

## **URIBE: COLOMBIA OVERCOMES PARAMILITARISM**

The Miami Herald  
Jul. 20, 2007

BOGOTA, Colombia --

President Alvaro Uribe said Friday that Colombia's institutions are now free of infiltration and corruption by right-wing militias blamed for some of the nation's worst human rights abuses.

In a nationally televised address, Uribe said his government has "overcome paramilitarism."

"Today paramilitarism no longer exists because combat against leftist rebels is now, in practice, the exclusive work of our democratic institutions," Uribe declared in the speech to Congress marking Colombia's independence day.

Paramilitary bands emerged in the 1980s, bankrolled by ranchers to counter leftist rebels. They later became a dominant political force, got rich from drug trafficking and were branded a terrorist group by the U.S. State Department.

Uribe, who has put the hemisphere's most powerful leftist insurgency on the defensive with a military buildup fueled by hundreds of millions of U.S. tax dollars, also said collusion with the paramilitaries "was never institutional."

That claim contradicts extensive testimony by former paramilitaries, soldiers and victims of Colombia's long-running conflict who say the private militias often worked hand-in-glove with security forces.

The paramilitaries massacred thousands, including suspected rebel sympathizers and union leaders, in a more than decade-long reign of terror.

Some 31,000 paramilitaries demobilized under a 2003 peace pact with Uribe's government, though an associated scandal has questioned its integrity.

Of the 14 congressmen jailed since October on charges of benefiting from the paramilitary project, just one is not a member of Uribe's camp.

"Most of the deeds being investigated were committed prior to this government," Uribe said of paramilitary crimes, which are being adjudicated under the Justice and Peace law that grants reduced sentences to paramilitary bosses who confess.

Uribe acknowledged that some paramilitaries who demobilized have regrouped. An Organization of American States report issued this month found that as many as 15 percent of demobilized paramilitary combatants have rearmed.