

Colombia rocked by wiretapping revelations

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The Colombian government of President Alvaro Uribe has been rocked by a political scandal involving the wholesale wiretapping of opposition politicians, top judges and journalists by a secret service agency under Uribe's direct command.

The revelations, emblematic of the police state-style methods of Uribe's right-wing government, came at a seemingly inconvenient time, on the eve of this week's trip to Washington by Colombia's defense and foreign affairs ministers for their first meeting with the Obama administration.

Nonetheless, the scandal appeared not to cause even a ripple, as top US officials embraced the Colombian emissaries and made it clear that the Obama administration's policy toward Colombia will differ little from the one pursued by the Bush White House.

Since 2000, the US has funneled some \$6 billion in aid to Colombia—the bulk of it military—while counting Uribe as its closest ally in the hemisphere. Shortly before leaving office, George W. Bush awarded Uribe the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The weekly news magazine *Semana* published details of the illegal domestic spying operation over the weekend, leading to a raid on the offices of the Department of Administrative Security (DAS) intelligence agency by state prosecutors Sunday.

The revelations resulted in the resignations of the DAS deputy director of intelligence Sunday as well as two other deputy directors for operations and analysis on Tuesday.

Uribe has denied any responsibility for his intelligence agency's covert spying, attributing it to a "mafia gang" within the DAS and even claiming that he himself was one of its victims.

"I have never ordered at any time for anyone to monitor the private lives of people," declared Colombia's rightist president. "I am a loyal man, who plays clean with the opposition and isn't involved in any tricks."

Uribe's political record, however, belies the claims of loyalty and playing "clean with the opposition." Ample evidence has linked the president and his closest political supporters to some of the bloodiest crimes committed by the right-wing paramilitary death squads that have claimed tens of thousands of victims in the country's four decades of civil war.

The principal targets of the spying operation were perceived

opponents of Uribe, suggesting that the intelligence agency was operating as a political enforcement arm of the presidential palace.

One of the main targets was Iván Velásquez, the principal judge in the so-called *parapolítica* case that has put 40 members and ex-members of the Colombian national legislature—almost all of them Uribe allies—behind bars for illicit ties with the country's main right-wing paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). At least 70 legislators are under investigation. The president's cousin and close political ally, former Senator Mario Uribe, was one of those arrested, charged with meeting paramilitary leaders to secure their support in the 2002 congressional elections.

According to the latest revelations, the DAS taped some 2,000 hours of Velásquez's telephone calls and had agents follow him as he met with jailed paramilitaries acting as witnesses and as he traveled to and from his home.

In an interview with the Spanish daily *El País*, Velásquez said that he feared for his life, citing the intense political "polarization" in the country.

Other victims of wiretapping include former Supreme Court president Francisco Javier Ricaurte, who had publicly clashed with Uribe, and opposition senators Piedad Córdoba and Gustavo Petro, as well as journalists from the Carocal and W. Radio networks, who had been critical of the government.

The wiretapping revelations are only the latest scandal to rock the intelligence agency. Just four months ago, the former chief of DAS, Maria del Pilar Hurtado, was forced out over a previous exposure of illegal spying on Senator Petro, who at the time was a key figure in exposing the links between leading pro-Uribe politicians and the paramilitary right.

Her predecessor, Jorge Noguera, is in prison on charges of supplying the paramilitary death squads with lists of union officials and left-wing activists to be assassinated. After these connections were exposed, Uribe sought to protect his secret police chief by naming him as Colombian consul general in Milan, Italy.

The latest illegal spying on Uribe's opponents has been carried out with surveillance equipment supplied and maintained by the US and British security agencies, supposedly for use in combating drug traffickers and anti-government guerrilla movements.

US Ambassador to Colombia William Brownfield openly acknowledged that the US had supplied the bugging equipment. "I don't have any problem in admitting this; I am proud of it, because, humbly, thanks to this collaboration the United States and Colombia are better countries," he told reporters. He added, however, that Colombian authorities should determine if the equipment had been put to illegal use. For its part, the British government remained silent on any connection to the domestic spying operation.

In Washington, the ongoing bugging scandal did not seem to cast any shadow on the meetings between the two Colombian ministers and top members of the Obama administration. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton welcomed Jaime Bermúdez, Colombia's minister of foreign relations, at the State Department, calling it "a real pleasure to have the representative of a country that has made so many strides and so much progress, and we have a lot to talk about because there is so much we have in common to work on."

In addition to Clinton, Bermúdez and Colombia's minister of defense Juan Manuel Santos held talks with Defense Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Adviser James Jones, CIA Director Leon Panetta and several members of Congress, including Democratic Senators John Kerry and Christopher Dodd and Republican Congressman Roy Blunt.

Among the issues discussed were the prospects for a Free Trade Agreement between the US and Colombia. Citing human rights concerns, the Democrats stymied the bill when the Bush administration tried to push it through the Congress last year. But now there are indications that, with Obama in office, they are prepared to reconsider.

In an interview with the Colombian magazine *Semana*, House Democratic Majority Leader Steny Hoyer declared, "The reduction in violence is clearly a positive step, and I continue to believe that a US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement would be beneficial to both nations." Hoyer suggested that the real reason for blocking the agreement last year was the Bush administration's failure to consult with the Democratic leadership in Congress. He added, "President Uribe has been a great partner and a real ally to the United States, and I look forward to continuing to work with him on the issues that are important to both our nations."

As the latest bugging scandal indicates, there are no grounds for claiming an improvement in democratic rights in Colombia. A recent report prepared by Colombian human rights groups indicates a dramatic increase in the number of disappearances. Between January 1, 2007, and October 21, 2008, there were some 7,763 disappearances in the country, 3,090 this year alone. Those most at risk are political activists, union leaders and militants, and leaders of community groups and indigenous communities.

Meanwhile, Colombia's National Labor School reported a 25 percent increase in the number of union leaders killed in 2008, jumping to 49, compared to 39 in 2007.

There has also been the recent exposure of the murder of innocent civilians under a macabre procedure known as "false positives," in which troops were encouraged to lure away young men in rural areas and murder them and then present them as guerrillas in order to get the army's kill numbers up.

The change in administrations in Washington has brought about no change in policy towards Colombia. The Democratic Congress is preparing to pass a foreign aid package that will hand the Uribe government \$547.05 million, more than half of that for the armed forces and police. The amount is almost exactly the same as that granted by the Bush administration last year. Meanwhile, the Pentagon is also expected to provide an additional amount of direct aid to Colombian security forces equal to that of last year—\$114.26 million—for a combined total of \$666.31 million, nearly 63 percent of it for Colombia's repressive forces.

Uribe was among the first foreign leaders called by Obama in the days after his inauguration. The American president was apparently anxious to reassure him that, Democratic election-year rhetoric surrounding the Free Trade Agreement notwithstanding, Washington remained firmly behind his right-wing government.

According to White House spokesman Robert Gibbs, Obama told Uribe that the US would continue backing "Colombia's efforts to improve its security and prosperity."

As in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration's policy toward Colombia and the rest of Latin America signals not the change promised in his campaign slogans, but continuity based on the defense of the strategic interests of US imperialism in the region. As with the Bush administration before it, it is prepared to defend those interests by means of militarism and mass repression.

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