

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) - Colombian security forces killed civilians in several states last year and falsely labeled many as leftist rebels slain in combat, the United Nations said a report released Thursday.

Colombia's government also has at times ignored links between security forces and illegal armed groups, the U.N. High Commissioner of Human Rights said in its annual report on Colombia.

The report said leftist rebels, right-wing paramilitary groups and, to a lesser extent, government forces were all behind frequent human rights abuses, including torture, executions and disappearances. The three sides have been pitted against each other in a half-century-old civil conflict.

The U.N. found that Colombia's army - the largest recipient of \$700 million in annual anti-narcotics and counterinsurgency aid from the United States - had participated in killing civilians in 21 of Colombia's 32 states.

The U.N. said the numbers of civilian killed in those areas showed an increase over 2005 but did not provide death toll figures.

In many cases, the victims were falsely presented as leftist rebels killed in combat, crime scene evidence was tampered with and the investigation was led by the military's questioned criminal justice system.

The report said such killings with "characteristics of extrajudicial executions do not appear to be isolated incidents" and may have been prompted partly by the government's use of combat deaths as a benchmark to measure success against leftist insurgents.

Despite its criticism, the tone of the report was softer than in previous years. It was the first under Juan Pablo Corlazzoli, a Uruguayan sociologist who took over as director of the U.N. high commissioner's office in Colombia last year amid a dispute about the agency's future.

"We believe progress has been made," Corlazzoli said, praising Colombian officials for showing "greater commitment" to reducing abuses.

President Alvaro Uribe's office said the government was working with the agency to prevent future rights abuses by the military, and that the "principal human rights indicators, with a few exceptions - reflected in the report - show a favorable trend."

Corlazzoli said his office received 2,138 complaints of human rights abuses last year, roughly the same number as 2005.

While 31,000 right-wing fighters have been demobilized under a 2003 peace deal with the government, the report said new armed groups were taking their place in some regions, imposing economic and military control.

The report said security forces had taken no action against police or soldiers believed to have links to such groups.

But Corlazzoli praised the Supreme Court's investigation of several members of Congress for alleged ties to the paramilitary groups. Eight pro-government lawmakers have been arrested in the case.