

“School of the Americas” Generals Face Criminal Charges In Colombia

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Two Colombian generals, both of whom received training at the U.S. Army’s “School of The Americas”(SOA) at Ft. Benning, Ga., have been accused by Colombian authorities of crimes involving narcotics and collaborating with criminal paramilitary groups, according to a report in the June 15th issue of *The Nation* magazine.

Brig. Gen. Pauxelino Latorre has been charged “with laundering millions of dollars for a paramilitary drug ring, and prosecutors say they are looking into his activities as head of the Seventeenth Brigade,” investigative journalist Teo Ballve reports. He notes that criminal probes repeatedly linked his unit “to illegal paramilitary groups that had brutally killed thousands” of Colombian farmers in an effort to seize their land for palm oil production.

Another general, Rito Alejo Del Rio, former Seventeenth Brigade leader, is in jail on charges of collaborating with paramilitaries, gangs that have been responsible for widespread atrocities. He also received training at SOA.

Various firms currently engaged in palm oil development since 2002 apparently have received \$75 million in U.S. Agency for International Development money under “Plan Comombia,” Ballve writes. And some of the firms appear to be tied to narco-traffickers, “in possible violation of federal law.” The writer notes Colombia’s paramilitaries are on the State Department’s list of foreign “terrorist” organizations.

“Plan Colombia is fighting against drugs militarily at the same time it gives money to support palm, which is used by paramilitary mafias to launder money,” *The Nation* quotes Colombian Senator Gustavo Petro, as saying. “The United States is implicitly subsidizing drug traffickers.”

President Alvaro Uribe has urged Colombians to increase palm production from 750,000 to 15 million acres to cash in on the expected boom in biofuels. “Oil palm, or African palm, is one of the few aid-funded crops whose profits can match coca profits,” Ballve notes. But human rights groups have long accused palm companies, notably Urapalma, of cultivating stolen lands, he adds.

Senator Patrick Leahy has attached an amendment to this year’s Plan Colombia funding (for 2010) to ban palm projects that “cause the forced displacement of local people” but in the bill’s current draft, Ballve says, Leahy’s amendment is marked for deletion.

Urapalma submitted a grant application to the Bogota, Colombia, offices of ARD Inc., a rural

development contractor based in Burlington, Vt., which *The Nation* reports does business in 43 countries and has received \$330 million in revenue from USAID. In January, 2003, ARD began administering \$41.5 million for USAID's Colombia Agribusiness Partnership Program and Urapalma was one of its beneficiaries. Urapalma has been accused of taking land illegally from Colombian peasants.

In July, 2003, just before Urapalma's USAID application, Colombia's national daily *El Tiempo* reported that "the African palm projects in the southern banana region of Uraba are dripping with blood, misery, and corruption." The region is where Urapalma is active.

The Nation article goes on to report that in 2003, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights singled out Urapalma for collusion with paramilitaries in these words: "Since 2001, the company Urapalma SA has initiated cultivation of the oil palm on approximately 1,500 hectares of the collective land of these communities, with the help of 'the perimetric and concentric armed protection of the Army's Seventeenth Brigade and armed civilians'", i.e., paras. One might ask, what is SOA going to do next with U.S. taxpayers' dollars?

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