

Colombian army asks war on narco-terror

by Valerie Rush

"We are at war," declared retired Colombian General Rafael Peña Ríos in a controversial June 12 interview with the daily *El Tiempo*, and the ability of the armed forces to prosecute that war has been stripped by a government lacking political will. If the military's hands continue to remain "manacled" by government inaction, said Peña, the result will be "an extremely serious vacuum of power," into which will step "the only organized force with a plan"—subversion.

Included in Peña's critique (see *Documentation*) is a blast at the Supreme Court, for having stripped the military of critical legal faculties for fighting the terrorists, and at the Finance Ministry, whose narrow-minded obsession with the budget has reduced soldiers to sleeping in the hallways of their barracks, and going without boots and bullets.

Peña's statements, the strongest military commentary yet on the disastrous state of affairs in terror-besieged Colombia, has—together with the still unsolved kidnaping of Conservative political leader Alvaro Gómez Hurtado—stirred a long-overdue controversy on the nature of the crisis in that country.

The Supreme Court has already issued its rebuttal. Its president, José Alejandro Bonivento, told the press that military justice could not be seen as a "panacea," and that the courts, given sufficient resources, can do their part in fighting subversion.

His answer, and President Barco's silence, did not sit well with the aroused Armed Forces, however. Defense Minister Rafael Samudio Molina came back the next day with a lengthy public letter to President Barco, which fully endorsed Peña's critique, and demanded that the proper legislation, funding, and political support be provided to the nation's military forces, if the citizenry is ever to enjoy the peace "for which we all yearn."

Minister Samudio repeatedly stated in his letter that, with the "sincere participation of all sectors of national power," the nation's defense could be assured. Like Peña, he insisted, "It is unquestionable that the trial of individuals by military justice . . . is a necessity," and criticized the Supreme Court for its "inexplicable" decision to reverse a 1980 ruling defining military trial of civilians as constitutional.

Denouncing the "red tape mania" of the Finance Ministry, Minister Samudio also detailed how "it takes, in the best of cases, a period of 56 weeks to formalize a contract" for

getting funds to the military, and multiple passes through nearly a dozen different entities before any military credits or investments are approved. He revealed the growth of the guerrilla insurgency from 800 cadre in 1978, to 1,400 in 1981, to more than 7,500 today, and confirmed that the government's misbegotten "peace amnesty," dating from the previous Betancur government, gave the various guerrilla groups the chance to rest, consolidate forces, and even enter the Congress.

Power vacuum growing

This unusual political intervention by the Colombian Armed Forces, according to some sources, was triggered by the recent cabinet reshuffle, ordered by President Barco in hopes of calming growing fears of a leadership vacuum. However, Barco's eight new ministry appointments only served to aggravate those fears. His Justice Ministry appointee declined the nomination when it was revealed that he was being investigated for fraud. A second nominee for the position told the media that he would not accept the appointment unless the President guaranteed that there would be no attempt to revive the Colombia-U.S. extradition treaty. Sources report that it took an irate phone call from the U.S. embassy in Bogotá to President Barco to nix what would otherwise have been the nominee's confirmation—on his terms.

But it didn't end there. The nominee for development minister, under investigation for tax fraud, was nonetheless confirmed in his post. The budget-cutting finance minister remained in his post. The Justice Ministry remains vacant. The new energy minister's first public statement was to call for government dialogue with the terrorist ELN, to bring an end to that group's constant dynamite attacks on the nation's oil pipelines. And the new labor minister is one of the country's most virulent anti-labor spokesmen.

The disgust of the military is, perhaps, best shown by a pamphlet currently making the rounds in Colombia, which calls on former Defense Minister Fernando Landázabal Reyes to run for the presidency. The pamphlet bears the title, "General, Save the Fatherland!" But the military is apparently not the only sector which sees Barco's attempts to exert "leadership" as an unmitigated disaster. A letter calling for the President's resignation has begun to circulate in all major cities, and has already garnered signatures from former governors and leading industrialists.

Efforts to neutralize the Church's moral leadership in the country were frustrated when a June 10 terrorist occupation of the Bogotá headquarters of the Latin American Bishops' Council (CELAM) whimpered to an end. Some 40 hooded "Christians for peace" took 35 priests hostage and demanded that the Church sponsor a "national dialogue" with the country's narco-terrorists. The Church responded with total condemnation of terrorism, and after six days, the terrorists were forced to abandon the CELAM offices under protection negotiated with the government.

'The only organized force with a plan'

Excerpts follow of an interview with Gen. Rafael Peña Ríos (ret.) that appeared June 12 in the daily El Tiempo. He was the commander of the XII Brigade in the southern jungle region of Caquetá.

Q: Why isn't there an effective military response to the armed insurrection?

A: To expand, the guerrillas require three supports: political, social, and economic. At this moment, they have all three. The political support that was lacking they got as a result of the peace agreements. Movements emerged that were the guerrillas' political extensions, not explicit, but camouflaged. Each guerrilla organization thus has its own political movement, broad in some cases and small in others. . . .

Q: What is the social support for the guerrillas?

A: It is given by the peasant himself in many regions, but not out of sympathy, as is believed, but by intimidation. The peasants know a military patrol is not going to kill them. But they know that if they don't carry out the order of a guerrilla commander, it will cost them their lives. So the orders of the guerrillas are carried out rigorously. The peasant marches are achieved by intimidation. . . . He who doesn't respond to the call is suspect. He turns up dead. In the next march, no one is going to refuse to go.

Q: I am not going to ask about economic support. That is known: assaults, protection money, extortion, kidnappings, coca. . . . What does the guerrilla propose to do in the short and medium term?

A: For the time being, an economic effect: block the resources of the national economy and, primarily, oil production. The action against the peasantry seeks to also destabilize agricultural production. . . . [In the long term], it is to have control over a portion of the territory. That is what everything turns on. . . . We could find ourselves with a Colombia divided in two. Put in that way, it sounds unreal, but that is the plan. . . .

Q: Do you think the escalation of armed actions . . . corre-

sponds to a plan?

A: Perfectly timed, yes. It began with the publication by Amnesty International [attacking Colombia's military], then with the trip to Europe of political leaders of the extreme left. . . . It continued with the peasant marches. Then expanded with the blockading of oil wells and pipelines. Bridges were blown up, banks and warehouses dynamited. Elements infiltrated into the marches shot at officers and soldiers. The kidnaping of Dr. Gómez was the culmination of the plan. . . . It was a destabilization operation, and nothing has more of an impact than the kidnaping of an important political leader. . . . It was a counterintelligence operation executed over several weeks, with the participation of many people. And the Army . . . [had] not the slightest idea!

Q: How do you explain that?

A: Because there is no intelligence. . . . And there is none, not just because of lack of training and of experts in this fundamental weapon of battle, but primarily because there exists no legislation that permits it. Telephone taps . . . here are a crime. Whoever uses one could go to jail. If there is no money for boots, there is even less for sophisticated equipment, cameras, fingerprint analysis equipment.

Q: So the guerrillas' intelligence is better?

A: Of course. On their side is technology, on ours not. . . .

Q: A few years ago, General, the army had more initiative, confronted the guerrillas, defeated them, recovered stolen weapons. None of this is occurring today. . . .

A: The army lost its combat capability, and lost it because it was taken away. It was taken away the moment military justice was stripped of its ability to judge crimes of public order, the moment they began to make accusations against commanders, to block their actions. The army lost the political protection of the state. . . .

Q: How can we better defend the country, General?

A: It must be recognized that there are insufficient troops to protect 1,000 towns. Further . . . that there be civilian support for the police. Self-defense or paramilitary groups should be formed. We are at war, that is forgotten. . . . The army hasn't the means, and when it has, it doesn't use them. It doesn't bombard camps out of fear of the law. The permission of the President must be sought, and he doesn't give it. . . .

There must be legislation to give strength to the army. It must be allowed to take special measures, restricting freedoms, at a given moment. I am not talking about arbitrariness, nor despotism. I am talking about an institutional framework appropriate for a war-time situation. . . . [Otherwise, there will be] a very serious vacuum of power. Nothing will remain as the alternative, neither the political parties, nor the church, not even . . . the armed forces. Only subversion. It is the only organized force with a plan.