

Union Killings Peril Trade Pact With Colombia

By Simon Romero
New York Times
April 14, 2008

BOGOTÁ, Colombia — Lucy Gómez still shudders when speaking of the murder of her brother, Leonidas, a union leader and bank employee who was beaten and stabbed to death here last month. His murder was part of a recent increase in killings of union members in Colombia, with 17 already this year.

Lucy Gómez and Luis Humberto Ortiz recently discussed the killing of Ms. Gómez's brother.

"I want those who did this to pay for their crime," said Ms. Gómez, 37, a seamstress, clutching a faded photograph of her brother, an employee of Citigroup's Colombian unit who was 42. "But I feel in danger myself," she said. "This is not a country where one can express such a wish without fear of being eliminated like my brother."

Ms. Gómez's fear and similar dread felt by union members and their families have long been features of labor organization during this country's four-decade civil war. More than 2,500 union members in Colombia have been killed since 1985, with fewer than 100 cases resulting in convictions, according to the National Labor School, a labor research group in Medellín.

Now those killings are emerging as a pressing issue in Washington as Democrats and Republicans battle over a trade deal with Colombia, the Bush administration's top ally in Latin America.

Colombia's government is already struggling to recover from the latest salvo in this fight, a vote by House Democrats on Thursday to snub President Bush and indefinitely delay voting on the deal.

Since President [Álvaro Uribe](#)'s conservative government took office in 2002, there has been a marked decline in union killings. That has accompanied a broader decline in overall murders and kidnappings as the civil war, between leftist rebels on one side and government forces and right-wing paramilitary groups on the other, has eased somewhat from its peak in the 1990s.

Still, 400 union members have been killed since 2002, and dozens of Mr. Uribe's supporters in Congress and his former intelligence chief are under investigation for ties to paramilitary death squads, which are classified as terrorists by the United States and responsible for some of the union killings.

Unions were often pulled into Colombia's war when faced with suspicions among paramilitaries that their ranks had been infiltrated with leftist guerrilla sympathizers. Or sometimes union members suffered simply because they opposed the paramilitaries' brutal assertion of control over large parts of Colombia.

In recent weeks a new wave of threats has emerged, from groups identifying themselves as a new generation of private armies, against human rights and labor organizers. Many of those organizers have opposed the trade deal, raising the specter of still more anti-union violence to come.

This year, 17 union members have been killed, a rate that suggests a substantial increase in anti-union violence compared with 10 such killings in the same period the year before. Several killings occurred in the days surrounding unusual protest marches against paramilitary forces here last month.

Complicating matters further, leftist guerrillas, who have sought to topple the government in Colombia's long war, have also made union officials targets for assassination. Union leaders who are in favor of the trade deal, largely from export-oriented industries, have suggested some of the recent killings may have been carried out by factions opposed to stronger trade ties with the United States.

Some supporters of the trade deal are quick to point out that union members are still statistically less likely to be killed than members of the general population. But that ignores geographic and socioeconomic factors — poor rural residents in the country's war zones bear a disproportionate risk from violence — and it is clear that union officials continue to be specific targets for intimidation and violence.

The case of Leonidas Gómez, Ms. Gómez's brother, is one of several examples of union officials killed in recent weeks who were involved in organizing rare protest marches last month against paramilitaries. Government investigators here said they were investigating all the recent killings but had not yet identified those responsible.

Carlos Burbano was a vice president in the hospital workers' union of the municipality of San Vicente del Caguán in southern Colombia who disappeared March 9. His body was found four days later in a garbage dump in an area considered paramilitary territory. Mr. Burbano, who had received threats before from paramilitaries, had been stabbed multiple times and burned with acid.

Like Mr. Burbano, Mr. Gómez, a member of the Bank Workers' Union here in Bogotá, was an outspoken critic of the paramilitaries. He had also traveled throughout Colombia to speak against the trade deal, which he expected to raise salaries of senior Citigroup executives while eroding the benefits of employees, said Luis Humberto Ortiz, a fellow union official and Citigroup employee.

Mr. Gómez, last seen at a meeting with leftist politicians on the night of March 4, was found dead in his apartment on March 8, with stab wounds and his hands tied behind his

back. Missing from his apartment were his laptop computer, U.S.B memory sticks and cash from his pockets, said his sister, Ms. Gómez.

Mr. Gómez's family and his colleagues from the Bank Workers' Union said they were convinced that he had been killed because of his union activities. But Maria Isabel Nieto, a vice minister of justice, said in an interview that investigators could not rule out a "crime of passion."

Such uncertainty surrounds many union killings here, and critics of the unions insist that some of the killings are simple criminal cases rather than political violence. Union leaders say that despite a recent increase in murder convictions in cases involving union deaths, there are still relatively few convictions and that prison terms have been too lenient.

"Colombia has a horrible record of bringing the vast majority of those responsible for these killings to justice," said José Miguel Vivanco, Americas Director for [Human Rights Watch](#).

Some of the killings linger over commercial ties with the United States, Colombia's largest trading partner. Paramilitaries, for instance, killed three union leaders in 2001 who were employed by Drummond Company, an Alabama coal producer with operations in northern Colombia. A jury in Birmingham, Ala., cleared Drummond last year of claims that it was responsible for the killings.

No one denies that assassinations of union members have dropped significantly from the 1990s, the worst years of Colombia's war, when more than 200 such killings a year were reported.

In 2007, union killings fell to 39 from 72 the previous year, according to the National Labor School in Medellín. They were expected to decline further this year until the recent spike in killings. (Figures from Colombia's government are often lower because of methods that refrain from including killings when motives are unclear; so far this year the government has counted 15 union killings compared with 17 documented by labor groups.)

"We must remember that these killings are not a matter of state policy," Vice President Francisco Santos said in an interview here in March. "On the contrary, we abhor these acts and are doing everything we can to bring the number down as low as possible," he said, citing an unprecedented increase in prosecutions of union killings in the past year.

For 2008, the government budgeted \$45.7 million for protecting people at risk of assassination, of which about a third goes to threatened union members. Under the program, more than 200 unionists have armored cars or bodyguards, and more than 170 union buildings and homes of union members have bulletproofing improvements.

Still, revelations of ties between the private militias and some of Mr. Uribe's most influential political supporters haunt official efforts to lower union killings. For instance, Jorge Noguera, Mr. Uribe's former intelligence chief, is under investigation for handing over lists to paramilitaries of union leaders and other left-wing figures who were singled out for assassination.

Widespread ambivalence, bordering at times on hostility, persists in Colombian society over the role of unions. Many Colombians still view unions as redoubts of privilege for union leaders at a time when the private sector is driving an economic boom, through exports of legal commodities like coal and illicit ones like cocaine.

"Why don't the Democrats worry about Chinese products that take jobs away from Americans or about trade with countries with terrible human rights violations?" asked Rafael Jordán Rueda, 54, a management consultant here. "I'm completely convinced Colombia has become a victim of the struggle for power in the presidential elections in the United States."

Faced with the delays in Washington, senior government officials here are somewhat more cautious in expressing their shock at the possibility that Colombia might be denied the trade pact. "If the United States takes the rug out from under us, we would look like imbeciles internally and in the region," Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said in an interview.

El Espectador, an influential weekly newspaper in Bogotá, said in an editorial on Sunday that such a move would be misguided. "Blocking a tool like the free trade agreement, which seeks to foment development, does not seem like the best mechanism for defending Colombian trade unionists," the editorial said. Instead, the newspaper suggested redirecting American aid to strengthen the Colombian judicial system's investigations of human rights violations.

Still, for union leaders like Rafael Boada who are living with threats, the focus on political violence is welcomed as part of the debate over the trade pact. Mr. Boada, a bank employee in Bucaramanga in northeastern Colombia, escaped March 7 after two men on a motorcycle shot at him, their bullets lodging in the windshield of his car.

"We are a stigmatized group," said Mr. Boada, explaining his role in helping to organize last month's march against paramilitaries. "I am certain this happened because of my union activities."