

# Colombia faces power vacuum as narco-terrorist siege intensifies

by Valerie Rush

The abrupt suspension on June 3 of Colombian President Virgilio Barco's trip abroad, and his hurried flight home from Europe, has failed to calm the nerves of those who fear the consequences of a permanent power vacuum in this country, which is besieged by an upsurge of Soviet-sponsored narco-terrorism.

Respected former President Carlos Lleras Restrepo editorialized in the June 7 edition of his weekly *Nueva Frontera*, "The country feels that it is badly managed and is screaming for correction, while asking at the same time if the strange nature of Dr. Barco and the advisers he chose from the beginning are going to allow him to carry it out."

The president of the opposition Social Conservative Party, Rodrigo Marín Bernal, was more forthright, saying that he "doubted" that President Barco "has enough sense to comprehend the magnitude of the crisis that confronts society." The president of the ruling Liberal Party, Hernando Durán Dussán, publicly urged a return to the historic "National Front" alliance of the two major political parties to form a cabinet of national salvation "to defend the threatened system."

Colombian Ambassador to the United States Victor Mosquera Chaux, also the vice-president designate, responded to a reporter's question on whether he was planning to return to Colombia: "Why? To make a civil coup against President Barco? Forget it!"

Widely read columnist María Teresa Herrán wrote in the daily *El Espectador* June 8, "A civil coup must be made in Colombia . . . before it occurs to the Armed Forces to make one."

## Destabilization, El Salvador-style

This painful debate by Colombian leaders on the fate of their nation was only in part triggered by the bloody May 29 kidnaping of national political figure Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, twice a candidate for the presidency, whose fate—and the identity of whose captors—remains unknown. Violent "peasant marches" organized by narco-terrorist gangs across the country have the population terrorized, with the return of all-too vivid memories of the genocidal 1950s civil war known as the *Violencia*.

Latest reports from Colombia are providing chilling details on just how the narco-terrorist onslaught is proceeding, El Salvador-style, to isolate and starve entire portions of the Colombian population into submission. Newspapers throughout the country on June 5 carried extensive reports on the ongoing siege of Magdalena Medio, in the central region of the country, where the fuel that maintains the productive activity of the country is produced and distributed.

The combined guerrilla forces of the National Liberation Army (ELN) and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the area understand well the strategic importance of the 16,000 square kilometers that make up the region, and have begun to employ tactics that go beyond the usual terrorist assaults and kidnapings. By destroying roadways and bridges into and out of the region, such critical cities as Barrancabermeja, where the nation's sole oil refinery exists, are being starved for lack of food supplies from outside.

At the same time, in the countryside, peasants are being forced at gunpoint to abandon their land and crops. Pipelines and electricity towers are being dynamited. Since May 23, when the "peasant marches" began, more than 130 productive oil wells have been abandoned by workers under threat of death. At least four departments which make up this oil-producing region have been targeted by the narco-terrorists for isolation and capture. The media is stating that a total lack of government authority in the area—guerrillas have even replaced the judges on the bench!—has left the population vulnerable to such blackmail.

## 'The sword and the cross'

While the Colombian Armed Forces continue to take the point in the on-the-ground battle against Moscow's irregular warfare troops, the Catholic Church has begun to step into the breach with an appeal for moral leadership to heal a "sickened" nation.

Declared Alfonso Cardinal López Trujillo in an interview with the Church daily *El Catolicismo*, "We are already like an ill person, very sick in the lungs (or so we can call the violence), very bad in the kidneys (the economy is suffering serious symptoms), ill in the brain (politics isn't functioning and there is a crisis of leadership). . . . [We can] also present

ourselves as heart patients, because matters of faith and of the Church touch the heart of a nation, and could cause a massive heart attack to suddenly occur and such a serious problem that not even a heart transplant would suffice to deal with it.”

It is far from coincidental that at a moment of total crisis in the country, the Barco government has provoked a major confrontation with the Catholic Church in the country, by bypassing Colombia’s bishops in seeking to re-write the Concordat, the Colombian state’s standing treaty of understanding with the Vatican. The Barco government seeks to include in the new treaty acceptance of divorce, elimination of obligatory religious education, and other concepts which would go far toward eliminating what moral influence on Colombian society the Church has been able to exercise heretofore.

On June 3, Father Rafael García Herrero addressed a mass attended by former Presidents Belisario Betancur and Misael Pastrana, and the entire family of the kidnaped Alvaro Gómez Hurtado. In his homily, televised nationwide, the widely respected priest charged that the kidnaping was the work of the narco-terrorists and urged the Armed Forces to launch a one-month *blitzkrieg* to “purify” the nation of these insurgencies.

The kidnaping, he said, “warns us of the extremely serious danger in which we find ourselves, where the entirety of a nation is paralyzed by fear and terror, where every project is interrupted because faith in Colombia has been lost, where there is an environment of generalized pessimism that impedes any type of progress in Colombia. . . . I want to give voice to all Colombians, to ask the Army, which is charged with safeguarding order, to save the country. . . . We are today fighting the big battle for Colombia, and possibly for all America.”

### A ‘New Yalta’ proposal

Unfortunately, the appeals of the Church have fallen on deaf ears in the Colombian seat of power. In his June 7 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, read by Foreign Minister Julio Londoño, President Barco called for disarming the militaries of the developing sector nations, to set an “example” for the great powers.

Dismantling the Ibero-American militaries is, in fact, a key element in the “New Yalta” deal just struck in Moscow between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachov, a deal which—under the rubric of “de-nuclearization”—will give the Soviets a free hand in irregular warfare deployments around the globe. Stripping Ibero-America of its military defenses will thus deliver the continent over to Moscow-controlled narco-terrorism, and to a Thirty Years War scenario identical to that destroying the nation of El Salvador and, in short order, Colombia as well.

Barco’s call for disarming the continent’s armed forces is identical to that of Sol Linowitz’s Inter-American Dialogue, which not accidentally also urges the “selective legal-

ization” of drugs. It is also identical to the arguments of the Soviet magazine *América Latina*, which insists—like the State Department’s Elliott Abrams—that “democratization” of the continent is best served by ending “armamentism.”

That Barco’s disarmament strategy is already under way inside Colombia, was signaled by former President Lleras Restrepo, who, in the context of his editorial criticism of Barco’s “mismanagement” of Colombia, observed that “surprising things are coming to light, such as revelations on the non-assignment of funds to meet the elementary needs of the Armed Forces.”

In an early June interview, Armed Forces commander Gen. Jaime Guerrero Paz confirmed the report, noting that despite promises of new supplies, “Until now, this very day, we have not received the first pair of boots, the first bullets. . . .”

### Drive for drug legalization

President Barco’s moves to dismantle the Colombian military are especially criminal, when viewed in the context of his praise, while in Europe, of the debate over “alternative solutions” to the drug problem ongoing inside the United States. “It does not make sense to resort exclusively to traditional repressive instruments to manage this situation [the drug trade], because we do not face a crime that utilizes traditional mechanisms and organizations. We must think up alternative formulas that would be more effective than the conventional ones,” he insisted.

The Colombian President’s sentiments apparently coincide with those of the pro-drug Bogotá-based daily *El Tiempo*, associated with former President and political “godfather” of the narco-traffickers Alfonso López Michelsen. On June 7, the daily’s editors argued that if the United States can negotiate with a “drug trafficker” like Panama’s Gen. Manuel Noriega, why shouldn’t Colombia?

President Reagan’s reasons, the paper argued, “are not fundamentally different from those which a few years ago led former President López and Attorney General Jiménez to hold a dialogue with the kingpins of the mafia in Panama. We were the first to shout our protests. We don’t repent. But in retrospect, and upon seeing the hell into which that cursed plague has dragged us, one cannot help but ask oneself if soon the country will not be in a different situation.”

And in its June 8 lead editorial, *El Tiempo* urges that the debate on drug legalization now going on in the United States “be discussed among ourselves, with frankness, without fear, and without becoming a political debate. . . . We suppose that the President [Barco] had that in mind discussing this issue in the United States, which is the number-one problem between the two nations.”

*El Tiempo*’s editorial concludes with the lament that the drug legalization issue will not get fair play in an election year, and says that perhaps it was just as well that President Barco had to cancel his trip—for now.