

Colombia Must Uphold Law While Waging War September 6th, 2002

Letter to the Editor

By Jan Schakowsky

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In her Aug. 23 Americas column, Mary Anastasia O'Grady branded people who defend human rights as sympathizers of Colombian terrorists. This is absurd. I was particularly troubled by the quote from Colombia's attorney general, Luis Camilo Osorio, in which he attributes the human-rights criticisms of the Colombian military, which have been repeated time and time again in reports by the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as "a war to discredit the authorities . . . an international movement not only by NGOs but by some European states, Sweden, Norway, France in the past and some groups in the U.S., including some Democratic congressmen."

I would like to remind Mr. Osorio that many of the 45 signers of the letter have been emphatic supporters of U.S. aid to his own institution, to the attorney general's human-rights office and the judicial system in general. It just shows that funding does no good where there is a lack of political will.

As Colombia's highest-ranking law-enforcement official, Mr. Osorio has the duty to take seriously credible allegations of human-rights abuses and collusion with abusive paramilitary forces by members of the Colombian Armed Forces. Instead of fulfilling those obligations, he has removed experienced prosecutors from sensitive cases, forced the resignation of other dedicated judicial personnel (including the two mentioned in the article), and imagined a conspiracy behind those who remind him to just do his job.

I stand by the assertions in the letter regarding the records of Gens. Rodrigo Quinones and Rito Alejo del Rio. No "low-level investigator" found that Gen. Quinones was guilty of ordering the murders of at least 57 people; it was the Office of Special Investigations of Colombia's Inspector General. Gen. Quinones appealed the decision; the case lapsed after frightened investigators let a time limit pass without a decision. The case against Gen. del Rio includes solid evidence, some from the general's own subordinates, tying him to support for illegal paramilitary groups. President Pastrana dismissed Gen. del Rio and the U.S. government canceled his visa.

I object to the explanation that Mr. Osorio gave for the events that led to the general's arrest and release. The release resulted from a judge's controversial ruling that human-rights prosecutors cannot investigate generals, a ruling that helps to ensure that such crimes go unpunished.

Colombia's government has the absolute right to wage war against the brutal FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces) guerrillas. I agree with Ms. O'Grady's account of the atrocious

recent actions by the FARC. My colleagues and I insist, however, that Colombia must wage this war while upholding the law. That means that the Colombian security forces must stop resorting to dirty war tactics like aiding and abetting or tolerating the paramilitary forces that commit the majority of the killings of civilians in Colombia today. Ties between members of the Colombian military and the paramilitaries are extensively documented. What we demand is simple: that those ties be broken.

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