Colombian General with Ties to Drug Traffickers Extradited to U.S.

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For the first time ever, the US Justice Department has indicted a Colombian brigadier general. Mauricio Santoyo Velasco was the security chief during four of the eight years of the administration of former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and ended his active career as the police attaché in the Colombian Embassy in Italy. He opted to avoid the humiliation of being detained by his fellow officers and then extradited, instead turning himself in to US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents in Bogotá. The formal indictment filed with the Federal Court in Alexandria, Virginia, accuses Santoyo Velasco of responsibility for a series of crimes for which, if convicted, he could spend the rest of his days in prison.

The case deeply affected Colombian society and its political world not only because it concerned a police general but also because of the privileged relationship between the accused and two-term President Uribe, still a dominant figure in the life of the country. The ex-president is now facing a new scandal linked to drug trafficking and the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) paramilitary groups. Uribe's niece and her mother were jailed in Bogotá and, since last February, have had hanging over them an order from the Corte de Justicia for their extradition to the US, where two extradited paramilitary leaders who are serving prison sentences in the US have accused them of having ties to Mexican drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán.

US Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia Neil MacBride alleges that the Colombian general received bribes in exchange for turning over intelligence information to the major drug-trafficking groups regarding investigations by the secret services of the US, Great Britain, and Colombia.

US alleges general conspired with drug dealers and paramilitaries

On June 18, an Associated Press (AP) story datelined Alexandria said that US authorities believe Santoyo was working with the feared drug-running operation Oficina de Envigado, where he gave the AUC reports on operations that the authorities of those three countries were planning against them. Santoyo also helped other corrupt police support the paramilitaries and gave intelligence information gathered by the government that was later used by the criminal bands to identify people who were then murdered.

Colombians understand the Oficina de Envigado as an organization dedicated to drug trafficking, in the municipality of Envigado near Medellín, capital of the department of Antioquia, 250 km northeast of Bogotá. The Oficina de Envigado was reportedly created by the founder of the Medellín cartel, Pablo Escobar Gaviria, the country's most powerful drug trafficker until he was killed in 1993 (NotiSur, Dec. 3, 1993).

Finally, the Justice Department's request for Santoyo's extradition, issued on May 24, accuses Uribe's former security chief of receiving US$5 million to allow several tons of drugs to be taken to Colombia's Pacific coast, from where they were sent to Central America and the US. This criminal
alliance between the general and Oficina de Envigado existed from early 2000 to November 2008. Santoyo surrendered to DEA agents on July 3, 41 days after the US requested his extradition.

When he became the head of Uribe's security apparatus in 2000, Santoyo was already under a cloud. In 2001, he was involved in a scandal of electronic eavesdropping against members of human rights organizations in the city of Medellín. The Procuraduría General de la Nación, which is in charge of investigating the conduct of public officials, brought criminal proceedings against him, and in October 2003 a court found him guilty, a verdict that was upheld in November 2004. Santoyo was discharged and lost his rank of general.

The AP wrote on June 20 that, "despite the Procuraduría's finding, Uribe left Santoyo as head of security, arguing that there was still an appeal in process against his discharge." In April 2006, at the end of Uribe's first term, the Procuraduría's verdict was overturned by a decision of the Consejo del Estado—one of Colombia's four high courts—that took up the appeal because "[Santoyo] was not opportunely and duly informed of the sanction against him" as the law calls for.

Following the favorable Consejo de Estado opinion, Santoyo was promoted to brigadier general. Like all promotions, it had to be approved by the Ministerio de Defensa, which submitted it to Congress. The defense minister at the time was the current President Juan Manuel Santos.

**Allegations of ties to crime dog Uribe**

After learning of the US extradition request, Uribe used his Twitter account to Tweet, "I hope that Gen. Santoyo and police institution explain the case. I always respected internal police decisions regarding my protection." The former president then added that he "never" interceded with either the Ministerio de Defensa or Congress to approve Santoyo's promotion.

Uribe placed all the responsibility on Santos, even though, in 2007, Uribe signed Santoyo's appointment as police attaché in Italy. Santos called on Santoyo to turn himself in, but he is maintaining absolute silence on the underlying issue, despite the opposition's demand that he explain his role in Santoyo's promotion.

Deputy Iván Cepeda of the Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA) said, "Santos cannot remain silent given the seriousness of this matter." Regarding Uribe, Cepeda added, "It seems cynical that he asks [the general] for explanations when he is the one who owes the country an explanation."

At a time when no one wants to talk about the case so as not to be implicated in a plot that grows by the day, Uribe's former chief advisor Obdulio Gaviria came out in defense of the general. "I fear that Santoyo is a new victim of the mafia-style revenge by those who have been extradited and are in US jails." Cepeda said he wondered whether Gaviria's comment was in defense of Uribe's niece and her mother.

In the midst of this delicate situation, and when Santoyo had still not turned himself in to the DEA agents, the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) wrote a story datelined Bogotá in which it painted a picture of Uribe's connections to crime. The June 10 story was sent to subscribers and was based on Uribe's statements that he did not know Ana María Uribe Cifuentes, daughter of his late brother Jaime, and her mother Dolly Cifuentes Villa, who since February have been waiting for Santos to sign the extradition order approved by the court. Mother and daughter are alleged to be members of Clan Cifuentes Villa, a family of drug dealers and financial-assets launderers.
The DPA quotes an investigation by the magazine Semana, which says that the clan "has assets in its name worth in excess of US$250 million and activities in Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Ecuador, Brazil, Spain, and the US." The magazine also said that Uribe could not deny that his bother Jaime "was in jail in 1986, after military intelligence intercepted his calls to Pablo Escobar Gaviria."

The Semana investigation ended with the alleged connection between the Uribe family and the Oficina de Envigado, "which goes back to the 1984 discovery of a helicopter belonging to the ex-president's father Alberto Uribe in the largest cocaine-processing lab discovered to date, which belonged to Escobar Gaviria."

Santiago Uribe, another brother of the ex-president, is under investigation by the attorney general's office for accusations that he organized and led the paramilitary group Los 12 Apóstoles, responsible for some 100 murders. Finally, the DPA recounts that Mario Uribe, ex-senator and cousin of the former president, is serving a seven-year sentence for ties to the far-right paramilitary groups.

Uribe's ties to the world of crime go beyond his family and extend to his close associates implicated in the parapolitico scandal, involving links between the paramilitaries and politicians (NotiSur, May 25, 2012). More than 100 legislators are under investigation by the judiciary. Almost all belong to parties that were part of the coalition supporting Uribe. Of these 100, more than 20 have been sentenced to prison and 32 are fugitives. In addition, Uribe appears to be implicated in illegal wiretapping by the now defunct Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) against political leaders, judges, journalists, and human rights activists.

The DAS was the state intelligence apparatus that reported directly to the president. In this case, the judiciary sentenced to prison the former DAS director María del Pilar Hurtado, a strong Uribe collaborator who fled the country to seek asylum in Panama (NotiSur, Jan. 14, 2011). In all the cases, the investigations were begun based on statements made in the US by extradited drug traffickers and AUC leaders. Like Obdulio Gaviria, many leaders, with opposing political positions, have begun to question the regime of extraditions.

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