

COLOMBIAN SENATOR: THEY WANT TO KILL ME

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

A leading opposition senator went public with an alleged assassination plot on Tuesday, accusing a former army colonel who has provided security for the U.S. coal company Drummond of conspiring to kill him.

Sen. Gustavo Petro told The Associated Press that the public prosecutor's office learned of the plot from one of the would-be assassins, who testified he met with retired army Col. Julian Villate and others in January in the coastal city of Santa Marta to plan the killing.

The assassination was not carried out, and Petro said he had no more details about the plot. A spokeswoman for the public prosecutor's office would not confirm it had the testimony, but said it was looking into Petro's allegations.

Petro has taken the lead among Colombian lawmakers in unmasking ties between President Alvaro Uribe's allies and illegal right-wing militias.

He and his relatives have received a series of death threats since November, when his denunciations of paramilitary infiltration in Colombian politics spurred probes that have landed eight Uribe-allied members of Congress in jail on charges ranging from conspiracy to murder.

Uribe has condemned any links between politicians and the murderous militias, and has vowed to support the federal investigations wherever they lead.

Colombia's chief prosecutor opened a criminal probe last month into Drummond's alleged paramilitary ties, and a federal judge in Alabama is hearing a civil suit accusing Drummond of paying paramilitary hit men to kill three union leaders in 2001 at one of the company's Colombia mines.

Drummond Co. Inc., based in Birmingham, Ala., issued a statement Tuesday night rejecting "all accusations that tie the company to criminal acts or to illegal groups".

In the same statement, the company said the retired colonel "came with the best recommendations ... the fact that he had worked for the United States embassy in Colombia would lead one to suppose that there had been a thorough check of his resume."

A former leftist rebel who is protected by nine bodyguards, Petro has a history of thwarting assassination attempts by learning about them in advance and going public.

Petro brought the so-called para-politico scandal closer to Uribe last week, alleging before Colombia's congress that the president's rancher brother Santiago was a militia member in the 1990s, and that paramilitary gunmen met on Uribe family ranches to plan killings.

Former U.S. Vice President Al Gore then snubbed Uribe by withdrawing from an environmental forum in Miami rather than appear with him in public.

Drummond's Colombia press office did not immediately confirm or deny that Villate was employed in its security team, and officials at Drummond's headquarters in Alabama did not immediately return messages seeking comment about Petro's latest allegations.

The AP also attempted to reach Villate at a Drummond office where a company operator said he was listed as an employee but the phone went unanswered.

Drummond confirmed, in court papers obtained by the AP, that Villate coordinated security at the company's port in Cienaga on the Caribbean coast as recently as 2005. And the president of the Sintraminercol national mining union, Francisco Ramirez, said Villate "continues to be a member of Drummond's security."

Ramirez said Drummond hired Villate to break up the union at its Colombia operations, and that Villate also was involved in a 2004 plot to break up the public employees' union in the western city of Cali, where Uribe's government has sought to privatize the municipal utility.

Meanwhile, a separate plot to assassinate former domestic intelligence agency official Rafael Garcia, a key witness in both Drummond cases, was foiled this week by prison authorities, that man's lawyer said.

Garcia says he was present when Augusto Jimenez, the president of Drummond's Colombia operations, delivered a suitcase with US\$200,000 cash to a representative of regional paramilitary warlord Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, as payment for the murder of the top two union leaders at Drummond's La Loma mine.

Garcia's lawyer, Jose Strusberg, told the AP that authorities had transferred six prisoners who were plotting to kill his client from nearby cells. "Garcia is a target of dark forces that want to eliminate him," said Strusberg.

Prison officials, however, said the transfer was routine.

Garcia also is a key witness in the case against his former boss, Jorge Noguera, who was chief of the domestic intelligence agency. Noguera was hand-picked for the job by Uribe after running his campaign in the state of Magdalena, where Drummond's Cienaga port is located.

Colombia is the world's most dangerous country for union organizing - more than 800 trade unionists have been murdered in the country over the last six years, and almost all remain unsolved.