



U.S. Office on Colombia
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December 20, 2006

Dear Colleague,

The Association of Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians USA (AFRODES USA), the U.S. Office on Colombia (USOC), and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) would like to share the enclosed documents with you:

- A written copy of the testimony presented at the November 20th Congressional briefing hosted by the Office of Congressman Donald Payne on “The Plight of a Marginalized Population: A Briefing on Afro-Colombians.”
- An article published on December 14, 2006 in the International Herald Tribune that discusses this situation, with quotes from Ana del Carmen Martínez, an Afro-Colombian leader from the CAVIDA (Community for Self-Determination, Life, and Dignity) Community in Cacarica, Colombia, one of the briefing’s panelists.

We hope that you will find these documents useful. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at the numbers below.

Sincerely,

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The Plight of a Marginalized Population: A Briefing on Afro-Colombians

Sponsored by Representative Donald M. Payne

November 20, 2006

- I. Testimony of Ana del Carmen Martínez – *Community for Self-Determination, Life, and Dignity (CAVIDA)*, Cacarica, Colombia**
- II. Testimony of Enrique Manuel Petro – Curvaradó, Colombia**
- III. Presentation by Danilo Rueda – *Inter-Ecclesiastical Commission for Justice and Peace***
- IV. Recommendations to Members of the U.S. Congress – *Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)*, *U.S. Office on Colombia (USOC)*, and the *Association of Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians USA (AFRODES USA)***

I. Testimony of Ana del Carmen Martínez, member of the coordinating team of CAVIDA (Community for Self-Determination, Life and Dignity), a civil society organization created by Afro-Colombian internally displaced persons from the Cacarica River Basin to facilitate their return to their territories after becoming internally displaced in 1997. CAVIDA non-violently resists efforts to implement large scale development projects in Afro-Colombian territories and promotes the traditional environmentally sustainable land practices that they learned from their African-descendant ancestors.

My name is Ana del Carmen Martínez and I am one of the 10 million Afro-Colombians who reside in Colombia. I form part of a beautiful ethnic group that was forcibly brought as slaves to the Americas to serve the interests of the Spanish. Due to our communities' strong moral force, our way of thinking, the value we give our skin color, and the roots that are found in our blood, we have survived as people and continued to resist as a black people. We also learned to coexist with other persons including the indigenous communities and peasant farmers.

Being here with you all today is very important for us. It is like looking in a mirror and finding our common ancestors who struggled for liberty and equal rights. We are of the same family and our mother is from the same origin. We, the Afro-descendants, live in the same continent and the spirit of the drums makes our bodies move, the spirit of happiness makes us smile and the spirit of family makes us protect our way of life and our territories.

I live in the Cacarica River Basin in the Colombian Department of the Chocó. This is where I was born. The land where I come from is a land filled with biodiversity. It is where my ancestors, the descendants of slaves, lived in harmony and where we constructed our own form of life that included an ecologically sustainable relationship with the land. My family used to make approximately \$1,000 a year and we worked with other families on collective agricultural projects, schools, parties, sports, community exchanges, community health projects, on committees we set up for our women and other joint communal actions. Most of all, we protected our territory. Our way of life completely changed in 1996 and for the past ten years I have lived in constant fear of death.

We became internally displaced due to a military operation called "Genesis" that was commanded by Rito Alejo del Rio (a man who cannot enter into the U.S. due to his responsibility for violating human rights in Colombia) of the 17th Brigade of the Colombian Military. The men under his command worked jointly with hundreds of paramilitaries and

burned our homes, robbed our stores, took our livestock and burned our crops. They ordered us to displace while they dropped bombs on us from their planes. One of our brothers named Marino Lopez was cut up into pieces by paramilitaries in full view of our community. The paramilitaries then proceeded to play soccer with his head. This act of barbarism sowed terror in all of us and we got the message that we had to flee. These men felt no compassion for the girls and boys of our black communities or for our grandfathers and grandmothers. In the area where this happened, there never were any combat operations because the guerilla is not present in our communities. The guerillas were not there fighting the military and paramilitaries in the days these displacements took place. Prior to the combat operations, the guerillas would utilize the waterways near our communities as transport routes. We did not pay attention to them since we were only concerned with our daily activities.

Continued violence and aggression against our black communities is a major fear of ours. The demobilized paramilitaries continue to operate in our territories. They continue to deny us our human rights, our right to our territories and our right to freedom of movement. There existed for 7 years a paramilitary base in a place called "La Balsa." Due to the demobilization, the base no longer exists. Yet the same men are still in the area dressed as civilians, communicating through radios and carrying smaller arms (revolvers and pistols). These men are destroying our cativo, oak and cedar forests. The activities they support also have led to the contamination of our rivers by the wood company Maderas de Darién of Pizano, S.A., that forms part of the Board of Directors of Plan Colombia.

Before the demobilization, they tortured and killed our Afro-descendant brothers at the La Balsa paramilitary base. In this area, there exists a common grave containing the remains of our brother Edwin Salazar, who was killed in April 2002, and others. Since the paramilitary demobilization, we have learned that there is now a banana plantation in the area where these graves are located. The Colombian company that runs this plantation is named Multifruits and they have an agreement with Del Monte USA for the export of bananas to the United States. They have turned over the land in this area so we can no longer obtain the remains of our assassinated brothers and give them a proper burial. The companies and demobilized paramilitaries are destroying the evidence of truth and justice that is found in our territories. They do not allow us to cry, mourn and bury our dead.

For the past ten years, we have been asking that the Colombian Government take action to protect our communities by confronting the paramilitaries. Because of these denunciations, the military has accused us of being liars. They state many slanderous things about us that are all untrue. The worst thing is that soldiers who are present in the Cacarica River Basin do nothing to confront the paramilitaries that operated at La Balsa. Rather than attack the armed groups such as the paramilitaries, they attack us. They harass and threaten us. They consume marijuana, fire their guns in the air, and take actions that have forced us to become internally displaced for a second time. In June 2001, a uniformed man from the 17th Brigade with the last name Lopez, in front of a paramilitary named Mario "The Tiger Who Kills Seven", stated to us: "Progress has arrived in this area. Finish your community and begin to cultivate African oil palm and coca. Now you will see what money can give you. Fix things with Maderas Del Darién." To this, we responded that we do not support progress that is tainted with blood, with pressure, with destruction of our culture and territories.

We returned to our territories with a “Project for Life” that is based on five principles: Truth, Justice, Solidarity, Liberty, and Fraternity. In our community’s flag you will see many colors. The principle of truth is symbolized by the color yellow. We say that truth has to be everywhere that we go. Liberty is symbolized by the color red. The red stands for the blood of our 85 community members who were assassinated or disappeared (three of whom were also tortured) and our children and elderly who died during the displacement. The principle of Justice is symbolized by the color blue. For there to be a free world where we live in harmony with one another, there needs to be justice. For us, the color green symbolizes solidarity, which gives us hope that we can protect our natural environment for the good of the community. Lastly, the color black is our fraternal relationship with the black territories. The fruits of these territories are to be shared with the world’s humanity and should not be destroyed.

We have created “humanitarian zones” in order to protect ourselves and our way of life from further harm. In these zones, we live as a community composed of a civilian population, where we coordinate our activities together so that we are not killed. It is an area of protection for us. It is also where we educate our children with our own ethno-education, our values, and make sure that they remember our history. This is a place where we make collective decisions. Everyone is involved in the decision-making process. We have formed committees for our women, youth, children, matriarchs and patriarchs. We have implemented an organizational system that is in accordance with Law 70 of 1993. This is the law that recognizes our collective territorial rights and the responsibility we have for the administration of our territories.

Today, we face the strong likelihood that we will lose our territories. This is why I ask that in the new Congress you seriously consider reforming U.S. assistance to Colombia so that Afro-Colombian rights and our right to territories are protected. We believe that the Free Trade Agreement with Colombia is going to finish off the black communities, and we respectfully encourage you not to sign this agreement. It is crucial that you monitor the paramilitary demobilization process and encourage the Colombian government to take action against the demobilized paramilitaries who continue to threaten us and our territorial rights. In relation to the demobilization process, we ask that the national reinsertion program is reviewed to ensure that it does not lead to the legalization of lands that have been stolen from Afro-Colombian communities. Further, it is vital that the alleged links between politicians, business men in the companies that operate in our area, and paramilitaries are investigated. Not only should these links be investigated, but anyone found guilty should be arrested and tried. It is also important to us that the full truth of what happened in the past 10 years in our communities is known. We urge you to work towards bringing to light the crimes committed against our community, having the responsibility of the State and military in these crimes investigated, and sanctioning those found guilty.

II. Testimony of Enrique Manuel Petro, a 68-year-old leader of the Curvaradó community that continues to denounce the illegal appropriation of Afro-Colombian traditional territories by “African” oil palm companies in the Department of Chocó. In 1997, residents of Curvaradó suffered a mass internal displacement from their traditional lands due to threats and violence perpetrated by the illegal armed actors. Since then, Petro and others have returned to their ancestral territories in Curvaradó and established a Humanitarian Zone,

where they continue to suffer threats and violence. Petro, his family, and residents of his community have recently been the target of increased threats by illegal armed groups working in collaboration with the “African” oil palm companies that have illegally planted in the Afro-Colombian territories.

Since October 1996 until this year, 113 crimes have been committed in the Collective Territories of Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó. These include murders and forced disappearances, as well as 15 internal displacements. The violent appropriation of lands titled by the national government as collective territories belonging to Afro-Colombian and mixed race persons has taken place by paramilitaries with the support, tolerance, and acquiescence of the 17th Brigade. This appropriation coincides with the illegal plantations of “African” oil palm by the companies Urapalma, Palmado, Palmura, Agropalma, and others.

The last murder that the Afro-Colombian and mixed race persons who share the same Afro-Colombian collective territory of Curvaradó have had to endure is that of our Afrodescendant brother Orlando Valencia. On October 15, 2005, fifteen minutes after he was detained by the police and freed, he made his way to my house in Belén de Bajirá. It was at this moment that he was disappeared by paramilitaries. His body was found eight days later in the León River. Orlando had his hands tied behind his back and a bullet wound in his forehead.

Since this murder, I have continued jointly with other Afro-descendants to work to defend our territories that are being sowed with “African” oil palm. Many of us have had our lands taken away from us: I had 150 hectares. The oil palm companies, with the protection of the paramilitary and military, sowed 130 hectares of my territories with oil palm without my authorization. After the displacement, I decided to return on my own to my farm. The paramilitaries threatened me, saying that if I returned to my land I would be killed. I went to the 17th Brigade and talked with General Pauselino La Torre who proceeded to call the manager of Urapalma with whom he was good friends. In the presence of this member of the military, they put together a document where they committed themselves to pay for my land; this document was signed by the general, the manager, and myself. I mistakenly thought that if I negotiated with them, they would respect my right to live and recognize the damage they caused to my land. Instead, they never paid me for the land, and they continued to work on cultivating oil palm on my farm with the protection of paramilitaries dressed as civilians (they carried radios and weapons). This activity took place in the presence of soldiers from the 17th Brigade and policemen from Belén de Bajirá.

In March of this year, a group of 40 families (80% of whom are Afro-Colombian) whose lands were also stolen by paramilitaries and I decided to travel to Bogotá to inform the government, various Embassies (including the United States Embassy), and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that we were planning to construct a humanitarian zone on 5 hectares of my farm. During this visit, we showed everyone the contract signed by the manager of Urapalma and the general that recognizes that I am the owner of the farm, and a map created by Incora (which until 2002 was the Colombian agency in charge of agrarian reform and land titling) that shows the area where my farm is located.

In April of this year, we constructed the humanitarian zone on my farm. This is a neutral zone that is only for the civilian population. It is located on my private property and is surrounded by fences that clearly show to the whole world that this is an area inhabited by civilians. Since the designation of this area as a humanitarian zone, we have received a lot of harassment. Civilians come by and videotape us. Recognized paramilitaries come by to ask us questions and to accuse us of being guerrillas. Some have even threatened me and my family with death.

On two occasions, Ms. Teresa Castaño (a relative of Castaño Gil) and Carlos Merlano (the lawyer of Urapalma) have come to speak to me. They offered me money to be able to continue to grow oil palm on my land. Ms. Castaño was accompanied by a paramilitary known as “Gago,” who was present throughout our meeting. I told them that I had no desire to sell my land because I wanted to give it to my children. Further, I informed them that I wanted to fix the damage that had been done to it so that it would not lose its rich biodiversity. The cultivation of “African” oil palm is very damaging to our territories because it leads to desertification of the soil. After the harvesting of oil palm, it is not possible to re-forest the lands and to grow what we need for our daily needs. This plant also dries up of our rivers, and migrating birds no longer return to the areas where it is planted.

Although my land is legally recognized as mine in an agreement issued by INCODER (the Colombian agency now in charge of land titling and implementing law 70) and Minister Andrés Felipe Arias has stated that 25,000 hectares of land must be returned to the inhabitants of Curvaradó, I have not been able to live in peace on my land. Demobilized Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) Commander Vicente Castaño lives near my farm. I have been told that he is angry with me and that I have “tired them out” with my denunciations and demands. The Urapalma businessmen have begun legal proceedings against me, and against the national non-governmental organization and international organizations that accompany me. They accuse us of invading their land because we have created a humanitarian zone on 5 hectares of my private property. They accuse me of being an “invader.” I am not sure what such an unjust accusation is going lead to.

Although the Ministry of Agriculture has recognized that the Afro-descendants and peasants from the community council of Curvaradó are the legitimate owners of our territories and announced that they are going to return 25,000 hectares to us, there are no indications that this will become a reality. The palm industry businessmen continue to clear the plantations, they continue to fumigate the area with poisons, and they continue to harvest the fruits that grow in the area. Fifteen days ago, they entered into my farm and began to work the land without my authorization.

III. Presentation by Danilo Rueda, a founding member of the Inter-Ecclesiastical Commission of Justice and Peace (CIJY), a human rights organization that offers support — legal, education and psychological — to various communities. CIJY coordinates solidarity campaigns with its counterparts in the United States and Europe, and is part of a network of organizations in Latin America that work together to combat impunity in the region. Over the years, the members of CIJY have been subjected to physical, psychological, and legal threats and attacks due to their valiant human rights work, especially their work with internally displaced rural communities. CIJY represents the communities of Cacarica, Jiguamiandó and

Curvaradó at the sessions of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS).

The territory of Bajo Atrato is located in the Department of Chocó. In 1997 it was comprised of close to 10,000 habitants, the majority of whom were Afro-descendants. Today we only have an estimated 3,000 residents living in the rural zones of the Bajo Atrato. According to technical studies by European Universities, this region is the second most biodiverse region in the world. It borders the Katios National Park and the Darién, two areas considered to be part of the world's environmental heritage.

Our Commission of Justice and Peace has witnessed the important creation of Afro-Colombian, indigenous and mixed race communities' proposals and alternatives to confront the permanent threats that exist against their lives and their territories. We have witnessed how the quality of life of Afro-Colombian communities has significantly diminished due to violence in this region. We have also seen how private companies have implemented transactions in the collective territories of Afro-Colombians. Many of these activities are believed to be fraudulent and carried out with the complicity of the military and the police. Operations of these companies have denied Afro-Colombians their rights to prior consultation and freedom of decision. They have not recognized the identity of the Afro-Colombian community and its model of sustainable development.

Before the internal displacement that began in 1996, Afro-Colombians in this area received incomes of \$800 per month from their agricultural harvests. They utilized and still utilize an environmentally sustainable method of farming. The violence and take-over by companies of the agricultural activity in the area has left them in a defenseless situation that does not allow them to meet their most basic needs. This situation is also destroying their territories. These tragic changes in the lives of Afro-Colombians are being implemented with the protection of paramilitaries and demobilized paramilitaries.

In the past ten years, Afro-Colombians have negotiated agreements and developed proposals with the governments of Presidents Samper and Pastrana. In these agreements, their existence as Afro-descendant peoples was recognized and the return to their territories after becoming internally displaced was seen as valid. With the advent of the democratic security policies of President Uribe during the past 4 years, their situation has been different. The militarization of these areas has not generated protection for their communities. It has resulted in abuses of authority, including the killing of one mixed race four-year-old child in Jiguamiandó in 2004 by soldiers of the 17th Brigade. In this region, soldiers spend their free time smoking marijuana and offering it to civilians. They also fight among themselves. Last year, a soldier committed suicide after killing another soldier.

The paramilitary demobilization has not created peace in this area. Rather, the demobilization has led to the paramilitaries giving themselves new names. That is to say, it is the same paramilitaries using a different name for their group. The demobilization has also led to paramilitaries further appropriating territories belonging to Afro-Colombian peoples.

The United States Government is supporting the demobilization process in Colombia because it believes in fomenting peace in Colombia. Many of us agree that supporting peace in Colombia is a very positive thing to do. However, Afro-Colombian communities who have been victims of internal displacement and subjected to crimes against humanity are at high risk of becoming displaced again, or of being exploited by the local companies.

The situation of violence in the Bajo Atrato continues, although the Elmer Cárdenas Bloc of the Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) demobilized earlier this year. Now newly named paramilitary criminal structures are found in the Bajo Atrato region. These men continue to intimidate and threaten people. They are trying to appropriate more parts of the collective territories belonging to Afro-Colombians. The new names that these paramilitaries are using are “The Black Eagles” and “The Walkers.” Within these new groupings, you find demobilized paramilitaries who also work in the companies, such as Urapalma, and demobilized persons that carry radios and revolvers. There are serious allegations that demobilized paramilitaries are also working for the Colombian company Multifruits S.A. that exports bananas to the United States through an agreement signed with the Del Monte Company that has an office in San Francisco, California.

The Government of the United States supports the strengthening of Colombia’s judicial system and the Attorney General’s Office. This is something many of us think is valuable as long as the support leads to justice. However, we think that it is problematic that 10 years after Operation “Genesis,” the systematic violations of human rights that were part of this operation have not been subjected to exhaustive investigations, and those responsible have not been sanctioned. Today, 99% of the 200 crimes committed against the Afro-descendant communities of Curvaradó, Jiguamiandó and Cacarica, as well as the illegal appropriation of their territories, remain in impunity. In the Bajo Atrato region, these crimes include torture, assassinations, massacres, and 17 internal displacements.

The paramilitary commander known as “Double Zero,” who was killed at the hands of his own men, stated the following to the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* in July 2003¹ before he was killed: “the oil palm in Chocó...is dripping with blood, misery, and corruption.” In this interview, he also added that oil palm plantations are a method for the laundering of finances obtained through drug-trafficking and other illegal assets. A similar situation appears to be presenting itself with the sowing of commercial fruit products by the company Multifruits; yet none of this is under investigation. It should be underscored that the Colombian Minister of Agriculture Andrés Felipe Arias has publicly stated that those responsible for sowing oil palm in Curvaradó are narco-terrorists and that 25,000 hectares of land, those where oil palm has been sown, will be returned to the Afro-Colombians².

In the Colombian Congress, there is a proposed law 30, commonly known as the law of rural development. The Comptroller of Colombia has stated that “it appears that the principal objective [of the proposed law] is to grant legitimacy to the palm cultivations in the territories of the Community Councils of Jiguamiandó, Curvaradó, Alto Mira [Nariño]... developed without the consent of their legitimate authorities within a framework of systematic and recurrent human rights violations, which have included threats and assassinations against those who are opposed to them [the cultivations of oil palm].”³ We are concerned about this proposed law. We already

saw the passage of the forestry law last year, which commercializes the forests to the detriment of biodiversity and the territorial rights of Afro-Colombian communities.

Today these territories continue to be in the hands of companies that are protected by the demobilized paramilitaries and units of the 17th Brigade. The Afro-Colombians find themselves living in the humanitarian and biodiversity zones of Cacarica, Curvaradó, Jiguamiandó. These are civilian areas where an attempt is being made to protect and recover the biodiversity of nature. The civilians become the targets of intimidation, hostilities, and threats, while members of criminal networks freely walk around and calmly amass their fortunes.

The possibility of a dignified life for the Afro-Colombian communities of the Bajo Atrato and the assurance that their human rights are not violated lies in your hands. We ask Members of the United States Congress to support the return of properties titled to the communities of Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó, as well as actions that will lead to respect for the territorial rights of Afro-Colombians. We also ask that the U.S. government ensure that the Colombian Government sanction those responsible for the crimes committed against the Afro-Colombian population in the Bajo Atrato, and that the Colombian Government cease to approve laws that undermine the rights of the Afro-Colombian communities found in Law 70 of 1993. With your support, we are certain that the right to life and unique culture of the Afro-Colombian people can be respected.

IV. Recommendations to Members of the U.S. Congress

Based on the testimonies and presentations made by our Colombian colleagues at today's briefing, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the U.S. Office on Colombia (USOC), and the Association of Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians USA (AFRODES USA) would like to recommend the following to Members of the U.S. Congress:

- Support the Senate version of the FY07 Foreign Operations bill that conditions aid to Colombia. The Senate version adds a condition "to ensure that the Colombian Armed Forces are not violating the land and property rights of Colombia's indigenous *and Afro-Colombian communities*." The Senate version also adds a clause to the conditions on paramilitary demobilization that would require that the Colombian government take steps to identify stolen land and other illegal assets and return them to their rightful owners.
- Closely monitor the paramilitary demobilization process and ensure that the conditions for U.S. assistance to this process are met. In particular, Congressional offices should insist that the financial, political and military structures of paramilitary organizations be dismantled in the Bajo Atrato region of Colombia.
- Ensure that USAID establish adequate screening mechanisms to guarantee that U.S. financing does not directly or indirectly support development programs implemented on lands appropriated from Afro-Colombian communities by those not belonging to these communities.
- Urge the Colombian government to guarantee the return of collectively titled Afro-

Colombian lands to those who are entitled to these territories under law 70 of 1993.

- Members of Congress should sign the McGovern-Pitts Dear Colleague letter to Secretary Rice on the protection of Colombian human rights defenders, in order to highlight the importance of the protection of the human rights of Afro-Colombian and indigenous leaders and communities.

November 20, 2006

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Books and resources:

Somos Tierra de Esta Tierra: Memorias de una resistencia civil. CAVIDA Cacarica, Chocó, Colombia. Noviembre de 2002.

La Tramoya: Derechos Humanos y Palma Aceitera, Curvaradó y Jiguamiandó, Caso tipo 5. Comisión Intereclesial Justicia y Paz, octubre de 2005.

¹ El Tiempo. Mariela Gomez Giraldo. Artículo “Tierras: Punto Débil de Proceso Con Paras.” July 18, 2003. Tramayo, p. 115.

² El Espectador. Norbey Quevedo H. Artículo “La palma de la discordia.” September 11, 2006. Investigación. <http://www.elespectador.com/ElEspectador/Secciones/Detalles.aspx?idNoticia=823&idseccion=20>

³ 30 de agosto de 2006, Salon Esmeralda del Hotel Tequendama, Acto de Instalación de la Mesa de Tierras.

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

AP Exclusive: Uribe ally allegedly profits from paramilitary terror

The Associated Press

Thursday, December 14, 2006

BOGOTA, Colombia

A political ally of President Alvaro Uribe is under investigation for allegedly doing business with illegal right-wing militias as head of a company that sells fruit to Del Monte Fresh Produce Co. for shipment to the United States and Europe.

Juan Manuel Campo, a member of the Uribe-allied Conservative Party's executive committee, heads a company that ships 40 tons of plantain bananas a week to the Coral Gables, Florida-based company from land cleared of its rightful owners through intimidation by banned paramilitaries.

The federal prosecutor's office and the attorney general's office, which regulates public servants, opened investigations after residents of the fertile jungle zone just south of Panama complained to human rights organizations.

Officials in both offices told The Associated Press this week that they are trying to determine whether Campo, 30, had benefited economically from ties with the militias.

The revelation comes amid a growing political scandal in which other close Uribe allies have been jailed on charges of creating and bankrolling paramilitary militias, which have committed thousands of murders and perpetrated widescale land theft over the past decade.

Formed to protect property owners from leftist rebels, the private armies degenerated into criminal gangs that developed lucrative, symbiotic relationships with much of Colombia's rural business and political elite.

The "para-politico" scandal broke open last month with the arrest of three members of Congress for allegedly forming paramilitary groups. Now Colombia's Supreme Court is questioning lawmakers — including the brother of Colombia's foreign minister — about their alleged paramilitary ties.

To date, no major politician ally of Colombia's law-and-order president has been proven to have illegally benefited financially from ties with paramilitaries, which are deeply involved in drug trafficking and listed by Washington as "terrorist organizations."

A former congressional candidate active for nine years in the Conservative Party, Campo has been general manager since 2004 of C.I. Multifruits SA, which human rights groups say is illegally profiting from land violently usurped from an Afro-Colombian community near the Panamanian border.

Multifruits was founded in 2001, the same year paramilitaries publicly declared themselves lords of the Cacarica river basin where its crops grow.

In preceding years, paramilitary gunmen drove hundreds from the swampy jungle zone, claiming they needed to clear the area to defeat leftist guerrillas. The paramilitaries selectively killed people who resisted, and cemented near-feudal control.

Ana Carmen Martinez was forcibly displaced in 1997 from the Cacarica basin, where the communally owned land is supposed to be constitutionally protected, and has been living in the Caribbean port of Turbo, just outside the paramilitary zone.

She called the claim of a guerrilla presence "a pretext to rob us of our lands" and launch agricultural megaprojects including plantations of bananas and African palms.

Human rights groups allege that Campo and his business associates took commercial advantage of the forced exodus. Prosecutors learned of the allegations in the past few weeks and told the AP they'd launched investigations.

They spoke on condition of anonymity for security reasons and because of the political sensitivity of the case, which two human rights groups, the Colombian Commission of Jurists, and Justice and Peace, recently documented for a special multiagency panel on misappropriated lands.

In April 2005, Multifruits signed a strategic alliance with a group claiming to represent the Cacarica community — even though Colombia's Constitutional Court had ruled the previous year that the group did not legally represent the community. The court ruling declared void deals the discredited group had made with logging interests blamed for rampant deforestation in the basin.

The previous August, Multifruits signed a contract with Del Monte Fresh Produce, a copy of which was obtained by the AP, guaranteeing the company 104,000 pounds of plantains a week, beginning in January 2006 and lasting through the end of 2013.

The only crop Multifruits currently produces are the plantains grown on 140 hectares (346 acres) of the disputed Cacarica basin property, according to Campo, though the strategic alliance calls for eventual production on 20,000 hectares (50,000 acres).

Del Monte Fresh Produce did not deny that it has a contract with Multifruits. It did, however, say in an e-mail that it "does not operate farms (or own land) in Colombia" and that it "buys from many, many growers" at the port of Turbo, from which Multifruits exports.

Campo said in a telephone interview Wednesday that he was a founding investor in Multifruits. But he denied having any social or commercial relations with paramilitaries and claimed no knowledge of the Constitutional Court ruling against his partners in the basin.

"My work in that area is to make money. It's nothing other than to make money," Campo said. "I'm aware of the news of the paramilitary incursion in the zone but I don't know any details about the matter."

The region's paramilitary boss, Freddy Rendon, became one of 31,000 paramilitaries to demobilize this year in a peace pact with Uribe's government. But human rights groups and public officials say paramilitaries still dominate the area.

An uncle of Campo's, a successful agribusinessman named Rodolfo Campo, has been director since August of INCODER, the federal rural development agency tasked with more equitably distributing land in Colombia.

Both Campos hail from the Caribbean coast, where Uribe-allied politicians allowed paramilitary bosses to raid public coffers while the paramilitaries reciprocated by delivering votes, according to prosecutors, opposition lawmakers and local victims interviewed by the AP.

By one government estimate, Colombians have been driven off some 6.8 million hectares (16.8 million acres), an area larger than West Virginia, since the 1980s, mostly by paramilitaries but also by leftist rebels.

In some cases, outlaw groups take the land to grow coca for cocaine, of which Colombia is the world's No. 1 producer.

But more often, particularly in areas dominated by paramilitaries, investigators say the displaced have been forced to sell their property cheap, becoming refugees in their own country as large landowners increase their profits.

Associated Press writer Darcy Crowe in Bogota contributed to this report.

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http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2006/12/14/america/LA_GEN_Colombia_Paramilitary_Business.php