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Colombian president not asked back to Georgetown

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 1, 2011

Georgetown University students protest Alvaro Uribe's presence on the university's faculty outside the campus' Mortara Center March 23. (Photos courtesy of Sarah Vasquez, Georgetown University)

Georgetown University is not asking Alvaro Uribe, the controversial former president of Colombia, to rejoin the faculty of the Jesuit-run institution next academic year, the university has confirmed.

Uribe?s appointment last fall as a ?distinguished scholar? at Georgetown?s Walsh School of Foreign Service sparked seven months of protests from students and faculty.

Though Uribe remains popular in Colombia, he has been the target of investigations by human rights organizations for crimes committed during his 2002-2010 administration.

The news comes as Uribe is due to give testimony in a federal trial investigating the connection between a U.S. corporation and alleged war crimes in Colombia. It was a Georgetown law student who served Uribe with subpoena papers to compel him to testify.

Uribe?s Aug. 11 appointment to a faculty post at the university originally sparked negative reactions from Pax Christi USA, School of the Americas Watch, and Jesuits abroad.

In an e-mailed statement to *NCR* March 30, Georgetown spokesperson Julie Green Bataille confirmed that Uribe would not be returning and said the former leader ?was never scheduled to be here more than one year.?

?He is completing his service as planned at the end of the academic year,? she wrote.

Last fall, Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino, a theologian at the University of Central America in El Salvador, called Uribe a ?symbol of the worst that has happened in the tragic conflict in Colombia.? Sobrino told *NCR* then that ?there is a great deal of blood involved here, a very great deal.?

News of Georgetown?s decision not to re-invite Uribe onto the faculty for another year also comes after faculty

and students there put together a group called the ?Adios Uribe Coaliton? last fall and organized protests -- attracting crowds of a hundred or more -- in the campus? Red Square, wrote letters to Georgetown?s president, John J. DeGioia, and held talks with university administrators.

Speaking to *NCR* Wednesday, one of the group?s main organizers said Georgetown?s decision to not invite Uribe back for the following year made her ?much more content to be a Georgetown student.?

?It was sort of a real challenge for me in terms of our Jesuit identity and who Georgetown is as an institution to have Uribe here,? said Charity Ryerson, a second year law student at the university.

?We certainly expect there to be a lot of academic and ideological diversity and that is welcome and wonderful, but this really demonstrated a complete lack of standards.?

It was Ryerson who served Uribe with subpoena papers in November outside the building on the Georgetown campus where one of Uribe?s lectures was being held. She had previously worked as an intern at Conrad & Scherer, the law firm which brought forth the suit against a U.S. coal mining company on behalf of nearly 500 family members of Colombian citizens.

The subpoena set off a back and forth exchange between U.S. and Colombian diplomats. The Colombian ambassador sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Nov. 12, asking her to submit a letter to the court suggesting that Uribe should receive full immunity from legal consequences in U.S. courts as a former head of state, and therefore should not be bound by the subpoena?s requirement to testify in the case.

The State Department yesterday released a legal document, formally known as a ?Statement of Interest,? presenting its suggestion to the court in the case. Although the statement says Uribe should enjoy ?testimonial immunity? as a former head of state, preventing him from testifying from acts ?taken in his official capacity as a government official,? it does not recommend he be given full immunity from litigation in U.S. courts.

The lawsuit alleges that a financial agreement the coal mining company 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 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 State Department in 2001. The lawsuit covers Drummond?s relationship with the group from 1999-2007.

While it remains unknown whether the United States District Court for the District of Columbia will accept the State Department?s recommendation in the case, and whether Uribe will actually give testimony, the lead attorney for the plaintiffs in the suit said in a press release today they are ?encouraged? by the department?s

findings.

?The U.S. government is clear that the law does not permit blanket immunity for Uribe as a former head of state,? wrote Terry Collingsworth.

?At most Uribe may be extended immunity for any ?official acts? taken as President of Colombia. The law is clear, and the U.S. government?s distinction recognizes, that to the extent that Mr. Uribe directed or encouraged or abetted violations of the law of nations, including war crimes and extrajudicial killings, these illegal acts can never be classified as ?official acts.??

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