

Gaviria forced to battle drug cartels

by Javier Almario

After two and a half years of negotiations, concessions, and submission to the drug cartels, the Colombian government of President César Gaviria is finally being forced to do battle with the drug mafias. The government officially announced that it will not accept the new demands of Medellín Cartel godfather Pablo Escobar that he be granted an amnesty or pardon for his crimes as the condition for suspension of narco-terrorist violence.

In an official communiqué made public Jan. 18, the government accused the "drug trafficker and terrorist" of wanting to "cloak with political garb what is nothing more than crime and criminality." Escobar responded immediately. "I am left with no alternative but to discard the juridical battle and launch armed and organized warfare," he wrote, in a letter to Prosecutor General Gustavo de Greiff. Escobar also announced the creation of a new narco-terrorist group bearing the name Rebel Antioquia, a reincarnation of the "Extraditables" group, under whose name the cartels had waged war up to the day of Escobar's so-called surrender in 1991. Antioquia is the province whose capital city, Medellín, serves as Escobar's home base.

Escobar charges that his friends and associates have received "barbaric treatment" from government forces, and warns that the only basis upon which he will suspend the violence against Colombian society is if he receives the same treatment that has been granted to the guerrilla groups. "From now on, the conditions of this dialogue [with the government] will be the same as those used for all the rebel groups, be they subversive or guerrilla." Escobar's statement has been interpreted as a petition for amnesty, such as was granted the M-19 guerrillas, to "abandon" armed struggle and join the political class. Not accepting Escobar's demand necessarily implies a re-launching of the war against drug trafficking, which the country has been waging on and off for two decades.

Government's Achilles' heel

Escobar's demand strikes at the Achilles' heel of the government, which has repeatedly attempted to conclude "gentlemen's agreements" with the narco-terrorist movements. Despite overwhelming evidence of intimate collaboration between the drug cartels and the guerrillas, the Colombian government has chosen to draw a false line between

drug traffickers like Escobar, and narco-terrorists like M-19 presidential candidate Antonio Navarro Wolf, thereby undermining the government's own authority and capability of defending the nation. Years have been wasted in fruitless negotiations with criminals who, whether under the guise of "fighting revolution" or "fighting extradition," have been dedicated to the destruction of the nation. If Gaviria is to wage effective war against the cartels this time around, that war must be waged simultaneously against the cartels' partners in crime.

Gaviria is being forced to re-launch the war against the cartels for two reasons: 1) Escobar has declared war against *him*; and 2) the Colombian Armed Forces are pressuring Gaviria to get serious, following the fiasco in which Escobar, after getting the government to accept every one of the conditionalities of his "surrender" in early 1991, fled one year later from his own five-star "jail" at Envigado, when evidence of his unrestricted trafficking was forced into the public eye.

Taking advantage of decrees issued by Gaviria as part of a plea bargain offered the cartel, Escobar had accompanied his 1991 "surrender" with a single confession: having lent his services to the smuggling of a cocaine shipment into France. For this crime, Escobar expected to receive a maximum sentence of six years, which would be reduced to two or three years because of his "voluntary confession" and anticipated "good behavior" during incarceration. However, today, six months after his prison escape, new evidence and new witnesses have emerged (all the earlier ones were assassinated) to testify to Escobar's other crimes, which now officially number 17.

At the present time, Escobar has been indicted as the intellectual author of the assassination of politician Luis Carlos Galán, who would be Colombia's President today, had he not been murdered. Escobar is also charged with being the intellectual author of the assassination of newspaper publisher and anti-drug crusader Guillermo Cano. Escobar is further charged with illegal possession of weapons. The combined sentence for such crimes would be 30 years (the maximum allowed under the Colombian Constitution), and even with a reduction in the penalty, Escobar would spend at least 17 years behind bars, 15 more than he was planning.

Escobar also has warrants against him for his suspected involvement in the assassination of journalist Jorge Pulido, and for the dynamite attack against then director of the Department of Administrative Security, Gen. Miguel Maza Márquez. He is further accused of having ordered the bombing of an Avianca airplane in December 1989. And Escobar is under investigation for another 10 crimes, including car-bomb attacks and the assassination of more than 400 policemen in Antioquia.

Escobar's response to these indictments is best summed up in a letter of Dec. 26, 1992, sent to three Antioquia politicians, in which he threatened to use "a 10,000 kilo dynamite bomb" against the office of the prosecutor general.