



Extrajudicial killings mar new Colombia presidency

(AFP) – Aug 4, 2010

BOGOTA — Juan Manuel Santos will inherit Colombia's "false-positive" scandal of grisly army killings when he takes over the presidency this Saturday.

The scandal, in which the army presented civilians as guerrillas or paramilitaries who had died in combat, overlapped some of the period when Santos was defense minister, from 2006-2009.

The victims are now believed to be in their thousands.

Details first emerged at the end of 2008 after the disappearance of 14 young civilians in Soacha, near Bogota, whom the army falsely reported as combat deaths in the northeast of the country.

Rights group such as Amnesty International denounced the cases and, as the scandal grew, Santos ordered a purge of the army which saw more than 30 military officials, including three generals, fired.

Legal officials have now documented some 2,355 victims, reported since the middle of the 1980s.

Around 1,200 members of the military are linked to the investigations, including 234 who have been sentenced.

According to rights groups, the killings allowed units to fabricate results and officers to gain promotion, and were boosted by a 2005 military directive which sought to reward combat victories.

Although Santos only took over as defense minister in 2006, rights groups still hope to see him in court.

Internal army sources say the directive was abolished soon after it was issued, but military officials on trial said it continued to hold sway regardless.

"Santos applied the directive," said Agustin Jimenez, from the Colombia, Europe, United States Coordination rights group.

Ministers can be investigated in Colombia, Jimenez underlined, adding that his organization would seek to take both Santos and outgoing President Alvaro Uribe to court.

It "will be the most delicate or vulnerable (legal scandal) of the next government," said analyst Juan Carlos Eastman, from the Javeriana and Tadeo Lozano universities in Bogota.

Existing criticism of Santos' notoriously tough stance on rebel groups as defense minister has been eclipsed by the "false positive" cases, Eastman said.

Military sources suggested Santos had shaken up the top military brass -- including the naming of an admiral rather than a general to head the forces -- in order to reduce pressure on the army in the scandal.

Meanwhile, Fernando Escobar, the ombudsman for Soacha who denounced the first cases, underlined that "they still haven't given official explanations."

There were two types of responsibility -- political and penal -- among officials who had failed to impose checks to avoid the killings, Escobar said.

Colombia's Attorney General Guillermo Mendoza on Wednesday dropped a preliminary investigation into Santos over the killings, his office said.

The probe, which was brought in February by journalist Felipe Zuleta, was dropped due to a lack of evidence, an official said.

Santos has said that top officials have already acted to turn a page on the scandal.

"The government acted with determination to correct and finish with a really horrifying problem," Santos said.

"We were the first to support the legal process to condemn the guilty."



Colombian President-elect Juan Manuel Santos smiles during a meeting in Bogota