

Drug runners go for the kill as Colombian presidency changes hands

by Valerie Rush

The battle to decide who will control the next government of Colombia is already being fought out, nearly two months before President Belisario Betancur steps down from power. But this time, instead of the usual back-room deals, the battle is being waged with bombs and machine-guns, and the protagonists have never been more clearly identified.

On June 17, the narco-terrorist M-19 claimed responsibility for that morning's assassination attempt against Colombian Interior Minister Jaime Castro Castro, one of the key men behind the government's peace program. Castro escaped unharmed, but a policeman was killed, and a bodyguard and chauffeur wounded by the 12-person assault team. The M-19 also announced plans to form "suicide squads" to murder Betancur and his entire cabinet.

Colombia's top drug traffickers were forced to flee in 1982, when Betancur took the presidency out from under the drug-running oligarchy, and earned his reputation as a political maverick by declaring an all-out war on drugs, while offering a political amnesty to Colombia's multiple guerrilla forces. Now, at the end of his term, Betancur has more or less accomplished what he set out to do: The hard-core narco-terrorists have been separated from the historically disaffected and largely peasant-based guerrilla movements adhering to the amnesty. Their eradication is the urgent next step.

However, this vulnerable moment of transition from one President to the next has been seized upon by Dope, Inc. to launch a drive to capture key national institutions. They have deployed their narco-terrorist armies to murder some of their opponents and terrify others. At the same time, the political front-men for the mafia have moved to capture leading positions in President-elect Barco's transition team.

In fact, the list of transition-team members just released includes such a heavy dose of known mafia allies that the daily *El Espectador*, associated with Barco's own political party, was forced to editorially protest that Barco's "honeymoon" with the largely Liberal population will be short, indeed, if he continues to capitulate to the *caciques*, drug-tainted political bosses such as former Presidents López Michelsen and Turbay Ayala.

Among the list of transition-team members appear:

- **Alberto Santofimio Botero**, senator from Tolima and

convicted thief, who proudly brags of his mob connections and time spent in jail. He has been described in the press as a "moral cripple," while a 1986 review of senatorial aspirants described Santofimio's "political movement" as made up of "doubtful individuals accused of drug trafficking . . . who would produce an incalculable deterioration of Congress's image." One of those "doubtful individuals" is the now fugitive drug-kingpin Pablo Escobar Gaviria;

- **Ernesto Samper Pizano**, "economist," and 1990 presidential hopeful who has lobbied since 1978 for drug legalization in Colombia;

- **Bernardo Guerra Serna**, senator from Antioquia, one of whose private airplanes was reportedly found at the site of the infamous Villa Coca drug laboratories busted in 1984;

- **Eduardo Michelsen Concha**, first cousin of the fugitive narco-banker Jaime Michelsen Uribe;

- **Alfonso Gómez Méndez**, lawyer for Michelsen Uribe;

- **José Name Terán**, senator from Atlántico and rumored to be the mafia godfather in charge of contraband run on Colombia's Atlantic coast;

- **Gustavo Castro Caicedo**, brother to German Castro Caicedo, a journalist and close collaborator of the U.S. drug lobby, NORML.

Justice Palace revisited

The first attempt by the drug mob to discredit the government and regain a stranglehold on that country occurred last Nov. 6, when a commando force of M-19 terrorists stormed the Supreme Court offices at the Justice Palace in Bogota. Even as the terrorists demanded "negotiations" with Betancur—including a public trial of the President!—the M-19ers were executing, one by one, the captive Supreme Court judges and deliberately burning sections of the country's legal archives.

The fact that the judges had been receiving death threats for months due to their approval of the constitutionality of an extradition treaty under which drug traffickers were being sent to trial in the United States, and the fact that the national archives burned held the criminal files of those extradition requests, convinced honest members of Betancur's govern-

ment that the M-19 was indistinguishable from the drug mafia.

The military and labor sections of the country, among others, stood firm behind President Betancur's decision to safeguard the national interest. The ensuing army assault on the Justice Palace terminated the bloody two-day narco-terrorist siege, with a final toll of nearly 100 deaths, including 11 Supreme Court judges and the majority of the M-19 terrorists. Betancur's refusal to yield to the terrorists' blackmail won him the opprobrium of Amnesty International and the liberal media, but the republic of Colombia had fought a major battle with Dope, Inc., and won.

Buoyed by Betancur's lame-duck status, Dope, Inc. now intends to use the public debate stirred by release of a seven-month investigation into the Justice Palace incident to discredit and set him up for assassination.

Even before the release of the findings, which have confirmed the legality of Betancur's handling of the Justice Palace siege, mafia spokesmen began surfacing with accusations against the Betancur government. On June 4, the pro-drug daily *El Tiempo* prominently carried an article taken from the leftist Madrid daily *El País*, which argued that the military—and not the terrorists—had murdered the Supreme Court judges and other hostages. Madrid is the other end of the Colombian mafia's cocaine transmission belt into Europe.

Santofimio Botero, the mafioso from Tolima, on June 12 demanded a congressional trial of President Betancur for mishandling last November's M-19 siege. In addition, he has demanded that Congress prohibit Betancur from departing the country after leaving the presidency.

Attorney-General Carlos Jiménez Gómez, the same who confessed to meeting clandestinely with the drug godfathers shortly after their April 1984 assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, and who has been an open opponent of the President's war on drugs, has called for the trial of President Betancur and Defense Minister Vega Uribe by the Accusations Commission of the House of Representatives.

Papal intervention?

Despite the ugly odds which Betancur and the nationalist forces standing with him face, an intervention in their favor by Pope John Paul II during his upcoming visit to Colombia July 1 can tip the balance against Dope, Inc. An example of the effect a Papal intervention might have is clearly seen in neighboring Peru, where President Alan García's own war on drugs is modeled on and inspired by that of his Colombian colleague.

The Pope visited Peru in February 1985, two months before presidential elections in that country. During his tour of some of the worst hellholes of terrorism and economic deprivation in Peru, John Paul II gave the demoralized and cynical population a renewed sense of cultural optimism, while calling on political leaders to be "innovative" in taking on the debt crisis on the continent. On July 28, Alan García

took office, and shocked the financial world with his declaration of a 10% limit on debt payments drawn from Peru's export revenues.

The drug traffickers are well aware of the potential of Papal intervention in an intensely Catholic nation like Colombia, and thus the conspiracy is already set to contain the Pope's influence or, if that fails, murder him.

The M-19 held an underground press conference in Bogotá June 14 to call on the Pope to serve as a "mediator" between themselves and the incoming Barco government, a move which would give the narco-terrorists the legitimacy they have been unable to win thus far. They also declared their readiness to discuss a truce with President-elect Barco during the Papal visit next month, insisting, "We are partisans of dialogue, and believe that one can dialogue with Virgilio Barco."

Threats, some subtle and others not, are also being issued. An early May edition of the weekly magazine *Consigna*, associated with former President Turbay Ayala, editorialized violently against the Pope and Colombia's Cardinal Alphonso López Trujillo, saying the Pope's "election" was the result of "right-wing machinations" and that the Colombian population would not heed his words anyway. Why is he bothering to come, ask *Consigna's* editors.

An early June edition of the Colombian Communist Party newspaper, *Voz*, denounced the Pope for having sided with "capitalism and imperialism," and attacked the Pope's closest collaborator in Colombia, Cardinal López Trujillo, as "the retrograde head of the most backward sector of the Colombian Church." The commentary ominously warned that the Pope's visit would "tilt the balance" to favor López Trujillo.

In the daily *El Tiempo* of June 5, pro-drug journalist Enrique Santos Calderón attacked President Betancur for allowing the Papal visit, while having denied Colombia the status of host country to the 1986 World Cup Soccer matches. Santos lamented that "the already monotonous trips of the Pope who visits various countries each year" could not "even distantly compare to a World Soccer Cup."

At the same time, the cardinal has been targeted for assassination at least twice while preparing for the Papal visit. A powerful explosive was discovered and deactivated in the reception room outside the Cardinal's Medellín office, according to an official Church communiqué issued May 15. The communiqué added that the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), a narco-terrorist cousin of the M-19, had claimed responsibility for the attempted bombing in protest against the Pope's visit.

On June 12, a seminary the Cardinal was to have visited in Medellín was stormed and harangued by 35 guerrillas from the National Liberation Army (ELN), whose leadership ranks are made up of "guerrilla-priests" from the "theology of liberation." Church spokesmen said the assault was directly aimed at López Trujillo.