

Paramilitary Ties to Elite In Colombia Are Detailed

Commanders Cite State Complicity in Violent Movement

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MEDELLIN, Colombia -- Top paramilitary commanders have in recent days confirmed what human rights groups and others have long alleged: Some of Colombia's most influential political, military and business figures helped build a powerful anti-guerrilla movement that operated with impunity, killed civilians and shipped cocaine to U.S. cities.

The commanders have named army generals, entrepreneurs, foreign companies and politicians who not only bankrolled paramilitary operations but also worked hand in hand with fighters to carry them out. In accounts that are at odds with those of the government, the commanders have said their organization, rather than simply sprouting up to fill a void in lawless regions of the country, had been systematically built with the help of bigger forces.

"Paramilitarism was state policy," Salvatore Mancuso, a top paramilitary commander, said last week at a hearing in this city's Palace of Justice. "I am proof positive of state paramilitarism in Colombia."

In a scandal that began to gain momentum last fall, investigators have revealed dozens of cases of government collaboration with paramilitary groups. But Mancuso's testimony, buttressed with remarks made in a jailhouse interview by another top paramilitary commander, represents the first time that major players in the scandal have described in detail how the establishment joined forces with them.

Dozens of other top commanders are scheduled to testify before special judicial hearings in the coming days and weeks. Their testimony could help uncover the roots of the violence and drug trafficking that have plagued this country and commanded significant aid from Washington.

The administration of President Álvaro Uribe says that it has moved aggressively to dismantle the paramilitary groups, and that its determination to do so has made the investigations possible. The investigations, however, have resulted in a collective and painful catharsis for this country.

Ivan Duque, a strategist who helped formulate the ideology of the paramilitary coalition known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC, said in an interview that the group had alliances with anyone of influence in the regions where it operated.

"Could these three groups -- I'm talking about political people, economic people, the institutional people, meaning the military -- operate without having contact with the chief

of chiefs?" said Duque, speaking from the Itagui prison in Medellin, which houses dozens of paramilitary commanders. "That's impossible. That cannot be."

Chosen by his fellow commanders to speak to two American reporters, Duque said last week that, now that the paramilitary commanders have decided to air their dirty secrets, it also was time for the elites who helped the AUC to come clean. He said paramilitary groups had 17,000 armed fighters and more than 10,000 other associates, from cooks to drivers to computer technicians and informers. And he said it was plain for anyone to see.

"Men armed to the teeth," Duque said, gesticulating as he sat in an office provided by prison guards. "Could you really travel the whole territory so that no one could see them, notice them, that no one collaborate with them? That's why I talk of this county of hypocrisies, this society of lies."

Colombia's paramilitary movement began more than a generation ago to counter a growing Marxist guerrilla force and quickly turned into an irregular army that committed widespread massacres and assassinations, funding much of its operations with cocaine trafficking. The attorney general's office estimates the paramilitary fighters killed about 10,000 people from the mid-1990s until the early part of this decade, when its commanders began negotiating a disarmament with Uribe's government. The AUC is on the U.S. State Department list of terrorist organizations.

Now, in a crucial post-disarmament phase commanders to reveal their crimes in exchange for lenient treatment, Mancuso and others have begun to speak.

Mancuso's testimony came in the midst of a difficult week for Uribe, whose administration has received \$4 billion in mostly anti-drug and military aid from Washington since his election in 2002. Authorities arrested more congressional allies linked to paramilitary commanders, and then Mancuso began making his uncomfortable disclosures.

"Salvatore Mancuso spoke," the newsweekly *Semana* said, "and the country's political sector trembled."

Uribe remains highly popular in Colombia for lowering violence, but in Washington, Democrats on Capitol Hill are citing the recent disclosures in holding back support for a U.S. free-trade deal with Colombia.

So far, authorities have charged 14 members of Colombia's Congress, seven former lawmakers, the head of the secret police, mayors and former governors with having collaborated with paramilitary commanders. A dozen more current congressmen are under investigation. Most have been close Uribe allies who supported a constitutional amendment permitting his reelection and approved the lenient law, known as Justice and Peace, that governs the paramilitary disarmament.

Though Mancuso testified earlier this year to ordering murders and collaborating with military units, his testimony last week was much more explosive. He spoke of working closely with three former generals, all of whom have denied ties.

Mancuso's disclosures -- particularly about retired Gen. Rito Alejo del Rio, known in the state of Antioquia as the "pacifier" of the Uraba region -- are embarrassing for Uribe.

Though Uribe's predecessor, Andrés Pastrana, fired del Rio for collaborating with paramilitary groups, and though the United States rescinded his visa, Uribe has publicly eulogized him as an "honorable man" and defended him in Washington.

"I support all the generals who were in Antioquia," Uribe told Caracol radio earlier this year.

Perhaps Mancuso's biggest impact came when he said that two current ministers in Uribe's government, Vice President Francisco Santos and Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos, met with top paramilitary commanders in the 1990s. The two men, cousins in an influential family that owns El Tiempo, Colombia's most influential newspaper, had acknowledged long ago having met with the paramilitary members. Both said they did so to further peace in Colombia, not as part of a sinister plot, as Mancuso alleged.

Mancuso's allegations have prompted some commentators to note that the commander has besmirched as many people as possible while still falling far short of accounting for all of the crimes he has committed. "The strategy behind three days of testimony that tainted people, institutions and business must be understood," said El Tiempo in a Sunday editorial. "If the whole county is responsible, then no one is responsible."

Still, Attorney General Mario Iguaran has noted that, under a new system specially designed to try the commanders, they are required to tell the truth or face losing benefits acquired under terms of the disarmament law. "We should believe him," Iguaran told El Tiempo in an interview. "That's the principle of the Justice and Peace law."

In the interview, Duque, the strategist, explained that he's writing a book, tentatively titled "Stories of Silence," in which he plans to lay out the history of paramilitarism.

Once a small-town mayor and teacher, Duque spoke of how deep anti-Marxist sentiments led him to join the paramilitary groups. "I fell in love with this cause," he said.

Still, Duque called Colombia's war "dirty, slimy, anarchic, anachronistic," and said paramilitary fighters had killed countless civilians in massacres, contradicting long-held claims that those slain in the attacks were Marxist guerrillas. And he said that the paramilitary groups also murdered many union members for their "ideological posture," not for purported ties to guerrillas, as was claimed. "It was profoundly unjust," he said. But Duque, like Ma "Colombia would turn another page," he said, "if in an act of faith for our country we'd stand up and say straight out: 'Yes, I'm guilty. Yes, I'm responsible.'"

