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Paramilitary Ties Implicate Colombia's Political Elite

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BOGOTA, Colombia, Dec. 18 -- In what has been heralded as a decisive moment in Colombia's shadowy, decades-long conflict, a powerful paramilitary commander is to appear in a special court Tuesday to account for crimes that include massacres and assassinations. Salvatore Mancuso's testimony will be the first by a top death-squad leader in a Colombian courtroom, and it is being touted by the administration of President Álvaro Uribe as evidence that the wheels of justice are turning.

Rather than rejoicing, however, the Uribe government has found itself in the awkward position of being implicated in the wrongdoing. Over the past several weeks, Colombians have been gripped by revelations of ties between paramilitary fighters and several congressmen close to the president, as well as some officials in his administration. The scandal now threatens to unravel his authority.

Uribe won reelection in May after cultivating his reputation as a workaholic technocrat -- someone who would be relentless against corruption and illegal armed groups. But lately, he has joined a cast of lawmakers, intelligence service operatives and mid-level government bureaucrats in publicly denying ties to the paramilitary groups, which for a generation the military used as a proxy force to battle guerrillas.

"The government's smokescreen is becoming transparent," said Venus Albeiro Silva, a congressman from the left-leaning Alternative Democratic Pole party. "What's happening now is they cannot put the lid on this. That's why we're telling the president to come out and say the truth."

Repeated requests for an interview with Uribe went unanswered. But Vice President Francisco Santos said in an interview that the administration fully supports the investigations into ties with the paramilitary umbrella organization known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, known by its Spanish initials, AUC.

"The government has said this has to go as deep as it needs to go," he said. But he added, "We're seeing the whole iceberg here."

So far, investigators from the Supreme Court and the attorney general's office have revealed case after case

that not only expose friendly ties between officials and paramilitary fighters but also detail how lawmakers and others helped the fighters expand their hold over northern Colombia, liquidating opponents in the process.

Since three congressmen were jailed last month for collaborating with paramilitary groups, investigators have opened official probes into six more members of Congress and three former lawmakers. The most prominent is Sen. Álvaro Araújo, whose sister, Maria Consuelo Araújo, is the country's foreign minister. The senator has even admitted meeting with Rodrigo Tovar, a paramilitary commander who prosecutors say has been running a drug-trafficking group while negotiating with the government.

Another senator, Miguel de la Espriella, publicly detailed how he and dozens of other lawmakers met with paramilitary commanders in 2001. At the meeting, they signed a pact cementing an alliance designed to lead to disarmament negotiations, which death squad commanders hoped would help them avoid extradition to the United States on drug charges and hold on to land and other possessions. The talks began after Uribe won office in 2002.

"The interests of these men is personal, that they don't lose property and that they don't get extradited," said José Mejía, a former political officer in Tovar's paramilitary group who gave up his weapons this year. "What they're looking for is that they don't get tried for massacres and narco-trafficking."

The developments involving congressmen follow disclosures that a string of officials in the Uribe administration -- among them the former head of the intelligence service, the former head of the rural development agency and the former ambassador to Chile -- helped paramilitary groups by giving them classified information while orchestrating the takeover of land and the murder of the group's enemies.

The government has also come under withering criticism for moving too slowly to bring paramilitary fighters to justice, although the groups began disarming in 2003.

The government says 2,700 paramilitary commanders should be tried for atrocities, but the attorney general's

office says administration officials have fully identified only 400. And although Mancuso agreed to talk to prosecutors, dozens of other top commanders have balked, threatening to paralyze the process.

Maria McFarland, of New York-based Human Rights Watch, said the system set up to investigate paramilitary fighters puts the burden on prosecutors, not defendants.

"So far, the government hasn't gotten the paramilitaries to fulfill their commitments," she said. "They're supposed to confess, turn over their illegal assets, cease with their criminal activities, and they haven't really done any of those things."

The setbacks have the Uribe administration scrambling to contain the political damage while ensuring that the new Democratic majority in the U.S. Congress does not take a hard line against Colombia, the largest recipient of U.S. aid outside the Middle East. Most of that aid -- \$700 million a year -- is spent to fight guerrillas and eradicate drug crops.

Colombian officials also worry that the government's inability to successfully prosecute paramilitary groups - - at least until now -- could hurt its chances for a free trade agreement with Washington, since the Democrats have called on Uribe to improve Colombia's human rights record.

"There's this perception of strong infiltration of the paramilitaries in Colombia's system, and if it's not straightened out and cleaned out, it's hard to see how he's going to move forward on any of his priorities," said Michael Shifter of Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington policy group.

Santos, the vice president, extolled the administration's achievements, noting, for example, that the number of homicides in rural areas has dropped sharply. He said the government is advancing in a process that will for the first time bring the commanders of an illegal insurgency to justice.

"Everyone who said this wouldn't work is wrong," he said.

Still, Santos cautioned patience: "To me, it's preferable that we go at it slow, and do it better than very quickly, and in the end we don't hear the victims."

Santos said that it was under Uribe's order that 59 paramilitary commanders were recently transferred to a prison. And he warned that they would be extradited to

the United States to face drug-trafficking charges if they do not cooperate.

But documents from the attorney general's office, as well as interviews with rights groups and opposition congressmen, show that as the government prepares to process paramilitary commanders, some of them are forming parallel drug-trafficking gangs.

Even Mancuso, despite his imminent court appearance, was recently implicated in an international cocaine-trafficking and money-laundering ring involving the Italian Mafia.

A defector from one group, in the southern state of Meta, said in an interview that earlier this year he was recruited by a new paramilitary group run by Carlos Jimenez. The defector, Arley Rincón Herrera, 26, said the new group's purpose was to protect shipments of cocaine, cash and chemicals used to make drugs.

"They didn't teach us anything political, since it was narco-trafficking that they were interested in," said Rincón, who is in hiding in Bogota. "We had to guard the merchandise. If a car came down with merchandise, we protected it."

Meta's paramilitary forces demobilized under government auspices. But far from being freed of fighters, the state is afflicted by new groups that are snatching farms and killing rivals.

A local cattleman who spoke on condition of anonymity said these fighters demand the sale of farms at bargain-basement prices and that people who resist are killed.

Ranchers used to be able to appease the paramilitary forces by giving them support.

But those days appear to be over, the cattleman said. "We all see now that the medicine was worse than the illness."