

Familial Ties to "Para-Gate" Force Resignation of Colombian Foreign Minister: Meanwhile Reports Point to New Armed Groups

Why did Colombia's Foreign Minister resign?

Maria Conchego Araújo, Colombia's Foreign Minister, resigned this week, four days after the Colombian Supreme Court brought charges against her brother, Senator Alvaro Araújo, and four other politicians for allegedly colluding with right wing paramilitaries. The Court also recommended that Araújo's father be investigated in connection to the kidnapping of a political rival. Last week's developments raise the number of lawmakers arrested in connection to the "para-politics" or "para-gate" scandal to eight. This scandal erupted last November when judicial authorities and the press began investigating a long list of policymakers due to allegations of their links to AUC paramilitaries, a group that is on the U.S. foreign terrorist organizations list. ***This scandal should raise grave doubts for US policy makers because it is becoming apparent that top officials in Colombia have – for years now – essentially been collaborating with right wing paramilitaries responsible for 70% of the human rights violations in that country.*** This is more than a crisis in the legitimacy of the Colombian State – it raises serious concerns about the entire fabric of democracy in the country.

The scandal was further fueled in January when it was revealed that in 2001 more than a dozen lawmakers, including 11 members of the Congress, 2 governors, 3 mayors and other local officials, allegedly signed a document where they agreed to cooperate with the paramilitaries. In December 2006, one of the demobilized paramilitary bosses who formed part of this agreement, Salvatore Mancuso, confessed to ordering the killing or kidnapping of more than 336 persons, detailing his crimes in an 87-page PowerPoint presentation. One of his many victims was the Embera indigenous leader Kimy Pernía, whose body was unearthed by paramilitaries and thrown into a river after he had been assassinated and buried. Mancuso also confessed to his role in the Mapiripán, Puerto Alivira, El Salado, La Gabarra, El Aro and La Granja massacres. Some of Mancuso's victims were killed – either dismembered, beaten or tortured to death--in full view of their family members who then joined the ranks of Colombia's large internally displaced population. Mancuso's confession also confirmed what many human rights organizations have documented for years---that members of Colombia's armed forces and police colluded with the paramilitaries. He detailed how the armed forces transported paramilitaries in their trucks and helped to create lists of persons who were later killed in the massacres or selective killings by the AUC.

Recommendations

- ***Change the balance of the U.S. aid package to Colombia by reducing aid to military and security forces and increasing aid to strengthen civilian governance, to protect and assist victims of the conflict especially those internally displaced, and to promote sustainable rural development.***
- ***Monitor the paramilitary demobilization process to ensure complete dismantlement of paramilitary operational and criminal structures. Urge the Colombian Government to bolster its efforts to prevent the formation of new paramilitary groups and to arrest members of those groups that have already resumed illegal operations.***
- ***Encourage the U.S. Embassy and Department of State to urge Colombian officials to protect the victims of paramilitary violence from further harm, harassment and intimidation, and to guarantee their right to press legal charges for crimes against them.***
- ***Urge the State Department to deny certification of Colombia's human rights record until all policymakers and members of the armed forces who allegedly colluded with paramilitaries are arrested and brought to justice.***

Is re-armament or re-groupment of paramilitaries taking place?

The eighth quarterly report of the Organization of American States (OAS) mission to monitor the paramilitary demobilization in Colombia reported this week that it has identified 22 new armed units. Of these cases, the mission has verified that 14 are rearmed groups and 8 are “possible” rearmed groups. The OAS reports that most new groups are made up of ex-AUC members who did not demobilize, individuals who were recruited during their process of reintegration, and others – meaning that not all members of these armed groups are demobilized AUC combatants. The OAS points out that in spite of the Colombian government’s efforts to combat these groups, “the populations in Putumayo, Arauca, Nariño, Urabá, Norte de Santander, southern César and Pacific coast of Valle del Cauca do not perceive an improvement in security conditions and the presence of state institutions continues to be weak.” As such, these areas are highly vulnerable to the activity of illegal armed groups and ongoing illicit economic activities.

The Bogotá think-tank INDEPAZ has compiled information from various official sources that show a total of 75 new paramilitary groups operating in the country. This organization asks whether these groups are solely emerging criminal gangs – as the Colombian government argues – or whether they are proof of the lack of true dismantlement of paramilitary power structures. They point out that these groups are ***operating in the same areas, cities and territories as the AUC, and sustain themselves with the same licit and illicit activities*** as the paramilitaries, including the expansion of monoculture plantations, such as oil palm, as well as drugs and extortion. ***Some of the groups call themselves self-defense forces, have the same organizational structures as the former AUC, and are run by former mid-level commanders of the AUC.*** Perhaps what is most telling is that in the areas where these groups operate, INDEPAZ reports that the inhabitants do not differentiate between the prior and current armed groups. They see the new groups as being the same paramilitaries with new names.

Why do the “para-gate” scandal and re-arming of paramilitaries matter to US policymakers?

Between 2000 and 2007, the U.S. will have spent \$5.4 billion in Colombia, the majority of this aid (estimated 80%) going to military assistance and the remaining 20% of aid going to economic, human rights and humanitarian programs. The goal of U.S. aid was to cut drug production and improve the humanitarian and human rights situation. Yet it’s clear that the aid package in its current form is not meeting these intended goals: human rights violations continue to occur at high levels in Colombia and the majority of past cases remain in impunity; despite the aerial fumigation of over 2 million acres of illegal and legal crops in Colombia, the amount of drugs available on U.S. streets remains virtually unchanged. Although the demobilization of over 31,000 paramilitaries is a positive development, the soft terms and poor enforcement of the legal framework governing this demobilization may lead to a deepening of impunity in Colombia. The operational, financial, drug-trafficking and other criminal structures of the paramilitary groups are not being fully dismantled. There are serious questions surrounding justice for the victims. Threats and attacks against victims and human rights defenders continue. Internal displacement in Colombia remains a priority humanitarian and human rights issue of concern. The recent “para-politics” scandal and emergence of new or re-armed paramilitary groups should inspire debate in the new Congress about the make up and effectiveness of the U.S. aid package to Colombia. For more information see the attached article by Juan Forero of *The Washington Post* concerning the reaction to the “para-gate” scandal on Capitol Hill.

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Scandal in Colombia Raises Skepticism on Capitol Hill

By [Juan Forero](#)

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BOGOTA, Colombia, Feb. 16 -- U.S. support for Colombia has been a foregone conclusion under the administration of President Álvaro Uribe, who was elected in 2002. But with a widening scandal tying the president's close supporters to paramilitary groups, policymakers on Capitol Hill say skepticism of Uribe's government is mounting, leading to closer scrutiny of a proposed aid package and free-trade agreement with the Andean nation.

On Thursday, Sen. Álvaro Araújo Castro, the brother of Foreign Minister Maria Consuelo Araújo, was arrested along with three other senators and a congressman. Authorities said they are investigating links that those lawmakers -- along with a sixth legislator who remains at large -- may have had ties to a paramilitary organization that has terrorized the country for years while shipping tons of cocaine to U.S. cities.

And Friday, the Supreme Court, which is heading a probe of Congress, announced that it would provide prosecutors with documentation to help determine whether the foreign minister's father, Álvaro Araújo Noguera, had ties to paramilitary groups and participated in the kidnapping of a businessman. The foreign minister's cousin, Hernando Molina, governor of the state of Cesar, is also under investigation by authorities for allegedly collaborating with paramilitary groups to carry out killings and finance his campaign.

Uribe said he would stand fast behind his foreign minister in the midst of a scandal that has put eight congressmen behind bars and led to the questioning of dozens of national and local politicians. At a news conference Friday, Foreign Minister Araújo told reporters, "I'm going to keep working with efficiency, honor, results and joy."

Officials in Washington said Uribe's support for the foreign minister would not help the Colombian government in its negotiations with U.S. lawmakers.

"The effects of what we call 'para-gate,' among Colombia followers in Congress, are that more and more folks are starting to get a bit skeptical regarding support, because there's a question of how far-reaching the relationship between the paramilitaries and the government officials is, vis-à-vis the president," a senior aide to a Republican senator said on condition of anonymity. "The confidence that we have in Uribe has been what's carried this for so long. That confidence has been brought into question."

Rep. Sander M. Levin (D-Mich.) said Colombian officials cannot count on easy passage of a free-trade agreement or military assistance, as is currently being provided under a program known as Plan Colombia.

"Colombia F.T.A. cannot pass the Congress, as constructed, and Plan Colombia is in more jeopardy because of these scandals, the infiltration of the paramilitary into the inner workings of the Colombian government," Levin said by telephone from Washington. "I voted for Plan Colombia, at least the first few times, but this is a very worrisome development."

Though lawmakers in Washington remain intensely focused on [Iraq](#), it is not lost on policymakers that Colombia remains the biggest recipient of U.S. assistance outside of the Middle East and [Afghanistan](#). Nearly \$4.7 billion has been funneled to Colombia since Plan Colombia, an extensive aid package designed to defoliate coca and erode support for Marxist rebels, was instituted in 2000. The assistance has helped Colombia lower violence and tightened bonds between Bogota and Washington.

But Colombia continues to produce more than enough cocaine to meet world demand. And despite a highly touted demobilization that started in 2003, paramilitary groups still thrive, with

shadowy new forces killing rivals, union leaders and peasants while battling guerrillas for control of the country's lucrative drug business. In the midst of this tumult, the Supreme Court and a team of prosecutors have begun to unearth extensive ties between paramilitary commanders and dozens of congressmen, regional politicians from coastal states and mid-level administration officials.

For Uribe, the scandal couldn't have come at a worse moment. He, Vice President Francisco Santos and Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos have made recent trips to the United States to press for approval of a free-trade agreement and more assistance to help the state take control of an unruly countryside. In Colombia's latest proposal, Uribe and his cabinet say they want to spend \$44 billion in the coming years -- a program that would rely on a heavy infusion of aid from Washington and European countries.

"The whole scandal and the fact that all of these people are close confidants of the president are really going to muddy the waters as they're looking at a free-trade agreement and a new aid package in a democratically controlled Congress," said Adam Isacson, who closely tracks U.S. aid to Colombia for the Center for International Policy in Washington. "The Colombian government has a rather big sales job ahead of it, and this makes it infinitely harder for them to do that sales job."

Vice President Santos, in an interview, said that the disclosures would never have come out if Uribe's government had not entered into negotiations with the paramilitary organizations, a process that he said not only led to a full-scale disarmament but emboldened institutions such as the Supreme Court to investigate authorities' paramilitary ties.

"We're going to deal with it openly, and confront reality and let the chips fall where they may," Santos said. "The most important thing is that we clearly present what we've done. The United States Congress should be totally calm about there being complete transparency here."

The Bush administration has reiterated its support for Uribe. "We remain committed to the free-trade agreement," Tom Casey, a State Department spokesman, told reporters in Washington. He added that the administration would continue to back anti-narcotics operations in Colombia.

But the latest disclosures have drawn heated criticism, from organizations such as Human Rights Watch and from some of Capitol Hill's more influential shapers of U.S. policy in Latin America, including Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Senate Appropriations foreign operations subcommittee.

"This confirms the concerns that many have had for a long time, that the paramilitaries have infiltrated the economic and political establishment of Colombian society," he said in a statement. "It should give us some pause as to who we are dealing with."