trafficking wing of the paramilitaries took firm control of the group. Castano, meanwhile, became more marginalized in the organization he had helped found as peace talks started with the government of President Alvaro Uribe. Having married to a much younger woman with whom he had a daughter, Castano appeared more devoted to family life than the civil war.

"It's my good fortune to have found a woman who has turned me once again into a young boy, filled with hope," he said in his book My Confession. At the end of his life, he had dozens of investigations
pending against him and had been sentenced to more than 100 years in prison for roles in massacres and killings. With the US extradition warrant also weighing on him, Castano began negotiating with US officials. His comrades feared he would sell them out to save himself, which, prosecutors say, is what led to Carlos' death on April 16, 2004.

Eight years for fratricide?

The federal prosecutor accuses Jose Vicente of ordering the killing, allegedly because he feared his younger sibling would turn over information on his drug-trafficking activities in exchange for leniency in negotiations with the US. The government is demanding that Jose Vicente surrender and has threatened to withdraw benefits of the peace process Jose Vicente helped negotiate and Carlos helped initiate including suspending extradition and limiting prison time to eight years. If federal prosecutors apprehend Vicente and decide that the terms of the Justice and Peace paramilitary-demobilization law still apply to him, he could face a maximum penalty of eight years imprisonment.

Accusations against Jose Vicente came shortly before the discovery of Carlos' body, with various witnesses telling prosecutors that Jose Vicente had sent his top lieutenant Jesus Roldan, alias Monoleche, with 20 paramilitary soldiers in a caravan to surround Carlos and kill him in cold blood. "I saw Monoleche shoot him [Castano] twice," one of the witnesses told RCN radio and television, adding that Roldan later carried Carlos' body to Jose Vicente. Castano's disappearance highlighted the lengths to which the paramilitaries seemed ready to go to resolve their internal disputes regarding drug trafficking.

Witnesses to the attack said as many as eight trucks surrounded Castano at a store in a small village in northern Colombia, very near to where the paramilitaries were talking peace with the government. "The two trucks in front started firing," a witness, who was a bodyguard for Jose Vicente, told RCN. "Then the two in back...Monoleche then came to the front and yelled, 'Carlos Castano, turn yourself in. Your guards have already done so.'" The witness said Castano fought off his attackers until he had no more ammunition left. The attackers removed him from the store, and Castano asked Roldan who gave the order. "I only follow Vicente Castano," the witness said Roldan responded before shooting the legendary leader.

Detention of 14 militia leaders

The prosecutor's announcement appears to have added another stumbling block to a negotiated peace settlement with the right-wing paramilitaries. By law, the commanders and their troops are required to admit to crimes such as this one to gain the benefits of an amnesty that gives them significantly reduced sentences and protects them from being extradited to face drug-trafficking charges in places like the US.

In mid-August the government gave the top paramilitary leaders, Jose Vicente Castano included, an ultimatum to turn themselves in while investigations into their activities proceed or lose these
benefits. "Either he turns himself in or he loses his benefits [of the amnesty law]," Minister of Justice and Interior Carlos Holguin told the press, referring to Jose Vicente, known as the shadow leader of the AUC, given his aversion to public appearances.

In the latest potential obstacle in two years of tumultuous peace talks between the Colombian government and paramilitary groups, authorities detained 14 top militia leaders Aug. 16, saying they were not complying with the amnesty law. The leaders, who include two former commanders wanted in the US on drug-trafficking charges, were taken into custody in various parts of Colombia, with some of them voluntarily surrendering to police. The government said several ex-paramilitary commanders from the AUC would be "accompanied" to an installation it called "dignified, safe, and austere."

"The members of the AUC...will continue working on matters concerning peace" from that installation, the government said in a statement, with furloughs provided when needed. The government's actions came two days after President Uribe called on the paramilitary leaders to begin complying with the amnesty law that requires them to turn themselves in while awaiting trial on charges of murder, kidnapping, and other crimes. "Peace isn't born from an elected leader's acquiescence to delinquents," the president said during a military ceremony Aug. 16. "Peace is born from the elected leader's support of the legitimate exercise of authority."

The government's actions were the latest twist in the tangled peace process, which recently led to the mass resignation of the paramilitaries' entire legal team, after the Corte Constitutional (CC) ruled to tighten some parts of the amnesty law approved last year (see NotiSur, 2006-06-16). The captures began in the early hours, with police rounding up former commanders such as Ivan Roberto Duque (also known as Ernesto Baez), Ramon Isaza, and Salvatore Mancuso, and emerging names such as Carlos Mario Jimenez, Rodrigo Perez, and Francisco Javier Zuluaga.

"These are the compromises we made, and that's why I'm turning myself in," Mancuso was quoted in the local media as saying before he handed himself over to police. Mancuso and Zuluaga are wanted in the US on drug charges. Another leader, Diego Murillo, is in jail already, awaiting trial for alleged involvement in the murder of a local politician while the peace talks were proceeding. "The president has been very clear that a peace process has to have credibility," Justice Minister Sabas Pretelt said. "Everyone should know that this process continues."

Analysts questioned how serious the detentions were or whether they would lead to serious prosecutions. The timing, said writers in Bogota daily El Tiempo, coincided with a visit by US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) administrator Karen Tandy. Some commentators questioned whether these were show arrests and discussed whether the figures wanted in the US would be extradited. Politically, Uribe enjoys a certain degree of untouchability, having just won a second term in office and a supportive majority in the Congress. His main need, argue some analysts, is to keep Washington happy with advances against drug traffickers and extraditable felons. Still, demobilized fighters could decide to go back into the field, meaning the gains in militia demobilization that Uribe frequently points to could be lost.
Journalists, politicians, human rights groups, and foreign governments point to paramilitary members' impunity under the Justice and Peace process, with many figures seen living in luxury or facing no prosecution for alleged atrocities, according to the critics.

-- End --