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New Human Rights Denunciations against Colombia's Former President Álvaro Uribe

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A new wave of denunciations implicating Colombia's former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) in a wide range of crimes worries the country's political leadership, which is concerned that the situation will lead to investigations that could involve it as well. The new accusations are added to others, equally serious, that have been known since September 2010 and that, to some extent, tarnish President José Manuel Santos, who was defense minister from 2006-2009, during most of Uribe's second term.

The accusations come from leaders of the ultraright paramilitary groups (Autodefensas Unidos de Colombia, AUC), detained in various prisons in Colombia and the US, along with others made months ago by Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International (AI), and a group of US academics and researchers. The latest allegations accuse Uribe of helping create the AUC, of being implicated in drug trafficking through one of his brothers, of authorizing electronic espionage against judges, politicians, and journalists, of hiding information to thwart an investigation into the state intelligence services, and of ordering several massacres of campesinos and the persecution of others to force them to abandon their lands so he could buy them for next to nothing.

Uribe's presence as a central figure in all these criminal acts—basically his ties to the worst human rights violations, actions repeatedly denounced by HRW and AI—was a constant during the four years of his second term and following the inauguration of Santos on Aug. 7, 2010 (NotiSur, Feb. 13, 2004, and May 20, 2011). But the waters calmed after last February. Since Sept. 7, however, accusations have resumed and become worse.

New charges by former paramilitary leaders

Iván Cepeda, an opposition legislator with the Polo Patriótico Alternativo (PPA) and vice president of the human rights committee in the lower house, released testimonies recorded at the prisons of Itagüí (in the northwestern department of Antioquia) and Cómbita (in the eastern department of Boyacá). The speakers were ex-AUC commander Pablo Sierra García and Juan Guillermo Monsalve, a former member of the ultraright commandos who also worked for the Uribe family on one of its ranches, Finca Guacharacas, in the municipality of San Roque in Antioquia, 230 km northeast of Bogotá.

Sierra García, former commander of the paramilitary Bloque Cacique Pipintá, said that Uribe and his brother Santiago created the ultraright group when Álvaro was governor of Antioquia (1995-1997); that the two brothers supported the group along with ranchers Luis Alberto Villegas Uribe and his brother Juan Guillermo (cousins of the ex-president) and former departmental deputy Santiago Gallón Henao (convicted of paramilitary involvement and drug trafficking); that the base of operations for the group—which later gave rise to the creation of Bloque Metro, one of the most feared AUC groups—was Finca Guacharacas, where they trained and hid their arsenals; that, during Uribe's two presidential campaigns in 2002 and 2006, "all AUC structures received orders to collect money and support Uribe, unconditionally, in every region of the country."
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Monsalve’s testimony was just as damaging, and he said he was willing to give new details if the judiciary guaranteed him "preferential treatment." He said that, in the late 1990s, the already formed Bloque Metro had set up its general headquarters at Uribe's ranch; that the battalions that "had to carry out massacres" in the rural areas of San Roque left from there; and that, "in at least in one [massacre], everything was ordered by Señor Álvaro Uribe." Monsalve also said that, "at that time, the former president was linked to drug trafficking." Among other equally serious accusations, Monsalve said that in 1996 Uribe "interceded with the Antioquia police and judiciary to lessen the persecution of our groups [the paramilitaries], and he also ordered a 'social cleansing' throughout the Antioquia area."

Before Cepeda made Sierra's and Monsalve's accusations public, Congress had already received—in late 2010—a document from the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), which included a copy of statements by the then top AUC leader Salvatore Mancuso, extradited in 2008 to the US on drug-trafficking charges. Mancuso’s statements corroborated what Sierra García said regarding the paramilitaries' and the drug mafias' support for Uribe's electoral campaigns in 2002 and 2006. Based on the crucial testimony of Mancuso and other leaders of the ultraright commandos, the CSJ last February sentenced former Senate president Mario Uribe, who happens to be another cousin of the former president, to seven and one-half years in prison and a US$1.5 million fine (NotiSur, March 11, 2011). The lower-court decision, ratified by the CSJ, found that Mario had connections with the paramilitaries and the drug mafias.

In the same case in which Mario Uribe was found guilty, former paramilitary Jairo Castillo also testified, but from Canada, where he had been granted a controversial asylum. Castillo built on the statements of Sierra García and Mancuso, saying, "Uribe, who was my friend, not only received financial support for his presidential campaigns, but also, with his orders to harass campesinos, managed to get them to leave and to sell him their lands for much less than their real value."

Earlier, Juan Carlos Meneses, another paramilitary wanted by the Colombian judiciary on charges of being the material author of several murders, had told human rights agencies in Argentina, where he is still hoping to obtain legal asylum, that both Álvaro and Santiago Uribe had "made a lot of money protecting the paramilitary groups' drug trafficking."

**US academics add their voice against Uribe**

The ethical and moral circle that is closing in on Uribe, and that Santos is trying by every means to break, had its US link in September 2010, when some 150 distinguished academics from leading universities—among them Noam Chomsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Deborah Poole of John Hopkins University, and Gilbert Joseph of Yale University—delivered a public letter to Georgetown University president John J. DeGioia (NotiSur, Jan. 14, 2011). They asked
him to reconsider Georgetown's appointment of Uribe's as a "Distinguished Scholar in the Practice of Global Leadership," saying it was "an affront to scholars and their education mission."

The US academics were supporting an open letter released on Sept. 6 by Colombian Jesuit Javier Geraldo, director of the Centro de Investigaciones y Educación Popular (CINEP), in which he objected to the former president's presence at Georgetown, a Jesuit university. In the letter, Geraldo said that Uribe's giving classes in the Walsh School of Foreign Service of that prestigious institute "is deeply offensive and also places at high risk the ethical development of the young people who attend our university in Washington." The Colombian Jesuit accuses Uribe of having "founded and protected" the ultraright paramilitaries and adds that "it is difficult to ignore the intense moral disagreements aroused by [the Uribe] government and the investigations and sanctions imposed by international organizations that try to protect human dignity."

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Earlier, in 2009, 67 relatives of victims of paramilitary groups responsible for multiple murders of unionists employed by the US mining company Drummond filed suit in a US court in Alabama, alleging that the multinational "ordered" the murders (NotiSur, May 18, 2007). Uribe has been called to testify in that case and has not done so to date, claiming that he has diplomatic immunity as an ex-president. The US court wants to know what Uribe did to impede the Colombian judiciary's investigation of the killings allegedly ordered by Drummond.

Uribe also must testify before the Comisión de Acusaciones of Colombia's lower house regarding electronic espionage by the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS), the intelligence service that reported directly to the president (NotiSur, May 21, 2010). The victims of the DAS action included judges, prosecutors, opposition politicians, and journalists. So far, Uribe has avoided the committee appearance. Evidently to quiet the waters and prevent the waves from reaching him, President Santos ordered the DAS dismantled and created, as of Nov. 2, a substitute agency, the Agencia Nacional de Inteligencia (ANI).

Some local media have said that Santos was very likely involved in the espionage cases, as he was with the July 2008 rescue operation of former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt (NotiSur, July 25, 2008) and three US "contractors," captured by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). Operación Jaque, presented as a "brilliant" action by the armed forces that Santos led as defense minister, was apparently not that at all but in reality nothing more than an agreement to pay two guerrilla deserters to turn over Betancourt and the US contractors in exchange for providing the guerrillas with false passports and money to flee to France with a new identity. This was confirmed by one of the embarrassing cables released by WikiLeaks, which quoted the US ambassador to Colombia, who has not denied the account. The cable said that the arrangement with the FARC deserters "had the full support of the Ministerio de Defensa," that is, of Santos.
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