

## Andean Report by Jacobo Frontoni

### Venezuela and drug-money laundering

*Under fire in Colombia, the drug cartels and their political godfathers pose a threat to Venezuela.*

Like every other Ibero-American country, Venezuela cannot afford to remain indifferent to the war that Colombia is waging against narco-terrorism. With its long shared border, Venezuela has for a long time suffered the impact of Dope, Inc.'s bid to control the political, financial, and economic life of its neighbor. Problems have ranged from cross-border raids into Venezuela by narco-terrorist outfits like the National Liberation Army (ELN), coca cultivation in the shared Sierra de Perijá region, trafficking activities in which Venezuela has served both as a bridge and a refuge, and, most importantly, Venezuela's growing employment as the drug traffickers' money-laundering center.

Venezuela, too, shares the problem of creeping corruption within its political elite. Fabio Ochoa Restrepo, a prominent horsebreeder and the father of the infamous Ochoa clan which runs the Medellín Cartel, said a few months back that he had important friends and clients within the upper circles of Venezuelan society.

Venezuela's importance to the drug-trafficking networks was exemplified by information released Sept. 17 by the Venezuelan Judicial Police, that Medellín Cartel chieftains Pablo Escobar and Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha were believed to have taken refuge from the Colombian Armed Forces at ranches owned by associates of theirs in the Venezuelan border regions of Apure and Táchira. Similarly, *El Nuevo País* published a report Sept. 5 that Colombia's narco-guerril-

las were fleeing into Venezuela's Sierra de Perijá. Defense Minister Filmo López Uzcátegui has ordered the reinforcement of these regions under a declared "border alert."

Venezuelan National Guard commander General José Vicente Lecia Madrid revealed Sept. 17 that 15,000 kilos of drugs had been captured on Venezuelan territory in less than one month, believed to be a tiny percentage of the actual quantity of drugs which regularly crosses Venezuela on their way to markets elsewhere.

Possibly the most serious problem facing Venezuela, however, is "the laundering of dollars, which is being carried out with increasing intensity in our country. . . . All this under the inconceivable complacency of certain Venezuelan financial institutions," said deputy Leonardo Montiel Ortega in a letter to President Carlos Andrés Pérez, published Aug. 27 in the daily *Ultimas Noticias*. In his letter, which has thus far received no response, Montiel Ortega asserts that although in Venezuela, "foreign financial institutions are not permitted to accept deposits on national soil, national banks have full freedom to do so . . . and as a result, the drug dollars enter the country to be 'rinsed,' to be exchanged for bolívares and then once more into dollars." This mechanism, said the Venezuelan congressman, is facilitated by "the connection of our banking institutions with banks operating in the Caribbean."

On Aug. 8, columnist Mauro Gamus proposed the creation in Vene-

zuela of "an international financial center, to permit all the foreign banks that are leaving Panama to enter here. . . . Someone might say that this runs the risk of turning into a paradise for the drug traffickers, but that isn't so. With a little skill, the laundering of money is controllable. . . . It just takes a little imagination."

According to Congressman Oscar Yanes, Mauro Gamus is the pseudonym for Andrés Galdós Ferrer, whose column is published daily in most Caracas dailies as a paid advertisement. Congressman Yanes demanded to know who is paying the one million bolívares (\$25,000) a week to publish Galdós Ferrer's drug-lobby propaganda.

Regarding the cultivation of coca, a report published Sept. 1 by the daily *El Nacional* reveals that "the coca crops in Venezuela's Sierra de Perijá . . . were discovered in May 1987 in the region of Agdobadú, a few kilometers from the Colombian border." The report adds that, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the seed was brought by people from Medellín Cartel kingpins Pablo Escobar Gaviria and his partner at the time, Carlos Lehder.

On Sept. 6, the Venezuelan press reported that the chiefs of the Indian tribes of Zulia state, located in the Sierra del Perijá, charged that there are some 30,000 hectares of coca crop in the region. *El Universal* reported that "the 30,000 hectares of coca are located in the towns of Becerril, department of César, Colombia, and in the sector of Aroita, in the Sierra de Perijá, Zulia state [Venezuela]."

On Sept. 8, Venezuela's Defense Minister López Uzcátegui revealed that both marijuana and coca crops had been discovered in the cited region, and that troops had been deployed to destroy them.