

COLOMBIA TO EXPOSE MILITIA'S REACH

Six lawmakers face questioning by Colombia's Supreme Court this week over their alleged links to paramilitary forces.

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BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA – In Colombia's corridors of power, the tension is almost palpable. People worry and wonder who might be the next target in a widening probe into connections between politicians and the country's powerful right-wing militias that used terror and intimidation to impose their will on the population.

Six pro-government lawmakers face questioning by the Supreme Court this week over their alleged links to paramilitary forces in their home provinces in a scandal that is rocking the country's political establishment to its core.

Collusion between the right-wing militias and the US-backed government's military and police forces is well documented by human rights groups, but until now, the extent to which the paramilitaries had co-opted politics and local government was one of Colombia's best-known secrets.

"We always knew this phenomenon existed," says Vicente Torrijos, a political science professor at Bogotá's Rosario University. "And what we've seen so far is just the tip of the iceberg," he says, adding that politicians tend to "save themselves by implicating others."

Senator Miguel de la Espriella, from northern Córdoba Province, did just that. In a Nov. 26 newspaper interview he admitted that he was among about 40 politicians that had signed a political pact with the paramilitary leaders when they were at the height of their power in 2001. That revelation resulted in the resignation of a minor official of Mr. Uribe's government, who also acknowledged signing the pact when he was a member of Congress.

As the crisis snowballs, it comes increasingly close to the country's top leadership. "No one knows how high this goes," says Adam Isacson, who monitors Colombia for the Washington-based Center for International Policy.

Mr. Isacson says that the scandals could threaten US aid to Colombia's armed forces. "Especially if we see generals and colonels being named, it will affect US aid," he says, noting that already, disbursement of part of US aid for this year has been delayed, apparently over concerns about unrelated scandals in the Army.

The US has provided \$4.5 billion of mostly military aid to Colombia since 1999 to fight drug trafficking and leftist guerrillas. "But Democrats in the US Congress now could find ... reasons to question the president," says Gustavo Duncan, a security analyst with the Seguridad y Democracia think tank who has written a book on paramilitary power in Colombia.

Among the six lawmakers who are scheduled to testify this week before the Supreme Court is Senator Álvaro Araújo, the brother of Foreign Minister María Consuelo Araújo. So far, the foreign minister has withstood calls to step down. The former head of Colombia's intelligence agency during Uribe's first term is also being investigated by state prosecutors for collaborating with militias.

And a congressional committee is opening a preliminary investigation this week on accusations that Uribe himself is linked to the far-right paramilitaries. Despite persistent allegations against the president, no credible evidence has ever been presented, and in a recent speech, Uribe challenged the militia leaders to implicate him. "If any of those ... paramilitaries can say that the president has been complicit, let them come forward," he says.

Colombia's paramilitary groups were originally formed by wealthy cattle ranchers, business owners, and drug mafias in the 1980s to fight off extortion and kidnapping by leftist guerrillas. The paramilitaries later turned into powerful armies involved in drug trafficking and extortion themselves who then used their power to control local politics and politicians and even infiltrated the prosecutor's office and courts.

While some charges against the politicians had been filed - and buried - more than five years ago, the allegations resurfaced after the politicians' names were mentioned in files discovered on the laptop computer of a top paramilitary leader known as Jorge 40 that was seized earlier this year. The computer files include detailed accounts and audio recordings of meetings between local politicians and paramilitaries to ensure the election of the militia's chosen

candidates, and describe scams in which the paramilitaries stole state funds from local health services.

"The accumulation of evidence was overwhelming," says Mr. Duncan. "They [the government] could no longer contain it."

The former chiefs of the militia groups, which demobilized as many as 30,000 troops in the past three years, are currently awaiting prosecution for their crimes under a controversial law that grants them reduced prison sentences of up to eight years for confessing their crimes.

They sent shudders throughout Colombia's ruling class last month when they called on their "sponsors, collaborators, and direct beneficiaries, business people, politicians, regional and local leaders, members of the state security forces, among others," to join them in revealing details of the intricate web of financing and support that developed as the militias expanded their power throughout Colombia.

On Friday, Uribe ordered the 59 leaders transferred from the converted vacation resort that served as their prison to a maximum security facility in Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city. Those leaders protested, saying that the move sought to distract the nation's attention from the ongoing scandals. "Every time there's a political crisis, the smoke screen of [blaming] the paramilitary leaders reappears," says David Hernandez, spokesman for the former warlords.

As the political scandal grows, Uribe may be under pressure to reinstate the extradition orders for some of the paramilitary leaders, wanted on drug-trafficking charges in the US, according to Duncan. The orders were suspended as long as they participate in the demobilization and reconciliation process. "The risk of extradition for the demobilized paramilitary leaders is greater because the president will have to try to distance himself from them," he says.