

Uribe's microchip comments draw fire

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BOGOTA, Colombia - Comments attributed to Colombia's president that microchip implants could be used to track Colombians working temporarily in the U.S. drew attention - and criticism - Thursday.

The alleged statement by President Alvaro Uribe dismayed some Colombians after it appeared in Colombian newspapers.

"It would be a blatant violation of human rights," said Jorge Pinilla, 50, a lawyer in Bogota.

Details of Uribe's conversation last month with U.S. lawmakers were revealed by Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania in a report he read into the congressional record last week.

Specter and Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama met with Uribe, the United States' staunchest ally in Latin America, during their visit to Colombia on April 7-9.

During the informal meeting, Specter expressed concerns about seasonal workers who immigrate to the United States to work temporarily on farms and then don't return to their country once their visa has elapsed.

"President Uribe said he would consider having Colombian workers have microchips implanted into their bodies before they are permitted to enter the United States to work on a seasonal basis," said Specter in a speech entered to the Congressional record April 25. "I doubted whether the implantation of microchips would be effective since the immigrant worker might be able to remove them."

Uribe on Thursday refused to say whether he proposed microchip implants, acknowledging only that he encouraged the senators to replace "draconian" immigration laws with a temporary work program that treats Colombian workers humanely, like one the country already shares with Spain and Canada.

"If the United States, with all its technology, computers and chips, doesn't have the means to know who enters or leaves the country then where are we?" he said during an interview on City TV.

The offices of Specter and Sessions did not return calls seeking comment on their meeting with Uribe.

Uribe's alleged comments, which dominated the airwaves Thursday, were unpopular with some Colombians.

"If the United States wants to prevent illegal immigrants from entering the country, they should find a better way than treating humans like animals," said Diana Lozano, an architecture student.

Using microchips the size of a grain of rice to track the movement of cattle is nothing new. There has been some marketing of the microchips for human use as a way to control access to secure areas and keep tabs on some criminals, but not for immigration.

"It sounds rather Orwellian," said John Keeley, spokesman for the Center for Immigrations Studies in Washington. "In a Star Trek-kind of future, 20-40 years down the road, we might need to consider this, but it's not germane to the contemporary immigration debate."

An estimated 1.5 million Colombians live in the United States and scores more have considered migrating north to escape economic hardship or the country's four-decade civil war.