

COLOMBIA - Paramilitaries Aggressively Campaign for Votes (por Constanza Vieira, IPS)

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[IPS](#) - A group of sons and daughters of victims of the "dirty war" in Colombia urged voters not to vote in Sunday's legislative elections for candidates on lists that include alleged members of paramilitary militias, their accomplices or their front men.

When parliamentary Deputy Muriel Benito-Revollo was a candidate in the 2002 elections in the province of Sucre on the country's Caribbean coast, local paramilitary chief 'Rodrigo Cadena' took an active approach in supporting her campaign.

'Cadena', who controlled Benito-Revollo's hometown of San Onofre, among other areas, called the local residents, including the members of the town council, to the central square.

He then placed slips of paper with the names of each town councillor into a bag, and drew out two of the names.

"He said that if Señora Benito-Revollo was not elected, he would kill those two town councillors, as well as a few people from San Onofre who he would choose at random," philosopher Iván Cepeda told IPS.

Iván is the son of Manuel Cepeda, a journalist and senator of the leftist Patriotic Union party, which was destroyed by a campaign of assassination of its leaders, including Manuel, who was murdered in 1994.

Benito-Revollo won her seat in Congress.

'Cadena' is one of the heads of the extreme-rightwing United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitary umbrella group that has been involved in demobilisation negotiations with the government of Álvaro Uribe.

The paramilitary group he led rejoined civilian life in July, and in November, 'Cadena' disappeared.

AUC, which is heavily involved in the drug trade, according to its own admission, is blamed by United Nations human rights officials and leading global rights watchdogs for 80 percent of the atrocities committed in Colombia's four-decade civil war. The paramilitaries work in close cooperation with the military, as documented by U.N. officials, the U.S. State Department, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

The AUC demobilisation, which is about to come to an end with reportedly half of the organisation's fighters having laid down their weapons, has been widely criticised as a de facto amnesty process.

Today, Benito-Revollo is running for the Senate on the ticket of the pro-Uribe Conservative Party, in Sunday's legislative elections.

The candidate and her brothers control the public contracts in six municipalities in the northern province of Sucre, and have reportedly made it clear that piped water will only begin to reach San Onofre if she is elected, according to the Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris (Rainbow Coalition), a local peace and development group that has drawn up a "map" of paramilitary influence over Sunday's elections.

"According to witnesses, the paramilitaries have forcibly disappeared around 2,000 people in this region since 2001. Many of these crimes were committed to eliminate the political opponents of representative

Benito-Revollo," says a statement on the elections issued by the Daughters and Sons for Memory and Against Impunity, a newly created human rights group.

"United, we Daughters and Sons have turned pain into hope, and have decided to take up the fight against impunity," says the communiqué, which contains a list of candidates - besides Benito-Revollo - who the group urges voters not to cast their ballots for in Sunday's legislative elections.

The statement calls into question eight parties and movements, all of which support rightwing President Uribe, who is seeking reelection in May and has poll ratings of 48 percent.

The parties listed by the group are the Partido de la U, the Conservative Party, and the Democratic Colombia Party, and the movements are Cambio Radical, Colombia Viva, Alas - Equipo Colombia, 'Dejen jugar al Moreno' and Convergencia Ciudadana.

Opposed to Uribe are the social democratic Liberal Party, the strongest party in Congress, which does not however hold more seats than all of the pro-government parties combined; the leftwing Alternative Democratic Pole; and the Visionarios party of former Bogotá mayor Antanas Mockus, among others.

The Partido de la U, Cambio Radical and the Democratic Colombia Party removed several candidates from their lists after the U.S. Embassy reportedly warned the heads of the parties that it would cancel their entry visas. But the candidates made their way onto the lists of other pro-Uribe parties.

The statement sent out by the Daughters and Sons for Memory and Against Impunity marked the first public appearance of the new organisation, which was created on Mar. 8.

The group merely states that it is comprised of "a significant number of people" from several different towns and cities. But it does not provide precise figures or name specific places, because many of its members are afraid to identify themselves.

However, the Daughters and Sons "do have faces," said Cepeda. "We are the children of members of the Patriotic Union, of trade unionists and social activists. We are the sons and daughters of people who have been destroyed by the dirty war and terrorism in Colombia."

The rights group's statement says "We are the Daughters and Sons of people who suffered murder, persecution, genocide, massacres, terror, exile, 'disappearance' and forced displacement for belonging to political and social organisations that fought and are fighting to transform this country."

"We are also the Daughters and Sons of those who were considered enemies simply because they lived in areas where they formed an obstacle to plans to seize land and its natural resources through terror and death," it adds, referring to the more than three million people displaced by the armed conflict, nearly one-third of whom were displaced since Uribe took office in August 2002.

"We are calling on the Colombian people to veto the victimisers and their accomplices. We are urging them not to vote for those who directly or indirectly, allied with the paramilitaries, are responsible for the wave of death and corruption that continues to plague our country, while enjoying total impunity."

The Daughters and Sons' statement refers to the "shameful spectacle of election lists in which victimisers responsible for the extermination of thousands of people are presented as legitimate candidates," while "all of their crimes" remain unpunished.

The group is not only calling for rights abusers to be brought to justice, but also for political and "ethical" sanctions "for those who have directly or indirectly participated in the atrocious crimes that have been committed, or who have benefited from them," said Cepeda.

Rights abusers "should be marginalised from political life and from the possibility of holding public posts," the group declares.

On its list of candidates to be avoided, Daughters and Sons says there are names "involved in judicial investigations and scandals reported by the media, and mentioned in human rights reports."

"Their ethical standing is severely compromised by their alleged participation in crimes against humanity or acts of corruption, or their support for paramilitary groups," says the statement.

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