EDELLÍN, Colombia, Nov. 25 — After a minute of silence in memory of the thousands killed in Colombia's conflict, 800 fighters from an urban band of a right-wing paramilitary group laid down their weapons on Tuesday in a disarmament ceremony the government says could bring the country closer to ending its 39-year-long war.

The ceremony was choreographed by President Álvaro Uribe's government and clearly did not mean the end of the group, the United Self-Defense Forces, a 13,000-member federation of paramilitary factions. But it did suggest that the Colombian authorities might be making some headway in their new, two-pronged strategy to end the war: co-opt the right, defeat the left.

Critics were quick to dispute the idea that the disarmament represented real progress. But Mr. Uribe hopes the laying down of arms will represent the first step in the complete demobilization of the United Self-Defense Forces, which is planned as a two-year process.

If successful, it would be the first time in Latin America that a far-right antiguerrilla force has demobilized through a formal process before the end of a conflict. The government's hope is that this will in turn put pressure on two rebel groups that are the paramilitaries' longtime adversaries — the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the National Liberation Army — to negotiate peace accords.

"Today, after a long stretch, we have a first important accomplishment," Luis Carlos Restrepo, Mr. Uribe's top negotiator with insurgent groups, told rows of young fighters in the Medellín convention hall. "Welcome to civilian life."

The ceremony, involving a Medellín faction called Cacique Nutibara, was carefully prepared. Inside a cavernous hall in the convention center, rows of young men — their hair cropped, wearing newly pressed camouflage fatigues, some holding rifles — sang the national anthem.

Then they formed long rows and laid down their AK-47's, sawed-off shotguns, old carbines and revolvers — fewer than 200 weapons in all. They dropped ammunition vests and armbands stamped with the paramilitary logo into a heap before Mr. Restrepo. Reporters were boxed off to the sides, barred from interviewing the fighters.

A videotaped greeting from three top paramilitary commanders played on a giant television screen. The three — Carlos Castaño and Salvatore Mancuso, both of whom have been indicted in the United States on drug trafficking charges, and Diego Fernando Murillo, a reputed cocaine lord who heads Cacique Nutibara — hailed the moment as the start of a new attempt at reaching peace.

After the ceremony, the young men were bused to La Ceja, a town outside Medellín. They are to stay at a recreation center for three weeks, and then enter job training or educational programs.
A range of critics, from human rights groups to some members of the United States Congress, condemned the disarmament as a half-baked process that would let mass murderers and cocaine traffickers go free. They said the demobilization would not weaken the overall paramilitary group, with top commanders remaining free to recruit and to oversee operations.

"There's no transparency and no accountability," said José Miguel Vivanco, the Americas director for Human Rights Watch. "How can we trust this process? Not a single international agency is participating."

Mr. Uribe is pushing legislation in Congress that would allow the government to strike deals with the leaders of the United Self-Defense Forces, with the paramilitaries disarming in exchange for incentives that include suspended jail time for top commanders. Several commanders are wanted for some of Colombia's worst war atrocities.

Those who demobilized on Tuesday did so under the framework of earlier legislation allowing insurgent groups to demobilize and members to be reincorporated into society.

With the support of the military, wealthy landowners and cocaine trafficking, the United Self-Defense Forces have grown exponentially in recent years, its various member groups taking control of wide swaths of territory, wiping out whole villages and killing union organizers and leftist politicians.

But under President Uribe, paramilitary demobilization became one crucial component in a plan that also involves waging relentless war against Marxist rebels.

A year ago, the government embarked on secret talks with the United Self-Defense Forces. After the talks became public earlier this year, the government said disbanding the group would save lives and curtail the drug trade.

The process has largely been cloaked in secrecy and critics have suggested that there is no way to determine if demobilized fighters will return to the war or enter a life of crime. "If they find work, that will be good," one midlevel commander said Monday in a Medellín slum long controlled by the paramilitaries. "But if not, well, no one will simply allow themselves to go hungry."

The mood was giddy in the vast slums around Medellín the day before, as young men in baggy jeans and high-tops gathered in preparation for turning themselves in.

"I am a survivor — that's how I see myself," said a 23-year-old, Andrés. "Maybe one day I can go to a university, or just get a job."

Later, after being fitted for new uniforms, the men filtered to local community centers and schools, to be bused to the convention center.

The United Self-Defense Forces, led by Mr. Castaño, has been angling for a deal since the United States labeled the group a terrorist organization and indicted Mr. Castaño and two other leaders on drug trafficking charges. Those leaders fear extradition to the United States and say the threat of it, in large part, led them to negotiate with the government.

Bush administration officials say the extradition requests will not be dropped, so the paramilitary commanders are trying to obtain government assurances that they will not be arrested during negotiations, a close adviser to Mr. Mancuso said in an interview on Monday.

To show that they are negotiating in good faith, the adviser said, the paramilitaries will demobilize a group of as many as 1,500 paramilitary fighters in northern Colombia as early as January. "We are willing to give all
guarantees to show that this is an irreversible process," he said.