

Shake-up bypasses tainted Colombian general

A new general became Colombia's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but another general plagued by scandal remained in place.

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BOGOTA - President Alvaro Uribe has named a new head of the armed forces and retained a loyal army chief despite recent scandals that prompted speculation he would be fired, Colombia's defense minister announced Tuesday.

In a widely anticipated military shake-up, Gen. Freddy Padilla will become chairman of Colombia's Joint Chiefs of Staff under the new Uribe administration, replacing Gen. Carlos Ospina, Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said during a military ceremony Tuesday.

Gen. Jorge Ballesteros and Adm. Guillermo Barrera were tapped to head up Colombia's air force and navy, respectively.

But Uribe left in place army chief Gen. Mario Montoya, who has come under fire for not doing enough to root out corruption and for recent scandals implicating troops in killings of civilians -- after just six months in the office.

Montoya, for years a close military advisor of Uribe, became head of the army in February.

His predecessor was forced to resign after a magazine published gruesome photos of cadets allegedly tortured by their superiors.

Since then, the army's image has fallen even further.

The United Nations and human rights groups have warned of an increase in extrajudicial killings by Colombian soldiers in recent months.

Authorities in Antioquia province are investigating the killings of 29 people who the army claims were rebels.

Montoya also was criticized for his handling of a May incident in which soldiers killed 10 members of an elite anti-drug unit in southern Colombia. The general at first blamed the incident on friendly fire, but prosecutors later concluded the troops ambushed the unit at the behest of drug traffickers.

Speculation mounted that the scandal could soon claim Montoya's job despite his ties to the president, which date back to Uribe's days as governor of Antioquia.

Since taking office in 2002, Uribe has spent heavily to increase the military's ranks by more than 30 percent and ordered troops out of the barracks and onto the streets -- policies credited with a sharp drop in the South American nation's infamous kidnapping and murder rates.

Uribe vowed at his inauguration for a second four-year term Aug. 7 to preserve those gains by instructing his military to continue battling leftist rebels who have been trying to overthrow the government for four decades.