

Betancur challenged within his cabinet

by Valerie Rush

From the moment Colombian President Betancur declared at his inaugural speech last Aug. 7 that a Latin American heads-of-state summit should be convened to restructure the shattered post-Malvinas inter-American system, certain Anglo-American interests in the U.S. State Department knew they had a very dangerous maverick on their hands. In the past three months that view has been more than confirmed.

On both domestic and foreign policy, Betancur has charted a new and independent course. Internally, he has focused on reviving the battered Colombian economy, which has entailed a head-on confrontation with the drug-linked financial sector that has sucked the country dry. Externally, Betancur has taken a leadership role—unprecedented for a Colombian president—in forging new continental alliances for both political and economic security.

Political amnesty an imperative

To accomplish his goals, Betancur has defined the establishing of social peace inside Colombia as an imperative. To that end, he has leveraged his immense popularity with the Colombian people to win approval for a legislative framework for political amnesty with the armed guerrilla movements in the country. With the guerrillas neutralized and the military back in the barracks, Betancur can take up the challenge of implementing a long-overdue industrialization program for Colombia.

Betancur's peace plan has, however, encountered the fierce resistance of Defense Minister Fernando Landazabal Reyes, who is reputed to manipulate both left- and right-wing terror squads for the purpose of keeping the civilian government subservient to military dictates. Landazabal issued a scarcely veiled challenge to the President last week in the form of an editorial in the Armed Forces journal which characterized political amnesties as "periods of oxygenation" for the guerrillas and as mechanisms used by the "political authorities" to pull the rug out from under an Armed Forces "when it has been at the point of obtaining a definitive military victory over the subversives." Landazabal warned Betancur not to confuse his amnesty plan with a loss of confi-

dence in the military's ability to defeat subversion and added that, should elements of the guerrilla groups refuse the amnesty offer, "the government and the Armed Forces will be forced, as always, to exercise authority. . . ."

It was hardly accidental, therefore, that during the week the amnesty came to a vote in the Congress terrorist violence broke out across the country, allegedly carried out by splinter factions of the M-19 guerrillas whose leadership has welcomed the amnesty. Simultaneously, the major newspapers in the country carried gruesome front-page color photos, Aldo Moro style, of kidnap victim Gloria Lara de Echavarría, the wife of a prominent politician, with a gun held to her head by a hooded terrorist and headlines announcing the deadline for her execution.

A saboteur in the cabinet

While Betancur faces a virtual coup threat from his Defense Minister, he has also to contend with the sabotage of his foreign policy initiatives by Chancellor Lloreda Caicedo. On one vital issue after another, Lloreda has diluted, altered, or outright contradicted stated Betancur policies. Exemplary is President Betancur's unequivocal support for Argentina's claim to the Malvinas Islands, a position which in fact helped him win the presidency and which he has repeatedly reiterated since. Speaking to the United Nations last month, Lloreda declared that the Malvinas should be administered by a "multinational authority" until the claims of Argentina and the "interests of the islanders" are resolved.

Perhaps most blatant was Lloreda's unilateral reversal of the Colombian President's position on the highly controversial issue of the continent's foreign debt problem. Betancur was the first Latin American head of state to wholeheartedly embrace the proposal of newly inaugurated Bolivian President Siles Zuazo on joint renegotiation of the continent's foreign debt. And yet on Oct. 21, speaking from Mexico City, Lloreda declared to a press conference that the debt refinancing of the Latin American countries should be done individually; "it is not convenient at this moment to form a kind of cartel of countries with economic problems," he insisted.

Lloreda has gone even further in his role as agent provocateur, calling for a Colombian "arms buildup" to meet the new bellicose "ambience" of the continent in the post-Malvinas period. "A country like ours with 13 borders can never know when a problem will arise."

Lloreda's call for an arms buildup, matching Landazabal's demands for greater military expenditures on arms, coheres perfectly with the policy of Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders, known as the "North Star" policy. Enders advocates U.S. provision of arms to "avoid sub-regional imbalances of power" and to bring the continent back into the U.S. fold—following the "North Star." One proponent of the "North Star" policy, geopolitician Lewis Tambs, has been nominated by the U.S. State Department to be the next ambassador to Colombia.