

Andean Report by Andrea Olivieri

Colombia: corruption in high places

President Gaviria's complicity in Pablo Escobar's so-called escape—an impeachable offense—is being covered up.

Colombian President César Gaviria Trujillo, whose appeasement policy toward the cocaine cartels has led to the humiliation and debasement of his country's national institutions—from the Congress to the judiciary, from the national Constitution to the Armed Forces—is now engaged in a shameless coverup of his own criminal actions, which is drawing protests from political forces inside the country.

Dating back to convening of the Constituent Assembly in 1990, when Gaviria personally withheld videotaped evidence that the Medellín drug cartel had bribed as many as one-half of the 70 delegates engaged in rewriting the national Constitution, the Colombian head of state has consistently abused the power of his office to protect his plea-bargain deal with cartel chieftain Pablo Escobar. The essence of that plea-bargain arrangement was the elimination of extradition to the U.S. as a constitutionally sanctioned weapon of war against the cartels.

From that point onward, the presidential office became a silent partner of Dope, Inc. In exchange for playing out the government's charade of imprisonment, Escobar was allowed to continue his drug trafficking under government protection. Drug money poured into Colombia, creating an illusion of wealth on paper even as food production and manufacturing has plummeted and the population has been subjected to brutal electricity and water rationing due to the collapse of basic infrastructure. The country became, as press commentators rightly dubbed it, a "narcocracy."

For anyone who chose to lift the bedcovers, Gaviria's narco-complicity was there to see. But it was only after Escobar's "escape" from the Envigado jail that the country and the world were able to get a close-up view of the corruption at play.

First, it now appears that the attorney general's office had secretly taken photographs of Escobar's so-called "prison" back in January 1992, and that copies of those photographs—revealing not only obscene luxuries of every sort but also computers and faxes, radio equipment, night 'scopes and gas masks, surgical facilities, and weapons—were sent to the Justice and Defense Ministries *as well as* to the presidential office. Nonetheless, the photographs' existence was only revealed after Escobar's escape, when copies were found both at the jail *and* in a safe at the office of the deputy minister of justice, a Gaviria intimate who was conveniently sacked.

Second, when a congressional censure of Defense Minister Rafael Pardo Rueda was considered a virtual certainty, Gaviria forced the entire bloc of ruling Liberal Party congressmen to vote against the censure, or face sanctions. The defense minister told Congress that the sole cause of the failed operation to secure Escobar's prison was interference by the scapegoated deputy justice minister.

Third, it appears that Gaviria's first justice minister, Fernando Carrillo (under whose reign the plea bargain with Escobar was first made), had protected former prison director Manuel Humberto Caceres after the latter's in-

dulgence of Escobar's every whim came to light and he was fired. Minister Carrillo gave Caceres an advisory post with the ministry involving national prison security systems, despite his coziness with Pablo Escobar!

Fourth, Colombian Attorney General Carlos Gustavo Arrieta gave a press conference Aug. 7 in which he insisted that his office would not focus its investigation into the Escobar affair on the luxuries the mafia godfather and his henchmen enjoyed, but rather on the escape itself. Those "luxuries," however, were the *government-sanctioned* means by which Escobar was permitted to conduct his trafficking business, assassinate and terrorize rivals and opponents, both at home and abroad, and to come and go as he pleased.

The fact that various clandestine means of entering and leaving were *built into* Escobar's prison means that any government "investigation" into his so-called escape can only be intended to lay all blame for the affair on "military corruption," since it was the military which was forced to guard the outer perimeter of Escobar's refuge. Gaviria has consistently argued that it was the military's failure to follow his "clear and precise" orders that led to the escape.

The ongoing congressional debate over "ultimate responsibility" for the Escobar affair has yet to produce anyone with the courage to say what everyone knows. Perhaps that is why the family of presidential front-runner Luis Carlos Galán, murdered by the mafia three years ago, has just issued an open letter to Gaviria, denouncing his policy of appeasement toward the mob. Perhaps, too, that is why Army Col. Augusto Bahamón (ret.), whose bestseller exposé on the scandal of Escobar's "jail" has won him a life of constant death threats, has again laid the blame at Gaviria's doorstep.