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6-22-2012

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Recommended Citation

Gaudín, Andrés. "Colombian Capital Rocked by Bomb Attack, Rumors of Coup Plots." (2012).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14067>

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Colombian Capital Rocked by Bomb Attack, Rumors of Coup Plots

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Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 2012-06-22

Citizens of Colombia, the only South American country experiencing a prolonged internal war, were shocked on May 15, when they awoke to news that the police had thwarted an attempted bomb attack against one of its headquarters. Minutes later, a powerful bomb exploded on the car of former interior and justice minister Fernando Londoño. In the first incident, there were no victims or property damages; in the second, two persons were killed and 21 wounded.

Both incidents occurred in the capital Bogotá, a violent city but not one affected by actions of the guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). Since the guerrillas operate in the jungle and do not carry out urban operations, both the unsuccessful attempted bombing and the one that succeeded caused considerable consternation.

Bombings were a daily occurrence during the 1980s when drug traffickers launched a campaign to dissuade the government from signing an agreement with the US to allow drug-mafia leaders arrested in Colombia to be extradited to the US. The first bombing was in 1985, against the US Embassy in Bogotá. However, from Dec. 6, 1989, to May 15 of this year, only eight bombings had been carried out. The guerrillas claimed responsibility for only one of the bombings in those 23 years.

In the two recent incidents, authorities admitted that they had no clues. In any event, some are convinced the rebels are responsible, and others blame the right. The magazine *Revista* analyzed all the hypotheses floating around and concluded: "In this country, anything can happen."

Disturbing emails revealed

A week later, amid the tension following the bombing, contents were released of email exchanges circulated among active duty and retired military, which speak openly of bringing down the constitutional President Juan Manuel Santos and calling new elections in six months. The general consensus was that the emails were the ramblings of a few extremists in the armed forces.

Regardless, the highest-ranking military officers accepted the emails' existence and, while downplaying their importance, took the opportunity to indirectly suggest that the government meet some of their demands if it wants things to stay peaceful.

In the middle of that particularly intense week, a guerrilla group ambushed an Army detachment just a few steps from the border with Venezuela, and everything indicated that the rebels might have a camp in the neighboring country. At the least, the commando group that killed 12 soldiers in the ambush is believed to have fled toward Venezuela. The presidents of the two countries communicated immediately, and, as a result, the government in Caracas deployed 3,000 soldiers and 12 helicopters to patrol the conflictive area.

This combination of events gave Santos' critics the opportunity to criticize what they see as the administration's failure in fighting the guerrillas. Although in the almost two years since Santos

took office, eleven high-ranking FARC leaders have been killed and hundreds of guerrilla fighters killed or detained, rightist ex-President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) accuses Santos of being "soft" in dealing with the rebels. Former minister Londoño, a model for the far right, said Santos' "negligence" was directly responsible for the May 15 attempt on his life.

The details of the Bogotá attacks are of little importance. What are important are the contents of the emails, their authors, and the military leaders' reactions. On May 22, correspondence between an active-duty general and a retired officer who holds a leadership position of the Asociación Colombiana de Oficiales en Retiro del Ejército (ACORE) became public.

The first person to acknowledge the emails' existence was ACORE president Gen. Jamie Ruiz, who minimized the contents of the messages, which said specifically that "Santos is a weak president" and that "the time will come when some colonel or general...will put his cards on the table," demanding that the head of state "meet his obligations and electoral commitments or otherwise be removed from office, replaced by an interim government that will call elections within six months."

Whether the messages represent a reality or a delusion, it appears that these military officers have things well thought-out. However, Gen. Ruiz said, "That does not mean that a coup is being prepared; [the emails are] simply expressing dissatisfaction with the government, which has not dealt with matters that the military establishment has called for. They are making a mountain out of a molehill, what is being called for is more state support to prevent the situation from demoralizing the troops."

Also on May 22, the matter took on institutional overtones when Army Commander in Chief Gen. Sergio Mantilla had to call a press conference to insist, quite naturally, that the armed forces "are not promoting a coup." What he achieved, however, was to raise more concern, because he admitted that the emails existed, that their authors were real persons who signed their real names, and that he shared the concerns of his subordinates.

"We active-duty military respect the Constitution and our civilian commanders [the president]," Mantilla said. "The officers who mentioned the possibility of deposing the president are part of a small, unrepresentative group." But he became a quasi-spokesperson for that "unrepresentative group," saying, "The unfulfilled electoral promises to which the emails allude are salary and social-welfare issues, as well as the need to promote a military jurisdiction, which, two years after [Santos'] took office, has not happened."

The military jurisdiction that Mantilla mentioned implies a constitutional reform to spell out the competencies of the civil and military justice systems and determine which cases would require a special tribunal to judge members of the armed services accused of crimes committed in the performance of their professional duties.

The following day, during a public event at which President Santos participated, it was Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces Gen. Alejandro Navas' turn. He dismissed the threat of a coup but said, "These days there have been some disagreements, which, fortunately, do not represent the feelings of the military community and the police. Some compañeros have sent messages they should not have sent, but they do not reflect the position of the Colombian military forces or this commander or every last soldier, pilot, marine, technician, and police officer."

Navas was the third general, after Ruiz and Mantilla, to minimize and not condemn the emails. Other sectors of society noticed and expressed their fears. The humanitarian organization Nuevo

Arco Iris said, "The Internet messages' content alone warrants an immediate investigation, although the emails could be the written exchange between lunatics or the lament of sectors stripped of power."

Analyst León Valencia, who has good contacts within the military, told EFE, "While these members of the military don't have significant power, they are elements that destabilize and look for strength to negotiate and pressure for their interests."

"In Colombia, anything can happen"

In analyzing the May 15 attacks, Semana looked at all the hypotheses being tossed around, and, although its article was written a week before the emails became known, its conclusions are helpful for understanding the general situation because, as it says, in Colombia "anything can happen."

Although the article seems to point to the right, it opts to not accuse anyone in particular and in its conclusions recalls a statement by the president in mid-2011. It also says there are those who want to create problems to put the screws to the government. "Santos has already exposed them starting in the middle of last year, when he spoke of the existence of a shadowy "black hand" and said that not one but "two black hands are lurking. Black hands of the extreme left and the extreme right."

Finally, Semana recalled that when Santos spoke of "black hands," Londoño complained that the president was dividing the country. "He and his friends are the liberal democrats, the FARC is the extreme left, and we who think that his government fails in many important matters are the extreme right, with bombs included," the ex-minister said, apparently not embarrassed to be accused of being a bomb-throwing terrorist.

On May 23, when he shared the stage with Gen. Navas, the president spoke of the "uneasiness" caused by the recent events—attacks and pro-coup statements—but he made no mention of the two extremes. However, he called for "national unity around our institutions and our security forces to oppose terror and the threats to the strength of a united, democratic, and valiant people, now that terrorists are trying to impose their agenda with bombs, declarations, and fear."

-- End --