

Colombian government's pact with the devil comes to light

by Andrea Olivieri

Shocking new proof of the Colombian government's long-term connivance with the cocaine traffickers and assassins of the Medellín Cartel has come to light, through a recent series of exposés in the Bogotá daily *La Prensa*. According to the evidence presented by that newspaper, President César Gaviria struck a pact with the cartel at least three years ago, when he first became the Liberal Party's presidential candidate, following the mafia assassination of the anti-drug candidate and front-runner Luis Carlos Galán. Gaviria went on to bring a network of cartel accomplices and employees into his government, and to fashion a plea-bargain arrangement with cartel chieftain Pablo Escobar that allowed the drug lord to continue his illicit trade and carry out selective assassinations from a government-protected refuge. And when the corruption began to spill out into the public view, Gaviria arranged for Escobar's "escape."

How far back Gaviria's pact with the cartel actually goes is a matter for criminal investigation. What is certain is that the Colombian population's long-standing perception of the Gaviria government as corrupt now stands fully confirmed. As *La Prensa* editorialized Aug. 24, the specter of Brazilian-style corruption, which has led to impeachment proceedings against the head of state of that country, is now haunting Colombia.

Indeed, in a desperate attempt to fend off that specter, Gaviria staged a nationally televised press conference Sept. 1 to try to defuse the scandal. However, his evasive answers left no one convinced and actually prompted calls for a "political trial" of the President before the nation's Congress.

The making of a narco-President

Immediately following the August 1989 assassination of Luis Carlos Galán, César Gaviria, a relatively new face in the Galán camp, was inexplicably and suddenly thrust forward as the new candidate prepared to fly the *galanista* banner. Gaviria swore to wage implacable war against the drug mafia, and to root out Liberal Party corruption. He proceeded to form a security guard around himself made up, among others, of *known employees of Pablo Escobar*, the same Escobar who had just murdered a future President and thwarted the hopes

of the Colombian people for rescue from the narco-terrorist enemy.

Heading the team of Gaviria's bodyguards was retired Army colonel Homero de Jesús Rodríguez, who had also been "responsible" for Galán's security. Working with Rodríguez was Eduardo Mendoza de la Torre, a Gaviria intimate who would remain a security adviser to the President up to and after his 1992 appointment as deputy minister of justice. Rodríguez and Mendoza hired two mercenaries, the Israeli Eytan Koren and one Isaac Lee, who, according to *La Prensa*, are business partners and roommates.

Both Koren and Lee had been under investigation by Colombia's equivalent of the FBI, the Department of Administrative Security (DAS), for having brought another mercenary, the infamous Israeli Army colonel Yair Klein (ret.), into Colombia in 1988. Klein had personally helped train Escobar's army of narco-assassins (reputed to be 1,000 strong), until he was forced to flee the country in 1989, a few months before the Galán murder. Police evidence has confirmed that it was weapons from a \$10 million arms shipment that Klein delivered to the Medellín Cartel which killed Galán.

Had Gaviria decided to abandon his pact with the Medellín Cartel, what would his personal bodyguards have done?

After Gaviria was elected President in August 1990, he set about forging a government of explicit narco-sympathizers, ranging from drug legalization lobbyist Ernesto Samper Pizano, to longtime ally of the cartels, M-19 chieftain Antonio Navarro Wolf. His Economics Minister Rudolf Hommes is a former business partner and associate of Rodrigo Botero Montoya, the architect of Colombia's infamous "sinister window" at the central bank which launders the cartel's drug dollars, no questions asked.

'The Black Ants'

Koren and Lee maintained a thug apparatus (under cover of various security firms) which was brought into the government through Gaviria's Justice Ministry. Government documents published by *La Prensa* on Aug. 22 show that in early 1992, then-Justice Minister Fernando Carrillo, one of the

Harvard “boy wonders” with which Gaviria has surrounded himself, created a special security department within his ministry, and put none other than Isaac Lee in charge of it. Carrillo illegally bypassed official procedures to create the department, which effectively *displaced* authorized DAS personnel as security for the ministry.

Lee proceeded to staff this department with *Las Hormigas Negras* (“The Black Ants”), his personal thugs, and got them license to carry weapons on the street as well as apparent immunity from prosecution. At least one cold-blooded murder carried out by “The Black Ants” was covered up on Carrillo’s personal orders, according to *La Prensa*. Lee’s thugs became a terror and blackmail machine within the very core of Gaviria’s government, intimidating and threatening those who stood in their way and serving as a constant reminder to Gaviria and his cabinet of their subservience to the cartel.

General Security, Ltd., one of the security firms run by the Israeli mercenary Koren, was meanwhile contracted by the Justice Ministry to install the security mechanisms at the Envigado jail, known as “The Cathedral,” which housed Pablo Escobar and his henchmen following their orchestrated “surrender” in June 1991. *La Prensa* reports that at least 80% of the \$4 million contract was paid to Koren’s company by the ministry, although no more than 20% of the security work, including a crucial electrified fence, was ever completed.

In January 1992, Envigado prison director Jorge Pataquiva was fired when the luxuries and privileges he had permitted the “imprisoned” drug traffickers came to light. His replacement in the post was the former security chief for both Galán and Gaviria who had first brought Koren and Lee on board, Homero de Jesús Rodríguez. The national prison director Manuel Humberto Cáceres was also fired in the scandal, but Justice Minister Carrillo proceeded to hire the ghost consultant firm Proindustrial Asesorías, owned by Cáceres and Pataquiva, to help create a special elite force in charge of security at the Envigado jail!

And so, the accomplices and employees of Pablo Escobar maintained a constant and ominous presence inside the Gaviria administration.

Silencing the press

La Prensa’s revelations come rather late in the day. In the aftermath of Escobar’s flight from his Envigado refuge, several of these Escobar plants inside the government were purged by a President desperate to cover his own tracks. Nonetheless, *La Prensa* inescapably points the finger of blame at President Gaviria. Says its Aug. 24 editorial, “Brazil? Watergate? These are child’s play. . . . Here the corruption is big-time, from above, and with a President who neither hears nor sees. Who neither questions. Nor investigates. Nor blames. A President who is losing control of the country and who cannot say a word because behind the worst corruption

are his friends. His best friends.”

Gaviria and his “best friends” have no intention of allowing *La Prensa*, run by former Colombian President Misael Pastrana, to get away with its bold move. Although the President’s rumored threat of a lawsuit against *La Prensa* has yet to materialize, Gaviria and associates have launched a campaign of economic warfare and terrorism against the newspaper. Private and public vendors have been forced by the government to withdraw their advertisements, the government’s press agency has illegally denied *La Prensa* access to official news releases, the newspaper has been deprived of the right to publish lottery results, etc.

Stripped of protection

Most serious of all, the government has stripped officers of the newspaper, including former President Pastrana, of their government-assigned bodyguards. It is already being rumored that mercenary Koren is organizing the assassination of at least one *La Prensa* journalist, as a “warning.” Readers should remember the punishment meted out to the anti-drug daily *El Espectador*, including assassination of its publisher Guillermo Cano and of several of its journalists, and the car-bombing of its central headquarters in Bogotá.

La Prensa has thus far received no visible support from any of the other Colombian media, which are reportedly being courted or threatened personally by President Gaviria.

Whether Gaviria succeeds in silencing *La Prensa* remains to be seen. What is clear, is that his popularity has sunk to an all-time low, and that he is sufficiently haunted by the fate of his corrupt Brazilian colleague to attempt a public rebuttal. On Sept. 1, President Gaviria broadcast an orchestrated press conference, with carefully selected journalists asking pre-arranged questions, on national television.

Gaviria admitted that he was “not exempt from responsibility” for the Escobar fiasco, but that “I am at ease with the decisions I took and am publicly ready to give all the explanations which are asked of me . . . to the Congress of the Republic.” He nonetheless argued that these were the acceptable “risks” entailed in the surrender deal with the cartel chieftain—a deal which he continues to defend—and blamed those who did not carry out his orders properly. He denied any plans to resign should a congressional inquiry find him blameworthy, saying “I don’t think that anybody is seriously thinking that.”

Despite the report that Gaviria prepared for his press conference for a full week, he was clearly unprepared for the one question that went to the heart of the matter. When asked by a journalist whether “the soul of Luis Carlos Galán is resting in peace,” Colombia’s narco-President stammered and blushed like Shakespeare’s Macbeth seeing Banquo’s ghost, before blurting out an unconvincing “yes.” A poll of Colombian notables taken immediately after the broadcast showed a full 77% were unsatisfied and embarrassed by Gaviria’s answers.