UN Report: Colombian Army Accused of Widespread Abuses

LADB Staff
UN Report: Colombian Army Accused of Widespread Abuses

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2007-04-27

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) released its annual human rights report for Colombia, finding that human rights violations by the Army had increased. The report says the Army killed civilians and the government ignored links between the armed forces and illegal groups responsible for much of the violence in the country's ongoing armed conflict. It was the first report from the new head of the UNHCHR station in Colombia, Juan Pablo Corlazzoli.

UN says Army falsely labels dead civilians as rebels

Colombian security forces killed civilians in several states last year and falsely labeled many as leftist rebels slain in combat, the UN said in a report released March 15. Colombia's government also has at times ignored links between security forces and illegal armed groups. The report said leftist rebels, right-wing paramilitary groups, and, to a lesser extent, government forces were all behind frequent human rights abuses, including torture, executions, and disappearances.

The three sides have been pitted against each other in a decades-old civil conflict. The UN found that Colombia's Army the largest recipient of US$700 million in annual anti-narcotics and counterinsurgency aid from the US had participated in killing civilians in 21 of Colombia's 32 states.

The UN said the numbers of civilians killed in those areas showed an increase over 2005 but did not provide death toll figures. "Homicides with characteristics of extrajudicial execution do not appear to constitute isolated incidents, but rather conduct that tends to be generalized," said the report.

The report said such conduct may have been prompted partly by the government's use of combat deaths as a benchmark to measure success against leftist insurgents. In many cases, the victims were falsely presented as leftist rebels killed in combat, crime-scene evidence was tampered with, and the investigation was led by the military's questioned criminal-justice system.

Despite its criticism, the tone of the report was softer than in previous years. It was the first under Corlazzoli, a Uruguayan sociologist who took over as director of the UNHCHR office in Colombia last year amid a dispute about the agency's future. Critics accused Colombian President Alvaro Uribe of pressuring the UN to install Corlazzoli over another candidate with the idea that he would be less stringent in his criticisms of the government.

International groups have also criticized Uribe for trying to limit the UNHCHR's mandate to operate in the country (see NotiSur, 2006-09-08 and 2006-09-29).

A commitment to reduce abuses

"We believe progress has been made," Corlazzoli said, praising Colombian officials for showing "greater commitment" to reducing abuses. Corlazzoli said his office received 2,138 complaints of human rights abuses last year, roughly the same number as 2005. President Uribe's office said that
the government was working with the agency to prevent future rights abuses by the military and that the "principal human rights indicators, with a few exceptions reflected in the report show a favorable trend."

While 31,000 right-wing fighters have been demobilized under a 2003 peace deal with the government, the report said new armed groups were taking their place in some regions, imposing economic and military control. The report said security forces had taken no action against police or soldiers believed to have links to such groups. But Corlazzoli praised the Supreme Court's investigation of several members of Congress for alleged ties to the paramilitary groups. Eight pro-government lawmakers have been arrested in the case (see NotiSur, 2006-12-01 and 2007-03-02).

Human Rights Watch spokesperson Maria McFarland said the report showed government failings. "It is certain that the government has committed on repeated occasions to follow UN recommendations, but this report shows that, at this moment, concrete results do not exist."

**Colombia among world's worst for rights defenders**

Colombia continues to occupy the top spot in the world for attacks against people who promote respect for individual rights, according to the Observatorio para la Proteccion de los Defensores de los Derechos Humanos, a joint project between the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT).

The report says that, in 2006, there were 217 attacks on human rights defenders, including 30 murders or attempted murders, 122 death threats, and 35 incidents of assault. Director of the Comite Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos Jose Gutierrez said that in Colombia there are no guarantees for rights defenders to do their work.

"Human rights defenders are afraid, there have been deaths of rights defenders, and it is very difficult for the organizations to move around," said Gutierrez. He said that Uribe's policies had increased levels of security on the highways and some rural sectors, but that was not an indication of improvements in the cases of human rights defenders' safety. The observatory asserted that Colombia "has been converted into the most dangerous country in the world for these social workers."

-- End --