

ARMY COMMANDERS FIRED FOR KILLINGS RECEIVED U.S. TRAINING AND ASSISTANCE

By John Lindsay-Poland

Colombian Army commander Mario Montoya resigned today, in the wake of a scandal over army killings of civilians that a United Nations official on Saturday called "systematic and widespread." A protégé of the United States, Montoya was an architect of the "body count" counterinsurgency strategy that many analysts believe led to the systematic civilian killings.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe announced the dismissal of 27 military officers on October 29, including three generals and 11 colonels and lieutenant colonels, for human rights abuses. The abuses include involvement in the killings of dozens of youths who were recruited in Bogotá slums and shortly after were reported as killed in combat by the army, hundreds of miles away.

The dismissal is a positive action, which we applaud. Officers responsible for killing civilians must face consequences, or the killing will continue.

Human rights organizations have documented more than 500 reported extrajudicial killings by the army since the beginning of last year. This week, Amnesty International issued a scathing report on worsening conditions in Colombia, including massive displacement of internal refugees, increased extrajudicial killings, and attacks on human rights defenders. A New York Times front-page story on October 30 also highlighted the problem, and cited FOR's research on extrajudicial executions, as did a Los Angeles Times story.

But it was the report that poor Bogota youths whose families said they had disappeared, had been recruited by the army or others, then reported as dead in combat, that detonated the issue. Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos admitted that the army still harbors "holdouts who are demanding bodies for results."

The dismissal of officers also demonstrates extensive U.S. complicity with the abuses. The United States gave military training directly or assisted the units of nearly all of the officers implicated in the killings. At least eleven of the officers, including Brigadier Generals Paulino Coronado

Gamez and José Cortes Franco, were trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas, and Cortes even served as an instructor at the school in 1994. Most of the officers commanded units that had been 'vetted' by U.S. officials for human rights abuses and approved to receive assistance in 2008, or received training for some officers, in spite of extensive reports that their units had carried out murders of civilians.

Yet the dismissal, which focuses on officers operating in a northeastern region of Colombia where the disappeared youths were found, addresses only a small number of the army units responsible for civilian killings. In the oil-rich Casanare and Arauca departments, the U.S.-trained 16th and 18th Brigades have reportedly committed dozens of killings, as has the U.S.-supported 9th Brigade in the coffee-growing department of Huila. In southeastern Valle and Cauca, the Third Brigade's Codazzi Battalion receives U.S. support and reportedly committed at least nine killings of civilians last year, as may be implicated in firing on peaceful indigenous protesters this month. In southern Meta and Guaviare departments, the United States supports multiple mobile brigades in areas where the army has committed a large number of civilian killings.

Army chief Montoya is replaced by Major General Gilberto Rocha Ayala. In 2003-04, Rocha commanded the army's Second Brigade in northeastern Colombia. Under his command, Colonel Hernán Mejía, then commander of the La Popa Battalion, is under investigation by the Colombian Prosecutor General for reportedly engineering the killing of paramilitaries and passing them off as guerrillas. Rocha also commanded the army's Ninth Brigade in 2002-03, with jurisdiction in Huila province, where human rights groups report some six extrajudicial executions occurring during his command. Rocha Ayala was an instructor at the School of the Americas in 1995.

In addition, most of the army's current leadership - including 17 of 24 brigade commanders - were trained by the United States at the School of the Americas, on top of U.S. training provided to Colombian officers at dozens of other military schools and in Colombia. Washington is involved in the army's human rights problem through and through, and journalists, activists, and Congressional staff ought to ask when the United States will stop financing such murderous criminal operations. We believe the time is now.

