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Colombian Army Commanders Knew About Extrajudicial Executions, HRW Says

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The document, entitled “On Their Watch,” offers evidence that, the NGO says, suggests in a “convincing” manner that numerous generals and colonels knew or should have known about the cases of false positives, and even could have actively ordered or facilitated them.

“False positive killings amount to one of the worst episodes of mass atrocity in the Western Hemisphere in recent years, and there is mounting evidence that many senior army officers bear responsibility,” said Jose Miguel Vivanco, the executive director for the Americas division of HRW, in a communique.

However, the army officers who were in command of the units that carried out these killings of innocent civilians and then claimed that they were guerrillas have been promoted, in some cases rising to the highest levels of the military, he said.

The false positives involve cases of civilians who were enticed to rural areas by being promised a job but then were killed by the soldiers and added to the body count as guerrillas killed in combat, for which the soldiers involved were trying to obtain benefits or promotions.

HRW’s analysis of data gathered by the Attorney General’s Office found that the prosecutors have identified more than 180 battalions or other tactical units that allegedly carried out some 3,000 extrajudicial killings between 2002 and 2008.

Evidence presented in the report indicates that the commanders of brigades and tactical units

responsible for a large number of such killings – not to mention the top army leaders – at least “knew or should have known” about these crimes and, therefore, could be criminally liable, but although some 800 lower-ranking soldiers have been convicted to date for such acts, no higher officer has yet been held to account in court.

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