

Colombian general warns that survival of the nation is at stake

by Valerie Rush

Addressing a civil-military gathering of 1,000 supporters in Bogotá on Oct. 31, Colombian Armed Forces Commander Gen. Harold Bedoya warned that unless the orchestrated persecution of Colombia's military is halted, "I cannot imagine how the Defense Forces can guarantee the fatherland's existence." The general's warning follows a dramatic escalation by the country's narco-terrorist hordes to split off a vast chunk of territory in Colombia's south and southeast, and to forge an "independent republic" there, based on cocaine and heroin trafficking (see interviews). With only the country's Armed Forces standing in the way of such a scenario, ongoing efforts to defame and disarm them, and even to jail the country's military leaders, amount to de facto treasonous support for the narco-terrorist enemy.

Bedoya's warning may be Colombia's last chance to save itself. Its government is currently in the hands of Ernesto Samper Pizano, who is a wholly-owned asset of the Cali cocaine cartel which put him in power in 1994. As Colombia's military commander-in-chief, President Samper has played dirty with the nation's Armed Forces, by embracing the "human rights" non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which have been demanding the dismantling of the Armed Forces, and "peace negotiations" with the country's armed narco-terrorists. While reining in his soldiers, supposedly to further the chances for "dialogue" with the enemy, Samper has done nothing to sever the financial lifeline of the narco-terrorists; his lukewarm proposals to toughen the penalties on drug trafficking and money laundering are right where he wants them—frozen by the drug-cartel-owned majority in the Congress.

Samper's latest ploy has been to remove Bedoya from his post as Army commander, and to "kick him upstairs" into the chair of Armed Forces Commander. As head of the Army, Samper installed Gen. Manuel José Bonnet, a "New Age" general who favors dialogue with the terrorists, and whose ideal of the perfect Colombian soldier is—Elvis Presley! Bonnet's brother Pedro is a leader of the "legalized" narco-terrorist M-19 gang, which in 1985 burned down Colombia's Justice Palace and butchered half the Supreme Court.

The Clinton administration has applied intense pressure on the Samper regime, trying to isolate it internationally while at the same time backing Colombia's military and police forces in their battle against narco-terrorism. Washington's decertification of the Samper government, and stripping

Samper and his coterie of their U.S. entrance visas, were a first step; Washington is now said to be contemplating economic sanctions against Colombia, as well. More importantly, Clinton has approved the sale of urgently needed military equipment, including Blackhawk helicopters, to Colombia's military, and has asked for an inter-agency probe into Colombian Army charges that the country's so-called "guerrillas" are in fact narcotics-trafficking terrorists.

This last step is especially important, in view of efforts by the international human rights lobby to portray guerrilla armies such as the FARC and ELN as legitimate "opposition forces" and "protest movements," whose rights are supposedly being savagely violated by Colombia's Army counterinsurgency units. It therefore came as no surprise, when the London-based Amnesty International held a press conference in Washington on Oct. 29, in which it charged that certain Colombian Army units which have received U.S. aid are responsible for human rights abuses, and demanded a cutoff of all U.S. military assistance—including the Blackhawk helicopters so crucial to the anti-drug effort. As the Colombian daily *El Espectador* aptly noted in its Nov. 4 editorial, Amnesty intervention "has all the characteristics of a unilateral petition in favor of armed subversion."

Revolving-door justice

Bedoya was explicit in his address to the Oct. 31 civil-military gathering, that the justice system in Colombia has been thoroughly infiltrated by "narco-subversion." He pointed out that of the 5,000 narco-terrorists the Army has captured in 1996, only 200 of these are in Colombian jails. The rest have been returned to the streets, to wage war against the nation.

In the meanwhile, charged Bedoya, the nation's defenders are sitting in the dock, as "the accused are turning into the accusers." Bedoya was referring to the numerous military officers who have been arrested by civil prosecutors, frequently on the basis of concocted evidence provided by narco-terrorist sympathizers. "Behind every such accusation," said Bedoya, "is a prosecutor or people's defender who attacks the Armed Forces because his ideological creed is the same as the terrorists, except that instead of bombs and grenades, they attack by smearing the honor, and careers, of military professionals."

Bedoya was also speaking for Gen. Farouk Yanine (ret.), former Army commander in the central Magdalena Medio

region of the country, who was highly successful in ridding that region of a murderous narco-subversive infestation. Today, Yanine is under arrest on human rights abuse charges. Bedoya himself was threatened with jail by a judge in Caqueta province, when he and Gen. Nestor Ramírez, commander of the 12th Army Brigade headquartered in Caqueta's capital of Florencia, refused to heed the judge's order that military barricades around that city be lifted and 25,000 rampaging coca-farmers under the direct leadership of the FARC Cartel be allowed to enter Florencia. Had Bedoya heeded the order, according to Florencia mayor Hector Orozco, "they would have completely destroyed the city," and held hostage an entire region of the country (see interview).

General Bedoya also attacked human rights lobby groups such as Amnesty International, noting that these groups "do not base themselves on the reality of the conflict Colombia is facing. Under the pretext of defending human rights, the human rights NGOs cannot eliminate the right to legitimate self-defense."

The extradition weapon

The corruption of the Colombian justice system is also at the heart of the Clinton administration's battle with Samper over extradition of drug traffickers, which the drug cartels succeeded in banning in 1991. Because of the judiciary's inability to mete out justice to the cartel kingpins running the country, Washington has demanded the restoration of the U.S.-Colombian extradition treaty as a precondition for Colombia's recertification by Washington next year. The result is that a piece of legislation purporting to reinstate extradition is now before the Colombian Congress, facing months of procedural formalities before it can be voted into law.

In reality, the legislation is little more than a stall tactic on Samper's part, in view of the many conditions attached: 1) it cannot be applied retroactively, that is, the drug traffickers already in jail, such as Cali Cartel kingpins Miguel and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, are safe from extradition; 2) it cannot be applied to "political crimes," such as those carried out by the FARC Cartel; 3) the sentences received by those extradited must be equal or shorter than the sentences defined for those same crimes by the Colombian penal code, which has been significantly modified by drug cartel lawyers; 4) it cannot be applied to anyone who voluntarily surrenders to Colombian justice; and so on.

Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdivieso described the proposed legislation as worse than useless because of all the conditions attached, and warned that it was sending "a wrong message to the International Community." "We could end up paying dearly" for such a trick, he said.

Also rejecting Samper's extradition legislation, was U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette, who said, "What has so far been approved in Congress doesn't really meet international requirements, nor does it allow Colombia to face its responsibilities on organized crime."

Interview: Harold Bedoya Pizarro

In defense of justice

Gen. Harold Bedoya Pizarro is Colombian Armed Forces Commander. The following are excerpts of an interview conducted by EIR correspondent in Bogotá Javier Almarío on Oct. 31.

EIR: What do you think of this homage that civil society is rendering to the military forces?

Bedoya: This homage is being rendered to the military forces, and in particular to the national Army, for its fight against terrorism and the drug trade. Above all, this homage is a rejection of the juridical warfare that the terrorists are waging against the [military] institution, and against the generals and officers who have attempted to take on the criminals. It is important that society take a stand, so that justice can return to Colombia. I believe that those responsible for administering justice in Colombia had better think good and hard about this, because society is protesting the unjust treatment of the military, of the generals of the Republic, whose only actions have been to serve all Colombians and who, in particular, have participated in the pacification of vast areas that were in the hands of the criminals. . . .

EIR: Why do you propose that civilians be tried by military courts?

Bedoya: What I am referring to are these drug-trafficking groups, those who go around armed, with rifles on their shoulders, in uniforms, and who say they belong to armies. . . . These are not civilians. Anyone who carries a rifle, a machine gun, and bombs to kill Colombians is no civilian, and must be tried by military justice. . . .

Interview: Héctor Orozco Orozco

Héctor Orozco Orozco is mayor of Florencia, Caquetá, Colombia. The following are excerpts of an Oct. 31 interview conducted by Javier Almarío.

EIR: You have stated that the media did not report the truth of what was going on in Caquetá, with the coca-farmer marches.

Orozco: We paid a great deal of attention to what the media were saying, and they were not telling the country the truth. For example, they never said that during the marches, where

the guerrillas held people hostage, seven people died because of the guerrillas. They did not die fighting, but as a result of the march. One got sick and died, another got a snake bite, another a cerebral embolism, another because he was stabbed in a fight with someone; none of this was ever reported.

Neither did they ever report on the cattle the guerrillas stole, from San Vicente to Florencia—in one case, 100 steers were stolen—in order to feed the people on the march. They ate 40 steers a day. This was never mentioned; nor was all the money they took from the Florencia merchants to finance the march, in the millions of pesos. They took money from people to buy food for the marchers; the media never reported this.

EIR: How, then, were the marches run?

Orozco: The marches were under the control of the guerrillas and of the coca-growers. They controlled everything. They maintained command through a committee. You see, the guerrillas organized those marches six months earlier. For six months, they went throughout Caquetá, house to house, farm to farm, threatening people, gathering money, food, everything. The people in the marches were not allowed to speak. Ask any of the reporters who were there to tell you how, when they tried to interview any of the marchers, the command structure did not permit it. Only those leading the march could speak. They didn't allow the peasants to speak. Only those at the top.

They kept tight control and didn't allow anyone to leave. We have a lot of evidence of this, of people who were not allowed to leave the marches, women who wanted to leave, who cried, and were not allowed to leave; peasants who had been taken on the march for 8, 10, 15 days, leaving their wives and children behind, and who were not allowed to return home, who were forced to abandon their farms. These were not marches, but the collective kidnapping of more than 25,000 people.

EIR: There are reports that one of the objectives was to seize Florencia.

Orozco: To seize Florencia and assassinate the mayor. . . .

EIR: Did they want to declare Caquetá an independent zone?

Orozco: Yes, of course. They wanted to seize Florencia and carry out a brutal scenario. Army people told me this, but also friends of mine who picked up this information. I was told this by people who were kidnapped by the march and later, after they were released, told me what had been planned. The idea was to seize Florencia, take high school students hostage, and then carry out actions that would have been bloody.

EIR: Were they seeking to divide the country?

Orozco: More or less, because [FARC chieftain] Tirofijo's proposal for the past 30 years has been to create the independent republic of Amazonas, which would include Putumayo, Caquetá, Amazonas, the Eastern Plains, the Orinoco, and Am-

azon regions.

EIR: The Army's operation was to keep the march from reaching Florencia, the state capital, at all cost. How did it come off?

Orozco: Very well. Had the Army not mounted an operation to block access to Florencia, the guerrillas would have destroyed it. The disturbances of Aug. 23, which involved no more than 500 people in all of Florencia, burned cars, motorcycles, the District Attorney's office, burned my whole house, with cars, clothes, nearly killing my wife. They were going to burn down the telecommunications center. . . . They nearly destroyed Florencia. The country doesn't know this! The District Attorney's office was a three-story building. There were 70 motorcycles, all burned; the computers were burned, all the legal files were burned. This was without the marchers entering the city! Had the Army allowed the marchers in, some 20-30,000 people would have completely finished off the city.

EIR: The governor of Antioquia recently said that the guerrillas always called for regional dialogue, but that now that these regional dialogues have finally been authorized, they no longer want them.

Orozco: It's always been like that. When the guerrillas are under pressure, or cornered, they talk of peace, dialogue, treaties, while they recover, regroup their forces, prepare their cadre, and then go back to what they were doing before. That is why I have said that there are only two alternatives: either a serious, genuine, honest peace treaty, in which we all embrace each other and get to work to revive the country, or war is seriously declared.

EIR: What do you think of the agreements the national government reached with the coca marchers in Caquetá?

Orozco: I have never agreed with them. Governments can never negotiate under pressure. That is a bad example, and that is why I never attended the negotiations. Because I knew that what was going on there was undue pressure. Also, because the petitions of the marchers had nothing to do with questions of health, water, or sewage. When they talked about these, it was just a cover story for public consumption. At the bottom of the whole affair is the drug trade. That is the simple truth.

EIR: What do you think of the agreement for voluntary eradication of the coca crops?

Orozco: That is utopian. It will never happen. I don't believe in it. It's not only impossible to do, but also impossible to control. Look at the case of Cartagena del Chaira, so hard to get to, where it would take hours and hours of travelling by the Army to verify if Juan Perez pulled out his coca bushes or not. And if he did, what would stop him from planting them again? . . .