CIA document links Colombian army chief to right-wing “terrorists”

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In another blow to the Bush administration’s closest political ally in Latin America, an intelligence report obtained by the US Central Intelligence Agency has charged Colombia’s army chief Gen. Mario Montoya with collaborating intimately with right-wing paramilitaries who are classified by Washington as terrorists. The paramilitary organization, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, known by its Spanish acronym AUC, is also believed to be one of the principal forces in cocaine trafficking from Colombia.

The intelligence report was leaked to the *Los Angeles Times* by a government official who insisted on anonymity and who told the paper he was acting out of opposition to the Bush administration’s uncritical support for the right-wing government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe.

The *Times* article, published Sunday, indicated that the CIA attempted to intimidate the newspaper into killing the story. The article stated that some material was suppressed in response to the agency’s claims that it would expose covert sources and ongoing operations. The CIA issued a statement asserting that the publication of the article “makes it less likely that friendly countries will share information with the United States, and that ultimately could affect our ability to protect Americans.”

While the CIA report was based upon information gathered by another Western intelligence agency, it was corroborated by US sources. According to the *Times*, the document included a statement from the defense attaché at the US Embassy in Bogotá, Col. Rey Velez, saying that the report on Montoya “confirms information provided by a proven source.” Velez added that the information “also could implicate” the chief of staff of the Colombian armed forces, Gen. Freddy Padilla de Leon.

The report, implicating the highest levels of the Colombian military in the operations of the AUC, comes in the midst of a roiling scandal that has shaken the Uribe government. Already, 10 congressmen, all of them Uribe supporters, have been either arrested or forced into hiding on the basis of criminal charges stemming from their ties to the paramilitaries. Dozens of other pro-Uribe officials, including mayors and governors, have also been implicated.

Uribe’s foreign minister, Maria Consuelo Araujo—a close political ally of the president—was forced to resign last month after both her father, a former minister, and her brother, a senator, were charged in connection with the AUC scandal.

Also arrested was the former head of Colombia’s secret police, Jorge Noguera, who was charged with supplying the AUC with a hit list of trade union organizers, left-wing activists and human rights worker, many of who were subsequently assassinated. He has also been accused of destroying evidence prejudicial to the paramilitaries. Norguera, who was one of Uribe’s election campaign managers, was recently released on the basis of a technical flaw in his arrest warrant, but is subject to rearrest.

Much of the CIA document on Montoya centers on the general’s role in directing “Operation Orion,” a massive military-police sweep of a slum district in the city of Medellin ordered by President Uribe in October 2002. A combined task force of some 3,000 army troops, intelligence agents and police, backed by helicopter gunships and tanks, swept through the shantytown in a campaign to drive out leftist guerrillas. The operation left at least 14 dead, many more wounded and hundreds arrested. At least 46 people are reported to have “disappeared” in its immediate aftermath.

The net result of the operation was that the left-wing elements supplanted by the military were replaced by the right-wing death squads of the AUC, which continued a reign of terror in the neighborhoods. As the document obtained from the CIA indicates, this was not an unintended byproduct of Operation Orion, but rather was worked out in advance in negotiations between Montoya and leaders of the AUC.

According to the information contained in the document, Montoya, the commander of the local police force and a leader of the AUC, signed a pact before the operation was mounted spelling out its aims, which included the paramilitaries assuming effective control of the area. In Medellin, the AUC succeeded Pablo Escobar in dominating the city’s drug trade. The head of the local paramilitaries, Diego Fernando Murillo, is presently jailed in Colombia, facing a US extradition request on cocaine trafficking charges.

Uribe rejected the charges contained in the CIA document leaked to the *Los Angeles Times*. His statement was significant, however, in its failure to categorically refute the substance of

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these charges. His government, he said, “rejects the accusations made by foreign intelligence agencies through press links without any evidence having previously been presented to Colombia’s government or justice system.”

However, the links between the right-wing political coalition backing Uribe, the military and the paramilitary squads have long been known in Colombia and frequently denounced by the government’s left-wing opponents. During his first election in 2002, he was widely seen as the candidate of the paramilitary organizations, and there were widespread charges that he was connected with the Medellin drug cartel. Uribe’s home province of Antioquia, where he held the office of governor from 1995 to 1997, is widely seen as the birthplace of the paramilitaries, who were organized as death squads to suppress left-wing guerrillas, trade unions and left political parties.

Now, however, these charges are coming from within the reactionary alliance of the Pentagon, the CIA, the Colombian military and the paramilitaries themselves that has dominated Colombia over the past decade.

In 2003, the Uribe government enacted its “Law of Justice and Peace,” which amounted to a virtual amnesty for the rightist paramilitaries, who are responsible for the great majority of the massacres and assassinations that have claimed tens of thousands of lives over the preceding decade. There is ample evidence that despite the demobilization of the AUC and the jailing of some paramilitary leaders, the organization continues to maintain its power and influence over both the government and the drug trade. Moreover, the death squads themselves are reorganizing under new names, such as the “Black Eagles,” declaring themselves the successors of the AUC in the struggle to “eradicate communism.”

One jailed paramilitary leader, Salvatore Mancuso, boasted that more than a third of the Colombian congress was allied with the AUC, while the confiscated computer of another, Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, known as Jorge 40, provided detailed evidence of the paramilitaries’ funding of politicians and their use of violence to eliminate political rivals or intimidate voters. In some cases, it was revealed that politicians and paramilitaries jointly plotted assassinations and massacres. The new evidence led to investigations by the Supreme Court, culminating in criminal charges.

Uribe has responded to the mounting revelations with a combination of stonewalling and threats. Lashing out at the Colombian politician who has pursued the paramilitary-government links most aggressively, Senator Gustavo Petro, a former guerrilla of the M-19 movement, which disarmed more than 15 years ago, he referred to Petro and fellow politicians of the Polo Democratico as “terrorists in business suits.” In Colombia, this kind of violent language amounts to incitement to political assassination.

The growing political crisis and scandal surrounding Uribe’s government has failed to diminish the Bush administration support, a relationship that was underscored again last month when the American president visited Colombia.

The murderous repression—more than 8,200 political murders were recorded between 2000 and 2006—carried out by the security forces and the right-wing paramilitaries has been paid for largely by the US government. And, as has been revealed recently, the death squads have been privately financed by US-based multinationals like Chiquita Brands. Earlier this month the fruit company reached a plea bargain with the Justice Department to pay a minor fine to settle charges of offering material support to a foreign terrorist organization—in this case, the AUC—a charge which has been used to send others to jail for 20 years or more.

Colombia trails only Israel and Egypt in terms of the amount of US aid it receives. Since 2000, more than $4.5 billion have been poured into the country under Plan Colombia, a largely military program that combines a drug eradication campaign with counter-insurgency operations.

A recent report by the White House Office on Drug Control, points to the abject failure of Plan Colombia to achieve its ostensible goal of suppressing cocaine trafficking. It reveals that the street price of cocaine has fallen by nearly a third since 2003, while the purity of the drug has risen from 60 percent to 70 percent, both indicators that cocaine supply has only increased during the multibillion-dollar “drug war.” It is estimated that 90 percent of cocaine sold and used in the US comes from Colombia.

In the end, the billions of dollars in US aid have been funneled into a corrupt government and a corrupt military command that are themselves allied with the cocaine traffickers and the rightist paramilitaries that protect them. While having no discernable effect on the drug trade, this support from Washington has served to prop up a right-wing regime that suppresses the Colombian working class with terror, maintaining 65 percent of the population in poverty, while wealth is ever more concentrated in a few hands.

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