

# Colombian Soldiers Said to Assassinate Union Leaders

New York Times

September 7, 2004

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BOGOTÁ, Colombia, Sept. 7 - The attorney general's office in Colombia said late Monday that Colombian soldiers assassinated three union leaders last month, an account that contrasts sharply with the army's earlier claim that the three men were Marxist rebels killed in a firefight.

The attorney general's human rights unit ordered on Monday the arrest of an army officer, two soldiers and a civilian who participated in the killings of Jorge Eduardo Prieto, Leonel Goyeneche and Hector Alirio Martinez on Aug. 5 in Saravena, a town long besieged by leftist rebels. Since 2002, United States military trainers have been training Colombian soldiers in Saravena in counterinsurrection techniques, though it was unclear if the Americans trained the army unit accused of killing the unionists.

"The evidence shows that a homicide was committed," Luis Alberto Santana, the deputy attorney general, said in a news conference on Monday. "We have ruled out that there was combat."

The attorney general's announcement vindicated union leaders in Colombia and Europe who said the army had killed three defenseless union activists and then fabricated a story about rebel involvement.

"It's clear that we were never wrong, saying that they were assassinated by members of the Colombian army," said Domingo Tovar, who coordinates human rights activities for the Central Workers Union, the country's largest labor confederation. "The proof is that the attorney general's office has ordered arrests and it looks like the investigation will continue and lead to more arrests."

The attorney general's announcement came days after Secretary of State Colin L. Powell warned the Colombian government that it must curtail rights abuses or risk losing aid. Today, Vice President Francisco Santos acknowledged the government's mistake: "Yes, we were wrong."

Colombia is by far the world's most dangerous country for union members, with 94 killed last year and 47 slain as of Aug. 25 of this year, according to the National Union School, a research and educational center in Medellin. Most of those killings were by right-wing paramilitary leaders closely linked to rogue army units. Worldwide, 123 unionists were slain last year, according to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, a Brussels-based group.

The number of killings of union members has dropped in Colombia, from a high of 222 in 1996, but union leaders, foreign diplomats and political analysts say the government has done little to improve safety - underscored by the fact that the union leaders killed in Saravena had asked the government for better security.

Paramilitary groups, which use death squads to erode support for rebel groups, have accused unions of working hand in hand with guerrillas. And rebel groups have, to be sure, drawn

membership in part from unions. But union leaders have also made enemies of powerful forces in Colombia's highly stratified society, both for their leftist rhetoric and their harsh criticism of fiscally conservative governments bent on privatizing industries and holding down labor costs.

The three union leaders in Saravena had called for more protection in the weeks before their deaths, saying that they had been marked for assassination.

After their deaths, army officials said the men had opened fire on security forces who had come to the home of one of them with arrest warrants charging them with ties to rebel groups. When union leaders in Bogotá and overseas defended the men, top Colombian government officials, including Defense Minister Jorge Alberto Uribe, insisted that the unions were linked to the National Liberation Army, the country's second-largest rebel group.

But in a news conference today, Mr. Uribe said the army would abide by the attorney general's investigation.

Monica Trujillo contributed reporting from Bogotá for this article.