

Crime links shake up Colombian leadership

A minister resigned Monday, days after her brother's arrest for helping paramilitaries.

The Christian Science Monitor
February 21, 2007

BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA - Colombia is scrambling to contain international fallout from a ballooning political scandal surrounding ties between some of President Álvaro Uribe's closest collaborators and right-wing death squads.

Mr. Uribe's image has been tarnished by the arrest of eight lawmakers from his governing coalition, jailed on charges they colluded with paramilitary groups responsible for some of Colombia's most grisly crimes. The crisis threatens to debilitate his government just as it seeks a new \$3.9 billion US aid package and ratification of a free trade deal with Washington, and prepares for a visit by President Bush next month.



STEP DOWN: Colombian Foreign Minister María Consuelo Araújo resigned Monday.
REUTERS

Uribe himself appears untouched by the burgeoning scandal, but his foreign minister, María Consuelo Araújo, was forced to resign on Monday after her brother, a senator, was among five lawmakers arrested last week for collusion with the paramilitary groups. Sen. Álvaro Araújo is charged with ordering the kidnapping of a political rival.

Ms. Araújo's resignation and replacement by recently escaped kidnap victim Fernando Araújo – who is not related – served as temporary damage control but the truth of the ties between paramilitaries and politicians is only starting to emerge.

Even as the minister announced her resignation, the Supreme Court was questioning three other senators who, along with some 40 other politicians allied to Uribe, signed a political manifesto drafted by the paramilitaries in 2001 in which they vowed to build a new Colombia based on a strong state. And opposition senator Gustavo Petro plans to schedule hearings in March into the spread of paramilitary power in Antioquia Province, when Uribe was governor there in the mid-1990s. He has promised to present evidence implicating one of the president's brothers as an alleged member of a paramilitary group.

"This [scandal] couldn't come at a worse time," for Uribe says Myles Frechette, former US ambassador to Colombia.

Mr. Bush will be in Bogotá in early March on a visit meant to underscore Washington's support for its most important ally in South America, a region of growing anti-US sentiment. The United States has provided more than \$4.5 billion, mostly in military aid, for Colombia since 2000 for anti-drug and counterinsurgency operations. And the Bush administration is now asking Congress for another \$3.9 billion over the next six years.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D) of Vermont, chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that oversees aid to Colombia, said US lawmakers would bear in mind the scandal when they consider this year's budget request for Bogotá.

"As the new US Congress takes stock of this situation and the justification for continued US outlays to Colombia, American taxpayers deserve assurances that the Colombian government has severed links to these terrorist groups," said Mr. Leahy in a statement. "The Colombian government is not simply a victim of their corrupt influences. Too often it has tolerated them, colluded with them."

With Democrats now in control of the both the House and Senate, analysts say that Bush's request for more funding to Uribe's government may face serious scrutiny. "Washington's relationship with Colombia has been based on trust in Uribe. But at this point even the Republicans are starting to lose faith in Uribe," says Arlene Tickner an analyst of Colombian-US relations at Bogotá's Los Andes University.

Still, it is unlikely that Congress will be willing to sacrifice the US's closest South American ally. "The US continues to need Uribe to a certain degree," says Ms. Tickner.

And Colombia certainly still needs the US. Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos warned that if the US pulled or severely cut its funding, the Uribe government could be imperiled. "This is when we need their support the most, because if all this collapses we will return to a democracy without authority or power," says Mr. Santos. "When we explain to them [US lawmakers] what is happening, they will understand that this for the good [of the country], it is not bad."

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 heavily involved in drug trafficking and extortion themselves, who used their power to control local politics and politicians and even infiltrated the prosecutor's office and courts.

The former chiefs of the militia groups, which has demobilized some 31,000 troops in the past three years, are currently being prosecuted for their crimes under a controversial law that grants them reduced prison sentences of up to eight years for confessing.

Despite the scandal, Uribe maintains high approval ratings domestically. A recent Gallup poll showed that 73 percent of Colombians approve of their president.