

Colombia wants to restrict U.N. watchdog, activists say

Human rights groups said they fear Colombia's government is trying to restrict the actions of a U.N. monitoring agency that has publicized alleged abuses.

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BOGOTA - President Alvaro Uribe's government is lobbying to restrict a U.N. agency that has been the most trusted monitor of violence-racked Colombia's human rights record, according to foreign diplomats and rights activists.

The four-year mandate of the U.N. human rights office expires in October, and diplomats say Colombian officials are trying to remove its right to publicly criticize human rights abuses and publish an annual report on them.

Colombia has one of the most-criticized human rights records in the hemisphere and the United Nations' Bogotá office, one of 34 such missions around the world, has verified 8,100 human rights abuses since it was founded in 1997, including the killings of 29 civilians by security forces who claimed the victims were rebels.

Authorities last week announced the arrest of 18 soldiers in the case, and rights groups say that was, in part, a result of the United Nations' disclosure of the case.

The government has been lobbying foreign governments to have the office restricted to technical support of government agencies, according to the diplomats, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Officials have not publicly acknowledged efforts to restrict the agency, but they have been vehement in complaining about human rights monitors.

In 2003, Uribe said independent human rights groups who criticized his crackdown on rebel-linked criminals were "politickers for terrorism" and challenged them to "take off their masks . . . and drop this cowardice of hiding their ideas behind human rights."

REJECTED FIRST CHOICE

European diplomats say the government rejected the first new candidate to head the U.N. human rights office in Bogotá: Scott Campbell, deputy director of Washington-based advocacy group Global Rights.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights last week named Juan Pablo Corlazzoli to the post. The Uruguayan sociologist currently heads the United Nations' democracy development program for Latin America, based in New York.

Neither Campbell nor Corlazzoli returned phone calls seeking comment, and Vice President Francisco Santos, the lead Colombian official on human rights issues, refused to confirm the veto of any candidate before Corlazzoli.

But one diplomat familiar with the selection process said Santos told him that Campbell was perceived as biased because of his work on behalf of Human Rights Watch and other nongovernmental agencies critical of the government's rights record.

EXTENDING MANDATE

The European Union and rights activists have called for extending the U.N. office's current broad mandate, and a March letter from 61 foreign and Colombian human rights and development organizations asked U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to back the current mandate's renewal. But U.S. Embassy officials in Bogotá said it was an issue for Colombia's government.

In its most recent annual report in February, the U.N. rights office cited a "series of grave violations" -- including torture, executions and forced disappearances -- by leftist rebels, illegal right-wing paramilitary groups and, to a lesser extent, government security forces.

While it didn't accuse Uribe's government of deliberate involvement in the violations, the U.N. office decried an "inadequacy of remedial action."

Similar trends, which the government does not dispute, have been documented in the U.S. State Department's annual report. But Washington's criticism of Uribe, its firmest ally in South America, have been restrained.