

Colombia wages a military war on drug traffic

by Valerie Rush

Without fanfare or splashy press conferences, the Barco government in Colombia is prosecuting a full-scale war against the drug mafia which seeks its overthrow. In deploying the armed services as the only force capable of challenging the immense power of the mob, President Virgilio Barco has begun to tip the scales once again in favor of national, and perhaps continental, sovereignty.

In the short period since mid-December when that war was launched in earnest, the military has:

- captured Evaristo Porras Ardila, one of the country's top five drug kingpins, who reportedly runs a vast trafficking network spanning several countries.
 - netted three important drug traffickers sought for extradition to the United States, as well as another dozen whose names appear on a military-prepared "black list" of wanted drug traffickers.
 - conducted nearly 1,500 anti-drug raids from one Colombian coast to the other, detaining more than 500 suspects and seizing a substantial arsenal of illegal weapons.
- In addition, the government has:
- imposed a tight monopoly on imports and exports of any chemicals which might be used in the processing of illegal narcotics.
 - enforced strict vigilance over licensing of airlines, airports, airstrips, and aircraft, as well as of pharmaceutical and chemical companies involved in either the production or trade of controlled chemicals.
 - placed 2,700 Colombian companies, both industrial and commercial, under its direct surveillance to prevent the drug mafia from gaining access to the products produced or imported by those firms, which include: textiles, plastics, paint, ink, glues, shoes, batteries, leather-tanning, dry-cleaning, and pharmaceuticals.

Retaliation mafia-style

The drug networks can hardly be expected to lose gracefully. In fact, the government has ordered the militarization of Bogotá in anticipation of violent mafia retaliation. Rumors of a pending narco-terrorist assault on the U.S. embassy compound in Bogotá were sufficiently reliable to prompt an

evacuation of all personnel on Jan. 6, and a shutdown of the embassy for two days. When it reopened, it was under a tripled internal guard, restricted hours, and the temporary protection of 30 anti-riot police armed with machine guns.

The first vice-president of Bogotá's city council, Alfonso Garzón Méndez, survived a mafia hit attempt Jan. 7. Garzón, who has been active in the campaign against drug addiction and who has recently used the council as a forum for several debates on how to defeat the drug trade, is a political disciple of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, the anti-drug justice minister assassinated by the mafia in April of 1984. Garzón, who had received numerous threats prior to the assault, declared after his escape, "They will not intimidate me. I will continue using the Council to attack those involved in the criminal trafficking of cocaine."

But the mafia does not limit its counterattack to the weapon of terrorism alone. It has activated its political and "civilian" apparatus to campaign in its interest as well. It is no accident that, on Jan. 6, the same day that the U.S. embassy was forced to shut down under threat from the drug mob, the "liberal" *Washington Post* offered its editorial page to the West Coast correspondent for the pro-drug Colombian daily, *El Tiempo*. Cecilia Rodríguez writes that the violence and awesome power of the drug mafia has made any successful response from the population or government impossible, including the latest measures, which she dismisses as "too late."

Rodríguez concludes that: "For such a critical situation, new steps must be taken." Among those she recommends are: 1) government acceptance of a mafia offer to pay Colombia's foreign debt, repatriate its assets, and surrender its labs in exchange for protection from extradition; 2) church mediation of a truce between the government and the drug traffickers; and 3) legalization of production, trafficking, and consumption of illegal drugs, both in the United States and in Colombia.

It is these precise recommendations which the respected Colombian newspaper publisher Guillermo Cano had publicly fought, a stance which led to his murder by the mafia on Dec. 17. Cano had declared in a lead editorial of his news-

paper, *El Espectador*: "Colombia is lowering its guard against organized crime. Each day we are more shocked to learn that bills are being presented to Congress which favor the drug traffickers [i.e., anti-extradition]. That the miracle prescription is legalizing the drug trade. That the panacea is Church dialogue with the chiefs of the drug trade. We are on the verge of coexisting with organized crime, with accepting it. . . ."

Drugs and economics

The drug mafia is also getting lots of help from its assets inside the trade-union movement. The ruined shell of the Union of Colombian Workers (UTC), now abandoned by the majority of its base for the open identification of its leaders with the interests of the drug mafia, is nonetheless kept sufficiently afloat by the State Department-financed American Institute of Free Labor Development (AIFLD) to continue its services to the mob. The UTC has called for a general strike, allegedly against the government's anti-labor policies, with which it hopes to paralyze the country and divert the government's attention—militarily and otherwise—from the critical anti-drug war at hand.

That the UTC can attempt such a diversion operation is due, unfortunately, to the serious straits of the Colombian economy, made worse by President Barco's refusal to break from the dictates of the international banks in defining economic policy. An official unemployment rate of 15% is already the source of tremendous tension within the economy, and government approval of a cascade of New Year's price increases has already wiped out the 22% minimum wage increase fought for and won by organized labor. Barco's single-minded concern for eliminating what he has dubbed "absolute poverty" has offered no solutions, either for the jobless, the employed, or for an economy no longer able to rely on the upward fluctuations of international coffee prices as a substitute for genuine production domestically.

On the other hand, the newly formed Unified Workers Confederation (CUT), headed by former Labor Minister Jorge Carrillo, has been careful to present its opposition to the government's economic policies in the context of full support for a war on drugs, and a programmatic alternative which begins with the demand for reducing foreign debt-service payments to 10% of Colombia's total export earnings—the Peruvian model. The CUT also demands a lowering of interest rates, a halt to the endless "mini-devaluations" of the currency, and a general wage increase above the inflation level.

In his statements to the press, Carrillo has emphasized that the task is "to defeat those who believe that the development of the country lies solely in international loans. We must defeat the monetarist theory that calls for raising prices, devaluation, and increasing interest rates."

What the communist unions, formally committed to Carrillo's strategy, will do remains to be seen. Several of their

leaders have denounced the government's measures against the drug traffickers as "a war against the people," a position which puts them squarely in the camp of AIFLD and its mafia buddies in the UTC.

Setting an example

The arrest of 37-year-old Evaristo Porras presents dramatic proof of the seriousness of the government's anti-drug effort, and offers as well an interesting direction for it to take.

Porras was co-owner, along with drug kingpins Pablo Escobar and the Ochoa brothers, of "Tranquilandia," the infamous cocaine city of Colombia's southern jungle region which was dismantled in March 1984, under the Betancur government. Porras had earlier tried, and failed, to taint Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, Betancur's first justice minister, with public charges of taking bribes, charges which were ultimately dismissed as slander. It is also believed that Porras played a part in Lara's April 1984 slaying at the hands of mafia hit-men.

Porras escaped from a Peruvian jail in 1978, where he had been held on drug-trafficking charges, and his extradition to that country is sought by the Alan García government. Since that escape, Porras had built a vast empire out of the drug trade, controlling the strategically key jungle city of Leticia (on the Colombian-Brazilian-Peruvian border) as well as the "free zone" Caribbean island of San Andrés, where prostitution, drugs, gambling, and smuggling coexist with the terrible poverty of the island's largely black population. He is said to have extensive operations in neighboring Brazil, where a brother reportedly oversees his interests. He owns boats and airplanes as part of one of Colombia's largest fish-distribution companies, and is owner of 75% of the Suzuki operations in Colombia, both considered useful fronts for his drug trafficking activities.

Porras resided in the hotel Bahía Marina on San Andrés, one of several buildings he owned, and was quietly dining with his brother and confidants when the military surrounded the building and arrested him Jan. 3. The message to Porras's high-level partners in the drug trade—that they no longer had the protection upon which they have relied for years—was delivered loud and clear.

Proposals are now quietly beginning to circulate inside Colombia about what to do with San Andrés, which has also served as a playground and business center for the infamous Ochoa brothers and "El Mexicano" Rodríguez Gacha, all wanted in the United States as part of the "Medellín Cartel" of drug traffickers. According to one such proposal, it would only be fitting to take advantage of Porras's capture to transform that drug haven into a showcase of the war on drugs. To do so would require outfitting the island with the latest in radar and sonar equipment, and with an interdiction capability to match such advanced detection technology. The United States, of course, would be expected to play a key role in such an effort.