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Demobilization Scandal Touches Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos

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Eight years after the "demobilization" began of ultraright paramilitary bands belonging to the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), a process that consumed the entire first term of former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), the issue has returned to the political front burner and has begun to tarnish President Juan Manuel Santos.

It is unclear how many of those killers were allied with drug trafficking, large landowners, and illegal mining. How many who were pardoned by Uribe and supposedly put down their weapons returned to criminal life? Where are the members of that real clandestine army now—official sources speak of between 30,000 and 40,000? Where is the formidable arsenal with which they sowed panic in the rural areas? And how many passed themselves off as AUC members to receive demobilization benefits (economic remunerations, the cessation of police persecution, and, above all, the clearing of their criminal records)?

Other issues, such as the privileges enjoyed by military personnel jailed for human rights violations, have also cast a shadow over Santos.

**Accusations that demobilizations were a fraud**

Healthier sectors of Colombia's public life always questioned the Uribe administration's generous offer to the country's worst criminals. Now, even paramilitary leaders are denouncing the serious irregularities in the process of supposedly abandoning criminal activity. They say the process was tinged with fraud and the demobilizations were really "shows" put together to impact public opinion and obtain political gains.

All this, like everything since Uribe emerged on the Colombian political stage, is intimately related to human rights violations, but it is especially serious at this time, not only because Santos appears compromised but also because the Colombian people, after years of government corruption and trampled rights, had begun, with the new president, to believe in politics again. They thought that on Aug. 7, 2010, without Uribe and with Santos, a cleaner period had begun in the country's dirty political life.

The paramilitaries' first accusations referred to and directly accused Uribe and his peace commissioner, Luis Carlos Restrepo, whom the former president had put in charge of negotiating with the criminals. "What is incredible—or perhaps what is sad for the country—is that some killers are questioning the reputation of those who were believed to be honorable persons," wrote a reader of the influential magazine.

On March 4, during an appearance before the full Tribunal de Justicia y Paz—a special agency established by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to hear matters regarding human rights violations—paramilitary leader Freddy Rendón Herrera said that the first demobilization, in
November 2003 in the northwestern city of Medellín, was "a con, a farce that the government accepted knowing that it was legalizing the situations of many drug traffickers and their assassins."

In the middle of the hearing, Rendón Herrera asked, "Did commissioner Restrepo know what was happening in Medellín? Hadn't the security and intelligence agencies told him that no AUC group was there? There, in the Palacio de las Exposiciones, they mounted a huge spectacle before the television cameras, with some 855 supposed AUC members to whom they gave new, recently purchased boots, and who dressed for the occasion as if they were combatants."

**Common criminals, bus drivers paid to pose as guerrillas**

From the beginning, the Medellín demobilization had raised suspicions. Some of the 855 "paramilitaries" who turned in their weapons even admitted the same day that they had been rounded up, hours before the ceremony, in the poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of the country's second-largest city, which now has nearly 3 million inhabitants, and that they had been offered "good money" and the expunging of their criminal and police records in exchange for dressing like paramilitaries and posing for the TV cameras and news photographers.

The event's participants included two of the most wanted criminals in the city's underworld, Daniel Mejía and Jesús Antonio López, accused of drug and arms trafficking, laundering money from clandestine mining, and several murders. They had negotiated with Uribe's envoy, although they were not paramilitaries but drug traffickers. Despite the supposed demobilization, both continued to run their illegal activities. Mejía disappeared a few days later, and two assailants murdered López in 2008 while he was eating in one of the city's first-class restaurants. A mere police chronicle might have said that he "died by his own law."

It is noteworthy that, in due course, the daily and magazine reported that, just a few weeks before the paramilitary leader was killed, he had been in the Palacio de Nariño (presidential palace) for the second time and that he had met with no less than Uribe and then defense minister, now president, Juan Manuel Santos.

Rendón Herrera's denunciation, added to the longstanding suspicions expressed by the two publications, led the Fiscalía General (attorney general's office) to open a new investigation into Restrepo. Uribe is implicated in the dossier, and a name appears that Colombians do not want to see mixed with the most bloodthirsty criminals of the country—President Santos.

Restrepo was already under investigation because of denunciations by Juan Carlos Sierra, a drug trafficker who, from a US jail cell, said that he had paid "the commissioner a lot of money to let me enter the demobilization process."

Another dossier covers the investigation of Restrepo for the demobilization, real or fabricated, of the entire Frente Cacica Gaitana, an alleged arm of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) that the FARC does not recognize as belonging to them.

The denunciations of the false demobilizations have rekindled suspicions regarding Uribe's real objectives in the peace negotiations, and it is thought that his aim was to facilitate the criminals' reorganization into new bands.

"It is known that many midlevel AUC commanders did not participate in the demobilizations, some of which were very superficial," Camilo González Posso, president of the Instituto de Estudios
para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ), told the Spanish news agency EFE. "The bad procedures facilitated the actual restructuring, exemplified by new criminal bands that are the paramilitaries' heirs, although the Santos government prefers to call them 'bacrim' [short for ] and characterizes them as one more part of organized crime."

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Michael Reed, head of the Colombia office of the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), agrees with González Posso and says, "It can't be assumed that the AUC demobilization included all structures of the illegal groups. On a more serious note, he says, "The reason 30,000 AUC members were processed when the initial objective was to disarm 15,000 was because they wanted to sow confusion and to cover up rearguards who stayed armed and groups that were never demobilized."

Without saying so, Reed considers Uribe responsible for the "intention to confuse."

González Posso was quick to describe the process as "a shameful farce," and in that he agreed with Rendón Herrera. He said, "The lists of demobilized paramilitaries included everything, even domestic workers, bus drivers, and simple employees of the major drug dealers and the murderous paramilitary bands, and it turns out that they turned over much less weaponry than they had."

The power of the paramilitaries and the drug traffickers was never in doubt. Almost a hundred legislators, among them Uribe's cousin and three former Congress presidents, have been tried and jailed for receiving money from the criminal bands. Another 30 are under investigation, suspected of having been involved in the same corrupt acts.

Colombians call the phenomenon that undermined the belief in democracy during the eight years of Uribista government. In recent weeks, official information has been made public tying the paramilitaries to mining (Minister of Mines and Energy Carlos Rodado says they exploit half of the nearly 6,000 gold and coal deposits in the country) and rural properties (the state Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural says they own 10% of arable land), activities through which they launder money gleaned from their illegal activities.

**Better than a country club**

It is now known that, even after having been brought to justice, the paramilitaries and drug traffickers enjoy the pleasures of an exclusive prison.

"For years, the premier prison of the armed forces, the Centro de Reclusión Militar at the Tolemaida military base, has seemed more like a country club than a high-security prison," said.

The publication discovered that many of the 269 officers, noncommissioned officers, and soldiers serving sentences there for murder, massacres, tortures, and kidnapping come and go freely, have businesses both inside and outside the prison, and live not in cells but in cabins. And they live with the major human rights violators.

As if that were not enough, many continue on active duty. They have been promoted and continue receiving their salaries and other benefits, despite sentences, in many cases, of up to 40 years.
are prisoners who vacation in the historic and marvelous Cartagena de Indias and even outside the country.

Prisoners interviewed by the Bogotá magazine said that among those who had made large personal donations or who had obtained donors to set up businesses or construct cabins were former Gen. Mario Montoya Uribe and Óscar González. Montoya and González were the last two Army commanders in chief during the Uribe administration.

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