

Colombia cable: Army murder of civilians “widespread”

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A classified cable from the US embassy in Bogota confirms that Washington was told the Colombian army’s murder of civilians was “widespread,” yet still approved military aid.

The February 2009 message from the embassy to the US State Department recounts a meeting between American Ambassador William Brownfield and Major General Carlos Suarez, the Colombian army’s inspector general, who was charged with the investigation into the widespread extrajudicial murder of civilians by elements of the Colombian military.

The general told Brownfield that “the extrajudicial execution problem was widespread.” He went on to state: “[T]he Soacha phenomenon originated in the 4th Brigade in Medellin (commanded at one time by both former Army Commander Mario Montoya and current Army Commander Oscar Gonzalez). The practice later spread to other brigades and commands in the region, including the Joint Caribbean Command.”

Soacha is an industrial, working class city on the outskirts of the Colombian capital of Bogota. Beginning in 2008, it was revealed that dozens of youth from poor families in the city had been the victims of premeditated murder by the military.

The army, working together with local criminal gangs, lured the youth to the north of the country with the promise of jobs. Once there, they were turned over to army units to be executed. Their bodies were then presented by the military as “guerrillas killed in combat.”

The general attributed the spread of this horrific practice—known in Colombia as “falsos positivos,” or false positives—to “the insistence by some military commanders on body counts as a measure of success,” and military commanders’ “ties to criminals and narco-traffickers.”

He failed to mention that Colombian troops were rewarded for body counts with bonuses and days off, and that those who failed to report a sufficient number of victims came under command pressure. He presented the problem to the ambassador largely as a tactical and administrative one, complaining that the “false positives” resulted in the military diverting resources to units that were not engaged in genuine combat and that their exposure “undermined the army’s legitimacy.”

Suarez went on to tell the ambassador that the Colombian army commander, General Gonzalez, “opposes his [Suarez’s] work. He acknowledged that Gonzalez tried to intimidate witnesses not to testify about murders committed by the 11th Brigade in Sucre, and said Gonzalez tries to limit his office’s resources.”

He reported that after he had recommended that 28 officers and enlisted men from the La Popa Battalion be dismissed because of their role in the “false positive” murders, Gonzalez approved the dismissals of only 11. The battalion was accused of working with drug-trafficking paramilitaries and killing hundreds of civilians in its area of operations on Colombia’s northeastern border with Venezuela.

Suarez also attributed the problem to the attitude of Colombia’s rightwing president, Alvaro Uribe. Uribe left office in August of this year after two terms and was succeeded by his defense minister, Juan Manuel Santos.

Washington’s closest ally in the hemisphere for years, Uribe was described by the general as someone who “continues to view military success in terms of kills” and believes the “emphasis on human rights is overstated and is harming the war effort against the FARC [the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the country’s largest guerrilla movement].”

At the time the cable was written, the number of cases

of “false positive” murders under investigation stood at 1,009. Human rights groups in Colombia now put the number at over 3,000.

Suarez’s confidential discussion with the US ambassador confirmed the assessment made by the United Nations human rights investigator Philip Alston, who said that the false positive killings were “widespread and systematic” and not merely the work of “individual soldiers or units, or bad apples,” as both the US and Colombian governments have publicly maintained.

RCN radio in Colombia reported Monday that the cable released by WikiLeaks had reinforced fears among the relatives of the “false positive” victims that the military war criminals would never be punished.

Blanca Nubia Monroy, the mother of one of the victims, told RCN that the cable demonstrated that the military and the country’s political establishment want to bring the prosecution of those responsible to a halt. “This is very serious because it indicates that those responsible for these deaths will continue to enjoy impunity and this shouldn’t happen because they committed a very serious crime,” she said.

Luz Dary Carbonell, the wife of one of the victims, said the attempt to intimidate those demanding justice for the army’s victims mentioned in the cable continues to this day. “Yes, there have been many threats when they went to bring the charges on behalf of the victims, and there has also been a lot of delay in the investigation of the false positive cases,” she said. A number of criminal cases brought against military personnel over the killings have already been dismissed by the courts because of these delays.

Within five months of the conversation between Gen. Suarez and Ambassador Brownfield, Washington concluded a deal with the Uribe government giving the US military access to seven air, naval and ground bases inside Colombia, augmenting its capacity to project armed force throughout the hemisphere.

Last September, claiming that the Colombian government had made progress in protecting human rights, the Obama administration released more than \$30 million in US aid to the country’s military. Over the past decade, under Plan Colombia, Washington has poured more than \$7 billion into the country, which receives more military aid than any other country outside of the Middle East.

Within barely a month of Washington’s approval of the aid, Colombia was shocked by the revelation of another horrendous crime by the military, in which three children from an impoverished family were murdered by an army unit in the northeast of the country and their bodies dumped in a shallow grave. One officer is charged with raping the oldest of the children, a 14-year-old girl, before she and her two brothers, ages 9 and 6, were killed.



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