

# Colombia admits wiretapping operation

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

An illegal police wiretapping operation against journalists, opposition figures and government members included the man President Alvaro Uribe defeated in the last election, his defense minister acknowledged Tuesday.

Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos insisted that the Uribe administration was unaware of the police spying operation. "We don't know who ordered these interceptions and the government has never learned what they contain," he said.

Santos refused to reveal all the known victims of the wiretapping, but he did acknowledge that Carlos Gaviria of the Polo Democratico Alternativo party, who finished second in May 2006 presidential elections, was spied on. "That's as much as I'm going to say. I saw others but I don't think it merits giving the names," he told a news conference.

The wiretapping didn't surprise Gaviria, who told The Associated Press that it "all formed part of the dirty campaign against me."

Other Uribe opponents were incredulous at the official denials of responsibility. Uribe's national police chief, Gen. Jorge Daniel Castro, said he too had been unaware of the domestic spying campaign by his own officers during the lead-up to Uribe's re-election.

"It's impossible to think that Uribe didn't benefit from this," said Sen. Juan Fernando Cristo, a spokesman for the opposition Liberal party. "A middling rank officer didn't come up with this ... someone gave the order and someone received the transcripts."

The wiretapping scandal complicates Uribe's efforts to deal with an ever-widening political firestorm over the corrupting influence of illegal far-right militias in Colombia.

Twelve members of Congress, all but one of them Uribe allies, have been jailed on charges of colluding with paramilitaries who committed some 10,000 murders during a decade-long reign of terror, according to Colombia's chief prosecutor. A cousin of Uribe is among the congressmen under investigation, and more arrests are expected.

Moving quickly to contain the damage since a news magazine first reported about the spying operation over the weekend, Uribe forced Castro to resign Monday along with the police intelligence chief. Another 10 police generals were forced to retire to make way for the new commander, Oscar Naranjo, a one-star general.

But opposition leaders say the government still must explain who ordered the illegal wiretaps, who was monitored and who benefited from them.

And Naranjo said Tuesday he is committed to finding and punishing those responsible.

Political opponents and investigative journalists have complained for years of being harassed and wiretapped by Colombia's security forces, who have received U.S. eavesdropping equipment and training for criminal investigations against drug traffickers and leftist rebels.

Myles Frechette, U.S. ambassador to the country from 1994-97, complained at one point that his residence was so badly bugged, he couldn't make phone calls on weekends.

Asked whether he believes Uribe knew of the eavesdropping operation, Frechette said "experience would tell you that somebody close to him knew that stuff," he said.

Although Uribe enjoys widespread support among Colombia's elite for making cities safer and putting leftist rebels on the defense, he is facing an ever more skeptical U.S. Congress. His supporters worry the

scandal could jeopardize U.S. military aid to Colombia, the biggest recipient of assistance from Washington outside of the Middle East and Afghanistan.