

Andean Report by Javier Alamaro

Military 1, Samper 0

President Samper was forced to take a step backward in his plot to dismantle the Colombian Armed Forces.

The publication of an internal memorandum written by Colombian Army Commander Gen. Harold Bedoya Pizarro, a leak designed to cause Bedoya's expulsion from the Armed Forces, has evolved into a heated confrontation between those who seek the country's demilitarization, and those who seek to deploy the nation's defense forces against its narco-terrorist enemies. The conclusion to be drawn from that confrontation, is that the majority of Colombians still stand behind their military institution.

On July 3, the magazine *Semana*, owned by the family of former president Alfonso López Michelsen, published General Bedoya's memorandum, written to his immediate superior, Armed Forces Commander Gen. Camilo Zuñiga. *Semana* chose to present the leaked memorandum as a virtual coup d'état against the government of Ernesto Samper, provoked by the military's opposition to Samper's "peace" policy.

On June 23, Defense Minister Fernando Botero Zea, Interior Minister Horacio Serpa Uribe, and peace commissioner Carlos Holmes Trujillo had given the press an open letter to the FARC narco-guerrillas, in which the government reiterated its promise to demilitarize the entire rural zone of La Uribe, in the department of Meta some 100 km southeast of the Colombian capital of Bogotá. That action was demanded by the FARC and its National Liberation Army (ELN) brethren as a condition for entering into peace negotiations with the government. If Samper goes along with it, this would permit the FARC—without firing a single

shot—to recover a zone which until four years ago had been its permanent center of operations.

Bedoya's memorandum, expressing the general opinion of the Armed Forces, stated that any order to demilitarize La Uribe would have to be given in precise *written* form to avoid confusion; that in the case of demilitarizing La Uribe, the security of the troops in the area would necessitate giving the Army access to an area much larger than the county seat Samper would allow them; and that in the "hypothetical" case that the demilitarization order was given, the Armed Forces would be obliged to obey, but would not be responsible for the consequences of such an order.

"Military regulations," states the memorandum, "are directed primarily toward defense of values, without which the Public Force loses its effectiveness: discipline, honor, confidence in its leadership, and, therefore, any order that in any way undermines those principles would clash with the legal prescriptions binding it." The memorandum has been interpreted to mean that the military would consider the order to demilitarize La Uribe both illegal and unconstitutional.

Samper's response was furious. "I'm in charge here!" he told the military on the occasion of a visit to the Naval School of Cartagena. But, in the face of widespread anarchy in the country due to the unprecedented levels of impunity the terrorists and drug traffickers currently enjoy, Samper's exercise in "leadership" did not prevail.

Once General Bedoya's memo-

randum became public, opinion was uniformly in the military's favor. Retired military officers, newspaper editorials, and the man on the street were all vocal in Bedoya's defense. People even called in to radio shows to demand that Bedoya "retire from the Army, but *not* from La Uribe." Others said that instead of "demilitarizing" La Uribe, what was needed was to "de-guerrillize" it.

Defense Minister Botero Zea was obliged to hurriedly return from a vacation in Italy to meet with the division generals and with President Samper. After the meeting, Botero held a press conference at which he announced that peace negotiations in La Uribe would only be held if the terrorists suspended their violent activities (they have been carrying out one to two assaults on towns each day). The press was quick to note that Samper had initially offered to hold the talks even "in the midst of bullets." Botero also stressed that in the event the negotiations came off, "a large section of La Uribe" would be cleared, but not the entire region as originally promised.

The question that emerges after the incident of the memorandum is: If the negotiations with the guerrillas are so unpopular, why is Samper insisting on following through to the bitter end, despite the fact that everyone knows the guerrillas are the best organized of all the drug cartels? The answer lies with those who seek to use the narco-guerrillas as a mechanism to destroy the Colombian Armed Forces, and to impose U.N. supranational rule.

The second question is: why the Clinton administration, which has properly used its influence to force a crackdown on the Colombian Cali Cartel, is nonetheless encouraging President Samper to reach a "peace" accommodation with the worst narco-terrorists of all?