

# Death-Squad Scandal Circles Closer to Colombia's President

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CALI, [Colombia](#), May 15 — President [Álvaro Uribe](#), the Bush administration's closest ally in Latin America, faces an intensifying scandal after a jailed former commander of paramilitary death squads testified Tuesday that Mr. Uribe's defense minister had tried to plot with the outlawed private militias to upset the rule of a former president.

Speaking at a closed court hearing in Medellín, Salvatore Mancuso, the former paramilitary warlord, said Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos had met with paramilitary leaders in the mid-1990s to discuss efforts to destabilize the president at the time, [Ernesto Samper](#), according to judicial officials.

Mr. Mancuso also said that Vice President Francisco Santos had met with paramilitary leaders in 1997 to discuss taking their operations to the capital, Bogotá.

A spokesman for the Defense Ministry said the minister would not comment. The spokesman said a meeting did take place in which Mr. Santos, the defense minister, discussed an effort to reach a peace plan between two guerrilla groups and the paramilitaries.

The vice president, who was traveling outside the country, was not immediately available for comment.

Mr. Uribe went on national television on Tuesday night, but did not address the allegations.

These revelations followed the disclosure this week of an illegal domestic spying program by the national police force and additional arrests of high-ranking political allies of Mr. Uribe on charges of ties to the paramilitaries.

The scandals also come as Mr. Uribe tries to win Congressional support in Washington for a trade agreement and the disbursement

of American counterinsurgency and antinarcotics aid. Mr. Uribe, though popular in Colombia, faces growing scrutiny in the United States Congress.

“This is going to hurt,” said Michael Shifter, vice president for policy for the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington. “As much as Colombia’s government tries to make the case that the system is working, what dominates perception is that there’s a lot of rot.”

Mr. Uribe tried to contain the newest scandal by forcing 12 generals in the national police to resign Monday over illegal wiretaps of political opponents, government officials and journalists.

Among those whose phones were tapped was Carlos Gaviria, an opposition leader who ran for president against Mr. Uribe last year. “This cannot happen under a democratic government,” Mr. Gaviria said.

The purge of the generals came after the newsmagazine *Semana* published transcripts of cellphone calls from imprisoned paramilitary leaders in which they orchestrated murders and cocaine deals. It was not clear whether these intercepted phone calls were part of the police surveillance program.

Mr. Santos, the defense minister, said neither he nor Mr. Uribe knew of the police wiretapping operation. Still, the report has hurt the credibility of Mr. Uribe’s government, already suffering from a perception of being soft on the paramilitaries.

Mr. Uribe was elected to a second term last year after being credited with making the country’s large cities safer and presiding over a growing economy. But the scandal over the paramilitary ties now threatens a growing number of legislators, business executives, military leaders and American corporations over their collaboration with the paramilitary death squads, which are classified as terrorist organizations by the United States State Department.

The paramilitaries, which are largely demobilized but regrouping in some areas, committed some of the worst atrocities in a long internal war. Prosecutors ordered the arrest on Monday of five

legislators for entering into a secret pact with the paramilitaries in 2001, bringing to 14 the total number of legislators implicated in such ties.