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Death Squads, Murder and U.S. Corruption in Colombia

by DANIEL KOVALIK
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News broke this week, though not very widely here, that Francisco Santos, who served as Colombia's Vice-President under President Alvaro Uribe from 2002 to 2010, met three times with leaders of the right-wing paramilitary organization known as the AUC. Present at Santos' meetings with the AUC – an organization designated by the U.S. State Department as a “terrorist organization” since September 10, 2001 – was the infamous founder of the AUC, Carlos Castaño. The news of these meetings was originally broke by Colombia's Caracol Radio, and was picked up by very few U.S. news outlets, including Fox News (Latino), citing the EFE news service, and Colombia Reports.

According to EFE and Fox News (Latino), Santos met with the AUC during the 1990's, before becoming Vice-President, but during his tenure as editor-in-chief of Colombia's main newspaper – *El Tiempo*. During one of these meetings, Santos told the AUC to kill “all those SOBs that are taking this country.” However, at the same time, Santos made it clear that the AUC should not “disappear” these targets as this would cause problems with the foundation he created to fight kidnapping and to provide aid to the families of kidnapping victims. (And you thought Lance Armstrong had troubling issues with his charity?!)

EFE and Fox News (Latino), without proper attribution to CounterPunch I might add, relate what I had first revealed on these pages months ago – i.e., that “AUC fighters killed more than 250,000 people over the course of two decades, according to a cable disseminated by Wikileaks.”

There are a number of notable issues which these new revelations about Santos raise. First of all, Santos, as Vice-President, acted as one of Colombia's chief lobbyists on Capitol Hill for the Colombia Free Trade Agreement – an Agreement introduced to Congress by President Obama (despite his 2008 campaign promises not to seek passage of the FTA) and passed by the U.S. Congress in the fall of 2011. I know this fact well, for I personally met with Santos at the U.S. Embassy in Washington D.C. back in 2007 when he was pushing hard for FTA passage. Santos had invited members of the U.S. labor community to talk to him at the Embassy in a futile attempt to win our support for the FTA. At this meeting, Santos tried to assure us that the Colombian government was doing everything it could to stem the violence against Colombian trade unionists, and that this violence should not be viewed as an impediment to the FTA. Santos seemed like an affable enough guy, but we agreed to disagree on this issue. As it turns out, we in the U.S. labor movement were right to stand our ground, Santos' pleas notwithstanding. Of course, it was Santos who ultimately won out, obtaining passage not under George W. Bush, but under Obama.

That Santos, who openly urged AUC death squads to carry out killings, was the standard bearer for Colombia's FTA lobbying efforts is emblematic of what the FTA is all about. In short, the FTA is indeed about death, for it will accelerate the continued displacement of Colombians (in particular, indigenous and Afro-Colombians) from their land in order to make way for multi-national exploitation. In addition, the FTA — as NAFTA before it which led to the displacement of 1.3 million small farmers, and as “free trade” with Haiti which, as Clinton himself admitted, destroyed the ability of Haitian farmers to grow food – will undermine the livelihood of small farmers in Colombia who will be unable to compete with the U.S.'s cheap, subsidized food dumped tariff-free into Colombia under the FTA's agricultural provisions. This, in turn, will lead to the displacement of small farmers in Colombia. And, all of this displacement will only add to Colombia's internally displaced population which is now at over 5 million persons – the world's largest.

Indeed, as NACLA reported on October 10, 2011, just before FTA passage, “The alarms are already sounding among many sectors in Colombia, especially the producers of rice, corn, wheat, and dairy products. Colombia's Minister of Agriculture, Juan Camilo Restrepo, said that about 350,000 small farmers are expected to be among the first to be hit by the loss of protection to the import of cheap U.S. agricultural products. ‘We are not prepared for the FTA,’ said Restrepo.” Ready or not, the FTA has come to Colombia, thanks to advocates like Francisco Santos.

What is most notable and disturbing about the substance of Santos' meetings with the AUC is his ready acknowledgement of the AUC's preferred method of eliminating perceived enemies of the state – disappearance. Santos had to qualify his exhortation to kill to exclude disappearances because he knew very well that the AUC would naturally resort to such crimes as a first resort. Of course, many of us in the human rights field know this to be true, given Colombia status as the Hemisphere's leader in disappearances at anywhere between 50,000 and 250,000 disappeared in the last 2 decades. However, that the man who would hold the second highest office in Colombia so openly accepted this fact shows how integral this crime is to the Colombian government's maintenance of power.

Of course, what is also true is how readily Colombia's chief patron, the United States, not only accepts, but indeed encourages disappearances as a tactic of rule throughout this Hemisphere. On this note, I leave you with a quote from COFADHES, Honduras' chief advocacy group for the families of the disappeared in that country. COFADHES explains on its website that disappearances, along with torture and murder, are the "emblematic," "systematic and selective forms of human rights violations" carried out by U.S.-backed states in Latin America "following the instructions of the U.S." in the pursuit of the U.S.'s "doctrine of NATIONAL SECURITY." As COFADHES notes correctly, it was this National Security doctrine, and the crimes which go with it, which were first carried out in South America, most famously in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Chile, and then in Central American countries like Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Sadly, it is in Colombia where this doctrine has been carried out now continuously, as we learn best from Noam Chomsky, since 1962.

And, this doctrine, and such crimes as disappearances and torture which go hand in hand with it, will not stop in this Hemisphere until the people of the U.S. recognize that they are being carried out at the behest of our own government, and until the people of the U.S. then say "*basta*," or "no more" to such crimes against humanity being carried out in our name.