

# Court Overrules Parts of Law Shielding Colombia's Warlords

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BOGOTÁ, [Colombia](#), May 19 — Colombia's highest court on Thursday struck down crucial provisions in a law governing the disarming of death squad fighters, ending generous concessions that have shielded warlords from serious punishment for their crimes.

Announced Thursday night, the ruling drew a swift, threatening response on Friday from the paramilitary leaders, who live on ranches in northern Colombia. The paramilitary groups, financed by landowners and from the profits of drug trafficking, have killed thousands in their war against Marxist rebels, leftist politicians and union members.

"This is a mortal blow to reconciliation in this country," Iván Roberto Duque, a paramilitary commander, told RCN radio.

The court's decision also raised the specter that the groups might stop cooperating with a government program that has disarmed more than 30,000 fighters.

"I'm amazed and perplexed," said Sabas Pretelt, the interior and justice minister, who oversaw some of the implementation of the law and is one of its staunchest defenders. "I can only have a democratic attitude, but I'm frankly worried." The law, which was approved by Congress last July, has reduced the amount of violent crime in areas controlled by the groups.

The latest development in the troubled process comes as the government has been tarnished by revelations that Colombia's intelligence service had collaborated with death squads to assassinate leftist union activists, provided secret information to drug traffickers and engineered votes for President [Álvaro Uribe](#) in the 2002 election.

Mr. Uribe, who is running for re-election on May 28, has angrily denied the allegations, which were made in the magazines *Semana* and *Cambio* last month.

The government, though, has come under relentless criticism from [United Nations](#) officials, rights groups and lawmakers here and in Washington. They accuse Mr. Uribe of bending over backward for the paramilitary groups, saying that in exchange for laying down their weapons, the groups were essentially rewarded with the so-called Justice and Peace Law.

Diplomats and human rights groups say there has been no mechanism to guarantee that the militias and their drug networks are completely dismantled. Commanders were not required to turn over their vast fortunes or confess to atrocities. Prison terms for war crimes could also amount to less than three years. The Constitutional Court, in a 6-to-3 vote, sought to rectify those problems. The court said that the warlords, who receive reduced sentences for cooperating, must confess to all their crimes and that if they are found to have lied, they would risk having full prison sentences reinstated. They must pay full reparations to victims' families and direct authorities to the buried bodies of victims.

The court also gave prosecutors more time to investigate paramilitary crimes. José Miguel Vivanco, the Americas director for Human Rights Watch, applauded the decision. "The Uribe administration has been on its knees, essentially turning the country over to drug traffickers and groups that spread terror," he said from Washington.

The paramilitary leaders had proceeded with talks on the assurance that they would not serve long prison terms or turn over all their wealth. They have also made clear that they would not cooperate if the government moved to extradite them to the United States on drug trafficking charges, a provision Mr. Uribe's government agreed to as long as the paramilitaries cooperated.

"This is very serious, because they are not complying with accords that were made during negotiations," Rocío Arias, a former congresswoman who often speaks for the paramilitary groups, said in comments published by El Tiempo, Colombia's leading newspaper.