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Amid Increasing Scandals, Colombian Government Accuses FARC of Plot

by Guest
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The Colombian military high command confirmed in Bogota on Sept. 27 that the guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) has a plan to augment its arsenal that includes purchasing land mines and anti-aircraft missiles to launch an offensive against the government of President Alvaro Uribe Velez. The news had appeared the day before in the daily El Espectador.

The newspaper printed a document in which the FARC’s top leader Alfonso Cano outlined a 14-point plan with instructions for the various guerrilla fronts that operate in the country. The rebel offensive has come to light as the government finds itself enmeshed in three scandals that could damage the presidential image.

First is the kidnapping, torture, and assassination of 45 young people by paramilitary groups and police and military officers. Second is the detention of a brother of Interior and Justice Minister Fabio Valencia Cossio, who is accused to having ties to drug trafficking. Third is the release of the results of an investigation ordered by the Mexican government, which proved that the Mexican students assassinated or detained during a Colombian Army incursion into Ecuador did not have ties to the FARC (see SourceMex, 2008-10-08).

Uribe and Valencia had insisted that the students were tied to the FARC as part of the Colombian government’s justification for the incursion into Ecuadoran territory (see SourceMex, 2008-06-18, NotiSur, 2008-05-09).

Military Forces Commander Gen. Freddy Padilla told Agence France-Press (AFP) that the document signed by Cano recognized that, with the freeing of former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt last July 2 (see NotiSur, 2008-07-25), the armed forces had gained militarily and the FARC had lost politically.

Various press reports quoted Gen. Padilla saying that the rebel document maintained that "the best way to stop the advance of the Army is with mine fields..., which is the only thing that will stop them and intimidate them [the military]."

According to the rebel document cited exclusively by El Espectador, the FARC is reported to have between US$5 million and US$6 million to put toward its arms-purchasing plan, but it could also
ask for help from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Colombian Sen. Piedad Cordoba, something that they both deny. Sen. Cordoba said, "The document is a fabrication by the military intelligence to draw the country's attention away from the serious scandals in which the government is implicated," referring to the alleged links between the government and paramilitary groups and drug traffickers (see NotiSur, 2008-09-12).

President Chavez and Sen. Cordoba have been turned into President Uribe's worst enemies since they headed the negotiations that led to the liberation, last May, of 14 people who had been kidnapped by the FARC. Despite the confirmation of the supposed authenticity of the FARC document, Padilla played down the threats in statements on various radio stations regarding a new rebel offensive. He said that what the guerrilla leadership wanted was "to raise the spirits, which are way down, of their people." He added, "We have to remember that the FARC's numbers are down significantly, they have suffered the worst that can happen to any organization of this kind, they have earned the contempt of the people."

The rebel document is dated Aug. 16, but its contents were only made public Sept. 27, and, said Padilla, "It is nothing more than a rehash of many plans they have had in the past." So far this year, the FARC has lost three of its longtime commanders: Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda Velez, FARC founder, dead of natural causes (see NotiSur, 2008-06-06), and Raul Reyes and Ivan Rios, killed in confusing actions by the Colombian Army (see NotiSur, 2008-03-07).

According to the Colombian nongovernmental organization (NGO) Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODES), in the first half of 2008, the internal conflict in Colombia has caused the greatest displacement of the population since 1985, an average of 62 persons per hour, about 1,500 each day.

**Military, police implicated in assassinations**

Although Colombia is a country that has been immersed in violence for more than four decades, it was shaken on Sept. 23 when, in less than a week, a number of clandestine graves were discovered that proved that at least 45 young people from the poorest barrios of Bogota, Cali, and Medellin had been assassinated after being kidnapped and tortured. Clara Lopez, the government secretary of the Bogota mayor's office, indicted that "the young people were forcibly disappeared and later were assassinated after having been recruited by illegal paramilitary and drug-trafficking groups."

The news agency EFE reported, however, that, between January and August of the year, high-ranking military officials had said the victims had been killed in confrontations with the Army. Given the evidence provided by the Bogota mayor's office, Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos was forced to admit that some leaders within the security forces ordered their subordinates to show the bodies of those supposedly killed in combat to prove the veracity of statements they had made. "The situation is so serious that Santos had no other option but to assume that mafias exist inside the Army and the police," said Sen. Cordoba.

As the attorney general's office ordered the detention of various people accused of the crimes, among them Cols. Wilfredo Ruiz Silva and Hernan Contreras Pena, Attorney General Mario Iguaran told the Associated Press, "We are facing a horrendous and sinister phenomenon of extrajudicial
executions carried out by members of the Army." The Miami-based El Nuevo Herald reported that among the dead whom the military had described as killed in combat was a baby barely four months old and at least two young people who had cognitive disabilities.

Despite the evidence and the admission by the minister of defense and the attorney general, military commander Gen. Paulino Coronado insisted to AP that the matter was one of "combat deaths that occurred between January and August [2008]." He added, "They are people who died in confrontations with the troops."

Various communications media said that the unmarked graves were found thanks to confessions by members of the paramilitary Autodefenses Unidas de Colombia (AUC).

**Growing number of lawmakers in jail**

The detention of Guillermo Leon Valencia Cossio was another embarrassment for President Uribe. Valencia Cossio not only had been head of the Medellin attorneys' offices, appointed by Uribe, but he is also the brother of Fabio Valencia Cossio, interior and justice minister and close aide to the president.

Guillermo Valencia Cossio was investigated for ties to drug trafficking and to paramilitaries within a greater generalized phenomenon that Colombians call "parapolitica" (see NotiSur, 2008-05-16). Guillermo Valencia Cossio was detained Sept. 24. Five days later, pro-Uribe Sen. Miguel Pinedo resigned under suspicion of the same crimes. They are but the latest of almost 40 pro-Uribe legislators who have been sent to jail, along with 33 diplomats, governors, mayors, city councilors, and former legislators, as well as the former minister of foreign relations Consuelo Araujo Castro, the president's cousin Mario Uribe Escobar (see NotiSur, 2008-05-18), and Carlos Garcia, architect of the president's election campaign.

"To which parties do these implicated political figures belong?" asked the Spanish daily El Mundo in a special edition in April 2008. They are Uribistas, was the answer. Uribe's Cambio Radical has more than half its legislators in jail. Convergencia Democratica has all of its congressional delegates in jail.

In the special cell block in Bogota's La Picota prison alone, there are 33 legislators, and many others are detained and under investigation. Too many for a Congress of only 260 members, said another Spanish newspaper El Pais. In February 2007, when Consuelo Araujo Castro was forced to resign (see NotiSur, 2007-03-02), the top AUC leader Salvatore Mancuso said that "some 35% of the members of Congress are our friends."

Earlier, in November 2006, ruling party Sen. Miguel del la Espriella had said in an interview that 40 members of Congress had signed a document in 2001, a kind of letter of intent, in which they made commitments to the paramilitaries. Despite Uribe's questionable friends, an investigation by opinion firm Latinobarometro said that, before these latest scandals broke, he was the most popular president in Latin America among voters, having the support of 80% of Colombians. "The scandals have not sullied his popularity," wrote Salud Hernandez Mora in El Mundo.