

Bush, Colombia and Narco-Politics

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, August 09, 2007

[Consortium News for Independent Journalism](#) 9 August 2007

George W. Bush's strategy of countering Venezuela's leftist president Hugo Chavez by strengthening ties to Colombia's rightist government has been undercut by fresh evidence of high-level drug corruption and human rights violations implicating President Alvaro Uribe's inner circle.

These new allegations about Colombia's narco-politics have tarnished Uribe's reputation just as Bush has been showcasing the Harvard- and Oxford-educated politician as a paragon of democratic values and an alternative to the firebrand Chavez, who has used Venezuela's oil wealth to finance social programs for the poor across the region.

Despite the corruption disclosures — and Uribe's failure to stem Colombian cocaine smuggling to the United States — the Bush administration continues to shower Uribe's government with trade incentives and billions of dollars in military and development aid.

With other regional leaders unwilling to side with the United States against Chavez, Bush may see little alternative but to stay the course with the 55-year-old Uribe and hope Colombia's corruption doesn't draw too much attention in the United States or across South America.

Ironically, the latest evidence against Uribe's government emerged from a U.S.-backed peace process that offered leniency to right-wing paramilitary death squads and their financial backers in exchange for giving up their guns and disclosing past crimes.

The right-wing paramilitaries and their cocaine-trafficking benefactors testified that elements of the Colombian government collaborated in a decade-long scorched-earth campaign that killed almost 10,000 civilians while seeking to dislodge a leftist guerrilla army known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

The confessions include blood-soaked tales of political murders, cocaine smuggling and staggering government corruption. As a result, dozens of former and current congressmen, governors, government ministers, military officers, prominent business leaders and multinational corporations are being investigated or have been arrested.

This so-called "para-scandal" revealed that a counterinsurgency force, known as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, or AUC, collaborated with drug lords to control the cocaine trade and simultaneously worked with Colombia's elites, including Uribe's family, to fend off the guerrilla threat.

Another troubling offshoot of the peace process was the creation of a safe haven for drug lords, who flocked to a 370-square-kilometer sanctuary set up for the AUC.

Colombian mafia boss Fabio Enrique Ochoa Vasco, 47, who was indicted in Florida in September 2004 for drug trafficking and money laundering, claimed he was one of 10 U.S.-wanted traffickers who found protection in the Santa Fe Ralito sanctuary.

AUC leaders “promised to include their financial backers in the negotiation” as a way to shield alleged cocaine traffickers from extradition to the United States, Ochoa Vasco told a Colombian magazine in June.

It was all prearranged in 2001, according to paramilitary and drug lord accounts. If Uribe won the presidency, paramilitary leaders would be offered generous sentence reductions and be allowed to serve their time outside prison walls if they demobilized and confessed.

Ochoa Vasco, who allegedly ships eight tons of cocaine monthly to the United States, was told that he and other AUC allies would be sentenced in Colombia to a maximum of 12 years, rather than face possible life sentences in U.S. prisons.

Uribe’s History

The new disclosures also have brought back to public attention the Uribe family’s long history of ties to drug lords and paramilitary militias. Colombia’s Supreme Court announced in July that it was investigating Senator Mario Uribe, the president’s cousin and his point man in the Colombian Congress, for alleged links to the AUC.

Several paramilitary leaders have said Mario Uribe was one of their allies and an intermediary with the government. He has denied any wrongdoing.

But the family link to purported drug lords dates back several decades. As a young man and an aspiring politician, Alvaro Uribe lost his position as mayor of Medellin — after only five months on the job — because the country’s president ousted him over his family’s suspected connections to traffickers, according to media reports at the time.

His father Alberto Uribe, a wealthy landowner, reputedly had been a close associate of the Medellin cartel and its kingpins, such as Pablo Escobar and the Ochoa brothers, who were personal friends.

In 1983, Alberto Uribe was reportedly wanted by the U.S. government for drug trafficking when he was killed in a kidnapping attempt by the FARC. According to media accounts, his body was airlifted back to his family by one of Escobar’s helicopters.

In the early 1990s, Alvaro Uribe’s brother, Santiago, was investigated for allegedly organizing and leading a paramilitary militia that was headquartered at the Uribe family hacienda. He was never charged and the case was dismissed for lack of evidence. But Santiago was photographed alongside Fabio Ochoa at a party even after the government had declared Ochoa one of the most notorious Medellin cartel kingpins.

The incident with Santiago Uribe coincided with Alvaro Uribe’s eight years in the Senate, where he opposed extradition of drug suspects. His critics accused him of working for the Medellin cartel.

But the relationship between right-wing narco-financed paramilitaries and the Colombian government has been a long and complex one, with shifting alliances based on the self-interest of the moment.

In 1992, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the CIA and the U.S. military, along with Colombian intelligence services, joined forces with the Cali cartel to train, equip and coordinate an undercover group of mercenaries known as the Pepes, an acronym for Persecuted by Pablo Escobar. Among its leaders was Carlos Castano, who would later run the AUC.

Systematically, the Pepes assassinated Escobar's top henchmen and their families, finally killing Escobar himself in 1993. The Pepes then split up. Some went on to create their own drug empires, while Castano built a paramilitary army financed by rich landowners and drug dealers.

Since the war on Escobar's organization, Castano and the Cali cartel — as well as Colombian military officers — have claimed that they work side by side with U.S. agencies, but U.S. authorities have denied such an alliance.

The alienation from Washington widened in 1994 when President Ernesto Samper came to power amid disclosures that his campaign had received generous donations from drug cartels. President Bill Clinton cut most aid and severed some military support to Colombia because of Samper's ties to drug traffickers.

With less U.S. aid, the Colombian army was unable to contain the FARC and coca acreage soared. Colombia's rulers responded with the creation of paramilitary militias that used terror to reduce popular support for the guerrillas.

The Samper government pushed what was known as the Convivir project. It armed, trained and organized local defence cooperatives to provide "special private security and vigilance services" alongside the armed forces, creating another cover for right-wing paramilitary forces.

Rise of Uribe

Alvaro Uribe's political rise was tied to the success of Convivir. In 1995, Uribe became the governor of Antioquia, a north-western district with Medellin as the capital.

Uribe was the country's most vocal supporter of the defence cooperatives, authorizing dozens of them with almost 20 of these Uribe-backed cooperatives run by paramilitary leaders, including the AUC's current top commander, Salvatore Mancuso. [Castano, who operated in a different state, wasn't one of them.]

Castano is quoted in a biography as saying Uribe was the presidential candidate of the AUC's social support base.

"Deep down, he's the closest man to our philosophy," Castano said, adding that Uribe's support for the Convivir was grounded on the same principle that gave rise to paramilitarism in Colombia, the right to self-defence against guerrillas.

When confronted with accusations of complicity between Convivir and drug-connected paramilitaries, Uribe said that at the time nobody knew who the right-wing leaders and the cocaine traffickers were.

After an international outcry, however, the government slowly phased out Convivir. By the

time it was outlawed in 1998, however, over 200 defence cooperatives, counting thousands of men, defied the order to demobilize and joined Castano's new paramilitary alliance, the AUC.

The Convivir project had other long-term consequences. Beyond establishing and arming paramilitary militias, the project created a web of cooperation between Colombia's military and right-wing death squads. Some paramilitary leaders, such as Castano, claimed the CIA and DEA also gave the AUC discreet support.

At least two top paramilitary commanders have claimed that the Colombian military coordinated counterinsurgency operations with the AUC.

"I am living proof of state-sponsored paramilitarism in Colombia," said the AUC's Mancuso in his deposition earlier this year.

The AUC leaders have named several high-ranking Colombian officers as collaborating with the paramilitaries, including former General Rito Alejo del Rio, Antioquia's commanding officer during Uribe's governorship.

While running for the presidency in 2002, Uribe cited the perceived success of the Convivir program in damaging the FARC's infrastructure in Antioquia as a key reason why Colombians should vote for him.

Despite the drug suspicions — and the links to paramilitary death squads — Uribe benefited from public disenchantment with a sputtering peace process that had failed to end the civil war. Uribe emerged as the winner with 53 percent of the vote.

After Uribe's election, several drug barons claimed they had financed his campaign. Indicted drug trafficker Ochoa Vasco said he contributed \$150,000 of his own money at the AUC's request.

Ochoa Vasco also said he witnessed a conversation between the AUC's leaders and supposed representatives of Uribe's campaign before the election.

"They talked about the peace process," Ochoa Vasco said. "They said anyone with problems with the U.S. could get involved. And in another meeting, there were businessmen, landowners and drug traffickers who [the AUC] thought they could also include, so they told them to get ready for the peace process."

All the paramilitary leaders who negotiated the peace agreement "know the truth. They know that to be there, they invested more than 10 million dollars," Ochoa Vasco said.

Government negotiations with the AUC began four months after Uribe took office. Castano repositioned himself as an opponent of the drug corruption that, by then, clearly pervaded the AUC. He resigned as AUC military leader.

In April 2004, Castano was ambushed by 20 elite paramilitaries following orders from the AUC's top leaders. He was shot almost two dozen times in the face, chopped into pieces, and burned.

Surviving AUC leaders and drug traffickers said Castano was killed because he was negotiating his surrender to the DEA along with all trafficking information about the AUC and

its government and military allies. U.S. authorities have denied any negotiation.

Uribe-Bush Alliance

Meanwhile, Uribe lined up solidly behind President George W. Bush by becoming the only South American leader to endorse Bush's invasion of Iraq. Uribe also sought more U.S. military aid as he defined the civil war against the leftist FARC as part of the "global war on terror."

The backbone of U.S. policy in Colombia is Plan Colombia, a mostly military aid program to fight both drug production and irregular armies, most notably the FARC and the AUC. Since 2001, Washington has sent over \$5 billion to Bogota.

Nonetheless, Plan Colombia put little dent in cocaine production. The coca acreage in 2006 was slightly more than in 2001, when Plan Colombia was implemented. Acreage was reduced in 2003 and 2004 but shot up again in 2005 and 2006.

But Uribe's success in curbing political violence boosted his popularity in Colombia. He vigorously pressed the war against the FARC, forcing the leftist guerrillas into a tactical retreat. Overall, Uribe reduced the number of murders, kidnappings and massacres by about one-third.

The Uribe-controlled Congress also passed the Justice and Peace Law, which launched a peace process with the right-wing paramilitaries that demobilized 30,000 men and women. The law was written by Sen. Mario Uribe, the cousin now being investigated for his AUC ties. Even the Bush administration criticized the law's terms as overly lenient.

With Uribe's popularity soaring, he got his congressional allies to change the Constitution to permit a second presidential term. Uribe then swept to reelection in 2006, winning 62 percent of the vote.

Still, accusations of corruption and unpunished human rights violations dogged him.

Several investigations, especially those led by Colombia's Supreme Court, slowly amassed evidence against former and current government officials and prominent figures among the country's elite.

Those implicated included dozens of current and former members of the Congress; high-ranking military officers, including the current chief of staff; entire army battalions allegedly working for drug cartels; prominent businessmen; and some of Uribe's closest allies, including the father and brother of Colombia's former foreign minister Maria Consuelo Araujo.

In March 2006, a laptop belonging to a top paramilitary leader was seized in a raid. The computer was found to contain detailed information on drug-trafficking operations, killings committed during the peace process, potential hit lists of other victims, the AUC's plan for influencing the government, and a list of contributors and political allies.

One of the hit lists was linked to Colombia's intelligence service and to its director, Jorge Noguera, a close Uribe ally who the president named consul in Milan after the initial investigation was opened.

Noguera was later arrested for his ties to the AUC and drug traffickers, for filtering information to the AUC, for erasing incriminating evidence of several drug traffickers and paramilitary leaders, for complicity in the assassinations of several union leaders, and for obstructing operations to capture his allies.

Other Colombian intelligence officials also were arrested, including one high-level official, Rafael Garcia, who testified that he erased evidence at the request of Noguera. Garcia also accused Noguera of plotting to assassinate Venezuela's president Chavez in coordination with high-level officials in Uribe's administration, though Garcia didn't give their names.

Paramilitary leader Mancuso also accused Uribe's Defence Minister Juan Manuel Santos in his deposition of plotting with the AUC to kill Venezuela's Chavez, although it's not clear whether Santos was one of the men whom intelligence officer Garcia was referring to. Santos denied the accusation.

Then, in December 2006, embarrassed by the ongoing criminality in the AUC's Santa Fe Ralito safe haven, the government put some paramilitary leaders in prison. But even there, they continued to live the high life and kept on top of their criminal operations.

The local press published in May transcripts of police wiretaps revealing AUC leaders continuing to order killings and to direct drug trafficking from prison, while also enjoying dance parties, sexual orgies and alcohol. They hosted "Mexican friends" and had unrestricted access to cell phones and the Internet.

In one conversation, the frustrated former prison warden complained to a colleague that her orders were constantly overruled by her superiors when paramilitary leaders called to complain to the peace commissioner, government ministers and even the president. The warden soon requested to be relocated.

Infuriated by the wiretap disclosures, Uribe ordered the firing of the top 12 generals in the police, but he said little about the evidence of AUC criminality beyond promising another investigation.

AUC leaders also threatened to break off the peace process, accusing the government of changing the terms. They felt betrayed, they said, and threatened to incriminate all their elite allies, including politicians, businessmen, and multinationals.

Regional Trouble

The Organization of American States, which has overseen the peace process with the AUC, has been critical of the results. The OAS warned that the paramilitaries are rearming and reorganizing under different names, with stronger ties to drug traffickers, and are being led by some of the same leaders who supposedly had surrendered.

OAS Assistant Secretary General Albert Ramdin said this year that the AUC demobilization process might well fail to solve Colombia's problem with drug-financed paramilitary groups.

Colombia's approach "could trigger a truth and justice process that would put an end to paramilitary groups in the regions, and lead to reconstruction of the State," Ramdin said. "Or, on the other hand, it could accentuate the influence of paramilitary groups linked to drug trafficking."

Despite Colombia's problems — the corruption, the shaky peace process and the shortcomings of its anti-drug program — Bush has continued to show unstinting support for Uribe. Calling Uribe a true democrat and a strong leader, Bush has visited Colombia twice, including earlier this year, and met with Uribe several times in Washington.

"I'm proud to call [Uribe] a friend and strategic ally," Bush said during one of Uribe's visits. In Bogota, the U.S. president said: "I appreciate the [Colombian] president's determination to bring human rights violators to justice. ... I believe that, given a fair chance, President Uribe can make the case."

Bush asked the U.S. Congress to increase financial support for Plan Colombia, but Democrats cut military aid from 80 percent to 65 percent of the total allocation, while increasing economic and humanitarian aid. Moreover, the Democrats attached strict conditions on the total \$530 million.

Democrats also have conditioned their ratification of a free-trade agreement with Colombia on Uribe improving the country's human rights record and prosecuting paramilitary leaders.

In South America, Uribe has slowly backed himself into a corner by siding with Bush. While most South American countries have grown more critical of U.S. foreign policy and its Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, Colombia has staunchly supported Bush's policies, distancing itself from its neighbors.

Brazil and Ecuador have closer relations with Venezuela, as do most countries in the region, in stark contrast to a decade ago. Colombia has been kept out of South America's Mercosur regional trade union, while Venezuela is expected to join sometime this year.

Uribe also has lost some regional backing in his fight against the FARC. Ecuador has resisted labelling the FARC a terrorist organization, but did criticize Plan Colombia and sought reparations for collateral damage inflicted by Colombian forces on Ecuador's border population.

Meanwhile, the drug and corruption scandal keeps growing. Though Uribe has denied most of the accusations, drug lord Ochoa Vasco has said he is willing to negotiate his surrender to the DEA along with proof to support his charges.

Ochoa Vasco said some AUC leaders and drug traffickers now are willing to negotiate their surrender to U.S. law-enforcement agencies to avoid being murdered in Colombia, as powerful forces seek desperately to silence them and end the "para-scandal."

In July, Henao Gomez Bustamante — the biggest reputed drug lord since Pablo Escobar — was extradited to face trafficking charges in the U.S. He is believed to have been a key player in right-wing politics and one of the main financiers of the AUC.

The target of at least half a dozen assassination attempts while he was in prison, Gomez Bustamante told a magazine that he preferred being extradited to being murdered. He also said he will disclose all the information about drug corruption in Colombia, AUC infiltration, and Mexican cartels, in exchange for a more lenient sentence.

Whatever is ultimately proven, however, the spilling out of evidence linking Uribe to Colombia's vast cocaine industry and to the country's history of political murders is bad news for President Bush as he counts on Uribe to serve as the model for South America's

future and as a bulwark against Hugo Chavez.

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