

Rodrigo Lara Bonilla: a man of courage

Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, 1944-84, was born in Huila, Colombia. He is survived by his wife and three young sons. A lawyer and former university professor, he was mayor of his hometown of Neiva, a senator, and an ambassador before his appointment to the post of Justice Minister under President Belisario Betancur in August, 1983.

Lara Bonilla was a member of the Nuevo Liberalismo wing of the opposition Liberal Party, a dissident, anti-drug faction headed by presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán, and the sole representative of that faction inside Betancur's Conservative Party government.

The following is a chronology of Lara Bonilla's courageous battle against the drug trade during his brief nine months in office:

August 1983: Immediately upon being appointed to his post, Lara Bonilla puts the mafia on notice by launching a congressional debate on the infiltration of "hot [drug] money" into Colombian politics. He particularly targets the billionaire alternate congressman Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Hitler admirer Carlos Lehder Rivas. Both Escobar and Lehder are presently fugitives from the law.

In response to Lara's frontal assault on these mafia godfathers, Cong. Ortega Ramírez (whose alternate is Escobar) publicly charges that Lara had accepted one million pesos from a drug trafficker while managing the Galán presidential campaign in 1982. Despite Lara's denial of the charge, the leading anti-government daily *El Tiempo* editorially demands Lara's resignation from the Justice post. *El Tiempo* is the political news outlet of Alfonso López Michelsen, president of Colombia during the period of the greatest illegal drug "bonanza" in Colombia (1974-78).

September 1983: Lara tells the daily *El Espectador* that he and his family are receiving daily threats from the drug traffickers, but that "I will not yield in my fight against the drug industry. What would happen if the justice minister died of fright from every threat against him. There are risks one must assume in life. . . ."

The National Narcotics Council (Consejo Nacional de Estupefacientes) under the jurisdiction of Lara's justice ministry, is reorganized and strengthened, including centralization within its offices of all purchases of chemicals that could be used to refine cocaine.

The civil aeronautics agency, on orders of the justice ministry, grounds over 100 private airplanes belonging to prominent drug traffickers and begins the systematic mapping of clandestine airstrips nationally.

October 1983: Lara Bonilla charges that the drug mafia has "infiltrated" professional soccer in Colombia, and reveals the names of 6 out of 14 professional teams in the country which are in the hands of the mafia. A congressional investigation based on his charges is begun.

November 1983: Lara Bonilla announces that drug money has also infiltrated other sports arenas, including horse racing and bullfights, and warns that his exposures of corruption in professional sports will continue. Despite congressional resistance to pursuing the investigation, Lara insists "I will not retreat one centimeter" from my charges.

December 1983: Battle over U.S.-Colombian Extradition Treaty's application. Following repeated threats from the mafia that extradition of captured drug traffickers would be met with widespread terrorism, Betancur turns down several extradition requests.

Lara Bonilla calls on Congress to give him the legal jurisdiction to confiscate private property and capital assets of drug traffickers; he also denounces those judges who through either cowardice or corruption are releasing drug traffickers from jail.

Lara Bonilla authorizes the National Drug Council to begin feasibility studies on the use of paraquat as an anti-marijuana herbicide, and experimental use of the herbicide is approved, despite violent opposition from the health ministry and leading political forces.

January 1984: Interception of home and ministry telephone lines belonging to Lara Bonilla is discovered as part of a mafia-financed plot to assassinate the minister.

Lara Bonilla informs the political parties that the drug mafia is infiltrating the electoral slates of both major parties, and promises to publicly release the names.

February 1984: Former Deputy Minister of Justice and anti-drug lawyer González Vidales is assassinated by hired guns of the mafia. Lara Bonilla receives a telephone threat, "Lara Bonilla will be next."

Narcotics squads of the National Police raid the jungle cocaine complex known as "Tranquilandia," the largest illegal drug laboratory discovered in the world.

April 1984: Lara Bonilla calls for a "world pact" against drugs, beginning with bilateral and multilateral agreements among the Andean nations, and global extradition procedures against drug traffickers.