
Colombia Has a 'Shadow State' of Mass Surveillance, Report Says

01/09/2015



The report says Colombian government agencies have been developing spying tools for unlawful collecting of mass data without judicial warrants

The Colombian police and intelligence agencies have deployed "secret and unlawful" surveillance tools and techniques that allows the authorities to have access to mass internet and cellphone data of citizens beyond the scope of law, a new report by the London-based advocacy group Privacy International said Monday.

"We all thought that Colombia's history of illegal surveillance and abuses of power was well documented," Matthew Rice, advocacy officer at Privacy International, said in a statement. "This report shows that there are still practices to expose, systems to reveal, and questions to be answered."

According to the detailed report, one tool called Integrated Record System, which was developed by the Colombian police intelligence starting in 2005 is capable of monitoring 3G cellphones and snoop on lines carrying voice and data communications for the whole country.

The report added that the system had the capacity of collecting 100 million cell data and 20 million text message records per day without the service providers' knowledge or consent.

Also, Colombian government agencies were deploying tactical surveillance, according to the investigation. The police intelligence agency DIPOL was deploying fake phone base stations that "can monitor phone usage and intercept communications without involvement from service providers nor necessarily with the knowledge of judicial authorities," the report said in its introduction.

The report said that the new high level technology was being provided to Colombian authorities by two Israeli companies, the Israeli arm of the security and surveillance company Verint Systems and security Nice Systems, also based in Israel.

In recent years, several high-level scandals relating to the intelligence agencies in the country prompted outcry at home and abroad and called for reform. In 2007, senior police generals were fired after it was revealed that the national police had spied for years on activists, journalists and opposition political figures.

Meanwhile, in 2011, it was revealed that the country's national spy agency conducted surveillance and harassed more than 600 politicians and public figures who opposed the then right-wing conservative President Alvaro Uribe. And in 2014, the local newspaper Semana revealed that the Colombian army unit codenamed Andromeda had been spying for more than a year on the government's negotiating team in the ongoing peace talks with the leftist rebel group FARC.

"The scandals have shocked and galvanized Colombia's civil society and ordinary citizens. But it has reinforced their assumption that they are always monitored," the report said.

The report highlighted that these moves taken by the government in recent years were undermined by the secret expansion of those surveillance tools, which are illegal under the country's "flawed" laws.

"This investigation by Privacy International based on confidential documents and testimonies shows that recent reforms have been undermined by surreptitious deployment of mass, automated communications surveillance systems by several government agencies outside the realm of what is proscribed by Colombia's flawed intelligence laws.

Much of the intelligence-gathering technology was developed with direct assistance from the United States and its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), who provided billions of dollars in cash, training and equipment to Colombia over the past 15 years to aid the government against FARC.

However, officials directly receiving these technologies in the police and intelligence were implicated in the illegal surveillance on the journalists, activists and opposition figures in recent years.

"As we stand now, it's clear that there's a long way ahead for the compliance of intelligence and criminal investigation activities with human rights standards, and for us, as civil society, to keep our work pointing out these abuses," Carolina Botero, director of the Bogota-based Karisma Foundation, said in a statement.