

Colombian politicians held; paramilitary ties alleged

Several influential politicians were arrested, accused of having ties to illegal right-wing paramilitaries.

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BOGOTA - The Colombian government has arrested five national politicians, including Sen. Alvaro Araújo, the brother of Colombia's foreign minister, and has issued an arrest warrant for one other politician charging them with links to illegal right-wing paramilitaries.

The attorney general's office also has summoned the cousin of the senator and Foreign Minister Maria Consuelo Araújo -- the current governor of the province of Cesar, Hernando Molina -- to testify about his connections to a former paramilitary commander and his possible participation in paramilitary murders.

U.S. AID

The revelations Thursday came amidst a diplomatic offensive by the Colombian government in Washington to help secure funds for Plan Colombia II, a multi-pronged strategy to fight drug trafficking and leftist guerrillas that have plagued this country for decades. Colombia is the largest recipient of U.S. aid outside the Middle East, receiving somewhere in the vicinity of \$700 million annually.

Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos spent this week in Washington meeting with members of Congress who questioned him about the Colombian government's human-rights record. Last month, Colombia's defense minister visited Washington and insisted that Colombia have more flexibility as to where to put the money that comes from the United States.

OTHER ARRESTED

Foreign Minister Araújo did not comment on the arrests, which also included Sens. Mauricio Pimiento, Dieb Maloof and Luis Eduardo Vives, and Rep. Alfonso Campo. Rep. Jorge Luis Caballero is still at large. All of the politicians are from the northern coast of this country of 42 million. They join three other coastal congressmen and one ex-congressman already in jail on the same charges.

When asked whether Araújo would maintain her post, Interior and Justice Minister Carlos Holguín said to the local media that it was a "personal decision." He added that the arrests illustrate the independence of the justice system.

"This shows that the country is working," Holguín said.

The Araújo family has long been part of the highest levels of Colombia's government. Another cousin sits on the Constitutional Court. Foreign Minister Araújo's father was a longtime congressman and senator. Molina's mother was minister of culture. His stepfather is inspector general.

In interviews with The Miami Herald in December concerning the paramilitary investigation, Foreign Minister Araújo and Governor Molina denied the family had connections to paramilitaries.

CLAIMS

Still, the attorney general's office said it was investigating claims that Molina was a member of the right-wing paramilitaries, that he participated in the murder of several members of the Kankuamos indigenous

tribe, that he laundered money when he was consul in Guatemala and that he received money from paramilitary leader, Rodrigo Tovar, for his gubernatorial campaign. Molina ran unopposed.

Speaking on Caracol radio Thursday night, Molina said that he was friends with Tovar when they were younger and that ``they took two different paths."

"This is part of a huge conspiracy," he added. ``Here, they are saying a lot of lies."