

Plot to Kill Colombian Witness Exposed

By Juan Forero
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BOGOTA, Colombia, April 25 -- The Colombian attorney general's office confirmed Friday that it had uncovered a plot to assassinate a key witness whose testimony has linked several Colombian congressmen, including President Álvaro Uribe's cousin, to death squads.

Authorities on Monday warned Jairo Castillo, 40, a former member of an ultra-right paramilitary group who now lives in Canada, that investigators had determined that two hit men posing as tourists would try to kill him. The attorney general's office then faxed him a warning Tuesday, and Castillo reported the threat to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

"I fear for my life," Castillo said by telephone from Canada, saying he believed that those he has testified against, members of the death squads, want him dead. "I know all about the network they use for murdering people," he said.

Police officials in Canada did not return phone calls seeking comment. Officials in the attorney general's office in Bogota confirmed that authorities learned of the plot against Castillo through an analysis of intelligence. José Gilberto Martínez of the witness protection program then alerted Castillo, who lives in Quebec province and has been granted political asylum in Canada.

The plot was uncovered the same week that the attorney general's office arrested former senator Mario Uribe, a political ally of the president. Castillo had accused the politician of having participated in meetings with paramilitary groups in which land grabs were orchestrated.

Castillo, in an interview with The Washington Post last April, said Mario Uribe was "a strong collaborator of the paramilitaries' " who wanted the groups' commanders to pressure people to sell him land at low prices.

Mario Uribe, who has been in jail in Bogota since the Costa Rican Embassy denied his request for political asylum Tuesday, could not be reached for comment. But last year he said, "I have nothing to do with paramilitary activities."

The president's cousin is among more than 60 members of Colombia's Congress who have been arrested or are under investigation for ties with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia. Prosecutors say Castillo's testimony helped build cases against several lawmakers.

Until a long disarmament of its fighters ended in 2006, the AUC, as the group was known, collaborated with corrupt politicians and army units to kill leftist guerrillas and their supporters. The group also assassinated leftist politicians, human rights activists and journalists, while infiltrating and sacking state institutions across northern Colombia.

As part of special judicial proceedings against former commanders, Colombian investigators have uncovered intimate details about the close links lawmakers had with paramilitary commanders. The attorney general's office and Supreme Court, which are carrying out the investigations, have found important witnesses, such as Castillo, from within the paramilitary movement.

Those witnesses are considered targets for assassins.

"For these mafias, no one is outside their reach when the goal is to protect their interests," said José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director for Human Rights Watch.

Castillo, who lives with his wife and family, said he has settled into a comfortable life in Canada, working as a machinist about an hour away from his home. But he said he fears that his past testimony, particularly the details he gave investigators about Mario Uribe, continue to make him a target.

"The whole state is against me," he said. "I've done a lot of damage, talking about politicians and paramilitary groups."