

Former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe linked to international drug trafficking through Sinaloa Cartel

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Allegations have recently emerged linking Colombia's former right-wing president and current senator Álvaro Uribe with Mexican drug cartels, right-wing paramilitary groups and the American Drug Enforcement Agency in a plot to traffic large quantities of cocaine into Mexico between 2006 and 2008.

If true, the allegations would represent the latest in a series of incidents and revelations exposing the so-called "war on drugs" waged by the United States and Colombia as a phony pretext for decades of militarization, as well as the intimate role played by both countries' governments in the lucrative multi-billion-dollar narcotics industry.

Uribe has long been a dominant figure in Colombian politics and is the chief political patron of current President Iván Duque, who heads the Democratic Center (CD) party founded by Uribe in 2014. Before the most recent allegations, Uribe had already been under investigation since 2018 by the Colombian Supreme Court on charges of tampering of witnesses who had testified that he was one of the founders of the far-right paramilitary group Bloque Metro when he was governor of the province of Antioquia. Recent revelations that the military has been spying on the prosecutors involved in this case, with President Duque being fully aware, have fueled widespread popular opposition to his administration, which has an approval rating of merely 24 percent.

A series of nationwide strikes and protests against government corruption, social inequality, political assassinations and state violence erupted on November 21, 2019, and are set to resume on January 21, with none of the protesters' demands having been met. The protests have been the largest in Colombia since 1977 and are part of a region-wide and global resurgence of class struggle.

The recent allegations against Uribe were made by a former security chief for Colombian airliner Air Cargo Lines, in an interview with whistleblower and investigative journalist Richard Maok. Maok, a former detective and IT

specialist with the Cuerpo Tecnico de Investigacion (CTI, the Colombian equivalent of the FBI) went public two decades ago with strong evidence showing top right-wing paramilitary figures working in close coordination with the army, intelligence agencies and other government institutions, including congress, to install Álvaro Uribe as the future president of Colombia.

For his exposures of criminality in the Colombian state, Maok faced death threats and assassination attempts, and was granted political asylum in Canada where he continues his journalistic activities and remains a fierce critic of the Colombian government.

According to the Air Cargo Lines security chief, between 2006-2008, while president, Uribe received large bribes from representatives of the Sinaloa Cartel in exchange for helping traffic 10,000 kilograms of cocaine from Colombia to Mexico. As part of the deal, Uribe authorized the construction of a hangar on the grounds of a Bogotá airport to be used as a logistical hub for the operation, and instructed the country's aviation authority to allow a privately owned Mexican DC8 aircraft to fly in and out of the country without first passing through customs.

The cocaine exported was provided by the Colombian Paísa cartel, which was composed of ex-members of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), accurately described by Latin American crime research organization *Insight Crime* as "a coalition of right-wing death squads that used the [civil war] to camouflage their illicit economic activities [including] drug trafficking, displacement, kidnapping, and extortion."

The AUC paramilitary group has been exposed by Richard Maok as playing a key role in bringing Uribe to power in 2000. The latest whistleblower interviewed by Maok also alleges that he met several times at the American embassy with Emir Abreu, an official of the American Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) stationed in Colombia, who gave his blessing for the operation. The arrangement ended

in 2006 when a metric ton of cocaine went missing from the sixth shipment to Mexico.

While the former airline security official has chosen to remain anonymous, the allegations appear credible in light of other reports connecting Uribe to Colombian paramilitary and drug trafficking organizations. These date back to the early 1980s, when Uribe, then head Colombia's civil aviation agency, was accused of giving air licenses to drug traffickers.

Previously classified cables from the early 1990s released by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and State Department in 2018 describe a politically emergent Álvaro Uribe as a "close personal friend" of Pablo Escobar, the richest and most powerful narco-trafficker in the world. Uribe was said to be "dedicated to collaboration" with Escobar's Medellín Cartel, at the time responsible for most of the cocaine imported to the United States. The Medellín Cartel terrorized the population of the city and surrounding Antioquia region from 1976 to 1993, assassinating thousands and making Medellín the murder capital of the world.

As for the United States, among the most infamous drug trafficking episodes in the last five decades was the CIA's facilitation in the mid-80's of cocaine trafficking from Colombia through Panama into the United States by the CIA-backed Contra guerrilla group that waged a bloody insurgency against the left-nationalist Sandinista government of Nicaragua. Public exposure and a congressional investigation into the sordid affair did nothing to end the ongoing involvement of powerful sections of the state in international drug trafficking.

As the WSWS noted in 2014:

Relations between the US ruling elite and organized crime have flourished in the decades since the Contra war. In April 2006, the capture of a cocaine-laden DC9 owned by the Sinaloa cartel exposed money laundering operations by Wachovia bank on behalf of the massive cartel, which operates across more than 40 countries. The cartel, responsible for 25 percent of illegal drugs sold in the US, passed some \$370 billion to Wachovia, investigators found. Large infusions of drug money played a key role in stabilizing the finances of the big banks during the 2008 financial crisis, according to top UN official for drugs and crime Antonio Maria Costa. During a 2012 Al Jazeera interview, an official spokesman for the government of Mexico's Chihuahua province accused the CIA of "managing the drug trade."

Another notable incident possibly linking the CIA to the Colombian drug trade was the crash in 2007 of a Florida-based Gulfstream II Jet over Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Several tons of cocaine were discovered on the jet, which

took off from the Rio Negro airport in Medellín, Colombia.

As documented by the WSWS, the bill of sale for the Gulfstream jet was listed as Greg Smith, a pilot previously employed by the FBI, DEA and ICE. The sale of the aircraft was facilitated by the son of Ismael Zambada Garcia, a top official in the Sinaloa Cartel, through Wachovia accounts. Highlighting the interconnection between the fraudulent "war on drugs" and "war on terror," the plane was also identified as being involved in the CIA's "extraordinary rendition" and torture program, transporting captives to secret prisons around the globe.

The most recent revelations about Alvaro Uribe's involvement with international cocaine smuggling further expose that large sections of the Colombian state—the closest ally of US imperialism in South America—are deeply involved in the multi-billion-dollar cocaine industry stretching from Colombia to Mexico and the United States.

Colombia's more than three-decade-long US-backed "war on drugs" was waged under the auspices of "Plan Colombia." Launched under the Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton in 1998, it funneled some \$10 billion in mostly military aid to Colombia, financing a bloody counter-insurgency campaign that killed many tens of thousands, while driving millions from their homes.

The so-called drug war in Colombia, like that in the US itself, has served as a smokescreen for government criminality, while providing a pretext for violence inflicted upon the broader population. In Colombia, this "war on drugs" has translated into decades of militarization, political assassinations, the indiscriminate murder of workers, the poisoning of the rural population through Vietnam-style aerial fumigation and support for right wing death squads such as the AUC.



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