

Colombian Senator: Death Squads Met At Uribe's Ranch

Scandal Over Paramilitary Ties Widens

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BOGOTA, Colombia, April 17 -- An opposition lawmaker on Tuesday alleged that paramilitary death squads met at the ranch of President Álvaro Uribe in the late 1980s and plotted to murder opponents, an explosive charge in a growing scandal that has unearthed ties between the illegal militias and two dozen congressmen.

Basing his accusations on government documents and depositions by former paramilitary members and military officers, Sen. Gustavo Petro said the militiamen met at Uribe's Guacharacas farm as well as ranches owned by his brother, Santiago Uribe, and a close associate, Luis Alberto Villegas.

"From there, at night, they would go out and kill people," Petro said, referring to the sprawling ranch owned by Álvaro Uribe, who served as a senator from 1986 to 1994.

The allegations, made at a congressional hearing on the "para-politics" scandal, were vigorously denied by the government. In a rebuttal, Interior Minister Carlos Holguín said that all manner of rumors have arisen about Uribe's farm.

Holguín said Petro had "abused" his position by using court documents selectively to make his points and was trying to portray Colombia "as a country of assassins, a country of paramilitaries." And he wondered aloud why Petro was not so aggressive about unearthing links between politicians and leftist guerrillas, noting that Petro had been a member of the M-19 rebel movement until his election to Congress in 1991.

The hearing, called by the senator, a member of the left-of-center Democratic Pole party, came in the midst of a scandal that has led to the arrests of eight members of Congress and the head of the secret police, allegedly for having worked with paramilitary commanders to extend their hold through threats and violence across northern [Colombia](#).

The Supreme Court and the attorney general's office are investigating nearly 20 other current or former members of Congress, most of them allies of the president. And the court is collecting evidence and interviewing witnesses to establish whether the president's cousin, Sen. Mario Uribe, had met with paramilitary commanders to plot land grabs; the senator denied any links in a recent interview.

Government officials say the disclosures of ties between the militias and the political establishment are taking place precisely because Uribe's administration entered into negotiations with paramilitary groups that permitted the disarmament of thousands of fighters. That has created a safer climate for public disclosures, they say.

"We're the ones pushing for full disclosure," Vice President Francisco Santos told a small group of reporters in Washington on Monday.

It was unclear what impact the accusations would have on Uribe. The Bush administration's closest ally in [Latin America](#), Uribe's government has received more than \$4 billion in mostly military aid to push back Marxist guerrillas and fumigate much

of the country's huge coca fields. Government figures show that violence has dropped dramatically, and the economy has soared.

But Uribe, since he first ran for office, has also been dogged by the fact that paramilitary groups grew dramatically during his term as governor in the northwestern state of Antioquia, from 1995 to 1997. During that time, he helped spearhead the creation of Convivirs, legal vigilante groups. Some were later denounced for having morphed into paramilitary death squads or for serving as fronts for paramilitary warlords.

In a two-hour presentation in which military intelligence reports and affidavits of mid-level military officers were made public, Petro provided a detailed sketch of Colombia's fearsome paramilitary movement, from its first links with cocaine kingpins including Pablo Escobar to its use of massacres to spread terror to its liquidation of the leftist Patriotic Union party.

He spoke of how banana companies, including foreign firms, bankrolled death squads and helped paramilitary groups traffic in cocaine. And he read from a government statement provided by an army captain who was present at meetings between a former general, Rito Alejo del Rio, and paramilitary commanders. President Uribe has long been close to del Rio, who was charged in 2001 with having paramilitary ties. The charges were later dropped.

The senator said that despite a common perception, the generation-old paramilitary movement did not surge because of the lack of state presence. "Paramilitarism was founded with the help from some sectors of the state," he said.

In the hearing, Petro focused much of his time on the Convivirs and how officials who promoted them knew that paramilitary warlords ran some of the groups. The Convivirs were eventually outlawed following allegations of rights abuses.

"If these type of people made up the Convivirs and directed them, then could they really guarantee the security and tranquillity of the people?" Petro asked.

In a recent interview, a paramilitary turncoat who is providing investigators with evidence of ties between paramilitary groups and politicians said that President Uribe had strong support among paramilitary commanders, who favored him for his tough stance against guerrillas. He said, however, that he had never heard evidence of direct ties between the president and paramilitary groups.

"We all admired the president," said the former paramilitary member, Jairo Castillo, who fled Colombia and now lives in [Canada](#). "He was a guy who was for the Convivirs and strengthening the Convivirs. But to say that he was helping or had ties with the paramilitaries, I'd be lying if I said he did."