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AUC Ties Bring Down Several Colombian Congressmembers

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Congressmembers allied with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and a top member of his Cabinet were at the center of a major political scandal in October and November as prosecutors accused several politicians of ties to right-wing paramilitary groups. Courts detained three politicians and prosecutors named six more for questioning as evidence of a secret agreement between Uribistas and paramilitaries emerged, rocking Colombia's political establishment and bringing pressure on Foreign Relations Minister Maria Consuelo Araujo.

**Uribe allies face prosecution, probes**

Three congressmembers from Uribe's ruling group of legislative allies Alvaro Garcia, Jairo Merlano, and Erik Morris and former congressmember Muriel Benito Rebollo, who had the support of Araujo, faced investigations in mid-October and detention orders in November. All four are all solid supporters of Uribe from the northern Caribbean state of Sucre. Three have either been arrested or turned themselves over to police and a US$30,000 reward has been issued for the capture of the fourth.

In late November, Colombian prosecutors named six other politicians they wanted to question regarding alleged paramilitary links. The men were members of Uribe's governing coalition and included the foreign minister's brother, Sen. Alvaro Araujo. All are accused of conspiracy to commit a crime, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) said in a statement. Four other politicians from northern Colombia are already awaiting trial on charges ranging from funding the paramilitaries to ordering murders. The investigation began after the police seized a laptop computer belonging to Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, who goes by the alias Jorge 40 and is one of the leaders of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC).

The AUC is accused of drug trafficking, extortion, and massacring civilians. Authorities found detailed accounts on the laptop of the AUC's activities along Colombia's Caribbean coast and its alleged dealings with local politicians. The paramilitaries were created by landowners to combat left-wing rebels and anyone suspected of being their sympathizer. The AUC is engaged in a peace process with the government, which has led to more than 33,000 fighters surrendering their weapons (see NotiSur, 2005-07-22 and 2006-06-16). Most AUC leaders are now in jail awaiting trials in which they face a maximum of eight years in prison under the terms of the peace process (see NotiSur, 2006-09-22). Previous allegations of paramilitary links among Uribe allies shook up the congressional election earlier this year, but the parties supporting the popular president still took control of the Congress (see NotiSur, 2006-02-03 and 2006-03-31).

**Uribe refuses foreign relations minister’s resignation**
The scandal moved even closer to Uribe when Sen. Araujo acknowledged in a radio interview Nov. 17 that he attended a 2004 party at which one of the country’s most feared paramilitary leaders was present. Araujo denied that his "marginal contact" with Jorge 40 implied any political dealings with the paramilitary commander, who is wanted in the US for being among Colombia's biggest drug traffickers. Uribe sought to defuse what many Colombians think could become more damaging than the scandal involving drug-cartel financing of politicians in the mid-1990s that nearly toppled then President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998). Uribe said any member of Congress found to be conspiring with illegal armed groups should be jailed and "punished with extra severity."

Earlier, Uribe called upon "all congresspeople to tell the country the truth and reveal whatever contacts they had with the paramilitaries." Evidence is mounting that politicians across Colombia's Caribbean coast funneled public funds to the paramilitaries in exchange for election wins aided by paramilitary intimidation. Despite the paramilitaries having disarmed as part of the 2004 peace deal, it is believed that they still hold sway over huge parts of the country after killing hundreds and forcibly displacing tens of thousands of mostly poor Colombians in a nearly decade-long reign of terror. Evidence of a long-running paramilitary-political mafia appeared to be confirmed when the CSJ ordered the arrest of the former and current congressmembers.

Sen. Araujo, whose powerful political family hails from the Caribbean state of Cesar, said he had spoken with Jorge 40 on at least two occasions since 2002, including at the birthday party for an ex-congresswoman long suspected of paramilitary ties. But he denied any improper dealings. "I've never made any political agreement with the paramilitaries," said Araujo, who vowed to cooperate fully with the CSJ investigation. Although no charges had been filed against Araujo, opposition politicians have long tried to dig up evidence linking his fledgling Alas Equipo Colombia movement to the paramilitary groups.

New Uribe-aligned parties were a major influence in the midterm congressional elections earlier this year, although the current scandal threatens to break some of them apart. In the epicenter of the scandal, Sucre, on Nov. 17, more than 2,000 friends and relatives buried lawyer Carmelo Berrios who had denounced fraud in local elections. Unknown assailants shot him the night of Nov. 15 in his hometown of Betulia. Leaving the cemetery with weeping relatives, Rep. Jesus Berrios, the lone state assemblyman from the opposition Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA) party, said his brother's murder shows how a dark alliance of paramilitary fighters and politicians continues to rule by terror across Colombia. Many Sucrenos believe members of the political-paramilitary mafia running the state for the last decade killed the 50-year-old Berrios to try to silence a public finally beginning to shed its fear of denouncing the state's discredited political class.

"And this mafia power quiets the voices of those who are against it," said Jesus Berrios, who was assigned a police bodyguard after his brother's killing. "Here in Colombia to think differently means a death penalty." Opposition congressmembers from the PDA and Partido Liberal called for Uribe and Foreign Relations Minister Araujo to answer questions about the prosecutor's accusations. "We want [Araujo] to explain to us the motive of the visit by the foreign relations minister to the attorney general and what issues they discussed," said Liberal Sen. Juan Fernando Cristo on Nov. 21.
Araujo had attended a meeting with Attorney General Mario Iguaran the week before, together with her brother Sen. Araujo, after testimony linking the latter with the AUC emerged. When the accusations against the senator came out, Uribe denied rumors that Foreign Relations Minister Araujo would resign from his Cabinet. "She has not presented her resignation, nor would I accept it," said Uribe on Nov. 17. She did attempt to resign later that day and Uribe refused to accept the resignation.

PDA Sen. Gustavo Petro also came out as a strong opposition voice against Uribe and the accused legislators, saying during an Oct. 18 debate, "The president lied to Colombian society. Colombia is left with a new paramilitarism, trafficking, sacking and destroying democracy in a good part of the national territory." Petro later accused Uribe of "evading his own responsibility" in the scandal. Ex-chief of secret police accused of paramilitary links Prosecutors also called for an investigation of Jorge Noguera, the ex-director of the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS), or secret police, for supposed links to the AUC. He is accused of erasing DAS archives with records of narcotraffickers and "paras."

In mid-November, the nation's prosecutor put out charges against Noguera, saying he had slowed down operations to seize goods belonging to narcotraffickers and paramilitaries. As of Nov. 22, Noguera's whereabouts was unknown, although some media outlets said he had traveled to the US. Uribe defended Noguera last year and named him as consul to Milan, Italy, but said in November, "A person who has had such an elevated public responsibility may not elude the actions of justice."

Jailed paramilitary leaders call for truth commission

On Nov. 23, imprisoned paramilitary leaders called for the creation of a truth commission where they can confess their actions in the brutal civil war. "We understand and accept that a fundamental part of the Justice and Peace Law lies in the confession of the truth of what occurred in the recent history of our national tragedy," said a statement signed by all the paramilitary leaders who have been held at a special prison on the grounds of a former vacation resort for two months as part of a peace deal with the government.

The warlords, accused of some of the worst atrocities in Colombia's five-decade conflict pitting the government and far-right militias against leftist rebels, also urged their supporters to confess. "We publicly ask that those who urged us on, collaborators and direct beneficiaries, the businesspeople, industrialists, and political leaders...members of the security forces, join us in this task without apprehension or fear," the statement said. The paramilitaries' targets have included leftist guerrillas, their civilian supporters, civic leaders, human rights workers, journalists, and anyone who revealed the extent of the paramilitaries' infiltration of Colombia's public institutions.

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