

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

A vacuum of power

The Barco government in Colombia is devoting its energies to evading responsibility for a war on drugs.

The popular outcry against the drug traffickers in Colombia following their brutal kidnap and execution of Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyos has not been so loud since the April 1984 mafia assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. The support was there and the moment ripe for declaring Colombia in a state of war, and decreeing such long-overdue measures as immediate confiscation of the drug mafia's vast properties inside the country, financial transparency, militarization of anti-drug efforts both in the battlefield and in the courts, and investigation of the mafia-deployed "citizens above suspicion" encysted within such national institutions as the Congress.

Instead, President Virgilio Barco decreed a "Statute to Defend Democracy" which, incredibly, neither makes mention of the narcos' offensive against the nation, nor orders any of the stringent measures expected. Instead, it is a broad-based "anti-terrorist" statute which, among other things, extends penalties for a variety of terrorist crimes, hires 5,000 new judicial employees, and orders an increase in Colombia's standing army. As the anti-drug daily *El Espectador* generously observed, the decision of Barco to do something, anything, was "a relief."

But, the editors continued, "We shouldn't forget that the Attorney General's office itself is infiltrated by the mafia, as is the Congress, public administration, many courts, and the armed forces. . . . Conceiving good measures alone will not suffice. It is indispensable to apply them and dem-

onstrate their efficiency. . . . May those in charge of imposing them, the competent authorities, not fail, nor submit to the language the terrorists and mafiosi speak to neutralize their efforts."

Even columnist Antonio Caballero, notorious for anti-extradition, pro-drug commentaries, was less than diplomatic in blasting the President's weak-kneed response to the narcos' declaration of war. In his Jan. 31 column, Caballero wrote: "Attorney General Mauro Hoyos has been so easily assassinated . . . because political power had the means, but not the will, to defend him. Colombia is being assassinated, not for lack of power, but for lack of will." (Perhaps Caballero's sudden concern stems from his inexplicable presence on a mafia hit list.)

At least the issuance of the anti-terrorist statute gave the military authority to conduct raids against safe-houses of the Medellín Cartel of cocaine traffickers. Vast arsenals were uncovered containing sophisticated weaponry, including infrared scopes and flash suppressors for machine-guns which the armed forces do not possess. A recent Mexican bust of 22 drug-smugglers, including 6 Colombians, turned up similar weaponry, reportedly destined for the Cartel in Colombia. However, not one of the mafia kingpins sought has been captured.

In answer to the deafening chorus of demands for a more vigorous administration of authority, President Barco has responded by convoking a national plebiscite to reform the Co-

lombian constitution.

Former President Carlos Lleras Restrepo responded to the plebiscite call by declaring: "We are at war, and to prosecute it the executive has and needs no other limitations but those recognized by international law guiding war among nations. We would not have arrived at the present situation if that juridical principal had been firmly adopted."

While the Barco government, as well as influential political forces within the opposition, cower under the terror of mob rule—cheered on by such *New York Times* headlines as "Colombians Grow Weary of Fighting Drugs"—patriotic elements in the country continue to fight. On Feb. 2, *El Espectador's* editors furiously denounced former President Misael Pastrana's willingness to hold a "dialogue" with the mafia in the aftermath of his son's kidnaping, "as if one were dealing with talks among peers, who could be measured by the same stick and viewed in the same plane of moral reference. . . ."

"And who do these criteria serve?" asks *El Espectador*. "To do away with extradition? To wash ill-gotten money? To pardon their crimes? To submit ourselves to their dominance and empire? To have a pact with them, and make mutual concessions? Former President Pastrana must tell us where he is going, and where he would take us all."

Former President Belisario Betancur wrote a letter to the daily *El Espectador* Jan. 29 calling for a crusade for "moral peace." Said Betancur, "The government, with the President at its hand, should tell us what we must do, without vacillation, without haggling. . . . We cannot permit the nation to be dishonored or for it to dissolve in our hands. For my part I am ready to carry out orders."