

Colombia's Samper hits Cali Cartel, but negotiates with 'Third Cartel'

by Javier Almario

"I feel like someone's taken a piano off my shoulders," said Colombian President Ernesto Samper Pizano on June 9, upon learning that Cali Cartel kingpin Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela had been captured in a National Police dragnet. The Cali Cartel is a criminal organization that produces and transports an estimated 80% of the cocaine consumed in the United States, along with substantial and growing percentages of marijuana and heroin. Samper told the press that "this is the beginning of the end of the Cali Cartel."

While Samper's enthusiasm is motivated not by any interest in ending the drug trade, but rather in protecting his own skin, the fact remains that the capture of Rodríguez Orejuela is a major victory in the war on drugs.

The police had raided an apparently modest home in a middle-class section of the southwest city of Cali. There, hidden behind a false wall, was the multi-billionaire Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela. Hidden elsewhere in the house were documents, including intelligence reports and other detailed information, on cartel payments to various individuals and companies. Among the documents were proof that the traffickers had paid substantial sums of money to buy a constitutional ban on extradition from the 1991 Constituent Assembly.

National and international pressure on Colombia's government to produce results in the war on drugs had been dramatic since before Samper assumed the Presidency last summer, when the existence of taped conversations by Cali Cartel chiefs Gilberto and Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela was revealed. On those tapes, the cartel bosses discussed multi-million-dollar sums given to Samper Pizano's presidential campaign. Samper took office on Aug. 7, 1994, after winning by a margin of less than 2% of the vote.

In July, while still President-elect, Samper was hastily cleared by then-Prosecutor General Gustavo de Greiff, today the Colombian ambassador to Mexico. De Greiff's nomination to the latter post is widely viewed as a political payoff for having exonerated the President. In October, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) chief in Colombia Joseph Toft caused a scandal when he accompanied his resignation with charges that the governments of both former Presi-

dent César Gaviria and of Ernesto Samper had favored the drug trade. The Clinton administration diplomatically disassociated itself from Toft's charges, but never rebutted them.

Samper was in desperate need of a U.S. seal of approval on his Presidency. State Department officials on several occasions had told him in private, and occasionally in public as well, that "we aren't interested in the past; what matters is that we see results."

In February, U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette announced that the U.S. Congress would not certify Colombia for effective action in the war on drugs. This would have meant depriving the country of preferential tariffs and other benefits given to Andean countries fighting drugs. As the result of President Clinton's intervention, the U.S. Congress finally certified Colombia, but with the clarification that it was certifying the country, not the Samper government.

In May of this year, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Narcotics Matters Robert Gelbard got into a fight with the Samper government because he was demanding the capture of the Cali Cartel bosses. "We Americans are pragmatic, and we like to see action. We want to see arrests," said Gelbard during a trip to Colombia, when journalists asked him to evaluate Colombia's fight against drugs. Gelbard set a deadline of May 1996 for the kind of "action" the U.S. government was demanding.

But domestic pressure was also significant. In July 1994, Alfonso Valdivieso Sarmiento was named to the post of prosecutor general. A cousin of the political leader Luis Carlos Galán who was assassinated by the cartel in 1989, Valdivieso reopened various investigations that his predecessor de Greiff had prematurely closed, and moved full steam ahead on an investigation into cartel corruption of political figures. Every day, new lists of individuals who had taken cartel money began to appear in the press: congressmen, sports leaders, ex-governors, movie stars, U.S. lawyers like Michael Abbell. Even the current Comptroller General and Attorney General!

Samper's only chance at a political future lay in proving that he bears no allegiance to the Cali Cartel. In a recent



The drug cartels' legacy in Colombia: The headquarters of the Department of Security Administration in Bogotá was bombed in 1989.

meeting with top military and police personnel, Samper announced that he would remove from their commands any officer who did not produce results in the war against drugs. He set a deadline of Aug. 7 to see some action, the first year anniversary of his government.

When Samper learned of Rodríguez Orejuela's capture, he held an impromptu party at the Presidential Casa de Nariño, displaying a euphoria which many described as exaggerated, since Rodríguez has been neither tried nor convicted yet. Another problem Samper has yet to face, is that his government remains committed, at all cost, to effecting a negotiated peace agreement with the narco-terrorist FARC and ELN guerrillas, who are described in military intelligence reports as Colombia's third cocaine cartel.

So far, the prosecutor's office has announced that it has evidence and an effective case against Rodríguez for drug trafficking, illicit enrichment, bribery, and illegal arms possession. In Colombia, the maximum sentence for such crimes is 30 years, and the sentences are served concurrently. If Rodríguez confesses to any of the crimes, gets time off for good behavior, or works and studies while in prison, he could get as little as nine years. Samper would have to amend the 1991 Constitution in order to permit major drug traffickers like Rodríguez to get sentences "proportional to the crimes" committed, as the Clinton administration has urged.

Thus far, Prosecutor Valdívieso has no absolute evidence

against Rodríguez to try him for homicide, which would mean many more years in jail, even though it is common knowledge that Rodríguez donated money to a fund put together by the cartels to finance the 1984 assassination of then-Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, and the 1986 assassination of *El Espectador* newspaper director Guillermo Cano Isaza.

The success of the Colombian authorities in capturing Rodríguez Orejuela has led the vast majority of Colombians to hope that if it is possible to defeat the Cali Cartel "supermen," it should be equally possible to mobilize an effective response to the FARC and ELN narco-terrorists, and that instead of dialogue and negotiations with them, they should be defeated in battle, just as Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori did with Shining Path and the MRTA narco-guerrillas.

Unfortunately, just as there has been international pressure—especially from the Clinton administration—to say *no* to a deal with the Cali Cartel, so there has been international pressure *in favor of* peace talks with the "Third Cartel," the FARC and ELN. The main pressure is coming from the human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the one-worldist apparatus of the United Nations, and those elements inside the U.S. State Department which support them, whose intention is to use a negotiated deal with the narco-terrorists as a weapon against the Colombian Armed Forces—a tactic already being pursued in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, and elsewhere.

The other decisive factor that has favored the drug trade in Colombia has been the free-trade policies adopted—removing tariffs on imports, a complete opening to foreign capital, privatization of state companies, and the entire package which has come to be known as neo-liberal economics. The DEA, for example, has issued several reports complaining that free-trade economic policies "favor the drug trade," the "laundering of drug money," and the buy-up of state sector companies by the drug cartels.

But to the international financial interests who are determined not to let Colombia's huge oil reserves and other wealth escape them, drugs and terrorism are not an obstacle. If anything, they can serve as a weapon to be used to pressure the government into greater concessions. For example, it was no accident that in the mid-1980s, the late Armand Hammer had a public alliance with the narco-terrorist ELN, whose constant sabotage attacks on the facilities of Colombia's oil monopoly Ecopetrol permitted greater inroads for Hammer's Occidental Petroleum and British Petroleum.

Indeed, during an early June 1995 visit to Colombia by a British trade mission, Her Majesty's Trade Secretary Richard Needham insisted that drugs and violence were no obstacles whatsoever to British investors. Asked to comment on the negative reactions to these problems by "other countries"—a reference to Clinton administration pressures on Colombia to crack down on the cartels—Needham responded, "That's their problem, isn't it?"