

Colombia Sends 13 Paramilitary Leaders to U.S.

*Extradition Likely to Benefit
Alleged Allies in Legislature*

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CARACAS, Venezuela, May 13 — Colombia's government extradited 13 top paramilitary warlords to the United States on Tuesday, effectively handing over the most brutal commanders of the country's once-fearsome paramilitary movement.

President Alvaro Uribe said the commanders, all of whom had been incorporated into a government-run peace process, had continued to traffic cocaine while in custody and had failed to cooperate with authorities investigating their role in numerous atrocities. The extraditions were a sharp departure for a government that until recently had touted the effectiveness of special tribunals designed to try commanders for crimes committed in Colombia's long, shadowy conflict.

"The country has been generous with them, but the government cannot tolerate their return to crime, their failure to truly and efficiently collaborate with justice," Uribe said in a nationally televised speech.

Since Uribe took power in 2002, the government has turned over 682 people to the United States, most of them rank-and-file traffickers and low-level commanders. The Bush administration has celebrated Colombia's record, and on Tuesday, officials hailed the latest extraditions. "It shows the power, determination and progress of what's happening in Colombia," John Walters, the White House drug czar, said in an interview from Washington.

But the families of victims of paramilitary violence and groups that investigate paramilitarism said the extraditions will make it far more difficult, if not impossible, for Colombian prosecutors to solve countless crimes and untangle the structure of the paramilitary movement. Among those who could benefit are scores of politicians accused of helping the paramilitary members expand their reach, including the president's cousin, former senator Mario Uribe.

"It becomes harder to ask them about their ties with politicians," said León Valencia, who with several other academics wrote "Para-Politics," an acclaimed book detailing the spread of paramilitarism. "The agenda of the United States is drug trafficking, and our agenda is crimes against humanity, the political scandal and learning the truth."

Wearing handcuffs and bulletproof vests, the 13 former commanders, along with a 14th suspected trafficker, were placed aboard a Drug Enforcement Administration plane early Tuesday and flown to the United States, where they were wanted in Washington, New York, Miami and Texas.

The commanders included Salvatore Mancuso, Rodrigo Tovar, Diego Fernando Murillo, Hernán Giraldo and Ramiro Vanoy. Along with others, they have been accused of ordering the slayings of thousands of people over a generation, from poor peasants to leftist politicians, journalists to union activists.

Their organization, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, at one time operated an army of nearly 12,000 heavily armed fighters and was blacklisted as a terrorist group by the United States in 2001. The group had ostensibly been formed to fight Marxist guerrillas. While it did significantly weaken two guerrilla groups, its members also seized prized farmland while morphing into a leading cocaine-trafficking network.

In 2003, the commanders began to disarm as part of negotiations with Uribe's government, which the militia leaders believed would be soft on them. The government and its supporters in Colombia's Congress, many of whom were later identified as having secret links with paramilitary members, approved a law governing the demobilizations.

But human rights groups criticized the measure as a near amnesty, and Colombia's highest court later struck down much of the law. The court also added new conditions forcing commanders to confess to crimes and provide reparations to victims, in exchange for reduced prison terms. The government, in the meantime, had shelved the extradition of paramilitary commanders.

But after months of testimony, no top commander had been convicted. And in long depositions, commanders such as Murillo, known as Don Berna, and Tovar, best known as Jorge 40, gave little insight into their criminal networks and provided scant information about their ill-gotten gains.

The lack of cooperation did not go unnoticed in Washington. A May 2005 declassified U.S. government cable obtained by the National Security Archives, a nonprofit research group, and provided to The Washington Post, said Murillo, after joining peace talks, "subsequently began to stall negotiations and launched a campaign to project his influence in the political arena."

Another American document from August 2005 noted with concern how drug traffickers were "buying a seat" at government negotiations in order to take advantage of government concessions. In other 2005 documents, American officials wrote about how paramilitary groups were rearming as commanders recruited unemployed Colombians to fulfill demobilization quotas.

Victims' rights organizations had taken to protesting the process, and beleaguered prosecutors appeared incapable of uncovering the details of thousands of crimes.

The extraditions come as an expanding investigation of links between paramilitary groups and lawmakers has led to the arrests of more than 30 members of Congress. Thirty other lawmakers are under investigation.

While rights advocates voiced concern Tuesday that the extradited commanders would cease all cooperation on investigations into rights abuses, Uribe and U.S. officials said that the inquires would continue.

Among those who are skeptical of the claims is Yolanda Becerra, who heads a women's rights organization in a region of central Colombia that for years was hard hit by paramilitary death squads.

"There are so many victims, so many crimes, so much democracy that has been destroyed by these men," Becerra said by telephone from the city of Barrancabermeja. "What we the victims want to know is the truth: who financed them, who directed them, who ordered them."