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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
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Subject: Colombia's Santos shakes up top military brass (Reuters)

BOGOTA (Reuters) - Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos changed the Andean country's top military leadership Tuesday following the appointment of a new defense minister and criticism that security gains were being reversed.

Latin America's No. 5 economy has seen drastically improved security over the last decade as billions of dollars in U.S. aid flowed in to battle leftist rebels and drug lords although bombings, killings and attacks continue to plague the country.

"I'm sure this team ... is going to be a slap-up team who will be at the minister's side and at the head of armed forces, giving peace of mind to the country," Santos said in a statement on the presidency's website.

The shake-up in the armed forces top leaders was widely expected after the defense minister quit last week and was replaced by an economist and former deputy defense minister.

Santos named General Alejandro Navas -- who spent various years leading army operations against FARC guerrillas and drug lords in the south -- as the new head of the armed forces, and appointed other officers to the military's top leadership.

Historically, an army officer has usually been at the top of the military although the former head was from the navy.

Colombia's defense minister resigned last week after growing criticism and perceptions that hard-won security gains were being reversed by guerrillas and new criminal gangs.

On Monday, Colombia's new defense minister, Juan Carlos Pinzon, vowed a forceful response to illegal armed groups and more innovation in the conflict.

Santos came to power last year vowing to continue the hard-line stance against illegal groups adopted by ex-President Alvaro Uribe, but Santos' popularity has taken a hit over perceptions that security is worsening.

Better security has helped Colombia attract billions of dollars in foreign investment since 2002, and was cited as one of the reasons why three Wall Street credit agencies gave the South American nation back investment grade status this year.

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