

# New terror wave brings chaos back to Colombia

by Andrea Olivieri

The March 22 mafia assassination of Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, the 39-year-old presidential candidate of the left-wing Patriotic Union (UP) party, has shattered the calm and more importantly, the mood of optimism that had briefly prevailed in Colombia following March 11. On that day, congressional elections which also served as a presidential primary for the ruling Liberal Party overwhelmingly chose anti-drug hardliner César Gaviria Trujillo as the probable next President of Colombia. His pledge of continuity with the current government's war on drugs held promise of ultimate victory over the cartels.

But in the early morning hours of March 22, at the El Dorado airport in Bogotá, a 16-year-old hireling of the cocaine-trafficking Medellín Cartel sprayed Jaramillo Ossa with submachine gun fire, in front of his wife and children. The UP leader died on the surgeon's table two hours later. That evening, a spokesman for the Medellín Cartel called the media to claim full responsibility for the killing, to promise that Liberal candidate Gaviria would be next, and to announce plans for a national terror-bombing spree—all in alleged retaliation for the government's refusal to "negotiate" an amnesty for the traffickers. "This is the restart of the war because they haven't listened to us. The only thing we will deliver is dead people," the caller reportedly said.

A government communiqué was issued, reporting that Colombian security forces "had been able to establish with certainty that the attack was ordered by drug-trafficker Pablo Escobar," the chief of the Medellín Cartel.

## Government on the defensive

The Jaramillo assassination occurred within 24 hours of a heated public exchange between UP president Diego Montaña Cuellar and Interior Minister Carlos Lemos Simmonds, after the latter had accused the UP—made up largely of active Communists and former guerrillas—of serving as the political arm of the outlawed FARC guerrilla movement, which has been linked to Moscow. The FARC did propose and support the creation of the UP in 1985, but candidate Jaramillo had recently distanced himself publicly from the terrorists. Lemos Simmonds made his comment after a FARC ambush of a police van in the outlying region of Guainia, in which eight officers and the driver were killed—and while public outrage was at its height.

In the exchange of charges that preceded Jaramillo's mur-

der, Montaña had warned Minister Lemos that "You should know that a declaration such as yours could cause many deaths, because clearly our enemies will feel strengthened." Following the UP candidate's murder, Montaña demanded that Lemos resign from the Barco government and promised to initiate legal proceedings against the minister. President Virgilio Barco sent a letter of response to Montaña Cuellar in which he disavowed Lemos's accusation of UP/FARC links, albeit without mentioning his minister's name. Lemos Simmonds is expected to tender his resignation momentarily.

Aggravating the crisis is the fact that the Barco government had just ordered the withdrawal of some 3,000 police bodyguards who had been deployed to protect candidates, political organizations, judges, and other targeted persons from terrorist assaults during the pre-electoral period that ended March 11. Ingenuously claiming that the threat ended with those elections (presidential elections are on May 27!), the government was reflecting intense pressure to meet the soaring crime wave—from narco-terrorists and common criminals alike—by returning those policemen to their usual posts. However, the police redeployment invited narco-terrorists—from "left" and "right"—to exploit such an advantage.

## Chaos begins

Wasting no time in assisting the cartels' promise of renewed chaos and bloodshed, the Communists answered the Jaramillo killing by sponsoring violent protests across the country. In downtown Bogotá, army troops were forced to disperse rock-throwing Communist youth who were burning buses and denouncing the government for complicity in Jaramillo's death. Classes were canceled for the week. Troops nationwide were put on full alert. The national teachers' union, to which the murdered Jaramillo belonged, called a 48-hour strike, while the Communist-influenced banana workers in northern Colombia stopped working. A mass funeral planned for Jaramillo Ossa on March 24 could be the site of new eruptions of violence.

Giving the drug cartels critical "breathing space" in which to recoup their losses and launch a new offensive, were a series of developments which had begun to slowly erode the Barco government's anti-drug efforts. On Feb. 22, the Colombian Supreme Court overturned a government ban on returning confiscated properties seized in anti-drug raids, effectively de-fanging the government's potent expropriation weapon.

Another crucial weapon, extradition, was publicly rejected by Gaviria's Conservative Party challenger Rodrigo Llorca Caicedo, and even the U.S. State Department—the putative inspiration behind the Barco government's extradition strategy—urged in its March 1990 report on international narcotics matters, that Colombia's use of the extradition weapon be phased out over the course of the next year. That is precisely what the cartels have been waiting to hear.