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Colombian Leader Disputes Claim of Tie to Cocaine Kingpin

By SIMON ROMERO

BOGOTÁ, Colombia, Oct. 2 - President Álvaro Uribe of Colombia lashed out on Tuesday at claims in a new book that he had close ties to the cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar. He said he never aided Mr. Escobar's drug dealings or benefited from his political patronage.

Mr. Uribe's comments were in response to the book, "Loving Pablo, Hating Escobar," by Virginia Vallejo, Mr. Escobar's former mistress. Ms. Vallejo repeats claims that Mr. Uribe, as head of the civil aviation authority in the early 1980s, helped Mr. Escobar's cartel secure licenses for landing strips used to transport cocaine.

"I had no political relations with Escobar, I had no business dealings with Escobar and I was not a friend of Virginia Vallejo," Mr. Uribe said in comments broadcast on Caracol Radio. Ms. Vallejo, who is believed to be living outside Colombia, could not be reached for comment.

Mr. Uribe, the Bush administration's closest ally in South America, has been dogged by claims of his links to Mr. Escobar since his political star began to rise in the 1990s, claims that became pronounced during his presidential campaign in 2002. Ms. Vallejo's book, published here last month, had not received much publicity in Colombia until Mr. Uribe's emotional reaction to it this week.

The president also denounced a journalist, Gonzalo Guillén, a correspondent here for El Nuevo Herald of Miami, saying he helped Ms. Vallejo write the book. The claim drew a sharp denial from Mr. Guillén, who said he would sue Mr. Uribe for slander.

Ms. Vallejo, a former actress and television personality, also refers to Mr. Uribe's father as one of Colombia's "first drug traffickers" in her book. The president says his father was killed in 1983 by Marxist rebels.

A declassified American intelligence report from 1991 cited Mr. Uribe as a "close personal friend" of Mr. Escobar. The report, by the Defense Intelligence Agency, also listed Mr. Uribe among Colombia's important drug traffickers and said he was linked to an unidentified business involved in narcotics in the United States.

Mr. Uribe's office denounced the intelligence report when it was first publicized in 2004 as fitting within a trend of political attacks against him, but did not specifically address the assertion that Mr. Uribe was linked to Mr. Escobar. American officials have also disavowed the report's findings. But Mr. Uribe's comments on Tuesday show more explicit efforts to distance himself from any association with Mr. Escobar, who was killed by the police in Medellín in 1993.

"These allegations are nothing new, but what we're seeing is an increasingly diverse body of evidence," said Michael L. Evans, director of the Colombia project at the National Security Archive, a research group at George Washington University in Washington, referring also to a 2002 book that made similar claims against Mr. Uribe. The archive obtained the intelligence report.

This latest controversy occurs at a delicate time for Mr. Uribe, who is trying to persuade lawmakers in the United States to approve a trade deal. Despite his support of American measures aimed at limiting Colombia's cocaine trade, concern persists over ties between some of his political supporters and paramilitary death squads that deal in cocaine.