

Drug legalization again on the agenda in Colombia

by Javier Almario

Arturo Hein, coordinator in Colombia of the United Nations' program of coca and poppy crop substitution, furiously attacked Colombia's police force on May 26 for having eradicated 75% of Colombia's illegal poppy crops. In a seminar jointly sponsored by the United Nations and the Colombian Justice Ministry held at Bogotá's National University, Hein charged that those in charge of the crop eradication had not considered "the social, economic, environmental, and health trauma" caused by eradication, trauma which is "simultaneously both the cause and the effect of the production and consumption of drugs."

The same line was offered by Giorgio Giacomelli, executive director of the U.N.'s international narcotics control agency. According to Giacomelli, nothing should be done to try to substitute poppy, coca, or marijuana crops with legitimate agricultural crops, because that "could further encourage the illegal activity and thus lead to a superproduction instead of cutback in such crops." Giacomelli pointed out the danger that farmers "might well compare the benefits of obtaining illegal profits on the one hand, and the benefits of alternative crops on the other."

Although the U.N. officials never said so explicitly, they all attempted in one form or another to emphasize the presumed impossibility of defeating the drug trade and of replacing drug crops with ones useful to Colombia and to humanity. According to U.N. consultant on narcotics María Constanza Ramírez, drug crop eradication has only stimulated the drug trade because "it has contributed to a rise in the price of latex," referring to the liquid extracted from the poppy flower and which serves as the raw material for heroin. Ramírez went even further, and openly defended drug production: "The cultivation of poppy has generated income and increased the buying power of a sector of the peasantry and the indigenous."

In parallel to the United Nations' less-than-subtle efforts to present drug legalization as the only "logical" answer to the illegal narcotics trade, the Gaviria government in Colombia is doing its best to pave the way for precisely such a "solution" to this country's decade-long war with the drug cartels. Not only has its embrace of the International Mone-

tary Fund's (IMF) open market, free trade dictates driven Colombia's legitimate agricultural sector into bankruptcy—and thus, increasingly, into drugs—but it has also escalated its negotiations with the country's murderous drug cartels to assure them impunity for their crimes.

President César Gaviria's Agriculture Ministry, under the control of Alfonso López Caballero, the son of former Colombian President and cartel ally Alfonso López Michelsen, has taken the lead in stripping the national farming sector of any and all protection. He has not only eliminated tariff protection, but also low-interest credit and price supports. The result has been the bankruptcy of innumerable growers under an avalanche of imported agricultural products.

To this, of course, can be added the sabotage committed by the U.S. and British governments in preventing the reestablishment of a coffee pact which would set a stable price for coffee, once Colombia's leading export crop.

In other areas of legitimate agriculture, a comparable situation prevails. "The farmers in some areas have exchanged their traditional crops for coca and poppy, in view of the government's refusal to provide protection," charged Germán Orduz Peralta, director of Santander province's Growers Society, in a May 24 interview to the press in which he also documented the near total disappearance of Colombia's once thriving cotton sector.

Negotiating a 'narco-peace'

On May 6 of this year, Colombian Attorney General Carlos Gustavo Arrieta revealed that he, Prosecutor Gustavo de Greiff, Defense Minister Rafael Pardo Rueda, Security Director Fernando Brito, the national police director, and other high-level government officials met with representatives of the so-called Cali Cartel, to negotiate the "surrender" of the cartel's criminal leaders. The cartel spokesmen were explicit that what they wanted was dismissal of charges for most of their members; short, sweet (and presumably painless) trials for the rest; and the right to retain all of their ill-gotten gains, in exchange for a promised dismantling of their trafficking operations. A virtually identical proposal was sub-

mitted by the Medellín Cartel back in 1984, immediately following their assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. That proposal was later described by the cartel as a deliberate proposal for drug legalization.

Following three separate meetings which had the full public support of President Gaviria, the government presented a proposed reform to the criminal code premised in part upon the surrender "conditions" demanded by the cartel figures. "At least 9,000 members of the Cali and North Valle cartels are awaiting approval of the new criminal code in order to decide on their submission to justice," said Gustavo de Greiff.

Meanwhile, the prosecutor's office has already negotiated dramatically reduced sentences for a number of prominent drug traffickers currently in jail. Jorge Luis Ochoa, considered the number-two man of the Medellín Cartel after the fugitive Pablo Escobar, will reportedly receive a mere eight years in jail. To produce the reduced sentence, the prosecutor had to be willing to dismiss all charges against Ochoa as the "intellectual author" of the murder of any number of judges, witnesses, journalists, and prominent public personalities. This is precisely what the Cali Cartel now hopes to negotiate as well.

Presidential candidates agree

No challenge to this appeasement policy has come from the front-running presidential candidates who are vying for the nation's top office. Ernesto Samper Pizano has the official backing of the Gaviria government and of Liberal Party chief Julio César Turbay, despite his longstanding public advocacy of drug legalization. (An extensive dossier on Samper Pizano is contained in *EIR's* April 1991 Special Report, "Bush's Surrender to Dope, Inc.: U.S. Policy Is Destroying Colombia.") Nor is the leading candidate of the Conservative Party, Andrés Pastrana Arango, prepared to cross the traffickers. Both, in turn, support Gaviria's neo-liberal economic policies which are destroying what little remains of Colombia's productive economy.

The fact is that the drug traffickers have already taken the measure of both candidates. In 1982, for example, Samper accepted large sums of money from the Medellín Cartel chieftains, who wanted to finance the electoral campaign of former President Alfonso López Michelsen. Samper was campaign treasurer at the time. In 1989, Samper was shot by Medellín Cartel hitmen, reportedly by accident when he got caught in the crossfire of a cartel assassination of communist leader José Antequera at the Bogotá airport. Samper recovered from his wounds and refused to identify the cartel's role in the incident. Intelligence reports indicate that the traffickers paid Samper a huge sum to indemnify him for their "error."

As for Andrés Pastrana, he was kidnapped by the Medellín Cartel's shock troops, otherwise known as "the Extraditables," back in January 1988, and cartel chieftain Pablo Es-

cobar set a series of conditions for his release. At the time, Pastrana was a candidate for mayor of Bogotá and had taken a programmatic stand against the drug trade and drug addiction. Pastrana never revealed the contents of the dialogue he held with the cartel chieftains during his captivity, but after his release by the police, he was adamant in defending his captors' "good faith," and argued that the assassination of the anti-drug former prosecutor Carlos Mauro Hoyos, who had been kidnapped on the same day as Pastrana, had been a simple "error" by the cartel. Pastrana also abandoned his anti-drug-trafficking platform, and stuck to polemicizing against drug addiction.

It came as no surprise that after the kidnapping, his father and former President Misael Pastrana Borrero visited with then President Virgilio Barco and came away from that meeting telling the press that he was going to fight for peace negotiations with "all agents of violence."

Unlike Pastrana and Samper, former Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González, who survived a cartel assassin's bullets in Budapest, Hungary in January 1987, has been vehement in his denunciations of the drug traffickers and of the power-sharing negotiations the Gaviria government has conducted with them. Parejo was minister of justice in the Betancur government during 1984-86, and is one of the few surviving heroes of the fight to liberate Colombia from narco-terrorism.

Narco-politics

Today, Parejo is a Bogotá city councilman as well as a contender for the Liberal Party presidential nomination. However, the Liberal Party machinery of Samper, Gaviria, and Turbay are trying to keep him out of the race by any and all means. The National Congress is currently debating a law which would oblige presidential candidates to refrain from writing newspaper articles for a full six months prior to the May 1994 election. The measure would prove particularly devastating for the campaign of Enrique Parejo, whose sole means of communicating his ideas is a regular column in the daily *El Espectador*, and of another dissident Liberal candidate, Carlos Lemos Simmonds, who writes a column for *El Tiempo*.

Turbay is meanwhile trying to arrange for the official Liberal Party candidate to be chosen in accordance with the degree of support elected congressmen give to the different pre-candidates. This measure would effectively eliminate the independent vote that is not tied to the local party machines, which are controlled by Turbay and Samper.

By such means, César Gaviria's government hopes to assure that its neo-liberal economic policies and the present narco-"democracy" will continue to reign in Colombia. It would appear that not only the United Nations but also the United States, which has willingly provided refuge to the families of the cartel chieftains, are prepared to offer their full backing.