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More Colombian Legislators, Finance Minister Implicated in Paramilitary Scandal

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More members of the Colombian Congress are facing charges that they had links with paramilitary death squads while the country's recently installed finance minister has admitted to making policy with a paramilitary leader. President Alvaro Uribe's standing with prominent US politicians appears to be taking some damage as his administration and its allies face further accusations of links to paramilitary groups responsible for the majority of human rights crimes in the country.

A leaked report from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) charged that the head of Colombia's Army conducted military operations early in Uribe's first term to help a paramilitary leader take control of drug trafficking in the city of Medellin. In light of various allegations, the US has frozen a military-funding package worth US$55 million, a fraction of the approximately US$700 million the US sends annually.

Finance Minister Oscar Zuluaga in photo with militia chief Finance Minister Oscar Ivan Zuluaga admitted his relationship with paramilitary chief Maribel Galvis in early April, and he confirmed that President Uribe was aware of it when he named Zuluaga to the post in February. On April 9, Zuluaga admitted that he conducted a political campaign in 2003 with Galvis in the east-central department of Caldas.

Three years later Galvis confessed to being part of the paramilitary groups that commit the majority of atrocities in Colombia's decades-old armed conflict. Zuluaga, 50, detailed his dealings with Galvis in a radio broadcast, after the Colombian magazine Cromos published a photograph of him alongside Galvis during a political event for regional elections in 2003.

Zuluaga claimed that, when the photograph was taken, he was unaware that Galvis was a member of a right-wing militia that the government was ostensibly fighting. "I knew that Galvis belonged to the ultra-right squadrons in 2006, when the woman admitted it to the authorities," said Zuluaga. He said Uribe knew this and backed him. "[Uribe] has always shown me his solidarity," said Zuluaga.

In February, Uribe criticized a report by the independent foundation Nuevo Arco Iris that warned about "suspicions" that Zuluaga might have received electoral support from paramilitary groups. The ongoing prosecutions against Uribe-linked congressmembers and officials have brought down several lawmakers and one of Uribe's top ministers, potentially putting a kink in US military aid to the government's war effort (see NotiSur, 2007-03-02 and 2007-03-09).

Five legislators accused of signing AUC pact

As of early April, there were 14 arrest orders out for lawmakers that prosecutors say are criminally linked with the death squads. There are also investigations of municipal and regional authorities for
allegedly signing pacts to share bureaucratic posts and budget monies with paramilitary factions. The scandal has come to be known as the parapolitics (parapolitica) scandal in the press.

Revelations have proliferated as prosecutions against top militia leaders go forward under a paramilitary-demobilization process. Leaders are required to confess their crimes to be eligible for maximum prison sentences of eight years.

On March 22, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) announced that five more congressmembers would be called up on charges of conspiracy to commit crimes with paramilitary leaders. They allegedly signed a 2001 pact with chiefs of the country's main paramilitary umbrella group, Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), wherein they committed to refounding the state and taking control of vast areas of the country.

Ex-AUC commander Salvatore Mancuso handed authorities documentation of the Pacto de Ralito in January, signed at one of his estates. Among the signers were mayors, governors, ex-congressmembers and a journalist. Lawmakers signing the document included Miguel de la Espriella, Reginaldo Montes, Jose de los Santos Negret, and William Montes, all representing northern departments where paramilitaries wield strong influence. The only accused lawmaker from the political opposition was Sen. Manuel Lopez Cabrales of the Partido Liberal (PL), from the northern department of Cordoba. The five accused congressmembers joined other indicted legislators and political leaders, nearly all from parties allied with the president (see NotiSur 2006-12-01 and 2007-03-02).

The CSJ is the only institution with the authority to prosecute current congressmembers. While the prosecutions present a legal setback for Uribe, his popularity in opinion surveys has remained strong and his political hold on the legislature remains intact. It is still questionable whether the parapolitics scandal will actually hinder the president in domestic politics.

The leaked CIA report was the basis for a Los Angeles Times article published that day that linked Gen. Mario Montoya, a close ally of the president, to a paramilitary group headed by one of the nation's biggest drug traffickers whose extradition has been requested by the US.

The CIA document, which according to the newspaper was based on intelligence gathered by an allied Western agency, said that as head of the Army's 4th brigade Montoya worked with the militia to carry out a deadly raid in a poor neighborhood in the city of Medellin in 2002. At least 14 people were killed and several more believed disappeared during the high-profile sweep known as Operation Orion, which was heralded as a campaign to eliminate rebel influence in the crime-infested shantytowns ringing Colombia's second-largest city but which also cleared the way for the militias to gain control of the city's lucrative cocaine trade.

In a statement, Uribe said, "The Colombian government rejects the accusations made by foreign intelligence agencies" against Montoya "through press leaks, without any evidence having
previously been presented to Colombia's government or justice system." A spokesman for Montoya told the Associated Press the Army chief would not comment on the newspaper article. Human rights groups criticized Uribe's dismissal of the allegations against his loyal adviser.

"These allegations are consistent with the record of many Colombian military units, which have historically tolerated and supported paramilitaries," said Jose Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at the Washington-based Human Rights Watch (HRW). "Instead of rejecting the allegations out of hand, Uribe should take them seriously and call for a thorough investigation in the civilian justice system." Montoya, 57, is the highest-ranking Colombian official yet to be touched the widening scandal.

English-language press outlets stress that so far no evidence has been found linking the president to the outlawed AUC, which the US lists as a foreign terrorist organization. Yet ever more of his allies, appointees, and political-military support base are being drawn into the scandal. The Los Angeles Times said the CIA document was made available to the paper by an anonymous source who described himself as a US government employee unhappy that the administration of US President George W. Bush has not held the Uribe government more accountable.

The allied intelligence agency cautioned that the information linking Montoya to jailed paramilitary warlord Diego Murillo, also known as Don Berna, should be treated as raw intelligence because it was based on a yet-unproven account from an informant. But the document also contains a comment from the defense attache at the US Embassy in Bogota, Col. Rey A. Velez, who said information in the report dovetailed with additional, unspecified information on Montoya "provided by a proven source."

That intelligence, Velez said, may work its way up the military chain of command to also implicate the head of Colombia's Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Fredy Padilla, who commanded troops along Colombia's Caribbean coast at the same time Operation Orion took place. Murillo, who is believed to have led a band of assassins working for deceased drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, is wanted for extradition by a New York federal court on charges of smuggling tons of cocaine into the US.

One longtime Colombia analyst, Adam Isaacson of the Washington-based Center for International Policy (CIP), said any collaboration between Montoya and paramilitaries "would bring the Army right into the heart of the scandal." US and Colombian officials have insisted that any links between the Colombian military and the militias involved only low-level, renegade officers. Uribe's reputation takes hit in US The Colombian government said it was considering legal action against the Los Angeles Times, but some damage appeared to have been done to its international reputation already.

The report came as the White House asked Congress to approve extending approximately US $700 million a year in mostly military aid to help Colombia's government fight rebels and the illicit drug trade. The US Senate froze US$55 million in US military aid to Colombia in mid-April on the allegations that Gen. Montoya who has also worked closely with Washington in its multibillion anti-narcotics and anti-insurgent strategy collaborated with the death squads.

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That same week, ex-vice president Al Gore withdrew from an environmental conference in Miami on April 20 to avoid appearing with Uribe. Gore's office said the former vice president did not want to appear at an event with Uribe until "this very serious chapter in history is brought to a close." Some groups within the US are pushing Gore to run for president in 2008, meaning he may be extra-sensitive about whom he wants to be seen with in public. Uribe said Gore's decision was a sign of the damage caused by the growing scandal linking his political allies to Colombia's illegal right-wing militias.

Uribe denied that he formed alliances with illegal paramilitary groups and said he wants Gore to visit to judge the nation's progress. Speaking at the environmental forum in Miami, Uribe said accusations by Sen. Gustavo Petro on April 17 that he aided drug-funded death squads are old and have been fully investigated. "Maybe we have made mistakes, but we have never committed crimes," Uribe said in remarks carried live on Radio W in Bogota.

Petro, a member of the leftist Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA), said in an address to Congress that Uribe helped create the illegal paramilitary forces and that paramilitary meetings were held at farms owned by his family in the 1990s. Uribe, who governed central Antioquia province from 1995 to 1997, has repeatedly denied involvement with the paramilitary groups. "I want Gore to come to Colombia, not to meet me but to meet the people, and I am sure he will see the significant changes," Uribe said.

Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said he was disappointed by Gore's absence from the conference and said the former vice president was "badly informed and badly advised." "I am hopeful that in the US we will get the right decision for Colombia, to approve Plan Colombia," Uribe said.

The week of April 30-May 4 he was in Washington, DC, lobbying for the approval of the military aid and the bilateral free-trade agreement (FTA) that will be going before the US Congress. Top Uribe opponent claims he is assassination target Uribe has called Petro a "slanderer," saying, "To be a mediocre guerrilla and such a lucid slanderer speaks very poorly of the character of the guerrilla," Uribe said during a speech in the Caribbean city of Cartagena, referring to Petro's time in the defunct leftist rebel group M-19, which made peace with the government in 1990.

Petro, who has fashioned himself as Uribe's nemesis in Congress, has said he was in the M-19's political wing and never fired a shot. Petro says he has been targeted for death, going public with an alleged assassination plot on April 24 and accusing a former army colonel who has provided security for the US coal company Drummond of conspiring to kill him.

Sen. Petro told the Associated Press that the public prosecutor's office learned of the plot from one of the would-be assassins who testified he met with retired Army Col. Julian Villate and others in January in the coastal city of Santa Marta to plan the killing. Petro said he had no more details about the plot. A spokeswoman for the public prosecutor's office would not confirm it had the testimony, but said it was looking into Petro's allegations. Petro and his relatives have received a series of death threats since November, when his denunciations of paramilitary infiltration in Colombian politics spurred the ongoing probes.