

## ***Melting the Tip of the Iceberg: Colombia's "Para-politics" Scandal***

### **What is the "para-politics" scandal?**

A long list of Colombian politicians are being actively investigated by judicial authorities and journalists because of serious allegations concerning their history of collusion or collaboration with paramilitary forces. These investigations have revealed significant paramilitary control of the political system in Colombia, producing a political legitimacy crisis, particularly for the current Uribe Administration. On November 28, Colombia's Supreme Court called in six Colombian lawmakers for questioning on allegations of links to paramilitaries. The Court also issued arrest warrants for two senators, a current representative and a former Congresswoman. In mid-November, the Colombian inspector general's office charged Jorge Noguera, the former head of the Police Intelligence Service (DAS) with providing information on DAS operations to paramilitaries; this information allowed paramilitaries involved in criminal activities to evade capture by authorities. Last week Senator Miguel de la Espriella alleged in the Colombian media that in 2001 an estimated 40 lawmakers were ordered to a meeting by the paramilitaries where lawmakers signed a loyalty pledge to paramilitaries.

### **Why should U.S. policymakers pay attention to this situation?**

These revelations should matter to U.S. policymakers because the resulting investigations may expose the truth about the degree of paramilitary infiltration of and influence on Colombia's public institutions. While over 30,000 members of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) have demobilized, the more difficult reintegration process – including investigation and prosecution of paramilitaries for crimes committed – has only just begun. The U.S. provides assistance for the demobilization in Colombia on the condition that the Colombian government take steps to dismantle paramilitary groups. However, as the *Washington Post* points out, "the latest scandal has raised questions of how effective the disarmament has been and whether the government is truly committed to dismantling an organization that has infiltrated town halls, hospitals and even the government's intelligence agency, the DAS."

The actions taken by the Colombian Supreme Court and the investigative articles that have come out in the Colombian media are essential steps for understanding the extent of links between paramilitaries and politicians. Because paramilitaries control a significant portion of the international narcotics trade, U.S. policymakers should be interested in seeing these investigations

### **Recommendations**

- ***Ensure the physical protection of judicial authorities, members of the political opposition and the Colombian media who are investigating or reporting on the allegations of links between politicians and paramilitaries.***
- ***Call on Colombian authorities to fully investigate all alleged links between lawmakers and paramilitaries and to bring those found guilty to justice.***
- ***Urge that public officials accused of links with illegal armed groups are suspended from duty until investigations are concluded.***
- ***Encourage the U.S. Ambassador to make a public statement supporting the courageous work of Colombia's judicial authorities. He should also publicly support the victims of paramilitary violence who are speaking out against the crimes committed against them. The Embassy and Department of State must urge Colombian officials to protect the victims from harm, harassment and intimidation.***
- ***Monitor the paramilitary demobilization process and ensure the complete dismantlement of paramilitary structures.***

move forward. This recent round of scandals appears to be only the tip of the iceberg. Meanwhile, full dismantlement of paramilitary structures in Colombia will require effective judicial action in all emerging cases of alleged collusion or collaboration of politicians and public servants with paramilitaries. As the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) warns: “[if] the judicial system does not sanction all who are responsible for paramilitarism, and is unable to uncover the complete truth, then it is very likely that the phenomenon [of paramilitarism] will re-structure itself, as is already happening in various regions of the country.”

### **Public Hearing in San Onofre Exposes the Links Between Regional Authorities and Paramilitaries in Sucre**

On November 27, Senator Alexander López of the Senate Human Rights Commission held a public hearing with the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes in San Onofre, Sucre. The purpose of this event was to hear the testimonies of victims of paramilitary violence and expose the links between regional authorities and paramilitaries in Sucre. Prior to this event, attempts were made to silence the voices of several leaders of the Victims Movement. On November 24, the car assigned to members of the non-governmental organization Fundación Manuel Cepeda Vargas (FMCV) that forms part of the Victims Movement was stopped in Bogotá by two armed men dressed in civilian clothes. They ordered the driver – a security guard provided by the U.S.-financed human rights defenders protection program - to get out of the car at gunpoint and identified themselves as being part of the government secret police. This occurred just three days before Ivan Cepeda of the FMCV spoke at the San Onofre hearing to condemn the ties between authorities and paramilitaries and call for the Mayor of San Onofre to resign due to his alleged links to paramilitaries. On November 23, an attempt was made against the life of Juvenal Escudero, a victim of paramilitaries who had denounced that they were pressuring him to turn the title to his land over to the paramilitary group. Because Mr. Escudero denounced this common paramilitary extortion practice for appropriating lands he was shot in the back and remains in intensive care. On October 31, the National Victims Movement reported that paramilitaries are circulating a “death list” that contains the names of 26 persons including members of the Victims Movement from the Departments of Sucre and Bolívar. Nine of the persons on this list have already been assassinated.

These incidents indicate that it is necessary that strong steps are taken to protect the safety and defend the rights of the victims. Their testimonies are essential to ensuring that the full truth of paramilitary crimes is revealed and the perpetrators are brought to justice. Security guarantees for the victims are not just needed in Bogotá and Sucre. The Colombian Commission of Jurists points out that at present there is concern for the security of victims in Antioquia, Bolívar, Casanare, Catatumbo, Cauca, Chocó, Magdalena Medio, Nariño, Putumayo, Santander, Urabá and Valle del Cauca.

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#### **For more information:**

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