

'DAS-GATE'

The capture of Jorge Noguera, former DAS director, leaves us with three questions: Why was he appointed by the President, why did he last so long, and why did the President defend him?

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Jorge Noguera is the only government employee of President Alvaro Uribe that had to resign twice. He left the DAS directorship amidst a scandal of corruption and infiltration of paramilitaries and drug traffickers in the State's main intelligence entity. His appointment as ambassador in Milan allowed him to leave behind the growing storm. But the distance was not enough to avoid the whiplash of his controversial performance during the three years he led the DAS.

His pleasant stay in Europe was quickly shaken by the statement given by his friend and trusted man Rafael Garcia: he accused him of having close ties with 'Jorge 40' and Hernan Giraldo, the two most powerful paramilitary leaders north of the country. His stay in the consulate was unbearable. However, the President defended him with tooth and nail. Even though Uribe swore by him, the seriousness of the situation forced him to return to the country.

It is clear today that both resignations were more than justified. The Public Prosecutor's Office arrested him last Thursday for aggravated conspiracy to commit an offense. That is, the complaints filed by the press that gave way to the scandal -more than the political prosecution that was seen in the Casa de Nariño- eventually revealed that a Trojan horse of organized crime was at the doors of the presidential palace.

But what did Jorge Noguera do for the Public Prosecutor's Office to capture him and for the President to contemplate an apology to the country for appointing him? SEMANA was privy to the key evidence that took the appointed prosecutor before the Supreme Court to make such a momentous decision. Everything starts with Garcia, former Head of Information Technology of the DAS, whose testimony was disqualified by the government and by Noguera himself.

With extensive detail, Garcia told the Public Prosecutor's Office that Noguera had put the DAS at the service of 'Jorge 40' and Hernan Giraldo since he came into office in 2002. He described several secret meetings between the director of DAS and those paramilitary leaders -the Prosecutor's Office confirmed at least 10- and visits of people close to the AUC at the main location in Paloquemano to obtain confidential information. Inasmuch as the Public Prosecutor's Office corroborated the facts provided by Garcia, the witness's credibility grew.

There were two recent episodes that contributed to this verification and made them even more credible. The first happened last November 21st, when Garcia confessed to the Supreme Court that he was a member of the northern block of the self-defense forces of 'Jorge 40' for several years and that Noguera knew of these non sanctum relationships

before appointing him to a key office in the main intelligence body of the State. The second one when Garcia ratified all of these accusations in a face to face meeting with his former boss at the Public Prosecutor's Office.

But this testimony is barely one of the pillars of the case file that has Jorge Noguera behind bars. Sigifredo Puentes, a seasoned DAS detective, told the Public Prosecutor's Office that Noguera had filtered information to Hernan Giraldo, long-time paramilitary boss in the Sierra Nevada, regarding a money laundering operation against him. The former detective added that Noguera stopped, after just being appointed, an investigation on drug trafficking that involved family members and friends. Puentes was relieved of duty and forced to resign. He was not the only one who lost his job for reporting the irregularities within the DAS.

Rodolfo Benitez, former head of the entity's protection office, not only confirmed Puentes' version about Giraldo, but provided additional details about what he called "the Garcia-Noguera marriage." Benitez described how Garcia came to his office to ask him about the operation. After that, Benitez began to report the outrage, the corruption, and the abuse of power perpetrated by Noguera and his inner circle. He was sent to Choco, a decision that forced him to leave the entity after 16 years of service.

Noguera was also unable to explain convincingly his ties with Jose Gelvez Albarracin, a.k.a. 'el Canoso,' political leader of Hernan Giraldo's Tayrona Resistance front. In a February 2006 interview with SEMANA, Gelvez said that he collaborated with Uribe's first presidential campaign in Magdalena, which was led by Noguera (see callout). The Public Prosecutor's Office found that this relationship was kept during Noguera's term in the DAS. This wasn't the only friendship that prompted questions for the investigators.

For the Public Prosecutor's Office and, coincidentally for the State Attorney's Office, the nine visits of Alvaro Pupo, Rodrigo Tovar Pupo's cousin, a.k.a. 'Jorge 40,' to Noguera's office are suspicious. Even though Pupo is not linked to any investigation, Rafael Garcia mentions him several times. According to Garcia, Pupo was the link between the head of DAS and 'Jorge 40.' Once, according to Garcia, DAS agents sent lists of union members and teachers to 'Jorge 40' through Pupo that were later murdered. The Public Prosecutor's office is still investigating the alleged involvement of Noguera in this criminal strategy. What was confirmed, thanks to the information found in 'Jorge 40's computer, is that there was close collaboration of DAS employees with the AUC. More than 50 names of union members and socialist leaders were found in the computer, who were actually murdered by the paramilitary (see call out).

The starting point

Faced with the seriousness of the evidence, many are asking why such a capable politician such as President Uribe appointed Jorge Noguera to an office of such confidence and so critical to national security. According to Uribe, he met Noguera during his first presidential campaign, when he had the chance of staying at his house and with his family. He thought he was a good man and a professional with a future. Noguera would then be appointed as

director of Uribe's campaign in Magdalena, the only department of the coast where he won in 2002. In August, even though he had no experience in matters of security and intelligence, Noguera was appointed as director of DAS.

Noguera's term was characterized by serious mistakes that showed his inexperience and his desire to be in the spotlight. In August 2004, he came across a joint operation of the Colombian and Ecuadorian police that wanted to capture 'Raul Reyes.' It failed and also prompted great distrust within international intelligence agencies. Despite the mess and the discomfort caused among the high command and in the Ministry of Defense, Uribe left him in charge. It was not the first time the President protected him, nor would it be the last.

The most heard of case was precisely that of Rafael Garcia, who was removed from his position in January 2005 for erasing the criminal background of drug traffickers and paramilitaries. Despite the scandal, Noguera came out standing tall. Garcia was convicted for this fact, but he said that he was following orders from Noguera. This investigation is still under way.

How much did the high government know about what was going on inside the DAS? According to the former head of security of the entity, detective Benitez, whose testimony was weighted by the Public Prosecutor's Office, he personally informed the Casa de Nariño about the irregularities within the DAS. "In early 2004 I met with Jose Roberto Arango, former advisor to Uribe, and I informed him of all the complaints. He told me: 'the President knows about everything within the DAS and I don't understand why he doesn't want to take Noguera out,'" said Benítez in an interview with *El Espectador*. SEMANA was unable to contact Arango for his opinion on this matter.

In his quest for a protagonic role -Noguera was very well armed - he made multimillion dollar purchases of intelligence equipment and weaponry that are now stashed away in the entity's basement. He had sour relationships with his presidential cabinet colleagues and had practically become a loose end of the government. He wanted to turn the DAS into a clashing force and began dismantling the true essence of an intelligence organization, as was concluded by the commission appointed by the President to propose reform for that entity after Noguera's violent resignation. This was the first commission that officially acknowledged the paramilitary infiltration. "Some employees at the director level had direct ties and carried out a double function: for the State and for the paramilitary. This got stronger than ever during Noguera's term," reads one of the footnotes of the January 2006 final report.

Faced with the crisis, the President's first decision was the right one: he appointed the vice minister of Defense Andres Peñate, a man free of controversy, as director. And Peñate began a cleaning process that is still far from complete (see callout).

But what Uribe did was quickly undone when he appointed the controversial Noguera to a diplomatic position. That is where the chain of errors began. When Rafael Garcia started talking, Uribe's reaction was to attack the media. Attacking the messenger instead of investigating the veracity of the accusations that damaged the security of the State. To

wholeheartedly defend a man with sufficient evidence of irregular acts. Another big mistake.

Today, a year later, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the State Attorney's Office have reached the same conclusion: there was a deep paramilitary infiltration in the DAS. Last week, Alvaro Uribe reluctantly began to accept the possibility that he was wrong about Noguera. He had no other choice. The President is aware that this is worse than the capture of the para-political congressmen. In the end, the acts for which they are being charged occurred before Uribe's term or did not depend on him. On the other hand, Noguera's appointment and the DAS' activities are the President's direct political responsibility. As Harry Truman said, "the buck stops here."

With Noguera's arrest, Uribe's government faces a useless wear and a crisis that could have been avoided. The presidential stubbornness -applauded by many on several occasions- has played tricks on him this time. With such bad luck, that 'Das-Gate' coincides with the resignation of Ambassador Maria Consuelo Araujo, who he also kept in office against wind and tide, even though her brother, senator Alvaro Araujo, was under investigation by the Supreme Court.

One cannot predict the impact that this news will have abroad, where para-politics had started to make a dent. In Colombia, Uribe's popularity remains intact (over 70 percent), but with each scandal, his governance is diminished. However, his undeniable leadership and character to face adversity allow him to synch with the masses, make them feel that he is someone in charge and can therefore successfully tackle a political crisis that would have any other President against the ropes. And that is Uribe's secret: his leading vocation of interpreting the people and being cheered for, aside from political tremors and opposition skirmishes. And Colombia's destiny is marked by this extraordinary virtue to get rid of mundane problems. As long as the scandals don't include the President, the country will be able to sleep at night.

Uribe's quotes about Jorge Noguera

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"I will continue to believe in Jorge Noguera because I have known him as an honest and straightforward man"

04/12/06

"The speed with which Jorge Noguera reported the irregularities made by Rafael Garcia did not get the importance they deserved"

05/15/06

"Even political detractors, such as representative Joaquin Vives, have said that they recognize Noguera as a trustworthy man"

05/30/06

"I vouch for him"

11/22/06

"A person with such a high public responsibility cannot evade the action of justice"

11/22/06

"I appointed him out of good faith when he left the DAS to protect him in a consulate and now the least he can do is turn himself in"

11/23/06

"I admit that I have a political responsibility in the appointment of Jorge Noguera. I sent him to Milan because he was faced with serious threats and one wonders in these cases: □if one sends him, that is wrong; if one doesn't send him, he gets murdered here, and that is wrong"

12/05/06

"I defended Jorge Noguera, I defended him speaking into your microphones. If justice convicts Jorge Noguera, I will respect justice and I will assume the political responsibility"

"I appointed him as director of DAS, with all my trust, the truth is that I had one or two complaints about the Director of DAS, one from Mauricio Vargas (director of Cambio magazine), I don't recall about what, I immediately called Jorge Noguera in his presence and I asked him to go to Cambio magazine".

"The truth is that he is very different.. The accusations against Noguera were made by a man in prison, a convicted felon. For God's sake, man! Don't you know what I had to live with in the past? Convicted felons looking for time reduction, saying that such crime had been ordered by Alvaro Uribe as Governor of Antioquia in association with Carlos Castaño. My God! You must not lose sight of who made the accusations against Noguera"

04/12/06

"If Noguera is convicted, it is my duty to apologize to the country"

02/23/07

"We were working with doctor Noguera for a while"

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The statement by Jose Gelvez Albarracin, a former paramilitary of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, was a key testimony.

For six years, Jose Gelvez Albarracin was the political leader and ideologist of the Tayrona Resistance Front of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), led by paramilitary commander Hernan Giraldo. Known in the self-defense lines as 'el Canoso,' he was the strategist of the Grimaldo's armed group. They both dominated the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta.

On February 3, 2006, 'el Canoso' split with 1,166 paramilitary from his block. He was called to testify in the investigation that the Public Prosecutor's Office was carrying out against former DAS director, Jorge Noguera.

In early 2006, SEMANA interviewed 'el Canoso,' who told us about the relationship between the paramilitary groups of Magdalena and the DAS director. "I know Uribe, personally. I talked to him when he was running for President," said the former paramilitary to SEMANA. According to his version, he was involved in the 2002 campaign, in which he actively participated.

"We were working there with doctor Noguera for a while," he said. "Doctor Noguera was the one who managed doctor Uribe's campaign here in Santa Marta at that time and I went with him to several meetings. Doctor Noguera is a good person, we (the AUC) know him and we were aware of his good intentions," explained Gelvez to SEMANA.

The friends of the DAS

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Investigators for the Public Prosecutor's Office were amazed to see the information that was stored in the hard drive of the portable computer that was seized from Edgar Ignacio Florez, a.k.a. 'Don Antonio,' one of the trusted men of the leader of the northern block of the AUC, Rodrigo Toivas, a.k.a. 'Jorge 40.'

Dozens of reports were found in several folders where the paramilitary related their ties to the authorities. One such folder caused special concern: one that was tagged with the title 'DAS friend.' The information was encrypted and had 12 intelligence reports prepared by the DAS about union and social leaders. There was biographical data, places of residence and work, family members and friends, and accusations of being active members of the FARC.

This evidence does not directly compromise the former director of the DAS Jorge Noguera, but according to the Public Prosecutor's Office, it shows the infiltration of the self-defense in the State's main intelligence entity.

What the DAS is up to

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Ever since Andres Peñate became director of the DAS in November 2005, the changes in the entity have been a daily bread and butter. The most significant change was the implementation of a polygraph, the so called lie detector. Out of 1,646 employees who took the polygraph, 273 did not pass. This has resulted in the removal of 106 people, resignations, and internal investigations.

The second opinion wave was the removal and transfer of several section heads, particularly of the Atlantic Coast -Bolívar, La Guajira, Cesar, and Sucre- where most of the reports of paramilitary infiltration in the DAS are concentrated. Even though it is a start, some more house keeping is still necessary. For Peñate, his greatest success is the meritocracy policy, applied to appointments both in Bogotá and in transfers in the regions to get rid of the 'rings.'

The third announcement -of a transformation of the DAS- is still forthcoming. The internal changes are positive and necessary but insufficient for the entity to recover the lost confidence. While Peñate has sought for the DAS to dedicate itself only to its original mission -the collection and processing of information that is key to the State's security-, he has also been tempted by improper operations in that philosophy. The Hacari operation in April 2006, that cost the lives of 17 detectives of the DAS, is an example of what the entity must not do.

The efforts of a true transformation of the DAS -abandon the functions of escorts and judicial police- are still a written suggestion. The government lacks a greater commitment.

La Voragine (The Vortex)

The scandal for paramilitary control reaches the east of the country. The investigations in Casanare initially involve a congressman, six mayors, and several police commanders.

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The impetuous whirlwinds of events in Casanare that served as material for Jose Eustasio Rivera 83 years ago for La Voragine, have not ceased. In recent years, this region has had a web of relationships between paramilitary groups, millionaire resources, and politicians that now say that a new chapter of para-politics is to be written there. With the progress in the investigations, everything seems to indicate that the situation of the department was so grave that it would belittle what happened recently to its neighbor Arauca, where a good number of their leaders were captured due to their possible complicity with the National Liberation Army (ELN).

Casanare, with a population of barely 280,000, has suffered several lashes in recent times. Its land was the site for perhaps the cruelest war between two powerful paramilitary groups. The group led by German Dario Buitrago, a.k.a. 'Martin Llanos,' and the self-named Bloque Centauros, led by Miguel Arroyave, a.k.a. 'Arcangel'. Its inhabitants have also seen how the majority of oil royalties -more than 500 billion pesos annually- are squandered or simply disappear. Meanwhile, part of its political class leans towards the better armed suitor with whom they made co-administration compromises. Evidence of the latter are what have attracted the Public Prosecutor's attention to six mayors of the wealthiest municipalities of the department (see callout).

The authorities have documents dating back to 2003 when the candidates -now mayors- of the municipalities of Monterrey, Tauramena, Villanueva, Mani, and Sabanalarga, signed such an agreement with the paramilitary group of 'Martin Llanos.' In a 14 clause document they agreed to deliver 50 percent of the municipal budget, in addition to giving them 10 percent of all contracts and guaranteeing participation in high offices of the administration, among other things.

The Court is studying the case of representative Oscar Wilches, accused of benefitting politically from the paramilitaries.

The key witness in these proceedings is Carlos Guzman, a.k.a. 'Salomon,' who was a political leader of 'Martin Llanos.' In his statements, he also involved the Mayor of Aguazul, the municipality that receives the most royalties in the entire country, and House Representative Oscar Wilches. Regarding the first one, he said it was not necessary to sign any documents because "he was on the payroll," which is denied by the accused. And regarding the second one, he said he sought on several opportunities for the paramilitary intimidation to serve his political cause. The parties that signed assured that they did so under duress. Wilches said he did attend a meeting with 'Llanos,' but that he did not reach an agreement to share the power.

These serious accusations are currently being evaluated by the authorities. Initially, 'Salomon' has been given some credibility because there is evidence of his power within the structure of 'Llanos' and his ability to infiltrate political and social movements.

However, not all investigations against the leaders and authorities of Casanare depend on his testimony. Several months ago, a video delivered by another paramilitary leader put one of its former governors, Miguel Angel Perez, behind bars, after being convicted of receiving financial support for his campaign from the paramilitaries. Other complaints were used by the Attorney General to commence investigations against six police commanders of such municipalities, as he announced last week.

This, in addition to several murders in which the authorities are evaluating their possible relationship with the accusations, has turned the heat of the political climate of this department higher than ever.

The dark episodes related to the power of 'Martin Llanos' in the public administration of Casanare are nothing but the down payment of a scandal that will surely involve more politicians, authorities, and billions of pesos in royalties. We must not forget that in the war between paramilitary groups, 'Llanos' was the loser and then the people of the Centauros Block had control for several years using the same techniques as its predecessor. That is why in this new version of 'La Voragine' there are still many chapters to be written.



NACION

'DAS-GATE'

La detención de Jorge Noguera, ex director del DAS, deja tres preguntas: por qué el Presidente lo nombró, por qué duró tanto y por qué lo defendió.

Jorge Noguera es el único funcionario del gobierno del presidente Álvaro Uribe que tuvo que renunciar dos veces. Dejó la dirección del DAS en medio de un escándalo de corrupción e infiltración de paramilitares y narcotraficantes en el principal organismo de inteligencia del Estado. Su nombramiento como cónsul en Milán le permitió dejar atrás la creciente

tormenta. Pero la distancia no fue suficiente para evadir el coletazo de sus polémicas actuaciones durante los tres años que estuvo al frente del DAS.

Su placentera estadía en Europa fue rápidamente sacudida con el testimonio de su amigo y hombre de confianza Rafael García: lo acusaba de tener vínculos estrechos con 'Jorge 40' y Hernán Giraldo, los dos más poderosos jefes paramilitares del norte del país. Su permanencia en el consulado se volvió insostenible. Sin embargo, el Presidente lo defendió a capa y espada. A pesar de que Uribe puso la mano en el fuego por él, la gravedad de la situación lo obligó a regresar al país.

Hoy queda claro que las dos renuncias eran más que justificadas. El jueves pasado, la Fiscalía lo arrestó por concierto para delinquir agravado. Es decir, las denuncias de la prensa que levantaron el escándalo -más que la persecución política que veían en la Casa de Nariño- terminaron develando que un caballo de Troya del crimen organizado estaba en las puertas del palacio presidencial.

Pero ¿qué fue lo que hizo Jorge Noguera para que la Fiscalía lo capturara y el Presidente contemplara pedirle perdón al país por haberlo nombrado? SEMANA conoció las pruebas clave que llevaron al fiscal delegado ante la Corte Suprema a adoptar tan trascendental decisión. Todo arranca con García, el ex jefe de informática del DAS, cuyo testimonio fue descalificado en su momento por el gobierno y por el mismo Noguera.

Con lujo de detalles, García le dijo a la Fiscalía que Noguera había puesto al DAS al servicio de 'Jorge 40' y Hernán Giraldo desde el inicio de su gestión en 2002. Describió varios encuentros clandestinos del director del DAS con esos jefes paramilitares -la Procuraduría confirmó por lo menos 10- y visitas de personas cercanas a las AUC a la sede principal en Paloquemao para obtener información confidencial. En la medida que la Fiscalía corroboraba los hechos relatados por García, la credibilidad del testigo fue en aumento.

A esa verificación se sumaron dos episodios recientes que les dieron aun más peso probatorio. Primero, ante la Corte Suprema, el pasado 21 de noviembre, García confesó ser miembro del bloque norte de las autodefensas de 'Jorge 40' desde hace varios años y que Noguera sabía de estas relaciones non sanctas antes de nombrarlo en un cargo clave en el principal organismo de inteligencia del Estado. Y segundo, García ratificó todas estas acusaciones en un cara a cara con su antiguo jefe, en la Fiscalía.

Pero este testimonio es apenas uno de los pilares del expediente que tiene tras las rejas a Jorge Noguera. Sigifredo Puentes, un curtido detective del DAS, le contó a la Fiscalía que Noguera había filtrado información a Hernán Giraldo, viejo jefe paramilitar en la Sierra Nevada, sobre una operación de la unidad de lavado de activos en su contra. El ex detective agregó que Noguera paró, recién posesionado, una investigación sobre narcotráfico que involucraba a familiares y amigos. Puentes fue relevado de su cargo y obligado a renunciar. No fue el único que perdió su puesto por denunciar las irregularidades en el DAS.

Rodolfo Benítez, ex jefe de la oficina de protección de la entidad, no sólo confirmó la versión de Puentes sobre Giraldo, sino que agregó detalles sobre lo que denominó "el matrimonio García-Noguera". Benítez describió cómo García vino a su oficina para preguntarle sobre el operativo. A partir de allí, Benítez empezó a denunciar los atropellos, la corrupción y los abusos de poder de Noguera y su círculo íntimo. Fue trasladado a Chocó, una decisión que lo motivó a retirarse de la institución después de 16 años de servicio.

Noguera tampoco pudo explicar de manera convincente sus vínculos con José Gélvez Albarracín, alias el 'Canoso', jefe político del frente Resistencia Tayrona de Hernán Giraldo. En una entrevista con SEMANA, en febrero 2006, Gélvez habló de cómo colaboró en la primera campaña presidencial de Uribe en Magdalena, la cual era dirigida por Noguera (ver recuadro). La Fiscalía encontró que esta relación se mantuvo durante la administración de Noguera en el DAS. No fue la única amistad que generó preguntas a los investigadores.

Para la Fiscalía y, coincidentalmente la Procuraduría, las nueve visitas de Álvaro Pupo, primo de Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, alias 'Jorge 40', al despacho de Noguera son sospechosas. Aunque Pupo no está vinculado a ninguna investigación, es mencionado varias veces por Rafael García. Según dijo, Pupo era el enlace entre el jefe del DAS y 'Jorge 40'. En una ocasión, según García, agentes del DAS le hicieron llegar por esa vía a 'Jorge 40' las listas de sindicalistas y académicos que posteriormente fueron asesinados. La Fiscalía aún investiga la presunta participación de Noguera en esta estrategia criminal. Lo que sí se ha podido confirmar, gracias a la información encontrada en el llamado computador de 'Jorge 40', es que había una estrecha colaboración de funcionarios del DAS con las AUC. En el computador se encontraron los nombres de más de 50 sindicalistas y líderes sociales que efectivamente fueron asesinados por los paramilitares (ver recuadro).

El origen de todo

Ante la gravedad de las evidencias, muchos se preguntan por qué un político tan hábil como el presidente Uribe nombró a Jorge Noguera en un cargo de tanta confianza y tan crítico para la seguridad nacional. Según Uribe, conoció a Noguera durante su primera campaña a la Presidencia, cuando tuvo la oportunidad de hospedarse en su casa y compartir con su familia. Le pareció un buen muchacho y un profesional con futuro. Noguera luego sería designado director de la campaña de Uribe en Magdalena, el único departamento de la Costa donde triunfó en 2002. En agosto, y a pesar de no tener experiencia alguna en asuntos de seguridad e inteligencia, Noguera asumió como director del DAS.

La gestión de Noguera se caracterizó por graves errores que mostraban su inexperiencia y sus deseos de figurar. En agosto de 2004, se atravesó a una operación conjunta de las policías de Colombia y Ecuador que buscaba capturar a 'Raúl Reyes'. Fracasó y generó de paso gran desconfianza en los organismos de inteligencia internacionales. A pesar de la embarrada y el malestar que causó entre los altos mandos y en el Ministerio de Defensa, Uribe lo dejó en el cargo. No fue la primera ni la última ocasión en que el Presidente lo protegió.

El caso más sonado fue precisamente el de Rafael García, quien fue removido del cargo en enero de 2005 por borrar antecedentes de narcotraficantes y paramilitares. A pesar del escándalo, Noguera salió bien librado. García fue condenado por este hecho, pero dijo que obedecía órdenes de Noguera. Esta investigación sigue su curso.

¿Qué tanto conocía el alto gobierno lo que estaba en el interior del DAS? Según el ex jefe de protección de la entidad, el detective Benítez, cuyo testimonio valoró la Fiscalía, él mismo le advirtió a la Casa de Nariño sobre las irregularidades en el DAS. "A principios de 2004 me reuní con José Roberto Arango, ex consejero de Uribe, y le expuse todas las denuncias. Él me dijo: 'el Presidente sabe todo lo del DAS y no entiendo por qué no quiere sacar a Noguera'", dijo Benítez en una entrevista a El Espectador. SEMANA no pudo comunicarse con Arango para conocer su opinión sobre este tema.

En su afán de protagonismo -Noguera andaba armado hasta los dientes-, realizó multimillonarias compras de equipos de inteligencia y armamento que están hoy archivados en los sótanos de la entidad. Tenía malas relaciones con sus colegas del gabinete presidencial y prácticamente se había convertido en una rueda suelta en el gobierno. Quería convertir el DAS en una fuerza de

choque y empezó a desdibujar la verdadera esencia de una organización de inteligencia, como lo concluyó la comisión de personalidades designada por el Presidente para proponer reformas a ese organismo después de la salida intempestiva de Noguera. Esta comisión fue la primera que reconoció oficialmente la infiltración de paramilitares. "Algunos funcionarios del nivel directivo tenían nexos directos y realizaban una doble función: para el Estado y para los paras. Esto cogió toda la fuerza del mundo durante la administración de Jorge Noguera", dice uno de los apartes del informe final de enero de 2006.

La primera decisión del Presidente frente a la crisis del DAS fue la adecuada: nombró al viceministro de Defensa Andrés Peñate, un hombre libre de cualquier cuestionamiento, como director. Y Peñate comenzó un proceso de depuración al que todavía le falta mucho (ver recuadro).

Pero lo que hizo Uribe con la mano lo borró con el codo al enviar al cuestionado Noguera a un cargo diplomático. Allí empezó una cadena de errores. Cuando a Rafael García le dio por encender el ventilador, la reacción de Uribe fue arremeter contra los medios. Atacar al mensajero en vez de investigar la veracidad de las acusaciones que perjudicaban la seguridad del Estado. A defender a ultranza a un hombre del cual existían sobrados indicios de actuaciones irregulares. Otro craso error.

Hoy, un año después, la Fiscalía y la Procuraduría han llegado a la misma conclusión: hubo una profunda infiltración del paramilitarismo en el DAS. La semana pasada Álvaro Uribe empezó a regañadientes a aceptar la posibilidad de que se equivocó con Noguera. No tenía otra salida. El Presidente es consciente de que esto es más grave que la detención de los congresistas de la para-política. Al fin y al cabo, los hechos que se les imputan ocurrieron antes del gobierno de Uribe o no dependían de él. En cambio, la designación de Noguera y las actividades del DAS son responsabilidad política directa del Presidente. Como decía Harry Truman, "la responsabilidad política termina en mi oficina".

Con el arresto de Noguera, el gobierno de Uribe se enfrenta a un desgaste inútil y a una crisis que pudo haber evitado. La terquedad presidencial - en varias ocasiones aplaudida por muchos - le ha jugado una mala pasada en esta oportunidad. Con tal mala fortuna, que el 'Das-Gate' coincide con la renuncia de la canciller María Consuelo Araújo, a quien también mantuvo en el cargo contra viento y marea, a pesar de que su hermano, el senador Álvaro Araújo, estaba siendo investigado por la Corte Suprema.

Es impredecible el impacto que tendrá esta nueva noticia en el exterior, donde ya la para-política estaba empezando a hacer mella. En Colombia, la popularidad de Uribe sigue intacta (por encima del 70 por ciento), pero con cada escándalo su gobernabilidad se va reduciendo. Sin embargo, su indiscutible liderazgo y su carácter para frentear la adversidad le permiten sintonizarse con las masas, hacerlas sentir que alguien está al mando y por lo tanto capotear con éxito una crisis política que a cualquier otro Presidente lo tendría contra las cuerdas. Y ese es el secreto de Uribe, su vocación caudillista de interpretar al pueblo y ser ovacionado al margen de los temblores de la política y de las escaramuzas de la oposición. Y en esa extraordinaria virtud para deslindarse de los problemas terrenales está signado el destino de Colombia. Mientras los escándalos no salpiquen al Presidente, el país podrá dormir tranquilo.