

Group thinks CIA had vigilante ties

A Washington think tank has sued for CIA records on the agency's relationship with Colombian vigilantes.

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BOGOTA - A Washington-based think tank filed a lawsuit on Tuesday to force the Central Intelligence Agency to search its archives for documents that may help reveal the CIA's links to a vigilante group here that helped Colombian and U.S. authorities track down drug lord Pablo Escobar.

In its suit, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the law firm of Brian Gaffney said CIA actions ``discourage the Plaintiff, its members and other members of the public from obtaining public records from the United States government."

IPS, one of Washington's oldest think tanks, has been requesting documents on the case via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) since 2004.

CREATED IN 1992

The new lawsuit seeks a court order to force the CIA to search its records again so it can determine any U.S. government connections to the vigilante group, People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar, better known by its Spanish acronym PEPES.

Rival smugglers and illegal right-wing militias created the PEPES around 1992 to help authorities track down Escobar. They harassed and killed his relatives, associates and lawyers -- and destroyed their properties -- until Escobar was gunned down by police in December 1993.

'ACCOUNTABILITY'

The PEPES maintained regular relations with the Colombian police and even U.S. drug agents, U.S. documents already made public have revealed. But IPS wants to go a step further, lead researcher Paul Paz y Miño told The Miami Herald in a telephone interview, by obtaining other documents on the contacts between the PEPES and U.S. officials.

"The issue is of accountability," said Paz y Miño. "This is a very pivotal issue with respect to everything that has come out in the past decade."

After the PEPES disbanded following Escobar's death, many of its members went on to form the core of what became the illegal paramilitary group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia. Known by its Spanish acronym AUC, the paramilitaries killed thousands of civilians who they suspected of being leftist guerrilla supporters.

Many AUC leaders are now under U.S. indictments on drug-trafficking charges -- what Paz y Miño calls a blowback from bad U.S. policy decisions in the hunt for Escobar.

"The kind of monster the U.S. helped create was, in many ways, worse than what they wanted to destroy," he said about the PEPES morphing into the AUC.

OTHER AGENCIES

Since 1994, human-rights groups such as Amnesty International and information advocacy groups such as the National Security Archives have sought information regarding the U.S. government's ties to the PEPES.

Paz y Miño said that the most startling documents made public to date reveal that even after U.S. agencies knew that the PEPES were torturing and killing people, they continued to have contacts with the vigilantes. He added that the IPS is also pushing for documents from the Drug Enforcement Administration, the State Department and the Department of Defense, among others.

The CIA recently set up a detailed website to handle FOIA requests that states, "Because of CIA's need to comply with the national security laws of the United States, some documents or parts of documents cannot be released to the public. In particular, the CIA, like other U.S. intelligence agencies, has the responsibility to protect intelligence sources and methods from disclosure."