

Colombian government opens talks with drug traffickers, with U.S. blessing

by José Restrepo

With military units and police hot on the trail of Medellín Cartel kingpin Pablo Escobar, “The Extraditables”—as the Colombian drug-traffickers facing extradition to the U.S. call themselves—threatened on March 31 that they would cause a holocaust in downtown Bogotá by setting a five-ton bomb, if the government did not halt military operations against the Medellín Cartel. They also announced that they intend to kill one member of the Cano family, the owners of Colombia’s most committed anti-drug newspaper *El Espectador*, for every member of the drug cartel extradited for trial in the United States.

The traffickers were worried. In late March, military and police units moved in to take over the home base of Escobar, the town of Envigado, 20 kilometers south of Medellín, where he is believed to have been staying. An officer involved in the operation to apprehend Escobar told the press that their plan is to force Escobar to leave the area where he still enjoys the peasants’ support, *El Tiempo* reported March 31. “Sooner or later,” the officer added, Escobar “will experience the same situation as ‘El Mexicano’ [Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha], who left [his home town of] Pacho and was easily caught.” Rodríguez Gacha—Escobar’s partner—died in the resulting shoot-out with military police.

The drug traffickers moved quickly to display that their threats were not idle. On April 3, the “Extraditables” kidnaped Sen. Federico Estrada Vélez. Estrada was the Medellín debate manager for Liberal presidential candidate César Gaviria Trujillo in the recent elections, and shortly before being kidnaped, had made statements against negotiations with the drug cartel.

Then, on April 4, National Police were alerted by terrified citizens in a northern Bogotá neighborhood where the Labor Ministry is located and several leading politicians live, that a truck had been left in the area. Police investigators found a 1,600-pound charge of dynamite aboard, which they defused before it could explode.

Such barbarous acts are yet another proof of the absurdity of any “dialogue” with these Nazi-like murderers. Yet they bought Escobar valuable time. On April 4, President Virgilio

Barco announced from Europe, where he was on a ten-day trip, that if Escobar or any other drug trafficker surrendered, they would not be extradited to the United States but would get a “fair trial” in Colombia—even though every judge who has ever handled a case involving Pablo Escobar is now dead.

The announcement that the Colombian government is willing to stop extradition was a major victory for the narcos, and signaled that the government at least, if not the military and police, appears committed to continuing negotiations which, it has now been revealed, had begun secretly with the drug cartels last December, with U.S. State Department backing. The “Extraditables” signaled their pleasure, by releasing Senator Estrada unharmed on April 5.

Secret negotiations

As Colombian forces took over Envigado, *El Espectador* and other news media exposed the fact that a secret deal was being arranged between “certain areas of the government,” particularly, Germán Montoya, secretary general of the presidency, and the drug traffickers through the mediation of ex-President Alfonso López Michelsen. The government, which for six months had fought courageously against the narcos almost alone, was stung by the charges.

The narcos answered by threatening to kill members of the Cano family, which owns and directs *El Espectador*. It would not be the first time. In 1986, the drug mob gunned down Guillermo Cano, the paterfamilias and a vociferous opponent of the drug trade; in 1989 they nearly destroyed the paper’s headquarters by detonating a car-bomb next to the building.

President Barco replied to charges of secret talks on March 31 in a statement aired on national radio and TV. He admitted that private individuals had conducted “humanitarian efforts to free innocent persons,” but denied that those talks “compromise the policies and actions of the national government,” and accused the press of misinformation.

But the details of the narco-negotiations were soon revealed by one of the leading participants, Pablo Escobar’s lawyer, Guido Parra, apparently seeking to ensure the government did not backtrack. According to a lengthy letter from

Parra published in Bogotá's press, negotiations began after the "Extraditables" kidnaped German Montoya's son, as well as some relatives of President Barco in December. Montoya and Barco then contacted two people to ask they mediate with "the Extraditables": Alfonso López, who had met the narco kingpins in Panama at 1984, and the man who had organized the 1984 López-narco summit, Medellín architect Santiago Londoño White. White's ties with the cartel are well known, as he took 1 million pesos from the drug traffickers to support López Michelsen's 1982 presidential bid.

So López met with Escobar's lawyer Parra, and the two edited two comunicués, one issued in the name of the "Notables," and another by the "Extraditables." The "Notables," who included former Presidents López himself, Julio César Turbay, and Misael Pastrana Borrero; Patriotic Union president Diego Montaña Cuellar; and Cardinal Mario Revollo Bravo of Bogotá, sent a letter to the "Extraditables" promising them "a less severe treatment" if they liberate the hostages; the "Extraditables" promised to "surrender" if the government stopped the war. The negotiations were on.

The drug traffickers' strategy is no different than that implemented—successfully—by their allies in the narco-terrorist M-19 group, whose leaders, despite having assaulted the Justice Palace in 1985 and having killed half of the Supreme Court, today hold seats in Congress and are hailed internationally as model reformers!

Three years ago former Conservative Party presidential candidate Alvaro Gómez Hurtado was kidnaped by the M-19. In order to obtain his release, Gómez and the government negotiated an agreement which this year resulted in a general amnesty for the M-19 leaders, the election to Congress of Carlos Pizarro León-Gómez, the M-19's top leader, and their winning of mayoralties in several municipalities.

So today the drug traffickers argue that if the government negotiated with their agents, the M-19, why not do the same with the M-19's bosses, the traffickers themselves? The Gómez case was the drug traffickers' "proof" that whoever has capabilities to kidnap figures is entitled to hold office.

U.S. pressing for negotiations

The current negotiations with the narcos have been supported, and perhaps urged upon the Colombian government, by the U.S. State Department. The 1990 report of the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics Matters, issued in March, lays the basis for a retreat on the key issue, extradition, stating: "While extraditions of major traffickers should continue during the next year, success ultimately rests in Colombia's ability to prosecute and jail traffickers in Colombia."

U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Thomas MacNamara said Feb. 7 to the Colprensa press agency that "extradition is not the solution" for the drug traffic. On the eve of the "anti-drug summit" in Cartagena, Colombia, MacNamara added that the United States won't interfere if the Colombian government

decides to make a deal with the drug cartels, a Bogotá paper reported March 14.

Thus, Escobar's lawyer Parra, in his letter explaining the negotiations, praised the Colombian government for having carried out enough diplomacy "to wrest from the U.S. authorities statements that discredited the mechanism of extradition as the only means to fight drug traffic."

In this climate of appeasement, the pressure for a deal is escalating. Conservative Party presidential candidate Rodrigo Lloreda Caicedo proposed on April 4 that the Acting President while Barco is out of the country, Horacio Serpa Uribe—an intimate of López Michelsen and long-time adversary to Colombia's military—hold a dialogue with the drug traffickers with the help of the International Red Cross. Lloreda even proposed that a "verification commission" be formed by foreign and national figures to monitor implementation of the agreements.

The proposal was immediately endorsed by "Notable" Diego Montaña Cuellar, president of the Communist Party-created Patriotic Union party. Former Conservative Party presidential candidate Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, for his part, called for legalizing the drug trade—exactly as the drug traffickers say.

Winning battles, but not yet the war

Anti-drug forces have not stopped, however. César Gaviria, winner of the early March primary elections of the Liberal Party, has reiterated his opposition to any dialogue with the drug mob.

"If the press had not been indiscreet and had not sowed the confusion alluded to by the President, everything would have transpired in silence. The silence would have continued for some days more, and now we would be at the point of an armistice dictated from the shadow of well-known estates by the capos of drug trafficking, naturally with the diligent assistance of the 'Notables,'" *El Espectador* wrote in an April 1 answer to President Barco's charges of press "misinformation."

Neither the Colombian people nor patriotic elements in the military will support this treasonous pact. Even in his bragging letter, Parra admitted that talks were almost ruined already, when Gen. Harold Bedoya, commander of the Army's IV Brigade headquartered in Medellín, denounced López Michelsen and Parra for coordinating the "Notable"- "Extraditable" exchange. Clearly, as Parra said in his letter, no deal would survive Escobar's capture.

Upping the ante on the government, *El Espectador* announced on April 3 that it would stop publishing editorials, and instead leave the editorial space blank, until the Barco government guaranteed freedom of expression in the country. "In this situation, *El Espectador* is obliged to omit its editorial opinion until the President of the Republic returns to the country and guarantees of human life and freedom of expression are fully in place," announced the daily.