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Colombia: Momentum Against Paramilitaries Lost (U)

Before the March 23 kidnapping of five Americans by leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrillas and the army's humiliating defeat by FARC forces in early March, President Samper had begun to make good on his December pledge to attack Colombia's increasingly active and expanding network of right-wing armed paramilitary groups. With the military's focus back on the FARC insurgency, sustained progress against the paramilitaries and their "dirty war" probably will have to wait until the government shows it can control rampant guerrilla violence. (C)

Twenty-two paramilitary members who surrendered to the army on February 7 implicated military personnel in paramilitary activity. Police subsequently arrested one of the top deputies of Colombia's most notorious paramilitary leader, Carlos Castano. On February 24 police in Bogota arrested "Emerald Czar" Victor Carranza--who has been involved in illegal financial activity, including drug trafficking--on charges of organizing a right-wing death squad. On March 1 authorities captured another 11 paramilitary members in the central Magdalena Valley, a breeding ground for paramilitaries. (S)

Motivation

Though the government's anti-paramilitary activity coincided with some senior army personnel changes in northern Colombia, the crackdown may have been driven by larger political and economic interests. The image of the government and the armed forces has been badly damaged by charges of collusion with the paramilitaries, diminishing prospects for gaining international military assistance and training needed to confront successfully the expanding guerrilla presence. In a recent article in Colombia's leading news magazine, a top journalist frequently critical of US policy acknowledged that the State Department's recent annual Human Rights Report for 1997 was correct in its negative assessment of Colombia. (C)

In addition, international business interests are increasingly concerned about the chilling effect the paramilitaries' activities have on investment. Carranza's arrest occurred on the final day of a government-sponsored international congress aimed at improving the image of Colombia's lucrative emerald trade. Multinational oil company executives had also expressed concern about the expansion of Carranza's paramilitary forces. (S)

Outlook

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Momentum against the paramilitaries appears to have been lost; there have been no reports of anti-paramilitary activity since March 1, when the FARC killed 46 soldiers and captured 23 in the army's most disastrous defeat in 35 years of civil war. That setback, along with the FARC's recent high-profile kidnapping activities, promises to focus the army's attention on counterinsurgency while adding momentum to those in the government and military who argue that paramilitaries are a useful tool against the insurgents. (C)

For related analysis, see "[Colombia: Kidnapping Update \(U\)](#)," April 7, 1998.

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