

## Paramilitary Leader Submits to Justice

Seeking 'Real Truth,' Victims Gather For Testimony on Colombian Violence

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MEDELLIN, Colombia, Dec. 19 -- Some came to the Palace of Justice on Tuesday with huge color photographs of their loved ones strapped around their necks. Others wore T-shirts that read "Justice" and "Truth." Maria Eugenia Cobaleda, whose two older brothers were kidnapped in 1998 and never seen again, summed up the prevailing mood.

"We're waiting to have them tell us the real truth, no matter how much it hurts," she said.

They all came to press for answers from Salvatore Mancuso, the first commander from Colombia's paramilitary organization to submit himself to justice.

The strapping commander, known as "Blondie" to his friends but as a mass murderer to human rights groups, sat in a hearing room Tuesday, rattling off key events in his life while leaving out his complicity in the more unpleasant chapters, according to victims who heard the testimony. The proceedings were closed to the public.

The deposition was a sputtering start in a specially tailored judicial process designed to ferret out crimes committed by the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, an umbrella group known by the Spanish initials AUC. It was financed largely by ranchers and landowners to counter guerrilla groups espousing Marxist ideology.

To secure benefits, such as avoiding extradition to the United States on drug charges and ensuring short terms of incarceration on farms, commanders must confess to crimes and pay reparations to victims.

In Mancuso the victims have a man they consider the personification of evil. In 2003, a judge sentenced him to 40 years in prison for arranging the 1997 massacre of at least 15 people in the town of El Aro. Warrants have been issued for his arrest in selective assassinations, as well as other mass killings in villages.

The country's attorney general, Mario Iguaran, told El Espectador newspaper that 1,200 people had complained to prosecutors about crimes Mancuso allegedly committed.

Sitting next to a prosecutor in the hearing room, occasionally sipping from a bottle of water, Mancuso cast himself more as victim than victimizer, said Teresita Gaviria, who represents a group of mothers of victims.

He recounted how his father arrived in Colombia from Italy to make a new life. He said his family, like many others in rural Cordoba state, was targeted by the Marxist guerrillas. He spoke of how he and other ranchers took matters into their own hands, on grounds that the police and army did little to protect the citizenry.

That was as far as he went, said victims and other observers who watched the deposition in two hearing rooms equipped with closed-circuit televisions. He justified the actions

of the paramilitaries by saying that "the bullets we fired carried a hope for change," said Carlos Ivan Lopera, who represents a human rights group, Redepaz.

Then Mancuso broke down and cried, just before the afternoon televised newscasts, which went live with the news. "He asked for forgiveness for the tears he's caused," Lopera recounted.

For the government of President Álvaro Uribe, Mancuso's appearance was a positive turn after an avalanche of dire news about the involvement of congressional allies and a handful of government bureaucrats in paramilitary activities.

These disclosures have led many Colombians to wonder whether the government is committed to aggressively dismantling a group that is accused of killing thousands of people. Although officials say 30,000 paramilitary fighters have disarmed, investigators believe several bands remain intact or are reorganizing to traffic in cocaine and liquidate opponents.

Still, for several victims who arrived here Tuesday, the deposition helped the government make inroads against the paramilitaries and clarify their numerous crimes. Dozens of other commanders remain jailed and under pressure to begin detailing their offenses to prosecutors in hearings the government expects will begin next year.

"We want to know who his chiefs are, who ordered these crimes, who his political allies are, who has benefited from so much land usurped from poor Colombians," said Ivan Cepeda, leader of a victims group and son of Manuel Cepeda, a senator killed by paramilitaries.

The sheer complexity of the cases, and the limited resources of the attorney general's office, has many victims and their representatives doubtful that Mancuso's real crimes will be uncovered by investigators. Mancuso's deposition is expected to take several days. Once it is complete, investigators have to determine the veracity of his claims, hear from victims and formulate charges.

One group of victims stormed out of the Palace of Justice after authorities would not let the group watch the proceedings on closed-circuit television without registering. "My father was a senator of the republic, and he was murdered by paramilitaries," Cepeda told one functionary. "Is that not accreditation enough?"

Iguaran later told a group of victims that the cases would be long and difficult. Every four days, authorities are discovering hidden graves containing the bodies of paramilitary violence, and victims are emerging from across the country to detail their experiences.

"There are thousands of declarations. There are hundreds of graves," Iguaran said. But he pledged that the truth would come out.

For Rubiela Montoya, who lost her husband 14 years ago, the chance to attend the hearing was itself a step forward. She recalled how she had kept silent for many years, afraid that she, too, would be killed if she complained.

"The fear is over," she said. "We have to confront these things. We can't stay quiet all our lives. I spent 14 years without saying anything."