

# Colombia moves against drug financiers, narcos strike back

by Valerie Rush

The government of President Virgilio Barco in Colombia is rolling out the heavy guns in its declared war against the drug cartels. Despite the mafia's threat to murder four children of Colombian judges for every extradition of a drug trafficker, the suspected chief money-launderer of the Medellín Cartel, Eduardo Martínez Romero, was shipped off to the United States on Sept. 7, and will be facing trial here shortly. European press reports suggest that not only will he be on the hot seat, but also some very powerful New York-based commercial banks that are deeply implicated in drug money laundering. Martínez is the first major cartel figure to be extradited since President Barco issued his Aug. 18 state-of-siege decrees permitting extradition of traffickers, and expropriation of their goods and properties.

Barco has issued a new presidential decree which will permit the imposition of military mayors in any town under siege by the mafia. In the capital city of Bogotá, Mayor Andrés Pastrana has indefinitely suspended the holding of any public gatherings—demonstrations, political campaign rallies, sports events—in the face of an escalating number of terrorist incidents and threats, including a devastating car-bomb attack on the installations of the anti-drug daily *El Espectador*. Eighty-two people were wounded in that bombing, carried out with 70 kilos of dynamite.

## Rallying popular support

Perhaps most importantly of all, the Colombian government is making a concerted effort to draw the population into active support for its newly created war machine. The government has offered a quarter-million-dollar reward for information leading to the capture of one or both of two leading Medellín Cartel kingpins, Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. Wanted posters advertising the reward are going up throughout the country, and the airwaves are being bombarded with impassioned appeals for citizen collaboration in the war on drugs. The ads say, "For your children, for yourselves, for Colombia. Join this national crusade. The war declared by the international organization of drug trafficking is against everyone. No more skepticism.

Cooperate, denounce, inform!"

Since President Barco's Aug. 18 declaration of war on the cartels, police and army troops have conducted more than 2,042 raids, seizing more than 21 tons of cocaine and 11 tons of cocaine base, and knocking out 3,000 cocaine refineries and 62 clandestine airstrips. According to authorities in both Colombia and the United States, the flow of cocaine has ground to a near total halt, as the cocaine-smuggling infrastructure has either been dismantled, driven underground, or its operatives have taken flight. The arrival of U.S. aid, in the form of helicopters, assault boats, jeeps, machine guns, grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons, communications equipment, medical supplies, and other equipment, is expected to give remoralized anti-narcotics forces a chance to "even the score."

## Barbaric attacks on wives, children

The cartels have continued to escalate their response, in hope that a combination of paralyzing terror tactics and political sabotage of the government's efforts by their pin-striped allies in high places will force President Barco into some kind of accommodation.

In the course of one week, the wives of two military officers were gunned down by suspected mafia hit-men, in fulfillment of the threat by the drug lords (known as the "Extraditables," since they are prime targets for extradition to the United States for their crimes) that "families will not be respected." A mafia assassin disguised in army fatigues crossed security lines at the crowded Medellín airport and sprayed a line of waiting passengers with machine-gun fire. An airplane belonging to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration undergoing repairs in the city of Montería was fire-bombed Sept. 3 and totally destroyed. *El Espectador* was dynamited, and the rival daily *El Tiempo* was threatened. Bomb threats have been telephoned into military hospitals and universities, in the latter case forcing indefinite suspension of classes. The offices of the national

the DAS, were informed that their water would be poisoned.

Even schoolchildren are threatened. The Extraditables

issued a threat to the private secondary schools in Bogotá, threatening them with attacks, because “the children of the oligarchy” study there. Some of the schools have stopped picking up children in buses, for fear of attacks, and others have suspended classes altogether.

### **Dope lobby: ‘Let’s make a deal!’**

Behind the violence has been a constant drumbeat in the media, domestic and international, for dialogue with Dope, Inc. The claim that too much corruption within Colombia’s police and military forces makes an effective war against the cartels impossible, has been a constant underlying theme in news coverage appearing in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Times*, and others. Typical headlines are the *Baltimore Sun*’s “Will Colombia Talk to Drug Traffickers? It’s Likely.” That article opens with an interview with former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen, who asserts that dialogue with the drug cartels “appears inevitable.” The same article quotes presidential candidate and López frontman Ernesto Samper Pizano: “You can’t rule out the possibility of ending the war through negotiations.”

López, whose role as political godfather to the drug cartels has been extensively documented by *EIR*, was the target of an angry demonstration by the Schiller Institute in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 8, when the former President appeared to address an Inter-American Development Bank seminar on “Development and Democracy.” The demonstrators, mostly Ibero-Americans, supported Barco’s war against the cartels and demanded that López be jailed in Colombia as a traitor to his country. One banner read, “Extradite López.”

López has also been increasingly targeted by his countrymen. A July 7 editorial in the daily *El Espectador* called for exposing and dismantling the political and financial support infrastructure of the drug cartels, and indirectly identified López—who secretly went to Panama in 1984 to negotiate a deal with the cartels—as a prime example of the kind of treasonous individual who should be behind bars:

“The drug trade needs its own environment to exist and to feed off. It cannot survive alone, without that indispensable support, or without the advice, complicity, and help of that ‘fifth column’ which penetrates all social layers and are its ears, its eyes, its natural breeding ground. And already out of those contaminated sectors have arisen voices of complacency . . . which clamor for a deal and suggest that the infamy which overshadows the nation is irreversible. . . .

“There are then the dollar launderers, followed by the intermediaries who buy and sell real estate and have driven up commercial prices. And those who receive money to strengthen industries, serving from that moment onward as tributaries of the drug traffickers. And the political leaders who follow that same money to finance their electoral campaigns and then serve the traffickers as unofficial agents. . . . And those within the public force who have allowed them-

selves to be corrupted by the empire of money. . . . And the corrupt judges, who release those captured and then parade themselves with impunity before authorities terrorized and stripped of leaders. And the communications media bought with their money or sullied with their publicity.

“Not to mention those self-styled interlocutors who travel to Panama or to Mexico as couriers of crime, and not content with having done so, nor with receiving economic contributions to their electoral campaigns, present the country with a peace pact previously concluded with the kings of the drug trade. All are equally guilty, as authors or accomplices of crime, as its temporary representatives or intimate advisers. . . . And the hand of justice should nab and imprison them all.”

In Colombia and abroad, commentaries continue to appear advocating drug legalization, attacking Barco’s emergency decrees as unconstitutional, and predicting that the Supreme Court will overturn the President’s anti-drug initiatives. The list of prominents, like López, who urge an accommodation with the mob, continues to grow. A recent addition to that list is former defense minister and retired Gen. José Joaquín Matallana, who chose the moment of announcing his presidential candidacy to urge striking a deal with the mafia along the lines of the amnesty proposal negotiated between López and the Medellín Cartel five years ago: repatriation of drug fortunes held abroad to help pay the foreign debt, in exchange for a government pledge not to extradite.

The Colombian Communist Party, which has repeatedly denounced the government’s military campaign against the traffickers as a “subterfuge” for conducting a “dirty war” against the left, has just concluded a plenum of its national committee, which issued a denunciation of extradition as “a sellout” to the United States. An Aug. 31 declaration by the Communist Party, appearing in its weekly *Voz*, cleared the mafia of responsibility for the recent assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán by insisting instead that his death must be viewed within the parameters of a “low-intensity conflict, inspired by Washington against Colombia.” Student demonstrations organized by the Communists have protested the arrival of U.S. military equipment as “a violation of Colombian sovereignty”!

Thus far, the Barco administration has stood firm against these pressures, but the fact remains that unless Colombia is provided international solidarity—in deeds, not merely in words—that besieged nation will fall. One element that could seriously erode President Barco’s resolve is the international financial pressure already being brought to bear on him to back off from his military campaign against drugs. According to a Sept. 4 report published in the daily *El Espectador*, datelined London, European bankers are worried. One London banker is quoted: “Until a few weeks ago, I was happy to lend money and do business in Colombia, but now an enormous problem is posed that changes the whole situation. The war on drugs could be disastrous.”