

Carsten Wieland: Uribe's Fight on Two Fronts

The Iraq campaign has become a boomerang not only for George W. Bush and his European allies in the war against terrorism. The president of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe, Washington's only loyal ally in South America, is also feeling the consequences of its unfortunate development. For ever since the Democrats took over legislative power in the Capitol at the beginning of the year, the economic and military support Colombia has so far been receiving from Washington in its fight against the drug mafia and the guerilla has been on the line.

When Mr Uribe embarked on a propaganda tour through the USA in May, the Democrats gave him the cold shoulder – according to analysts from Bogotá, this was the price Colombia's head of state had to pay for his bias towards the policy of the Republicans. What is at stake in concrete terms is a free-trade package which has been under negotiation for years, as the American Democrats insist on stepping up environmental protection and strengthening employment rights and pillory the numerous murders of trade union representatives in this South American country. According to Colombian journalists, however, this is done to punish Mr Bush rather than Mr Uribe. They say that Mr Uribe was caught between the millstones of the internal power struggle in the USA. Yet the Democrats want even more: To ensure that Plan Colombia, which was originally introduced under Bill Clinton as an ample package of assistance to be provided annually, still has a chance, more emphasis would have to be placed on social and economic concerns, and the fight against drugs, which has so far been quite unsuccessful, would have to be reorganised to become more efficient.

To Mr Uribe, the cacophony from the North comes at a very inconvenient time, for at the moment, he provides reason enough to be attacked for his internal policy. Colombia is in its deepest crisis ever since Mr Uribe assumed office in 2002, especially as the scandalous aspects of the government's 'parapolitics' are gradually coming to light. There is a growing number of leading politicians who are involved in pacts and alliances with the paramilitaries, the neutralisation and disarmament of which Mr Uribe himself regards as the objective with the highest priority. Today, it seems to be certain that not only almost one third of the members of the House of Representatives and the Senate in Bogotá but also numerous regional and local politicians connived with the paramilitary and/or used them to secure their election. It is said that the former director of the security agency DAS deleted data on investigations against members of the paramilitary from the files. What is more, Colombia's foreign minister, Mrs Araújo, was removed from office because of her brother's direct connection to these feared groups.

The truth hurts: Today, 21 congressmen and seven former parliamentarians are strongly suspected of collaborating with the paramilitaries, all of them members of the heterogeneous camp which supports Mr Uribe. And the scandal is still escalating: In May, vice-president Santos Calderón claimed that up to 40 members of Congress would probably have to go to prison in the near future. All this is grist to the mill for Mr Uribe's critics at home and abroad. The democrats in Washington are increasingly questioning the human-rights policy of the Colombian leader, stating that he is dealing too gently with the paramilitary. Even though the president himself has not yet been accused of direct links to these groups, the scandal is moving closer and closer to him.

Senator Petro, a former guerillero of the M-19 group, recently demanded that the family of Mr Uribe should be observed more closely, arguing that the brother of the head of state was cooperating with the paras and the drug mafia. The USA responded immediately: Al Gore, America's former vice president, cancelled his participation in a conference in Miami to avoid sitting at a table with Mr Uribe. All this seems to have no effect on the president, although he is not capable of presenting new facts that might invalidate the charges.

As a matter of fact, the way in which Alvaro Uribe is perceived inside and outside his country seems to differ widely. In the first months of the year, supported by leading Colombian entrepreneurs, the president was still able to raise the high approval ratings he enjoyed among his people, despite the parapolitics scandal. Moreover, the facts are in his favour: The new security within the country caused a boost in the economy and stopped the flight of capital to foreign countries. Furthermore, the government's monopoly on the use of force was reinforced markedly. According to his own supporters, Mr Uribe was able to gain the trust of right-wing squadrons and motivated them to put down their weapons. If this process were to continue, which may not be considered certain at the moment, the strategy of the president would be successful, and the three conflicting parties – the military, the paramilitary, and the guerilla – would dwindle to two. A strong state with a legitimised monopoly on the use of force would then only be confronted by 'criminal' groups, if at all.

The emergence of a social democratic opposition, something the history of the country has never seen before, poses another challenge to Mr Uribe. Carlos Gaviria, the candidate of the catch-all movement Polo Democrático Alternativo, obtained 23 percent of the vote right away, and his chances look good of replacing Mr Uribe, who is not allowed to stand for president again, as the new head of state.

In the meantime, his clear re-election should gratify the ruling president. In May, almost two thirds of the Colombian population voted for him, thus strengthening his negotiating position vis-a-vis the paramilitaries. And in December, he convincingly demonstrated that he would not be intimidated either by left-wing or by right-wing gangs: He arranged for 57 leading members of the AUC, who had accepted to be disarmed, to be transferred to a high-security prison in Medellín without prior notice. The head of government need not fear the paramilitaries' protests or their threat to cancel the freedom process as the groups are weak, the population supports the measure, and the president himself was able to present this move as a clearing the air in the para scandal.

However, the process of disarmament also has negative aspects: A growing number of paramilitary members are reverting to crime, forming new gangs that blackmail, kidnap, and kill. As the governmental scholarships provided for them are expiring, as they do not have any job perspectives, and as their identification with civil society has hardly developed, many of the former right-wing fighters do not feel encouraged to change course permanently. Acts of revenge performed by rebels and former companions provide additional incentives.

Now that the paras have withdrawn from the areas formerly under their control, they are facing a new problem: the intrusion of the guerilla. What is more, new gangs called Aguilas Negras (Black Eagles) are spreading fear among the population so that the disarmament of the paramilitary has by no means led to a more organised and less complicated situation. It is estimated that the number of the new armed men amounts to between three and nine hundred. The danger they pose to the process of demobilisation and integration is considerable. However, according to international observers, it is underestimated by Mr Uribe.

For quite some time now, paramilitary groups have not been perceived by the population as the main threat to the country's societal life. According to a public opinion poll, one fourth of Colombia's population even has some regard for the right-wing fighters. What is really causing concern among the people are poverty, education, and health care. While only 51 percent of Colombia's population expressed this opinion five years ago, this proportion has risen to 92 percent today. Violence is no longer perceived as the country's worst evil, which may certainly be seen as one of Mr Uribe's successes. That many citizens of Colombia today openly show their sympathy

with the paramilitaries is part of a societal and political catharsis. Hypocrisy is a thing of the past; democracy has made progress.

Most people in Colombia feel safer today than in the past. The economy is gaining momentum, and social equality has become an issue as much as the option of talks with the FARC. There may be no doubt that it is thanks to Alvaro Uribe that these talks may now be conducted from a position of strength.