

At Georgetown, former Colombian president subpoenaed

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 11, 2010



Students at Georgetown University put up a sign at a the 'Adios Uribe' rally in the campus' Red Square in Washington, D.C. Nov. 3. (Photo courtesy of Liz Albanese)

Alvaro Uribe, a visiting lecturer at Georgetown University and former president of Colombia, was served Nov. 3 with a subpoena requiring him to give testimony in a federal trial investigating the connection between a U.S. corporation and alleged war crimes in Colombia.

Charity Ryerson, a Georgetown law student, served the papers as Uribe was leaving a classroom after giving a lecture on the Georgetown University campus.

Uribe is giving lectures as a "Distinguished Scholar" at Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service this semester.

The subpoena was issued in regards to a civil lawsuit filed in U.S. federal court against the coal mining company Drummond, which maintains operations in Colombia.

The lawsuit, which was brought by nearly 500 family members of Colombian citizens, alleges that a financial agreement Drummond made with one of Colombia's paramilitary groups for protection of the company's property in the country knowingly involved the corporation in the illegal murder of at least 67 Colombians.

The plaintiffs also claim that members of Uribe's government tried to suppress evidence of Drummond's alleged backing of the illegal militia.

The paramilitary group, known as the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia, was designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department in 2001. The lawsuit covers Drummond's relationship with the group from 1999-2007.

A Nov. 4 press release from Conrad & Scherer, LLP, one of the firms representing the families, said Uribe's presence at a legal deposition would provide "direct knowledge of several key issues in the case."

The subpoena comes as part of a months-long campaign by students and local activists protesting Uribe's affiliation with the Jesuit-run university. In September, an activist with School of Americas Watch was arrested for interrupting a question and answer session with the former leader.

Though Uribe, who was president of Colombia from 2002 until this July, remains popular at home, and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called him an "essential partner to the United States" in June, he has been the target of investigations by human rights organizations for alleged crimes committed during his administration.

Ryerson, who had previously worked as an intern for the law firm that issued the subpoena, told *NCR* Nov. 9 that she tried to serve Uribe the papers before the lecture, but was stopped by campus security officers and university administrators.

Instead, Ryerson and other activists spread out around each of the exits of the building while Uribe was in the classroom giving his talk.



When the former president came out of the exit at which she was standing, Ryerson broke through a mix of campus security officers, D.C. police officers and Uribe's personal security and touched the subpoena papers to Uribe's chest. One of Uribe's personal security guards then chased her down an alley.

Said Ryerson: "Georgetown needs to learn that harboring a war criminal is awkward and difficult."

In an e-mailed statement to *NCR* Nov. 9, Georgetown University spokesperson Julie Green Bataille said: "The University does not have a policy forbidding the service of process on its property, but does not, as a general matter, work with process servers to facilitate service. As an academic community, we are committed to fostering the transmission of knowledge and supporting the free exchange of ideas."

Ryerson's action came after a crowd of around 100 Georgetown students, faculty, and local activists had rallied at the campus' Red Square to protest Uribe's appointment to the university's faculty.

Organized by a group known as the "Adios Uribe Coaliton," those gathered set up teaching stations to educate passers-by on Colombian history.

Rhyming the nickname Georgetown students use for themselves -- the Hoyas -- and the name of the university's president -- John J. DeGioia -- Ryerson said some at the rally chanted: "Hoya's stand for justice, let DeGioia know. Hoya's stand for justice, Uribe's got to go."

Two Georgetown faculty members -- Joanne Rappaport, a professor of anthropology and Latin American literature, and Marc Chernick, an associate professor of government and director of the masters program in

Latin American studies -- also sent a letter Nov. 2 to DeGioia asking him to reconsider Uribe's appointment.

In their letter the faculty members ask that Uribe's appointment be quietly terminated and that former President Uribe not be invited to return to the campus after his current visit ends on Nov 12.

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