

Ibero-America launches battle against drug traffic

by Valerie Rush

In one short week, Ibero-American leaders have issued a call for the formation of a continent-wide military structure to battle drugs and terrorism, denounced the International Monetary Fund as "subversive," and charged Henry Kissinger with being a murderer. All this in the immediate aftermath of the April 30 assassination of Colombia's justice minister and anti-drug martyr, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla.

During the burial services for Lara Bonilla, Colombian President Belisario Betancur called for "a crusade" against the narcotics mob and the crime and violence it spreads in its wake. Patriots across the continent have responded. Betancur's angry call to arms over the grave of his slain minister has been taken up by a close collaborator and friend of Lara Bonilla, the president of the Colombian Anti-Drug Coalition, Fausto Charris Romero. Charris has embarked on a tour of the continent to forge an Ibero-American Anti-Drug Coalition that can realize Betancur's objective.

On May 4, speaking to 20 media representatives in Mexico City, his first stop, Charris declared, "I am responding to the call of my President, Belisario Betancur, for all Colombian citizens to participate in this battle, in this war, against the drug trade.

"Our war against drugs in Colombia and throughout the Ibero-American continent is a battle against a new Opium War. The British war that forced China in 1839 to pay its debt by destroying its population with the consumption and production of opium is being waged again. This time, it is the IMF and Henry Kissinger who want to collect the continent's debt by the trafficking of drugs.

"Here, in Mexico, I reiterate my totally confirmed charge that Henry Kissinger is responsible for the assassination of Lara Bonilla."

A common defense against drugs

Speaking to the multi-nation Andean Parliament that day, Bolivian congressman Rodolfo Gremiger called on the nations of the continent to form an Inter-American Defense

Council, "a military version of the Latin American Economic System" (SELA) to forge a common defense against their mutual enemies of drugs and terrorism.

Peruvian Senate leader Ricardo Montegudo echoed his sentiments, asserting that "drug addiction is growing in every country as a result of the economic crisis provoked by the banks' high interest rates. We need a common front to defeat drugs and terrorism." A commission created in the Organization of American States after the Lara Bonilla assassination has proposed a hemispheric conference on methods to defeat the drug trade.

Venezuelan Justice Minister Manzo González, who had met with Lara Bonilla not long before his murder, declared, "I believe the best homage that we can make to the memory of the distinguished Colombian political leader is to continue undaunted the battle against those who not only threaten the health of our populations but who weaken the sovereignty of our lands and attack our national defense."

The Venezuelan government has now created a specialized "Center for Drug Information" which will coordinate the forces of its justice ministry with the police and other law-enforcement agencies in an escalated war on drugs. Manzo González noted that Lara Bonilla had been fighting for a unified Andean anti-drug command, and called for common anti-drug legislation among the Andean nations as a first step in that direction. The Venezuelan Congress is considering legislation mandating up to 20-year sentences for drug traffickers.

The IMF question

The drug traffic in Ibero-America is protected not only by corrupt local politicians but by the International Monetary Fund and its controllers, who insist openly that "moralistic" anti-drug efforts would cut off the revenue required to pay foreign debt.

An executive delegation of the Latin American Parliament arrived in Washington on May 7 to issue a final warning to the IMF and the Reagan administration. The delegates declared: "We state here that the debt problem is not unconnected to democratic institutionality and our right to development and social justice. If the IMF does not change its attitude, it could become a subversive organism much more dangerous than the Soviet Union. . . ." One of the delegation members, Humberto Celli of Venezuela, added that during their meetings in Washington, the delegation "will also make contacts to show how this [debt] problem bears upon destabilization and also upon the problem of drugs and drug-running." (See article, page 7.)

Despite the warnings, the Reagan administration clings to the IMF policy. In his nationwide speech on Central America the evening of May 9, President Reagan repeatedly praised the recommendations of the Kissinger Commission's report on Central America, the same report which holds up the drug-trafficking United Brands Company as a "model" of private

initiative and which recommends converting Central America into another "Singapore or Hong Kong," the drug capitals of the world.

Betancur's escalation

Since the Lara Bonilla assassination, a vast dragnet under the extraordinary state of siege decreed by Betancur has turned up scores of drug-linked criminals from all levels. While some of the "godfathers" of the mafia have reportedly managed to escape Colombia, cocaine kingpin Carlos Lehder has reportedly been surrounded in a jungle hideout and his capture and extradition to the United States is considered only a matter of time. The vast assets of known drug traffickers like Lehder and the billionaire fugitive Pablo Escobar Gaviria are also now liable for expropriation under the law.

All drug-related cases are being handled under military jurisdiction, and a special corps of 100 military judges has been selected and given extraordinary security protection to enable ruthless prosecution of drug criminals without fear of mafia retaliation. The Colombian Air Force has orders to shoot down or destroy in the air any unauthorized (non-commercial) flight across Colombian borders, and new raids in the southern department of Meta have yielded busts against another eight giant cocaine laboratories comparable in size to the "Tranquilandia" busts earlier this year which set a world record in cocaine seizure.

On May 10, the government ordered the destruction "by any means necessary" of some 200 identified "clandestine" airstrips used by the drug traffickers, and a special session of the National Drug Council has been convoked by the president to make a final determination on the use of the herbicide paraquat for the eradication of Colombia's still vast marijuana crops. Until now, the use of paraquat—which had been fought for by Lara Bonilla—has been "experimental." It is widely expected that full-scale application of the herbicide along the Mexico model will be approved. The interim justice minister, Nazly Aljure, went public in favor of widespread use of the herbicide, and U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Lewis Tambs has pledged financial and technical aid for a paraquat program.

A new justice minister was named on May 8, chosen from the ranks of the "New Liberalism" political faction which Lara Bonilla had represented. Enrique Parejo González took up his weighty responsibilities with a pledge to "continue the extraordinary work of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. I sincerely believe that one must continue with the same courage, the same valor, in the war against drugs. He left us an example, a lesson. This is a battle that requires the support of the entire Colombian nation."

Asked if he feared the same fate as his predecessor, Parejo González answered: "Above any fear that I might feel is my elevated sense of duty, the necessity to pay homage to Rodrigo Lara with the same courage that he himself demonstrated."

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