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UN Human Rights Office Renewed for One Year

by LADB Staff

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The Colombian government has permitted the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) office in Bogota to renew its mandate for one year, substantially less than the four-year renewal the UN had sought. The agency has been highly critical of the government of President Alvaro Uribe, which has led Uribe's administration to return fire, leveling criticisms and pressure against the agency. The UN office has become the most prominent human rights monitor in Colombia since its creation a decade ago, having verified more than 8,100 rights abuses by leftist rebels, paramilitary groups, and government forces as part of the four-decades-old civil war in Colombia, which has one of the hemisphere's worst rights records.

Four-year renewal withheld by Colombian government

Foreign diplomats and rights activists had alleged that President Uribe sought to stymie the office's effort to renew its four-year mandate in Colombia (see NotiSur, 2006-09-08). Those critics also accused the Uribe government of pressuring the UN to appoint a chief perceived as less critical of the government and pushing for the softening of negative reviews of the government's actions. But Colombia said on Sept. 12 that it would allow the UN human rights agency that has accused the government of not aggressively addressing abuses to remain in the country for another year.

Vice President Francisco Santos said the agency's four-year mandate, which expires at the end of September, would be extended for a year to give officials a "prudent amount of time" to analyze the agency's work and negotiate changes in its monitoring activity. The announcement followed a Sept. 12 meeting with President Alvaro Uribe and Juan Pablo Corlazzoli, a representative of the UNHCHR. More than a hundred human rights groups and the European Union (EU) had urged the government to renew the mandate for another four years without changes. The agency has frequently run afoul of high-ranking officials by highlighting government inaction to protect and investigate abuses against labor leaders, indigenous activists, and other threatened groups. It also has criticized the participation of security forces in killings of innocent civilians.

The office has spoken out against a government peace deal with right-wing paramilitary groups who are accused of some of the worst atrocities in the country's recent history which it says runs roughshod over the rights of victims and international law. Santos, whose office is responsible for monitoring progress on Colombia's rights record, has been behind efforts to eliminate the office's strongest weapon: a lengthy annual report on rights violations. As part of that campaign, the government took the unusual step earlier this year of rebuffing the UN's top choice to lead its local office, saying the proposed candidate was closely linked to human rights groups that are unduly harsh with the government's rights record.

Army accused of setting up bombings

Concurrent with the mandate-renewal controversy were allegations that the armed forces had staged bombings that the government said the rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) had planned. On Sept. 8, the national newspaper El Tiempo reported that four soldiers, at least two of them officers, worked with a former leftist rebel nicknamed Jessica to organize bombings ahead of Uribe's Aug. 7 inauguration (see NotiSur, 2006-09-01). The paper later named the officers: a captain and a major working in intelligence. Citing recordings, the paper said the soldiers then broke up the attacks and claimed reward money.

One attack was alleged to be a car bomb that killed a civilian and injured 18 soldiers on July 31. Colombia's capital was on high alert the day of the inauguration as authorities tried to prevent a repeat of the scenes four years earlier when Uribe took office and leftist rebels rained mortars on the city center, killing 21 people in a nearby slum. Bogota mayor Luis Eduardo Garzon said he felt like he was a "useful fool" for taking security measures based on misleading reports that put the city in a "situation of war."

Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said on Sept. 7 that investigations had revealed that fraud was committed to obtain rewards and falsely improve the performance of the armed forces. "We are sorry that this has happened," said Santos, calling the revelations "totally censurable acts. We will proceed to take all the measures so that those responsible will be punished."

Commandant of the Army Gen. Mario Montoya read a press release that said, "These deceits may have been perpetrated by unscrupulous persons among whom there are two Army officials." But by Sept. 10, Uribe took over the country's airwaves to defend the military against reports soldiers were behind the string of bombings.

In a live half-hour speech during prime time on all the major networks, Uribe also called for an investigation into how the media came by the reports, which have shaken public confidence in the armed forces. "It has still not been proved that there was any participation by the soldiers in the attacks," Uribe said. A good part of Uribe's address was dedicated to the harm he said was done by the "illegal leak" of the investigation, and he called on all of those involved not to reveal such sensitive information to the media. "The leak, which has caused so much damage, must be investigated," he said, with the country's military brass and defense minister looking on.

The president has spent much of the past few days in heated consultations with them. Uribe added that he would not be making any changes to the armed forces' generals, as there was so far no evidence of wrongdoing. He implored Colombians to have faith in their armed forces, who are in their fifth decade of a civil war against leftist insurgents. The military has been the largest recipient of the more than US\$4 billion in aid the US government has given Colombia since 2000, ostensibly to help crush a leftist insurgency and dent the country's massive cocaine production. But a slew of recent scandals have tarnished the military's image.

A number of brigades are under investigation for extrajudicial killings of civilians and brutal hazing of new recruits (see NotiSur, 2006-03-10). And one army unit stands accused of taking money from drug-traffickers to slaughter 10 of Colombia's top anti-narcotics agents and an informant. There are precedents for security forces allegedly plotting attacks and then taking them down. A regional head

of the secret police was found to have invented assassination plots against Uribe and then broken them up to impress his superiors.

A human rights group says soldiers in one region have been killing civilians and dressing them up as guerrillas to boost their number of rebels killed.

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