

Colombia says priest led paramilitaries that committed atrocities

BOGOTA, Colombia - Colombian governmental authorities said a Catholic priest from a town outside Medellin led paramilitary groups that committed rapes and massacres and persecuted evangelical ministers and believers.

The priest, Father Oscar Ortiz Henao, was arrested in mid-April. Medellin chief prosecutor Martha Penagos said authorities had "a great deal of evidence" against the priest, including testimony and telephone recordings, from an investigation that lasted for more than a year.

Prosecutors said Father Ortiz created a paramilitary group in the town of San Antonio de Prado.

The paramilitaries, right-wing forces that have fought alongside the country's own military, are notorious for committing human rights violations, including chainsaw massacres, recruitment of child soldiers and forcing peasants from their homes. The paramilitary groups are also known for carrying out so-called "social cleansing" operations, in which they kill prostitutes, thieves, drug addicts and other social "undesirables."

The paramilitaries are considered terrorists by the Colombian and U.S. governments and the European Union.

Father Ortiz was a popular figure in San Antonio del Prado. After his arrest, residents marched in protest. Many said the priest had helped cleanse the neighborhood of criminals. Residents also said Father Ortiz had created a school for poor children.

A judge confined Father Ortiz to a residence for priests in Medellin while legal processes continue.

This is not the first time that priests have been linked to Colombia's illegal groups. Several priests played prominent roles in the founding and early years of the nation's two leftist guerrilla groups, the National Liberation Army and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

Father Ortiz's lawyer told media that the priest had contacts with illegal groups only during peace negotiations.