

## Gore Shuns Colombian President

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BOGOTA, Colombia -- Al Gore withdrew from an environmental conference in Miami on Friday to avoid appearing with the Colombian president, who is facing the most serious accusations yet that he aided far-right death squads.

Gore's office said the former vice president did not want to appear at an event with President Alvaro Uribe until "this very serious chapter in history is brought to a close."

Uribe said late Thursday that Gore's decision was a sign of the damage caused by a growing scandal linking his political allies to Colombia's illegal right-wing militias.

An opposition lawmaker in Colombia has alleged that Uribe let paramilitaries use his own property for meetings and killings while governor in a northern state in the mid-1990s.

Considered terrorist groups by the U.S. government, the paramilitaries are responsible for some of the worst massacres in Colombia's long-running civil conflict. Many of the group's commanders are wanted in the U.S. on charges of exporting hundreds of tons of cocaine.

During a news conference called to refute the allegations, Uribe also disclosed that a prosecutor had once questioned him about killings at a farm his family owned but said the property had been abandoned due to lawlessness in the region.

The U.S. Senate froze \$55 million worth of U.S. military aid to Colombia earlier this week on allegations that the head of Colombia's armed forces \_ who has also worked closely with Washington in its multibillion anti-narcotics and anti-insurgent strategy \_ collaborated with the death squads.

Eight legislators are already in jail on charges of helping the paramilitaries launch a nationwide offensive that killed thousands. Uribe's foreign minister resigned after her brother was jailed on links to the paramilitaries, and his former head of secret police is facing similar charges.

Uribe, President Bush's closest ally in South America, was re-elected in a landslide last year on promises of continuing a hard line against a five-decade leftist insurgency.