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Colombia army chief resigns amid scandal



Colombia's army chief, Gen. Mario Montoya, reads his resignation letter at army headquarters in Bogota

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BY FRANK BAJAK
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

BOGOTA, Colombia -- The commander of Colombia's army resigned abruptly Tuesday in a widening scandal over the killing of scores of civilians, allegedly spurred by promotion-seeking officers to inflate rebel body counts.

Gen. Mario Montoya, who won wide acclaim for the bloodless hostage rescue of Ingrid Betancourt and three U.S. military contractors on July 2, did not mention the scandal as a factor in his retirement after 39 years of service.

He did, however, ask his countrymen not prejudice soldiers who have been implicated in the scandal, to afford them "the right to defend themselves."

President Alvaro Uribe called Montoya "one of the best generals the republic has had" and swiftly named a replacement: Gen. Oscar Gonzalez, who currently heads the armed forces' joint Caribbean command.

Montoya's resignation follows stinging criticism of an army policy he allegedly encouraged of promoting officers whose units kill the most leftist rebels.

Human rights groups say that policy encouraged soldiers in recent years to kill scores - perhaps hundreds - of civilians who were presented as guerrillas slain in combat. Prosecutors say they are investigating more than 90 army officers in such cases.

The government now says it rejects that policy and Uribe last week fired 20 army officers, including three generals, for negligence in failing to prevent or investigate such killings, which he blamed on "criminals conspiring with members of the military."

On Saturday, the United Nation's top human rights official told reporters after a weeklong fact-finding mission that she considered the extrajudicial killings "widespread and systematic."

In the most publicized case, the bodies of 11 men who disappeared from the poor Bogota suburb of Soacha early this year were later found in common graves in a conflict zone hundreds of miles away.

"If he resigned, it's because he sinned," said Luz Palacio, the mother of one of the slain Soacha men.

Since Montoya took command of the army in April 2006, the nation's military has scored historic gains against the Western Hemisphere's last major remaining rebel army, the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

Montoya, 59, also was a chief architect of the July 2 hostage rescue, in which military intelligence agents helicoptered 15 hostages to safety by tricking rebels into believing they were an international humanitarian group transferring the hostages to another rebel camp.

His critics acknowledge that kidnappings and street crime in major cities are down but say Montoya's policies have made Colombia's countryside more dangerous.

A former far-right warlord has accused Montoya of providing illegal militias with weapons and a CIA memo leaked to the Los Angeles Times says Montoya carried out joint operations with the so-called paramilitaries as a brigade commander in Medellin prior to his promotion.

Navi Pillay, the U.N.'s high commissioner for human rights, said that the killings of civilians were crimes against humanity and that if Colombia's criminal justice system didn't deal with them adequately, they could fall under jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.

Last month, Amnesty International called on the United States, the top foreign backer of Colombia's armed forces, to halt military aid until stricter measures were taken to halt the killings.

Montoya's resignation was greeted enthusiastically by human rights activists.

"Gen. Mario Montoya has been named in multiple human rights reports as having committed violations back to the 1970s," said Ivan Cepeda, director of the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes.

Associated Press writer Cesar Garcia contributed to this report.

 

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