Colombia's Uribe: US ally in "war on terror" named as drug trafficker

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The release of a 13-year-old previously classified military intelligence document linking Colombia's right-wing president Alvaro Uribe to drug traffickers has intensified the crisis of Washington's most slavish supporter in Latin America.

A virtual "who's who" of the Colombian cocaine trade, the report was issued by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in 1991. It was obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by the National Security Archives, a non-governmental research group based at George Washington University.

The document lists 104 of the "most important Colombian narcoterrorists contracted by the Colombian narcotics cartels for security, transportation, distribution, collection and enforcement of narcotics operations in both the US and Colombia." Uribe appears as number 82 in this list of assassins and drug smugglers.

The confidential DIA report described Uribe in the following terms: "A Colombian politician and senator dedicated to collaboration with the Medellín Cartel at high government levels. Uribe was linked to a business involved in narcotics activities in the US. His father was murdered in Colombia for his connection with the narcotics traffickers. Uribe has worked for the Medellín Cartel and is a close personal friend of Pablo Escobar Gaviría." It added that Uribe had "attacked all forms of the extradition treaty" that Washington had sought to bring Colombian drug traffickers to trial in the US.

Uribe and his spokesmen rushed to deny the veracity of the document, pointing to factual errors in its findings. The Colombian president's father was killed by elements of the Colombian guerrilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, not drug traffickers, for example.

They failed, however, to dispute what many have charged is the key allegation in the document: that Uribe enjoyed a close personal association with Escobar and the Medellín Cartel.

Escobar was reputedly the most powerful drug trafficker in Colombia until he was shot to death in 1993 following a manhunt that united Colombian security forces, US special operations troops and a paramilitary death squad sponsored by Escobar's principal rival, the Cali Cartel.

In Washington, officials also repudiated the report. "We completely disavow these allegations about President Uribe," said State Department spokesman Robert Zimmerman. "We have no credible information that substantiates or corroborates the allegations in an unevaluated 1991 report." Another spokesman attempted to dismiss the report as "raw information" from an "uncorroborated source."

In releasing the report, however, the National Security Archive countered these claims. It pointed out that its authors felt the information was important and valid enough to send on to Washington and that they asserted that their findings had been checked "via interfaces with other agencies." The report included detailed information such as identification card numbers, birth dates and photographs, indicating that it could have been intended for use by both criminal justice agencies as well as immigration agents.

Moreover, these are hardly the first allegations linking Uribe to the drug cartels. Numerous reporters in Colombia established extensive connections between the Colombian president and the Ochoa family, one of the most prominent forces in drug trafficking. He first took public office in 1980 as civil aviation director, a post he used to issue hundreds of pilot licenses and scores of permits for private airstrips that were used for the transport of cocaine. He was named mayor of Medellín in 1983, but was removed after just four months as part of a government crackdown on officials linked to the cocaine cartel.

In the 1990s, as a senator and then governor for the province of Antioquia, he was instrumental in organizing private paramilitary vigilante groups linked to the landowners and cocaine traffickers and dedicated to the killing of left-wing and union activists.

There can be no doubt that the US government decision to release the DIA document was taken with full cognizance that its publication would create fresh ammunition for Uribe's critics and intensify his political problems. Perhaps even more significant was the decision by major media outlets—*Newsweek*, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*—to make it a prominent story.

The Colombian government, it should be recalled, stood alone in South America in backing the US war in Iraq, and, after Israel and Egypt, is the largest recipient of US military aid in the world. Uribe has embraced Bush's declaration of a worldwide "war on terror."

Uribe's government has been among the most amenable to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas pushed by Washington. It is also closest in its extreme-right ideology to the social agenda of the Bush administration. It has ruthlessly pursued free market and privatization programs while presiding over the steady transfer of wealth from the poorest Colombians to foreign banks and corporations as well as to the country's wealthy oligarchy. Colombia is one of the most socially polarized countries in the world, with the wealthiest 10 percent of the population taking in 60 times the income of the poorest 10 percent.

Why would the US political and media establishment deliberately embarrass such a close and faithful client state?

The answer appears to be bound up with tactical differences over how to pursue the "war on terror" and the "war on drugs," which in Colombia have merged into one counterrevolutionary enterprise.

Inaugurated in 2000 under the Clinton administration as "Plan Colombia," the US military intervention in the country has escalated continuously since. Initially, the effort was portrayed as a drug eradication effort, training and supplying the Colombian army to target the country's coca fields and processing laboratories.

In 2002, Congress voted to allow military funding that had been ostensibly restricted to anti-narcotics efforts to be funneled into counterinsurgency operations against the country's main left-wing guerrilla movements, the FARC and the ELN (National Liberation Army),

thus sealing the direct US involvement in Colombia's four-decade-old civil war. Since then, the number of Colombian troops undergoing military training has more than doubled to nearly 13,000. Meanwhile, US military commanders routinely lump together narcotics trafficking, terrorism and "radical populism" as threats to US security in the region.

Now the Colombian military, backed by US "advisers" and extensive US-supplied arms and equipment, is waging "Operation Patriot." This counterinsurgency offensive involves some 17,000 troops concentrated in the area of southern Colombia that previously served as a recognized safe haven for the FARC, before talks between the guerrillas and the government collapsed in February 2002.

In conjunction with the launching of this offensive, the Pentagon pushed for raising the limit placed on the number of US military personnel deployed in the country from 400 to 800 and for a similar increase in the number of civilian military contractors, from 400 to 600.

Meanwhile, the Uribe government has simultaneously conducted negotiations directed at the demobilization of Colombia's right-wing death squads. Enjoying intimate links with both the military and drug traffickers, these paramilitary organizations are organized primarily into the AUC (the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia). They have been responsible for the lion's share of massacres and assassinations that have forced nearly 3 million rural Colombians to flee their homes.

Among the AUC's signature methods are dismembering suspected guerrilla sympathizers with chainsaws and beating opponents to death with sledgehammers.

Initially, Washington welcomed the talks and even appropriated some $3 million for the effort. US officials even held secret talks with AUC representatives, despite the Bush administration's official designation of the group as a terrorist organization.

The seemingly explosive news that Bush's envoys were negotiating with terrorists found no response in the US media. But then, this is a kind of terrorism with which Washington has a long familiarity. The tactics employed by the AUC are entirely consistent with counterinsurgency methods developed by the CIA in the 1960s, and there have been extensive indications of ties between the agency and the right-wing death squads.

As part of the negotiations, the Uribe regime designated a 144-square-mile swath of Colombia's northern Cordoba province as a safe haven for the AUC, allowing its leaders immunity from arrest there. Government critics have charged that leaders of cocaine-trafficking gangs have flocked to the area and are participating in the talks with the aim of gaining amnesty as well.

Out of ten negotiators for the AUC, five had outstanding extradition warrants against them when the talks began. Then, on July 22, a New York federal court handed down indictments against two of the most prominent figures in the talks: Diego Fernando Murillo and Vicente Castaño. The former was a long-time assassin for the drug cartels, while the later is part of the family that originally founded the AUC.

The latest indictments, together with heated criticism by the US ambassador to Colombia, William Wood, appear to be part of a deliberate effort by Washington to sink the talks. While the Uribe government has lifted arrest warrants against the paramilitary leaders, US officials have refused to drop its request for the extradition of AUC leaders accused of drug trafficking. Lifting the threat of extradition has been a key demand of the paramilitaries.

On July 27, Uribe and his supporters brought three of the paramilitary leaders before the Colombian Congress to call for "peace." One of them—Salvatore Mancuso—is the subject of a US extradition order on cocaine smuggling charges. The names of the other two figure on a Treasury Department watch list for "significant" drug traffickers.

Demonstrators, including families of death squad victims, demonstrated outside the Congress, while Ivan Cepeda, the son of leftist Senator Manuel Cepeda, who was assassinated by rightists, raised a portrait of his father from the gallery. He was quickly hustled out by police.

US Ambassador Wood responded caustically to the congressional appearance: "It's a bit strange that in Congress, where they write the laws, approve the laws and defend the laws, you would also find those who break the laws." Earlier, Wood dismissed the peace pretensions of the AUC leaders, declaring, "they have only one program: narcoterror."

US opposition to the process has provoked unusual tensions between Bogota and Washington. The Uribe government's High Commissioner for Peace, a key negotiator with the AUC, erupted with anger in a speech to the Congress Tuesday, contrasting the international participation in the aborted talks with the FARC to the disdain shown for the negotiations with the rightist paramilitaries. In particular, he denounced the "distance of the Anglo-Saxon countries."

The shift in the US position and the hard line taken by the administration against drug-trafficking right-wing terrorists raises a number of questions. After all, this is a US administration whose Latin American policy is directed almost entirely by veterans of the Reagan administration's illegal war against Nicaragua, in which they supported the "contras," a group of right-wing terrorists who derived significant funding from drug trafficking.

Gary Leech, editor of *Colombia Report*, suggests a possible answer to this political riddle in an August 2 article, "Washington's Paramilitary Game in Colombia." Leech writes that Washington's position may be rooted in concern over a "military stalemate" between the Colombian army and the FARC guerrillas.

"While the increased strength of the Colombian military has allowed it to expand its presence in many regions, it is still the paramilitaries that are keeping the guerrillas at bay in many parts of the country," he writes. "Should these forces demobilize, it is the FARC that will likely seize control of much of the vacated territory."

For years, Leech points out, Washington turned a blind eye to the atrocities and drug links of the right-wing death squads because they were an essential component of the Colombian counterinsurgency campaign. "In a switch of tactics," he writes, "it may now be raising these same issues for the very same reason."

In other words, the Bush administration may be deliberately sabotaging the talks between Uribe and the AUC to assure that the rightist death squads continue their grisly work.

The release of previously classified documents linking Uribe to the drug trade only further complicates his talks with a movement that is riddled with narcotics traffickers.

Whatever the outcome of the present negotiations, there is no question that the US intervention in Colombia will continue to escalate. For Washington, the inclusion of Colombia's civil war in its "global war on terror" has become the means to expand its military presence throughout the Latin American continent and to tighten its grip over what is one of the world's major oil-exporting regions.