

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Arms-trafficking in Venezuela

Yes, Venezuela has a narco-guerrilla problem. Now that the purge has begun, how far will the government take it?

The myth of Venezuelan "immunity" to narco-terrorism was dispelled on Oct. 28, when forces from several security agencies raided the Maracay and Caracas offices of the Venezuelan Corporation of Military Industries (CAVIM), a branch of the defense ministry, for illegal arms sales to what the government has dubbed "narco-terrorists."

Eighteen individuals were arrested, including military officers and CAVIM employees. CAVIM's president, Brig.-Gen. José Santana Quevedo, was recalled from a vacation abroad for questioning, and has since been transferred to an active military command post.

One day earlier, the superintendent of the Arms and Explosives Office of the interior ministry's political police (DISIP), "ex"-guerrilla Domingo d'Alessandri, was fired after his office was pinpointed as the source of weapons permits that facilitated the CAVIM transactions. d'Alessandri's office reportedly received substantial bribes, in the form of money and drugs, for the forged permits.

According to the Venezuelan press, d'Alessandri is also linked to ex-DISIP commissioner Amilcar, now serving time for stealing jewels and 15 kilos of cocaine that were being held as evidence at DISIP headquarters. D'Alessandri was sacked along with a number of colleagues, all part of what has been described as a "clan" of former guerrillas from the 1960s who were incorporated into various government institutions under the 1968 Caldera government.

The firings and arrests have shaken Venezuela's political elite to its roots, as the scandal of narco-guerrilla infiltration into the intelligence and military apparatus threatens to engulf the maneuverings already under way for the 1988 presidential elections.

The extent of the corruption first became evident following a joint DISIP/army battle Oct. 10 with narco-guerrillas in the state of Yaracuy, in the north-central area of the country. An Oct. 16 communiqué by the defense ministry noted that the guerrillas, from both Colombia and Venezuela, had been part of a massive kidnapping ring along the border between the two countries. As a result of the clash, large numbers of weapons and ammunition were seized bearing the CAVIM seal, along with documents which implicated the DISIP "clan." Among the casualties of that clash was Evencio Sosa, a leading member of the Colombian ELN narco-terrorist band.

The Oct. 10 incident was not the first of its kind. Last April, seven guerrillas were captured in military uniform near Maturín, and several "ex"-guerrillas were seized following a bank robbery in Puerto Ordaz. Numerous army-guerrilla confrontations have taken place along the Colombia-Venezuela border region since then, and traceable arms caches have been discovered in several parts of the country.

An Oct. 29 cabinet meeting took the important step of acknowledging the problem and pledging a clean-up. Interior Minister José Angel Ciliberto

announced investigations of all the nation's security agencies, and the Venezuelan Congress will be pursuing an independent investigation.

The president of the congressional Commission on Domestic Policy, David Morales Bello, told the press Oct. 30, "It is evident that when agents of the drug trade penetrate security agencies, we have a destabilization plot in progress, and this is what we are going to investigate, until the government learns who is pulling the strings of the individuals apparently involved."

In addition to asking who infiltrated the narco-guerrillas into government security agencies in the first place, investigators might also take a closer look at who benefits from the scandal now being fanned by yellow journals like *Diario de Caracas*, the dope-linked daily which has publicly advocated drug legalization. Its director, Carlos Ball, would be more than delighted to see the Lusinchi government destabilized by a spreading corruption scandal, the better to bend it to the will of covetous international creditors whom Ball represents.

On Nov. 2, Ball's newspaper carried a two-page dossier on alleged drug and terrorism links to high-level DISIP officials. The article title: "Narco-guerrilla infiltration began more than two years ago."

Venezuela has learned, the hard way, that it is not exempt from the narco-terrorist "irregular warfare" that is plaguing the rest of the continent. President Lusinchi is left with two choices. He can purge a few, shuffle a few, and sweep the whole mess under the rug in hope that the next scandal won't erupt until after the 1988 elections; or he can make the thorough cleansing of Venezuela's intelligence and police forces a number-one priority.