

## Colombian President Hits Back

Uribe Denies Family Had Paramilitary Ties  
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BOGOTA, Colombia, April 20 -- Facing allegations that his family had ties to illegal paramilitary groups, President Álvaro Uribe issued fervent denials at a news conference here Thursday and in [Miami](#) on Friday as he tried quell a scandal that he said "puts at risk the greater interests of the country."

"Why condemn me without listening to me?" the president said in the nationally televised news conference in [Bogota](#) late Thursday. "I have to apologize for mistakes, but not for crimes."

The allegations prompted former vice president [Al Gore](#) to cancel his appearance Friday at an international environmental conference in Miami because Uribe was to attend. In a statement, a spokeswoman for Gore called the allegations against Uribe "deeply troubling."

"He believes that President Uribe should have every opportunity to address these unsettled allegations in [Colombia](#), but until this very serious chapter in history is brought to a close, Mr. Gore did not feel it was appropriate to appear at the event," Kalee Kreider said.

Colombia, the top [U.S.](#) ally in the politically tumultuous Andes region, has been rocked in recent months by allegations that congressmen, the head of the secret police and other government officials close to Uribe worked closely with right-wing paramilitary death squads.

On Tuesday, an opposition lawmaker alleged in a congressional hearing that in the 1980s and '90s paramilitary members met on two farms owned by the Uribe family. The allegation came after justice officials confirmed that they have been collecting evidence to establish whether the president's cousin, Sen. Mario Uribe, had ties to members of paramilitary groups.

On Thursday night, President Uribe told reporters he would act swiftly to dispel what he called slanderous attacks by Sen. Gustavo Petro, a leader in the left-of-center Democratic Pole party who has helped unearth information that has led to the arrests of eight congressmen.

"I have not had political ties with them," the president said of the paramilitary groups. "We have not received or looked for the political help of paramilitaries."

Colombian officials said Uribe's response was essential because the country, with [Latin America's](#) fifth-largest economy, is lobbying the [U.S. Congress](#) to both approve a free trade agreement and continue providing more than \$700 million a year in mostly military aid. Colombia remains troubled, with Marxist guerrillas at war with the state and drug trafficking unabated.

But under Uribe, thousands of paramilitary fighters have disarmed, Colombia's biggest cities have become far safer and the state has extended control over once lawless regions. Colombia's economy grew almost 6 percent last year as foreign investments poured in.

Still, the scandal has revived allegations that dogged Uribe when he ran for president -- that he had ties to paramilitary organizations during his years as senator and governor of Antioquia, the country's industrial hub. Those groups, formed by landowners and funded by drug traffickers, eroded support for guerrillas by killing thousands of peasants.

Petro said that during a three-year term as Antioquia's governor that ended in 1997, Uribe spearheaded the creation of vigilante groups that, although legal, were in some cases headed by paramilitary warlords. He said some of those groups morphed into paramilitary organizations.

Allegations of ties between paramilitary groups and Colombia's army prompted [Sen. Patrick J. Leahy \(D-Vt.\)](#), chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, to withhold \$55 million in military aid this week until the [State Department](#) explains why it recently certified Colombia as having made sufficient advances on human rights.

Democrats in Congress have also expressed concern about evidence that the secret police worked with paramilitary gunmen to kill union activists.

In his news conference, Uribe steadfastly denied that he or his family ever had ties to paramilitary groups. Challenging Petro's accusations that paramilitary groups met and plotted murder on his ranch, Uribe said the only killings carried out there were the murders of his father, in 1983, and a field hand, both by guerrillas.

He insisted that paramilitary groups have been weakened under his government. He also said the disclosures about ties between authorities and paramilitary warlords are surfacing because of his administration.

"The conditions have been created so that the people do not have fear about speaking the truth," he said.