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U.N. Decries Human Rights Abuses in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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Since mid-July, the Colombian government has been the target of numerous observations, denunciations, and criticisms regarding its long-questioned humanitarian policies. While the most serious and detailed objections have come from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), President Alvaro Uribe personally received more worrisome warnings regarding the country's domestic and foreign image on his July 1 visit to the White House.

Italian news agency ANSA reported that, besides being greeted by protestors carrying condemnatory signs, Uribe received observations from US President Barack Obama, who brought up the troubling assassinations of civilians, the freedom with which paramilitary groups act, the incidents of spying on politicians, judges, and journalists, and the lack of transparency in the ongoing legislative process that could lead to a constitutional reform to allow Uribe to run for a third consecutive term (see NotiSur, 2009-05-29).

US to have military base in Colombia

Alongside this news, it was confirmed that the US Defense Department had reached an agreement with its Colombian counterpart to install a military base in Palanquero, in the east-central part of the country. The US military now based at Manta in Ecuador would be stationed at what is now the largest facility of the Colombian Air Force (Fuerza Aerea de Colombia, FARC). Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa ordered the US military to leave Manta by November 2009 (see NotiSur, 2008-08-08, 2009-06-12).

Palanquero offers a modern facility, with a 3,500-meter runway, hangars for 100 aircraft, lodging and other amenities for more than 2,000 personnel (restaurant, cafeteria, supermarket), and a radar system installed by the US in the late 1990s.

A report by the Colombian magazine Cambio said Pentagon experts had told a Colombian negotiating mission that, with some upgrading, the Palanquero runway will have simultaneous takeoff and landing capability for up to three troop and heavy-equipment transport planes or intelligence-gathering aircraft, among them the 24 Israeli Kfir C-7, C-10, and C-12 fighter-bombers turned over to Colombia at a special ceremony at Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv on June 22.

UNHCHR says human rights issue "critical"

"The UN is on alert because of the critical human rights situation, and not only because of the civilian executions [which in Colombia are called extrajudicial executions] but also because of the illegal monitoring, the high number of displaced persons, and the growing violence by paramilitaries against the population," said Christian Salazar, UNHCHR director in Colombia, in an interview published June 22 by BBC Mundo.

"Currently, we are paying attention to executions of people who are not participants in the internal conflict, to telephone wire-tapping, and to surveillance of Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) justices, human rights defenders, journalists, and opposition political leaders by the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) [the secret service that reports directly to Uribe]. And also to the growing violence by paramilitary groups that at one time said they had joined a demobilization program (see NotiSur, 2005-07-22, 2007-03-09)."

In explaining the actions of the paramilitary commandos, Salazar said that "in some cases, groups cooperate with each other, others engage in constant confrontations, and some battle the guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), which we know now operate in 15% of the municipios, and their influence is spreading and growing rapidly." The UN official spoke of extrajudicial executions as naturally as do others in Colombia, which has no death penalty and a Penal Code that defines the crime as "assassination."

Salazar said, "It has been verified that extrajudicial executions are not isolated incidents but a constant, systematic, and widespread practice." He added, "It is now vitally important to ensure that the judicial processes regarding extrajudicial executions develop without interference, and I say this because we have documented threats against attorneys, witnesses, and relatives of victims and even a recent attempt to assassinate a key witness in Cali [second-largest city in Colombia in the extreme eastern part of the country]."

UN report says Uribe government ignores recommendations

Earlier, on June 17, a UNHCHR report referred to the dramatic situation of those displaced by the internal conflict, now estimated to number "at least 3 million." The most vulnerable groups, the report said, are those living in areas with the highest intensity of armed conflict and the displaced, the vast majority children and women, who are also victims of growing sexual violence. The report said the largest mass displacements have occurred in the departments of Cauca, Narino, and Putumayo, in the southeast on the borders with Ecuador and Peru, and they particularly affect indigenous communities.

The UN's recommendations to the government for designing a policy to prevent displacements has not been given proper official attention, said the report. It added, "The office received information that, next October, November, and December, the early warning system (Sistema de Alerta Temprano, SAT) the state program to prevent the phenomenon will be left without resources, which will force it to suspend operations."

Using diplomatic, but direct and concrete, language, the UN's report expresses its "hope that the new risk-assessment measures will be quickly implemented," and calls on the government to allocate the resources necessary to strengthen SAT.

Finally, the report denounces the threats made against SAT analysts, which the government has done nothing about, by the Aguilas Negras the name adopted by the paramilitary commandos and expresses its hope that, once and for all, "the day may come when the authorities decide to investigate, try, and punish the perpetrators of such acts."

The frustration of those responsible for writing the report mirrors the pessimism of Salazar. "Since 1998 [when former President Andres Pastrana Arango (1998-2002), took office], we have been making recommendations to stop extrajudicial executions, but there has been no official response," Salazar said. "There is a direct rejection of the recommendations and, therefore, I must express my profound sadness for not having been able to break through the political barriers that block action in defense of the rights of the victims of the armed conflict."

Special coverage by prominent international media, including The Miami Herald and Le Monde, has verified, through interviews with displaced indigenous and campesinos or with relatives of victims of the extrajudicial executions or of the young people assassinated and made to look like guerrillas killed in combat, that the perceptions of Salazar and the representatives of the UNHCHR do not deviate at all from the dramatic reality lived by the most neglected sectors of Colombia.

Their voices are added to those of agencies such as the Organizacion Feminina Popular (OFP), which on June 20 deplored "the state of terror experienced by communities and municipios throughout the country, especially in Magdalena Medio [in the center-east of the country]."

The OFP said, "Since last February, pamphlets have appeared threatening prostitutes, lesbians, gays, and unemployed youth with death. In Barrancabermeja, Yondo, Canaletal, San Pablo, and Cangallo alone, we have recorded 76 vicious assassinations, and in those and other municipios armed men dressed in black patrol the neighborhoods at night, threatening, while the state looks the other way, absent, allowing all kinds of abuses."

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