

Andean Report by Carlos Cota Meza

Colombia averts coup threat

The popular President Betancur has survived a military challenge, but the drive to eliminate him continues.

Earlier this month, Colombian President Belisario Betancur underwent the first serious challenge to his short-lived administration from the Colombian military. He survived, but the threat remains.

Betancur has pinned his presidency on a two-fold initiative of achieving economic and social stability at home, and establishing a leadership role for Colombia within the developing sector. Both initiatives are under attack.

Vital to the success of Betancur's strategy is the amnesty for guerrillas, which the President himself has nurtured into existence. The amnesty is designed to bring an end to the "undeclared civil war" in the countryside between the large land and cattle owners, and the peasantry and their guerrilla defense squads.

The stumbling block to the amnesty has been the MAS death squad, which since its inception a year ago has acted as a Murder, Inc. for wiping out trade unionists, leftists, university professors, and "subversion" generally. The guerrillas have refused to lay down their arms until the government can guarantee that the MAS will not murder them.

On Jan. 29, Betancur's attorney general was scheduled to release the results of a months-long investigation by his office which promised to lay bare the notorious ties between the military and the death squad. The military hierarchy succeeded in postponing the report's release by 1) holding a prominently covered meeting with the powerful cattlemen's association,

believed to make up the "cadre" of the MAS apparatus, in which its vigilante pursuits were openly encouraged, and 2) claiming that Armed Forces Commander Gustavo Matamoros's home had been the target of a guerrilla attack. Both moves were widely viewed as explicit coup threats.

Betancur responded on three fronts. He sent three trusted associates, members of the "Peace Commission" in charge of negotiating the guerrilla amnesty, to hold a pow-wow with the top three leaders of the mass-based FARC guerrilla movement. A joint communiqué was signed between the government envoys and the guerrilla chiefs, stating a shared commitment to "a new coexistence and national peace," but agreeing that the guerrillas had the right to demand protection for their lives under the amnesty.

Betancur's second move was to order the release of the Attorney General's report, which acknowledged that members of the military were in fact working with the MAS, but which diplomatically asserted that these were degenerate individuals collaborating with a criminal cause, and did not represent the armed forces as an institution. The report called on the armed forces to purge themselves of such elements.

Betancur issued a response to the Attorney General's report in which he pledged to investigate the military, if necessary.

Thirdly, Betancur convoked an emergency meeting of the National

Defense Council, made up of his cabinet and the military hierarchy. When the meeting ended, Armed Forces commander Matamoros emerged to inform the press that the amnesty had *not* failed, that a state of siege would *not* be declared, and that, the report of a guerrilla assault on his house was a lie! Defense Minister Landazabal, leading opponent of Betancur's amnesty, had given the press that story.

Betancur appears to have maneuvered the crisis to his advantage, with political figures of all persuasions coming forward to praise the Attorney General's report and express renewed faith in the amnesty. But the danger persists.

A number of developments suggest that the military challenge was part of a broader move to keep all of Latin America on the ropes during the upcoming Non-Aligned summit in New Delhi.

Trilateral Commission head David Rockefeller made a well-publicized stopover in Bogotá last month as part of a continental tour he shared with his colleague Henry Kissinger. He met briefly with President Betancur, and later emerged to inform the press that he was not there to pressure Colombia against joining the Non-Aligned. U.S. Air Force Commander Charles Gabriel suddenly arrived in Bogotá around the same time, his first visit to Latin America. He met separately and secretly with both President Betancur and with Defense Minister Landazabal.

And in early February, at the height of the military-government crisis, Rand Corporation "terrorism expert" Brian Michael Jenkins appeared in Bogotá to give forums and interviews recommending a form of "restricted democracy." Rand Corporation has been affiliated with the U.S. Air Force since its inception.