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Colombian prosecutors probe illegal wiretap scandal

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BOGOTA (Reuters) - Colombian state prosecutors swooped on headquarters of the national intelligence agency on Sunday to probe charges that rogue agents illegally wiretapped politicians and judges as a paid favor to drug traffickers.

The telephone bugging accusations are the latest scandal to rock the state security agency, known as DAS, and could further stain President Alvaro Uribe's campaign to stamp out corruption of state law enforcement in the world's top cocaine supplier.

"I have ordered a probe of the DAS interception systems and controls," Attorney General Mario Iguaran told reporters. "If necessary, because the seriousness of this case, we could suspend operations in the DAS interception rooms."

The latest accusations were first made by the news magazine *Semana* in a report on DAS agents intercepting the phone calls of well-known journalists, politicians and magistrates to sell information to drug traffickers and armed gangs.

Uribe, a strong ally of the United States, has received billions of dollars in aid from Washington to help his fight against drug traffickers and leftist guerrillas. Violence, bombings and kidnappings from Colombia's four-decade conflict have declined sharply.

But officials in the armed forces and police agents are still often accused of taking bribes from drug lords. The justice minister's brother, a prosecutor in Medellin, was arrested last year in a probe into suspected ties to drug traffickers.

Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos told local radio the intelligence agents were likely in the pay of drug smugglers, but opposition leaders questioned those claims, saying Uribe's administration would benefit most from the recordings.

The new scandal came to light just four months after the former intelligence director quit after admitting agents had spied on opponents of Uribe, a hard-liner popular for his crackdown on the rebel group known as FARC.

Felipe Munoz, the new director of the DAS agency, said an elite team would probe the case to establish if there is a mafioso-type network trying to strike at national security.

In 2007, Uribe fired his senior police chiefs after an illegal wiretapping scandal that fueled worries about intelligence practices in the Andean country. A former director has also been under investigation for ties to

paramilitary death squads.

(Reporting by Patrick Markey, editing by Chris Wilson)

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