

Uribe defends officials vs. accusations

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

President Alvaro Uribe defended his vice president and defense minister on Wednesday against a jailed former paramilitary commander's accusations that they conspired with illegal right-wing militias in the late 1990s.

"I have every confidence in the honesty and moral fiber" of both men," Uribe said in a radio interview. The officials, who are cousins, belong to one of Colombia's most powerful political families.

The allegations complicate the U.S.-allied president's efforts to deal with a widening political firestorm over the murderous militias' corrupting influence in Colombian politics and commerce.

The jailed warlord, Salvatore Mancuso, testified Tuesday that Vice President Francisco Santos proposed creating a paramilitary bloc in the province surrounding Bogota, the capital, and that the defense minister, Juan Manuel Santos, sought paramilitary help in an alleged plot to overthrow then-President Ernesto Samper.

At the time, both were private citizens but well-known public figures. Francisco Santos was an editor at the country's leading newspaper, El Tiempo.

Samper was disgraced and badly weakened by a scandal over the financing of his 1994 campaign by Cali cartel drug traffickers and Bogota, along with most of the country, was afflicted by extortionist leftist rebels.

Juan Manuel Santos admitted meeting with the late paramilitary leader Carlos Castano in 1997 but said the idea was to spur peace talks with paramilitaries and leftist rebels - not to topple Samper.

His cousin Francisco, on a trans-Atlantic flight Wednesday and not immediately available for comment, has acknowledged meeting with paramilitary leaders in what he called efforts to seek peace.

Since his 2002 election, Uribe has put the guerrillas on the defensive. Many credit, in large part, a nearly decade-long reign of terror that began when Uribe was a provincial governor and which was spearheaded by warlords including Mancuso and Castano.

The paramilitaries killed some 10,000 people, the chief prosecutor says, and stole millions of acres of land as they moved to retake the country's north from rebels and became deeply involved in drug trafficking.

Mancuso did not provide evidence supporting his allegations, which the chief prosecutor's office said it planned to investigate.

Although coming from an admitted criminal, the allegations are yet another embarrassment for a government sullied by the "para-politico" scandal. Nearly a dozen allies of Uribe in Congress have been jailed on charges they colluded with the illegal militias.

Mancuso, testifying in a closed hearing to which only representatives of his victims were permitted entry, also said the Colombian state from the start backed the paramilitaries, which were created in the early 1980s by landowners and drug traffickers to counter rebel extortion. The private armies later degenerated into criminal gangs and poisoned regional politics.

"This statement ends the idea that the paramilitaries grew up and operated behind the backs of the political and military class," said Ivan Cepeda, director of the Victims' Movement, who heard Mancuso's statements.

Mancuso testified in the northern city of Medellin, fulfilling a peace deal that requires demobilized militia commanders to confess to their crimes in exchange for prison terms of no more than eight years.

Also Tuesday, Defense Minister Santos acknowledged an illegal police wiretapping operation against journalists, opposition figures and government members had included the man Uribe defeated in the last election. He insisted top officials were unaware of the spying, whose targets were reported by El Tiempo to include prosecutors and members of the state security agency.

In his testimony, Mancuso said the paramilitaries, branded "foreign terrorist organizations" by the U.S. State Department in 2001, were aided by top army brass in training and logistics.

More than 31,000 paramilitaries have demobilized in the peace pact, and Mancuso is among some 60 militia commanders in jail awaiting trial.