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LADB Staff

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More Colombian Legislators Arrested for Ties to Paramilitary Groups

by LADB Staff
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Colombia's "parapolitica" scandal linking top government officials to right-wing paramilitary groups led to more arrest orders for members of Congress in February and the resignation of embattled Foreign Relations Minister Maria Consuelo Araujo as her brother faced arrest. Additionally, the former head of the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) Jorge Noguera went to jail for allegedly giving a list of assassination targets to paramilitary death squads.

The parapolitica or "paragate" scandal, as the Colombian press has described it, buffeted the administration of President Alvaro Uribe and may have implications for US funding directed toward the Colombian military and government.

Foreign relations minister's brother Sen. Araujo arrested

Maria Consuelo Araujo had been under fire since revelations emerged that she and her brother Sen. Alvaro Araujo had met with the nation's top prosecutor. The senator then faced allegations that he had previously undisclosed contacts with top paramilitary leader Rodrigo Tovar, also known as Jorge 40 (see NotiSur, 2006-12-01).

On Feb. 15, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) ordered the senator's detention for paramilitary links, making him the highest-ranking arrestee in the scandal so far. Three other lawmakers had been detained in November. Right-wing armed groups are accused of drug trafficking and massacres and have been involved in a long-running conflict with state forces and left-wing rebel forces while tens of thousands of civilians have been killed in the fighting.

Allegations of deep ties between the militias and top military and government officials have been long-recurring facets of Colombian politics. Araujo said she had informed President Uribe of her decision on Feb. 18. Uribe had defended his foreign minister, saying Araujo should remain in the post because she "had nothing to do with the crimes being investigated." Sen. Araujo's arrest on charges of colluding with the illegal paramilitaries and orchestrating the kidnapping of a political rival came along with arrest orders for five other members of the congressional coalition that backs the government.

The CSJ also recommended that prosecutors investigate Araujo's father a regional power broker in northern Colombia who has served as agriculture minister, senator, and governor for the same crimes as the senator. Some of the evidence against the politicians came from a laptop belonging to Jorge 40.

The outgoing foreign minister told the press, "I'm leaving because I am not tied to any charge. I see clearly that the judicial process must be free of any interference. The certainty of my father's and my
brother's innocence obliges me to leave to have the freedom to be at their side to support them as a
daughter and a sister." "It was unsustainable, it was politically and ethnically impossible, especially
after the criticism voiced over the weekend," said Dario Arizmendi, news director on Caracol Radio,
after the announcement that Araujo was resigning.

The detained legislators are accused of undermining public security through their close ties with
paramilitary groups that, through violence, are able to "influence the administration of justice
so that it does not operate with the efficiency that society demands of it," according to the CSJ
resolution first quoted on television Feb. 16 and published Feb. 18 in Colombian newspapers.

The resolution was made public the same day that CSJ magistrate and former chief justice Yesid
Ramirez received a death threat. Since the CSJ began to investigate links between politicians and the
paramilitaries last year, the court decided that all of its statements and resolutions would be signed
by all nine magistrates to safeguard its members.

**Will scandal affect US funding for Colombian military?**

Observers reporting to the BBC said Maria Araujo's resignation dealt another blow to a president
already under pressure because of his allies' ties to paramilitaries. But the affair might constitute
more of an image crisis than an actual political crisis for Uribe. Despite the scandal, his popularity
remains at 70%, according to recent opinion polls, and parties allied with him hold a wide margin of
control in the Congress.

The alleged ties between Uribe's political backers and the paramilitaries, particularly along the
Caribbean coast where the Araujo family is politically dominant, does complicate the president's
international appeals for help to fight leftist rebels and drug traffickers and shore up a shaky judicial
system. Uribe is counting on billions of dollars in mostly military aid from the US. In light of the
scandal, US Democratic lawmakers led by Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, chair of the Senate
subcommittee that controls aid to Colombia, are calling for rethinking the US$700 million in mostly
military aid that Colombia gets each year.

"The resignation of the foreign minister and the recent arrests of members of the Colombian
Congress are positive, though overdue, steps but they leave many questions unanswered," Leahy,
who frequently questions the aid given to Colombia, said in a statement. "American taxpayers
deserve assurances that the Colombian government has severed links to these terrorist groups."

The European Union's (EU) delegation in Bogota declined to comment on Araujo's resignation.
Uribe's supporters say he should be applauded for his determination to tackle corruption and
the roots of Colombia's violence, even when it involves his own supporters. "The international
community must understand that this scandal has been possible because of Alvaro Uribe's policy
to confront these groups and achieve a peace deal with the paramilitaries," said Sen. Martha Lucia
Ramirez, a former defense minister.

Regarding foreign aid, Ramirez said, "Donor countries must understand the help Colombia needs
to combat drug trafficking, which is precisely the source of financing for these illegal groups." But as
the scandal unfolds more than 60 federal and regional politicians are being questioned, almost all of them supporters of the president it appears to be edging closer to Uribe himself.

Despite all this, Uribe remains popular for reducing violence since he was first elected in 2002. Homicides are down to a two-decade low, although some accuse the government of tampering with crime-statistics reports. The paramilitary bosses and more than 31,000 of their fighters surrendered in the past two years under a government peace deal that promises reduced sentences in exchange for confessing crimes and surrendering ill-gotten gains (see NotiSur, 2005-06-17, 2005-07-22 and 2006-06-16).

But new groups have formed since then, and many Colombians complain that little or none of the stolen land has been returned. Newly escaped FARC hostage named to head foreign relations Uribe named Fernando Araujo Perdomo as the country's new foreign minister immediately after accepting Maria Consuelo Araujo's resignation. Araujo Perdomo, no relation to his predecessor, spent almost all of the past six years held hostage by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). He escaped in December after a dramatic rescue attempt that captured world headlines.

A development minister under the government of President Andres Pastrana (1998-2002), Araujo Perdomo was under investigation for alleged involvement in a corrupt land deal (see NotiSur, 2000-06-16) when he was kidnapped. Uribe's office called Araujo Perdomo "a reflective citizen who has suffered in this national tragedy." He escaped the FARC on Dec. 31 during a military operation aimed at securing his release. He bolted from the jungle prison where he was being held as a gun battle erupted around him. He wandered for five days before finding help. Photos showed the gaunt 51-year-old grateful for his escape and dressed in a cap that said "Navy."

As foreign minister, one of Araujo Perdomo's main jobs will be to support the president's policy of military rescues to free thousands of Colombians, and three US defense contractors, held hostage. But he has previously voiced opposition to military rescues, claiming they jeopardize the hostages' lives, a position common among many captives' family members. Journalists at El Tiempo in Bogota praised Araujo Perdomo's experience but wondered about his mental state after six years of captivity with only six weeks of freedom before his appointment as foreign relations minister.

**Former secret police head jailed**

The former director of the DAS secret police under President Uribe was arrested Feb. 22 and charged in connection with the murders of labor leaders and academics while collaborating with far-right militias responsible for some of Colombia's worst massacres. Jorge Noguera is accused of handing over a hit list of human rights workers and trade-union activists to the paramilitaries. At the time, he was in charge of domestic security.

A number of the people on the list later were killed. Noguera, who as a regional campaign chief also helped get Uribe elected in 2002, was arrested as he testified in the chief federal prosecutor's office, said his lawyer Orlando Perdomo. If convicted, he faces up to 40 years in prison. Noguera has been questioned by prosecutors at least five times and has denied wrongdoing (see NotiSur, 2006-05-12).

Noguera is being investigated in the killing of university professor Alfredo Correa de Andreis, one of the names on the hit list. Correa was investigating the forced displacement of peasants
from rich lands along the Caribbean coast that were then taken by the paramilitaries. Human
rights groups have documented extensive links between Colombia's security forces and the far-
right paramilitaries, originally created by drug-traffickers and landowners to wrest control of the
countryside from leftist rebels.

The recent scandal linking close Uribe allies with the militias was triggered in part by the testimony
of the former Noguera subordinate Rafael Garcia, currently serving an 18-year sentence for working
with drug traffickers while employed in the DAS. Noguera resigned from the DAS in October
2005 amid allegations that paramilitaries had infiltrated the organization. He was then named
consul in Milan, Italy, by Uribe, who had defended his innocence. Colombia's DAS is roughly
equivalent to the FBI and Secret Service combined. It also deals with immigration issues. [Sources:
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