

Andean Report by José Restrepo

Narcos want a deal

The "Extraditables" are laying out the conditions for their "unconditional" surrender to President Barco.

Speaking out of both sides of their mouths, the Colombian "Extraditables"—the group of drug traffickers headed by Medellín Cartel chieftain Pablo Escobar—is demanding that the government of President Virgilio Barco create either a commission or an "appropriate mechanism" for facilitating the drug cartel's promised surrender. The demand, transmitted through a letter sent to the "Notables"—a private group of would-be drug legalizers headed by former President Alfonso López Michelsen—also threatens that, should the government fail to do so, a new outbreak of violence will follow.

The Feb. 25 letter calls on López and company to intervene so that the government, "through one or more persons or through an appropriate mechanism, implements the process of our surrender." The Extraditables promise that if such a "mechanism" is created, they will hand over "the complete inventory of materials used in our activities" and will accept "the findings of Colombian justice, because we are subject to its Constitution and to its laws."

The same letter, however, warns the press and the government against placing "too much importance on use of words such as dialogue, negotiations, pact, when what is at stake is the opportunity to resolve a problem without violence, without repression, without hatred." Reading between the lines, the Extraditables are threatening, "Play by our rules, or pay the consequences."

The government has stood firm against the blackmail threats. Re-

sponded Government Minister Carlos Lemos Simonds, "There will be no negotiations because the state cannot negotiate its laws, nor the norms that have been dictated to protect society. If they are prepared to face justice, let them do so, because until now all we have heard are offers without substance."

In a Feb. 24 interview with the anti-drug daily *El Espectador*, the minister honed in on the real problem facing his country. The drug trade has grown to such magnitude, he said, because the country is "morally devalued. . . . Unlike what is happening with the rest of Latin America, our fight is not against galloping inflation, but against galloping immorality. The cause of our sufferings is not the foreign debt, but the debt we owe to our own consciences. The country has a deficit, but of probity. Thus Colombia needs a great moral bonanza more than a coffee bonanza.

"Our youth are trained to derive maximum personal benefit from their work, without realizing that that demands a high degree of social indifference. We zealously guard the soundness of our currency, but we disregard the soundness of our customs. We economically revalue ourselves but we morally devalue ourselves. And, without realizing it, we've ended up establishing a stock exchange of ethics, where betting down has become the most lucrative operation."

Lemos concluded that Colombia will not enter into a deal with the drug pushers, as former President López is demanding, "just so the traffickers will release people they have auda-

ciously kidnaped to demonstrate their criminal power."

The government may not be buying the cartel's offers, but the media both at home and abroad insist on presenting the Extraditables' letter as the same offer of *unconditional* surrender pending since Jan. 17. On that date, the Extraditables tried to curry public favor by promising to release its kidnap victims, and hand over explosives, arms, cocaine labs. Now, the narcos are presenting the *conditions* for that "unconditional" surrender.

Following an exchange of letters with López, the Extraditables began to release hostages one by one, while announcing the location of a handful of abandoned laboratories and some explosives caches. However, the security forces during that same period were raiding labs much more sophisticated than those supposedly surrendered, and found more weapons and explosives than those handed over as "good faith" symbols.

On Feb. 17, National Police director General Gómez Padilla revealed that a gigantic laboratory in the eastern plains of Yari had been discovered, and more than 60,000 gallons of refining chemicals and 700 kilos of pure cocaine confiscated. In another raid, they found an arsenal which included surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles. "I see no reason to applaud a few criminals who now appear to want peace after committing such crimes. The only offer I understand is their surrender to authorities and their immediate submission to Colombian law," he said.

A recent combined army-police raid uncovered \$37 million in cash and gold hidden on an estate belonging to the slain trafficker Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. That sum equalled the Colombian defense budget for an entire year!