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Colombia: Former head of the army must be investigated for human rights violations

Head of the Colombian army General Mario Montoya resigned yesterday in the midst of a scandal linking members of the security forces to the killing of civilians.

Human rights organizations have linked General Montoya to a number of cases of human rights violations. These allegations must be independently and effectively investigated by the civilian courts, and General Montoya's resignation must not be used as an excuse to bury them.

Among the allegations against General Montoya are that in 2002 he collaborated with paramilitary groups in Medellín during efforts to wrest control of parts of the city from guerrilla groups. This military operation, known as "Operación Orión" was marked by repeated human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, committed against civilians in the neighbourhoods affected.

In the early 2000s, troops under General Montoya's command in the department of Putumayo, in the south of the country, were also accused of collaborating with paramilitary groups. Hundreds of bodies, many of them mutilated, have in recent years been found buried in areas in Putumayo which were at the time under the control of the security forces and paramilitary groups.

Background

Last week, the scandal involving the alleged killing of dozens of young men from Soacha, near the capital Bogotá, who were subsequently falsely presented by the army as "guerrillas killed in combat", cost 27 members of the security forces, including three generals, their jobs.

These latest killings are only the tip of a very large iceberg. Amnesty International, and other Colombian and international human rights groups, have for years been denouncing extrajudicial executions in Colombia, a practice which continues to be widespread and systematic.

Only now has the Colombian government acknowledged a problem exists, but it is still failing to admit the real scale of the problem. Thousands of civilians have been killed or forcibly disappeared by the security forces over the last 40 years of the conflict. All allegations of extrajudicial executions must be effectively investigated by the civilian justice system.

All parties to Colombia's long-running armed conflict - guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and the security forces - have been responsible for serious human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.

General Montoya's resignation comes only a week after Amnesty International published an in-depth report looking at the human rights situation in Colombia .

For a copy of the report "'Leave us in peace!' Targeting civilians in Colombia 's internal armed conflict", please see:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR23/023/2008/en>

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