

Shake-up in Colombia's security forces

The Miami Herald
May. 15, 2007

BOGOTA, Colombia --

In the biggest shake-up in years of the security forces, Colombia's police chief and the head of police intelligence were forced to retire as the government alleged that police illegally tapped calls of opposition political figures, journalists and members of the government for the past two years.

The scandal multiplied U.S.-ally President Alvaro Uribe's woes on a day judicial authorities also ordered the arrest of 20 politicians and business leaders, including five congressmen, on criminal conspiracy charges for signing a 2001 pact with illegal right-wing militias.

"The procedure is totally unacceptable, illegal and contrary to the policy of the government," Minister of Defense Juan Manuel Santos said in a statement.

Santos also said the government had asked for and received the resignations of Gen. Jorge Daniel Castro, the national police chief, and Gen. Guillermo ChaveZ, his intelligence boss.

The statement did not specify whose phones had been tapped.

Gen. Oscar Naranjo, head of the judicial police, was named the new national police director. Naranjo has worked closely with U.S. drug enforcement and intelligence agencies against the country's drug cartels.

Naranjo's promotion means another 10 police generals above him will have to resign to make way according to the institution's hierarchy system, said a police spokesman.

While respected inside and out of Colombia, Naranjo has had his own embarrassments. Earlier this month a German court sentenced his younger brother to 5 1/2 years in prison for transporting 172 pounds of cocaine.

The wiretapping scandal broke over the weekend when news magazines reported the interception of phone conversations that supposedly showed jailed far-right warlords, who surrendered under a peace pact, continuing to commit crimes behind bars.

Following a probe into the recordings, the government said it discovered that members of the police's intelligence service were responsible. It said it further determined that other people - who were not under criminal investigation - had also had their calls wiretapped for the past couple of years.

Political opposition figures frequently complain of harassment by the security services, including the tapping of their phones. Journalists in Colombia assume their phone conversations are recorded by intelligence agencies, domestic and foreign.

Uribe's most vocal critic in congress, Sen. Gustavo Petro, told Caracol radio that with a massive increase of the security services and intelligence gathering, "it was a policy built by President Uribe who today is a victim of his own invention".

The highly decorated Castro took over the national police in November 2003, making him one of the longest survivors of the Uribe administration.

His predecessor was forced to resign after a series of corruption scandals involving different police departments.

The wiretapping scandal is hugely embarrassing to a government struggling over the arrests of some of Uribe's closest allies for allegedly benefiting from ties to the paramilitaries, who in a decade-long reign of terror killed thousands of suspected rebel sympathizers and stole land from tens of thousands of peasants.

The congressmen ordered arrested Monday brought to 14 the number of senators and representatives implicated in the so-called para-political scandal.

All were accused of benefiting - at the ballot box or otherwise - from close ties to the violent militias.

The scandal has badly marred the credibility of Uribe, the Bush administration's closest South American ally, and could jeopardize U.S. military aid to Colombia, the biggest recipient of assistance from Washington outside of the Middle East and Afghanistan.

The recordings of the far-right warlords' conversations has also put pressure on the peace accord. The deal was championed by Uribe but criticized by the opposition as too lenient on the illegal paramilitaries, responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the near half century civil conflict.

In Monday's statement, Santos said that the government had ordered the prosecutor's office to investigate the content of the warlords' intercepted phone calls and threatened to withdraw the peace deal's benefits, including limited prison time and the suspension of extradition warrants, for any eventually found guilty.