

Colombian extraditions aimed at covering up Uribe's death squad ties

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In a deal worked out between Washington and its principal ally in Latin America—Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe—14 leaders of the country's right-wing paramilitary militias were suddenly extradited to the US on Tuesday to face drug trafficking charges.

Without any advance warning, Uribe ordered the 14 imprisoned warlords—including prominent figures like Salvatore Mancuso, Diego Murillo and Tovar Pupo—bundled onto American planes under the escort of American Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agents.

The Bush administration and sections of the media hailed the move as an indication of Uribe's commitment to the rule of law and human rights and an argument for the swift passage of a free trade pact between the US and Colombia. Democrats in Congress, who have held up the trade treaty, likewise praised Uribe's action.

In reality, the Colombian president sent the paramilitary leaders to the US in order to shut them up and extricate himself from Colombia's ballooning "parapolitica" scandal, which has implicated his government and supporters in the country's national legislature as accomplices of the right-wing death squads.

Uribe delivered a televised speech Tuesday afternoon to explain—after the fact—his decision to extradite the 14 paramilitary leaders. He charged them with "failing to duly cooperate" with Colombian investigators and to compensate their victims, while resuming criminal activity from behind bars. "The country has been generous with them, but the government can't tolerate a relapse into crime," he said.

Uribe's speech only revealed what has long been obvious—that the so-called "Justice and Peace" process under which some 32,000 right-wing paramilitaries of the AUC (Self-Defense Units of Colombia) were supposedly demobilized beginning in 2003 was a fraud. It merely granted impunity to assassins and mass murderers allied with the military and the government, while failing to halt right-wing violence or provide any genuine accounting for the crimes committed by these militias.

That the Uribe government believes the solution to this failure is to extradite the paramilitaries to the US to face cocaine-dealing charges speaks volumes.

The paramilitaries, formed in the 1980s with the backing of Colombia's wealthy landlords and capitalists, committed massive war crimes against the country's people, including the lion's share of the massacres and assassinations carried out over the past two decades of civil war.

According to conservative estimates, they are responsible for the

death and disappearance of over 15,000 people and the killing of at least 3,500 others in massacres. Their reign of terror turned millions into refugees within their own country.

Some 130,000 Colombians have filed formal charges with the country's National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation regarding specific crimes committed by these right-wing squads, ranging from the murder of relatives to rape, forced disappearances and kidnapping.

Yet, despite these crimes, it is the cocaine deals carried out in the US that are to take legal precedence.

Washington's Director of National Drug Control Policy John Walters called it "a great day" for American justice. The American judicial system, he told the Associated Press, is "far less likely for them to be able to attack or intimidate or corrupt."

The US ambassador in Bogota, William Brownfield, expressed similar sentiments after the extradition of another paramilitary leader—Carlos Mario Jimenez, alias *Macaco*—last week. He declared the handover "good for both countries; Colombia is freeing itself from a dangerous person and the United States obtains justice."

Nothing could more clearly define Uribe's Colombia as what used to be called a "banana republic," whose every law and institution is subordinated to the corrupt relationship with its imperialist patron. Indeed, in this case, the banana companies—Chiquita, Dole, Del Monte—are among the principal beneficiaries. Paramilitary leaders had been speaking out about the financial support that they provided to the right-wing death squads to protect their interests and murder and intimidate militant workers.

Of course, Uribe took the action to serve his own immediate political interests. There are now 31 members of Congress—his supporters—who are in jail because of charges of complicity with the right-wing death squads. Another 37 have been charged. They include the president's own cousin and key political organizer, former senator Mario Uribe Escobar.

The president himself is under investigation for his connections with paramilitary militias in his home state of Antioquia, where he was governor. One paramilitary leader has charged that he helped organize one of the most infamous massacres in recent years, in which death squads descended on the town of El Aro in 1997, murdering at least 15 of its inhabitants, assaulting, raping and robbing others and driving hundreds from their homes.

Significantly, Uribe's cousin was arrested as a result of an

investigation into his 2002 meetings with Salvatore Mancuso—now safely extradited to the US on drug charges—in which the paramilitaries were evidently enlisted in the president’s successful reelection campaign that year.

Objectively, the extraditions serve to block these investigations and to silence paramilitaries, like Mancuso, who have made increasingly damning revelations to the press about their relations to the top levels of the Colombian state.

In recent months, Mancuso has stated that more than one third of the members of the Colombian congress had been placed in office directly by the paramilitaries. He has likewise revealed that the paramilitaries were well represented in virtually every agency of the Colombian government and confirmed that they maintained the most intimate ties with the military.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the extradition was ordered just one day after Mancuso featured as one of the principal witnesses in an exposé broadcast in the US by CBS television’s “60 Minutes” entitled “The Price of Bananas.” The paramilitary leader told his interviewers that not only Chiquita Brands International—which was recently indicted for paying out at least \$2 million to the AUC, which is defined by the State Department as a “terrorist organization”—but also Dole and Del Monte subsidized the right-wing death squads.

“They paid taxes because we were like a state in the area, and because we were providing them with protection which enabled them to continue making investments and a financial profit,” Mancuso told “60 Minutes.”

Mancuso had also charged that in the 1990s Colombia’s current defense minister Juan Manuel Santos, who enjoys the closest relations with the Pentagon, had also shared intimate ties with the paramilitaries, meeting with them on numerous occasions, including to organize a plot against the country’s former President Ernesto Samper. He has also testified that Vice President Francisco Santos sought out the paramilitaries, asking them to form a front in the capital of Bogota.

Finally, he brought to light the so-called 2001 Ralito Pact, in which the paramilitaries and 27 prominent politicians signed a joint accord to “refound the fatherland” on shared ultra-rightist principles.

The extradition was met with widespread protests from the political opposition, human rights groups and representatives of the numerous victims of the paramilitaries.

The opposition Alternative Democratic Pole charged that the extraditions had been ordered to prevent the testimony of the paramilitary leaders from “continuing to incriminate members of Uribe’s coalition in congress and involving members of the executive branch in the *parapolitica* process.”

The United Nations High Commission on Human Rights office in Colombia said that there was a “risk that the extraditions will weaken the possibilities of effectively and opportunely advancing in the struggle against impunity in relation to the grave violations of human rights.”

Similarly, Amnesty International warned: “There is now a real danger that the full scale of human rights violations committed over the years by paramilitaries, as well as the key role played by the security forces, state officials and leading political and

business figures in these crimes, will remain hidden and, as such, in complete impunity.”

Ivan Cepeda, a lawyer for the victims of the right-wing death squads, called the extraditions a “low blow by the government” aimed at blocking “the identification of the accomplices among the politicians, military officers and businessmen who are being investigated.”

Maria Eugenia Cobaleda, whose two brothers disappeared and were killed by the paramilitaries, told the Associated Press: “These men are not going to confess their crimes now that they’re over there. How am I going to find out where my brothers are buried?”

Others expressed fears that some of the right-wing leaders would be quietly released into the witness protection program and granted new identities in the US.

The concern is well founded. Aside from the paramilitaries’ ties with major prominent US corporations, Washington also has ample reason to want to suppress evidence of the role played by the CIA and the US military in helping launch and sustain the rightist death squads. The original structure out of which the AUC developed was the so-called Pepes (the Spanish acronym for People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar), a paramilitary group promoted by US intelligence agencies to hunt down the Colombian cocaine trafficker. Included among those extradited are members of the original Pepes organization.

In Washington, the Bush administration seized upon the extradition to renew its push for passage of a US-Colombian free trade agreement. “You can certainly hope that this will persuade Congress” to approve the pact, declared White House spokesperson Dana Perino.

The *Wall Street Journal* echoed this position somewhat more bluntly in a Wednesday editorial entitled “Uribe Calls Pelosi’s Bluff,” in which it stated: “House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s main excuse for trying to kill the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement is that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe winks at atrocities carried out by his country’s illegal paramilitary groups.” The extraditions, the paper claimed, are “further proof of his efforts to see that justice is done.”

Clearly, they are proof of just the opposite: his determination to cover up the massive crimes in which he is himself complicit.

Nonetheless, these arguments appeared to have the desired effect among the Democrats. “I think it’s a very positive development,” House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (Democrat, Maryland) said. Asked by Reuters news agency if Uribe’s action made passage of the trade pact more probable, he replied, “I think it is helpful.”



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