

# Colombian soldiers get 40 years for union killings

By Hugh Bronstein  
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BOGOTA - Four Colombian soldiers were sentenced to 40 years each for murdering union officials in 2004, a decision the government said reflects its commitment to labor rights as it tries to clinch a U.S. free trade deal.

In a ruling announced on Tuesday, a judge said the soldiers shot three defenseless trade unionists in the eastern province of Arauco, put guns in their hands and arranged their bodies to make it look like they were rebels killed in combat.

"This proves what human rights groups and the United Nations had long reported, that some sectors of the army had the practice of killing civilians and passing them off as guerrillas," said political commentator Daniel Coronell.

The government said the ruling "confirms our policy of respecting the work of labor unions."

Trade talks with the United States have been bogged down over concerns about the rule of law in Colombia, which is engaged in a four-decade-old war against leftist guerrillas and reports more murders of union members than any other country.

Democrats in control of the U.S. Congress say they will not approve the pending trade pact until more is done to protect labor rights in Colombia.

The U.S. Democrats want President Alvaro Uribe's government to take a tougher stance against Colombia's right-wing paramilitaries who have cooperated with the army in their fight against the guerrillas.

Colombia has mounted a campaign in the United States to push for the trade deal and contain the damage done by a scandal linking some of Uribe's closest political allies with paramilitary death squads.

Last week Colombia said it would extradite demobilized paramilitary leader Carlos Mario Jimenez, alias Macaco, for running a drug smuggling ring from jail.

It was the government's hardest blow yet against militia leaders who signed a peace deal agreeing to turn in their guns and give up crime in exchange for reduced jail terms.

Uribe's international standing has been diminished by the scandal in which his former security chief is charged with providing a death list of union leaders to the paramilitaries.

But the president remains popular at home for cutting urban crime and sparking economic growth with his U.S.-funded crackdown on the guerrillas.