

Report from Paris by Anne de la Brière

Operation Margarita is not complete

A nice blow was struck against the Colombian cocaine cartels in France, but it needs to be followed up.

Operation Margarita for the first time has allowed the dismantling of "an entire pyramid of the Colombian drug cartels in France," declared Commissar René Wack, chief of the Central Office for Repression of Major Financial Crime.

Sixty-one persons, including some 20 Colombians, are under interrogation in the wake of the wave of arrests carried out in Paris, Marseille, Montpellier, Limoges, and Lille.

The suspects will be arraigned before Paris Judge Jean-Pierre Zanotto, who is assigned to the case.

The whole affair actually began one year ago. The U.S. Customs Service noticed at that time that some Colombians were regularly crossing the Atlantic to travel to Europe and especially to France.

It was a tipoff from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration which led to the arrest of "El Turco," the supposed godfather of the Colombian cartels in Paris.

Meanwhile in the United States, in Atlanta, Georgia, and Miami, Florida, 34 men have been questioned, including three cartel "bankers." The DEA also seized \$15 million, 43 kilos of cocaine, and 112 kilos of marijuana, and froze 96 banking accounts.

At the same time, some 30 persons were picked up in Italy.

The French commented on their action in the course of a press conference in Nanterre at the offices of the Interior Ministry. René Wack underlined that there are two kinds of individuals in this affair: "Sleeper agents of the Colombian cartels, and agents infiltrated into society."

In the latter category, Wack re-

ferred to "men of nondescript complexion, with no past criminal record, and with no noise. The drug traffickers use methods worthy of the intelligence services, especially when it comes to compartmentalization, mailboxes, and transmissions.

"What could be more cunning, than to operate in Limoges! What ordinary policeman would go looking for money laundering in the land of porcelain? We have agents delegated by the Colombians, types whose only quality is a talent for being forgettable. Among our clients, there are numerous 'Schtroumpfs,' i.e., people who are entrusted with small quantities of money to recycle on the multitudes of the most important accounts. The small streams make up the big rivers," explains the boss of the anti-money-laundering office.

René Wack congratulates himself on having, this time, put his hands on "an entire structure of organized crime. . . . We have all the branches of the network, financial as well as material, and even of the distribution of drugs, including the passageways which interconnect them with one another."

Operation Margarita brings to light a new phenomenon: The Colombian traffickers want cocaine consumption to explode in France. They are no longer content with using the country merely as a transshipment area.

The pattern complements the growing criminalization of former communist eastern Europe and Russia in which western Europe, especially Germany, is the target for a growing black market of smuggled drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes and corresponding large-scale money laundering, as de-

scribed in the cover story of *EIR* of May 21, 1993.

René Wack thinks that Operation Margarita could have repercussions in other countries, perhaps in the Antilles and Guyana in the Caribbean, as well as elsewhere in Europe.

What are the real financial networks? What banking institutions are at the heart of the laundering operations for drug profits? Such are the questions which the next phase of Operation Margarita will have to pose and answer.

This operation against the Colombian cartels is very important. How can it be explained, however, that it is taking place after drug consumption has just been legalized in Colombia and the President-elect, Ernesto Samper Pizano, is a fierce partisan of drug legalization? If law enforcement agencies on a world scale really want to be effective, they must go on to phase two of Operation Margarita and create the conditions for cleaning up the political class and justice within Colombia itself.

The first objective of such a phase would be to nullify the election of Samper, who has been the main spokesman for the drug banks' legalization plans since 1976, a man whom the cartels have shamelessly "watered" since 1982 when he was campaign treasurer for former President Alfonso López Michelsen's failed reelection bid.

Colombia must also go back to penalizing drug consumption.

Failure to complete Operation Margarita by this phase two would bring grist to the mill of the skeptics who see in Operation Margarita nothing but an attempt to eliminate, after the Medellín Cartel, all the mafia cartels (the Cali Cartel, notably, which controls 70% of the Colombian cocaine market) in the context of "setting up a state monopoly" to market Colombian cocaine and marijuana.