Colombia: Mass Grave Underscores Ongoing Human Rights Issues

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Colombia: Mass Grave Underscores Ongoing Human Rights Issues

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Colombia
Published: Friday, March 5, 2010

The discovery of a common grave containing the bodies of more than 2,000 victims of Colombia's violence, the release of an official report confirming that in recent years paramilitary commandos have assassinated more than 30,000 people, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) document criticizing the passivity of the administration of President Alvaro Uribe in confronting the ultraright irregular forces, and the president's plan to use students and other sectors of civil society as informers in the fight against drug trafficking confirm the extreme fragility of human rights guarantees in Colombia. Along with this, in the context of an investigation of 70 legislators accused of having ties to the paramilitaries, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) sentenced to prison two former senators leaders of parties that are part of the Partido de la U, the coalition that supports Uribe in the legislature and ordered the arrest of a third, Mario Uribe Escobar. Uribe Escobar is also a leader in the governing coalition but, more importantly, the president's cousin and confidant (see NotiSur, 2008-10-10). The Macarena site of mass grave In early December 2009, a denunciation by British lawmakers, which slipped under the radar, claimed that a common grave had been found in the town of La Macarena, 200 km south of Bogota, containing the bodies of at least 2,000 victims of the paramilitaries. Details of the discovery became widely known only after the publication of a story in the Spanish newspaper Diario Publico on Jan. 26, on the eve of a visit to Colombia by a mission of European legislators. "What we saw was chilling, countless bodies and, on the ground, hundreds of wooden markers with the inscription 'NN' [name unknown] and dates from 2005 to the present," said Jairo Ramirez, executive secretary of the Colombian Comite Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CPDH), who accompanied the British parliamentarians. Ramirez added that the Army commander in the region said that the bodies were guerrillas who died in combat but that people in La Macarena said that they were civic leaders, campesinos, and people who lived in the community and disappeared without a trace. The horror of La Macarena adds to the list of more than 1,000 common graves. Antonio Albinana, the Diario Publico journalist who broke the story detailing the discovery, said judicial sources confirmed to him that, through 2009, "more or less" 2,500 bodies had been found, about 600 of whom have been identified. They were not guerrillas, said Albinana. The correspondent said that John Jairo Renteria, a paramilitary leader known as Betun, had told the prosecutor general that he and his group had buried at least 800 bodies in a common grave on the outskirts of La Macarena. They dismembered the bodies so they would take up less space. "In the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) [the umbrella paramilitary group], we all had to learn how to dismember bodies and many times we had to do it to people who were still alive," said Renteria. Alfredo Molano Bravo, a renowned Colombian intellectual who has traveled the country documenting AUC operations, accused Uribe of lacking the political will to investigate and told the European newspaper, "The prosecutor general speaks of some 25,000 disappeared. Throughout Colombia, there are enormous clandestine cemeteries, and it is also possible that many remains have been made to disappear as happened in the Nazi crematoriums." Ramirez and Molano pointed out that the wooden plaques at La Macarena with dates from 2005 to the present show that the burials happened during Uribe's time in office. A correspondent from
the Miami Spanish-language newspaper El Nuevo Herald wrote of a gruesome denunciation in a Jan. 28 story. He cited a source from the government Defensoria del Pueblo who said the office had received hundreds of complaints that "the excess of human bodies buried recently is contaminating the community water supply." Given the indignation that this news provoked in Colombian society, the Comision Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz said that it hoped that "this is not a momentary reaction from 'good' or 'ordinary' people who then quickly distance themselves from such atrocities, without considering that they may continue supporting or keeping silent about the repressive policies that result in thousands of disappeared in Colombia." Paramilitary demilitarization fails to reduce violence Three weeks later, a Fiscalia report, released after testimony was received from AUC members who said they demobilized to be eligible for benefits under the Ley de Justicia y Paz signed by Uribe in 2005, contained data that eclipsed the Spanish newspaper story. It said that the paramilitaries admitted that in the last two decades they had assassinated 30,470 people, participated in 1,012 massacres, disappeared 2,500 Colombians, and were responsible for 1,642 cases of extortion. Why did they provide the information that resulted in that macabre inventory? Because the Ley de Justicia y Paz guarantees that whoever "collaborates with the judiciary" will receive a maximum eight-year prison sentence even if they are guilty of crimes against humanity, and the law provides the "demobilized" with a monthly stipend equivalent to US$300. HRW, which has investigated Colombian violence for years, released a report, Paramilitaries' Heirs, the New Face of Violence in Colombia, in Bogota on Feb. 4, which looks at the nefarious existence of the AUC. The human rights group accused Uribe of being unable to stop the paramilitaries. "Between 2003 and 2006, Colombia implemented a demobilization process for 37 armed groups that made up the brutal, mafia-like, paramilitary coalition known as the AUC," said the report. "The government claimed success....But almost immediately after the demobilization process had ended, new groups cropped up all over the country, taking the reins of the criminal operations that the AUC leadership previously ran. Today these successor groups are quietly having a dramatic effect on the human rights and humanitarian situation in Colombia." The report, read in Spanish by Jose Miguel Vivanco, HRW Americas director, said that the new armed groups had managed to set up operations in rural and urban areas, including Medellin, "where the homicide rate nearly doubled in the past year." Almost simultaneously, a report by the International Human Rights Law Clinic (IHRLC) at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law cited the failure of Uribe’s peace policy and, according to an AP report in El Nuevo Herald, accused the US Justice Department of helping to reinforce impunity for paramilitaries' crimes. In its report Truth Behind Bars, the Berkeley lawyers said that US judges are not interested in investigating crimes committed in Colombia by the ex-leaders of the AUC extradited to the US to be tried on drug-trafficking charges. It recommended that the US "[i]ncentivize extradited paramilitary leaders to disclose details about all their crimes and the identities of their accomplices in the military, government, and national and foreign businesses. The United States should actively encourage extradited leaders to testify about their crimes and allies by conditioning sentence reductions or other benefits achieved through plea-bargaining on effective cooperation." The Justice Department has tools to see that the paramilitaries cooperate with the victims, but it does not use them, lawyer Roxanna Altholtz told AP. She pointed out two of those tools: reducing the sentences and offering visas to relatives of those extradited, some of whom have suffered serious attacks. The government remains impervious to the denunciations. After learning of the HRW document, Defense Minister Gabriel Silva said, "That report is not based on reality; it contains speculation, not information." Visibly rattled, Silva cancelled a meeting he had set up with Vivanco. In the face of mounting criticism, Uribe only deemed to call on the civilian population to act as political informants. He offered Medellin students
US$50 a month to turn in anyone they observed acting suspiciously. He offered Cali taxi drivers US $100 a month and a cell phone. In general, Uribe said, "all citizens who give us effective information regarding a homicide will receive a basic reward [US$250]." Uribe's proposals were criticized by all sectors. Alvaro Camacho, a professor at the Universidad de la Andes and an expert in security issues, summed up the criticism, saying, "A democratic security policy is supposed to take young people and workers out of conflict, not put them in it. Paying for information creates informers not citizens."

-- End --