

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

To spray or not to spray

With an anti-coca herbicide in view, the fight over eradication of drug crops in Colombia is heating up.

It was the decision of the previous government of Colombia, under President Belisario Betancur, to enforce a standing extradition treaty with the United States that triggered the wholesale flight of Colombia's leading drug kingpins from the country, and the mafia's declaration of war against the government. Less prominently played in the news, but of comparable importance, was President Betancur's decision to use the herbicide glyphosate against, especially, the vast marijuana plantations of northern Colombia, a decision which resulted in the elimination of 90% of the country's marijuana trade.

EIR has watched for a continuation of that eradication effort under President Virgilio Barco, and its ultimate extension to burgeoning coca cultivation in Colombia, as a litmus test for the new government. With the Barco administration nearly two months old, that policy is now under heated dispute.

The original harping about ecological damage from herbicides died down not long after the government initiated marijuana crop spraying, when it became evident that the government was not to be dissuaded by the self-serving denunciations of the country's ascension of Virgilio Barco to the presidency, and his appointment of a cabinet stocked with associates of former President López Michelsen, the dope mafia saw cause for hope.

The press drumbeat against herbicide eradication began, with charges

that the only beneficiary of the glyphosate spraying was the United States, whose domestic marijuana cultivation soared while Colombia's disappeared. Then, in early September, three "farmers" from the region surrounding the Caribbean drug port of Santa Marta made a stink about the destruction of their commercial banana, corn, and cacao crops by the glyphosate herbicide. A local councilman added his political weight to their protests.

Leaping to the rescue of the poor benighted farmers was the López-linked daily *El Tiempo*, which on Sept. 17 devoted one of its editorial cartoons to an attack on the herbicide, based on the "farmers'" complaints. *El Tiempo* regularly provides its editorial columns to advocates of drug legalization. Similarly, the daily *El Siglo*, owned by López intimate Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, covered the so-called glyphosate scandal in a sensationalist article entitled "Glyphosate? No Thanks, I Prefer to Live!" The title was especially cynical, since it was a take-off on the government's campaign against consumption of the deadly coca paste reefer, *bazuco*.

Just when the López forces had succeeded in creating a furor over the incident, however, they were forced to eat crow. On Sept. 19, *El Tiempo* was obliged to report on "a veritable war by the marijuana growers against the police in the beautiful Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta." It turns out that three scientists from Colombia's scientific agricultural institute (ICA), had

visited the lands of the three "farmers," and discovered that the police had indeed destroyed their crops—because hidden among the rows of corn, yuca, and other food crops were flourishing marijuana plants! The growers, according to *El Tiempo*, confessed to growing marijuana, but excused the illegal act on the basis of low market prices for their food crops. The compromised Santa Marta councilman charged that he had been "misled" and had not known "the source of my information."

The dope lobby has not given up, however. The National Institute of Health (INS), which violently opposed Betancur's approval of herbicide eradication of marijuana, has announced that it is sending its own scientists to Santa Marta to evaluate the effects of the herbicide on the population and traditional crops of the region. The INS coordinator of the investigation, one Francisco Rosi, has already called for suspension of glyphosate use.

And on Sept. 22, *El Tiempo* triumphantly published a letter from President Barco to the Scientific University of Magdalena, pledging a careful review of the glyphosate eradication program.

Not accidentally, one day earlier the rival daily *El Espectador* had carried the report that a new defoliant produced by Dow Chemical, Triclophyr, had been experimentally used against coca crops in Colombia, and found effective in destroying the plant. Eradication efforts against coca have traditionally been manual, since it is destruction of the roots which is necessary to kill the hardy and extremely prolific bush. If the new herbicide, reportedly safe for humans and animals, proves a success against Peruvian and Bolivian variants of the coca plant, a new phase in the war on drugs will begin.