

Samper Pizano vs. Colombia's generals

by Valerie Rush

The March 20 assassination of Colombian journalist and former congressman Gerardo Bedoya, an outspoken critic of President Samper Pizano's corrupt, drug cartel-controlled dictatorship, was yet another warning to the nation's patriotic forces to stop interfering with cartel plans to consolidate their stranglehold on the country. Specifically, the warning was intended for Armed Forces Commander Gen. Harold Bedoya, who had just forced the resignation of Samper's cartel-linked Defense Minister Guillermo Alberto González. The murdered journalist was Gen. Bedoya's cousin.

President Samper had insistently defended his choice for defense minister, despite a flood of press revelations of González's longstanding social and financial ties with Colombia's most wanted drug trafficker, multibillionaire Justo Pastor Perafán. It was only when General Bedoya presented Samper with an ultimatum from several of the country's top military commanders that either González must resign, or they would do so, that Samper told González, from between clenched teeth, "After a severe analysis, I consider your separation from the defense ministry the most expedient decision under the current circumstances."

On March 19, Samper issued a public warning: "The generals of the Republic are not there to issue opinions, or to deliberate, or to offer or withhold their support for anyone. They are . . . at the service of the Constitution and the law." General Bedoya gave his answer to the media the next day: "The loyalty of the Military Forces is there for all to see: We have demonstrated that we are loyal to the Constitution, loyal to the laws, to the Congress, and to the Constitutional order." Glaring in its omission was a declaration of loyalty to Samper.

General Bedoya's cousin was riddled with bullets that same day, in a gangland-style murder by a professional assassin who sped away on a motorcycle.

Gerardo Bedoya was by no means Samper's first such victim. Former Senator Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, who had been the visible leader of a civil-military mobilization to force the President's resignation during the 1994-95 period, was assassinated on Nov. 2, 1995, shortly after U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette told Samper that Gómez's circles had sounded out the U.S. government on a possible coup d'état against him. And, on Feb. 16, 1996, Dr. Germán Cifuentes

was assassinated in Bogotá, one month after his father, respected Army Gen. Ricardo Emilio Cifuentes, caused a huge stir by resigning from the army with a public statement that he could not, in good conscience, follow orders of a corrupt commander-in-chief, President Samper.

The lead editorial of the March 21 issue of *El Nuevo Siglo*, owned by the Gómez Hurtado family, backed General Bedoya's courageous stance in standing up to Samper, noting that "The military cannot have personal loyalties, but awareness that their duty lies with the good of the fatherland and with the rigor of the law. That is why Gen. Cifuentes's behavior was admirable, when he asked to retire rather than have to refuse homage to someone who does not represent the legitimacy of the State."

Green light to narco-terrorism

It should come as no surprise that the Colombian Communist Party (PCC), mother to the FARC narco-terrorists who are a major drug cartel in their own right, protested the ousting of the drug-tainted Defense Minister González. On March 19, the PCC's weekly *Voz* complained that González fell because the military didn't like his commitment to "human rights" and to peace negotiations with the country's "guerrilla" forces. They made no mention of his ties to Perafán.

The FARC will be delighted, however, with González's replacement. Samper's new choice for defense minister is Gilberto Echeverri Mejía, who has headed a group of regional businessmen in private "dialogue" with narco-guerrillas since 1995. Among Echeverri's first statements upon accepting the defense ministry, was his pledge to set up a state institution which would facilitate "dialogue" with the country's subversive forces, irrespective of the government in power. De facto, the Colombian military's role as armed defender of the nation is relegated to the garbage heap.

Samper's Interior Minister Horacio Serpa Uribe, a notorious thug with close ties both to the cocaine cartels and to the narco-terrorist National Liberation Army (ELN), took Echeverri's statement as an opportunity to publicly revive efforts to bring his buddies into a power-sharing arrangement. In an interview with the leading daily *El Tiempo* on March 25, Serpa called for recognizing the FARC and ELN narco-terrorists as "belligerent forces" to be accorded political status under the Geneva Convention. "However uncomfortable it may be, we must recognize that sitting down and talking with the guerrillas has a political aspect. . . . One must recognize that peace costs, but it costs much less than war."

Serpa is Samper's hand-picked successor for the Presidency in 1998, and is expected to be resigning his current post shortly to launch his candidacy. Aware of the implications of such a candidacy, columnist Alberto Mejía Estrada in the newspaper *El Nuevo Siglo* asked on March 17, "How much longer are our men of iron . . . going to put up with this. . . ? Elections run by Samper and Serpa would prove fatal for Colombia."

Retired Argentine generals denounce effort to dismantle Armed Forces

Below is the statement of the Retired Generals' Forum of Argentina, published in its entirety by the Buenos Aires daily *La Nación* on March 7. The Retired Generals' Forum was founded in December 1996, to address the grave crisis in Argentina's Armed Forces, caused, as the statement documents, by the anti-military policies of the two "democratic" governments—Raúl Alfonsín (1983-89) and Carlos Menem (1989-)—which have ruled Argentina since December of 1983.

The policy of these governments was to "de-Malvinize" Argentina, by crushing those nationalist factions who see the military institution as the defender of national sovereignty, and by dismantling the Armed Forces through drastic budget cuts and "restructuring." The Project Democracy apparatus which dictated policies to these governments, would not tolerate a repeat of Argentina's April 2, 1982 retaking of the Malvinas Islands from Great Britain, an event which coalesced nationalist sentiment throughout Ibero-America, and threatened to explode the "debt bomb." Argentine authorities made an example out of Malvinas War hero, Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, when it sentenced him to life in prison for daring to defy the demilitarization policies of the Army high command. [Seineldín was jailed on charges stemming from his role in the December 3, 1990 military uprising against the Army's leadership. Since then, national and international media have lied that Seineldín was trying to stage a coup against "democracy."]

Although the statement was issued on Dec. 6, 1996, it was kept in the "strictest reserve" by its authors and signators until its publication by *La Nación*. Because of the unprecedented number of retired generals who signed it—200—the Forum statement carries significant institutional weight: It cannot be ignored by the current leadership of the Armed Forces. It particularly challenges Gen. Martín Balza, the Army chief of staff who has overseen the dismantling of the military institution over the last six years.

From the Retired Generals' Forum

This organization came into being, after a lengthy period of reflection, for the purpose of promoting and consolidating, with an attitude of solidarity, actions to strengthen the presence of the Armed Forces as a founding institution of the Republic, and revitalize its members' image as natural members of Argentine society.

On Dec. 4, 1996, an assembly approved [the Forum's] statutes and elected a board of directors to serve for two

years. This is an independent grouping, set up according to existing law. Given its specifically institutional and hierarchical character, its magnitude and objectives, its creation is unprecedented in the country's military history.

With a unifying purpose, it has decided to invite the highest-ranking retirees of the Navy and Air Force to participate in this joint action.

At the moment of its founding, the Retired Generals' Forum considers it necessary to publicly issue a clear definition of the principles which will govern its actions.

The initiative for creating it was prompted by the grave crisis currently afflicting our national defense structure, the magnitude of which affects the country's historic destiny and our identity as a nation.

Its negative consequences span a broad spectrum, from an indifference and lack of motivation with regard to an authentic and healthy sense of nationality, to the striking material and spiritual deterioration of the Armed Forces.

It is with grave concern that we warn of this deterioration, which has reached alarming proportions, as a result of institutional political decisions made over the last 13 years by two governments of different political affiliations. These have placed the country in a virtual state of defenselessness, disdaining their obligation to "provide for the common defense," as mandated in the Preamble to our Constitution. On Dec. 10, 1983, the Armed Forces handed political power over to a constitutional government, after holding it for eight years. This latter fact was an anomalous situation alien to its specific mission, and which greatly damaged the exercise of professional military activity.

To ameliorate this situation, it was agreed that the new government would offer special treatment [to the Armed Forces] for the purpose of restoring them [to their proper role] in the shortest possible time. Instead, the government took an aggressive and ideological stance, mounting a formidable campaign to discredit everything connected to the military, whose results we detail below.

The commanders-in-chief of the Armed Forces were removed, creating a vacuum in the system of institutional political relations, and providing no mechanism capable of assuming certain responsibilities.

Decree 183/83 transferred control of Fabricaciones Militares [military industries] to the Defense Ministry, in flagrant violation of Law 12.709 which created it as an entity of the Army. Aggravating an already arbitrary dispossession, [the government] appointed a political board of directors, break-

ing the chain of command and creating a situation of conflict with the military personnel assigned to the company.

It was decided that everything done in the war provoked by terrorism [in the 1970s], would be tried, through special—illegal—legislation, approved after the fact and applied retroactively. Ignoring the fact that actions undertaken in wartime cannot be judged by peacetime legislation, [the government] used the penal code to try the military institutions, in the persons of their former commanders-in-chief. The government's action occurred in the context of a scathing media campaign, backed by the full power of the state, which offered unconditional support for those who unleashed this fratricidal war.

More for political than legal reasons, the Military Justice Code was unilaterally changed, without evaluating how this would negatively affect military organization, by depriving it of a most valuable pillar of discipline.

The military wage scale was also modified, delinking it from the judiciary branch and foreign service [wage scales] to which it was connected by law, based on the premise that these are the only activities completely monopolized by the state.

Taking advantage of a circumstantial and tragic event, on the eve of elections [the government] effected changes in the compulsory military service law, pushing through legislation immediately without a transition period. In European countries, such transition periods have lasted for five to ten years. By dismantling an indispensable system of reserves, this [act] created a serious fissure in our national defense structure. As [the draft] constituted the only opportunity for barracks living, [its elimination] also deprived the nation of an important unifying factor.

The restructuring of the Armed Forces was carried out, without considering potential hypotheses of conflict, a sense of fundamentals sense and *raison d'être* of the institution.

By distorting the concept of privatization, by which a state-run business activity is transferred to a private entity, [the government] disrupted the integrated system of matériel production, a valuable and efficient patrimony of the nation, today employing 12,000 Argentines.

The industry's material remains were inexplicably and unjustifiably transferred from their natural orbit at the Defense Ministry, to the Finance Ministry, where they face an uncertain future because their fate is not yet decided. Moreover, the Condor [missile] project was dismantled and the Domeq García submarine factory shut down.

For years, the Financial Assistance Institute, which makes payments to military retirees, has been forced to make larger contributions than stipulated in Law 22.919, which governs its functioning. This arbitrary decision poses a danger to its capitalization.

Wage reductions and arrears in the Armed Forces have forced a large number of its members to find second jobs, to the detriment of their specific military assignment which

demands their exclusive dedication.

[The government] has determined that the military will participate in the anti-drug war; but there has been no explanation of the scope of this intervention. If it exceeds very limited and specific tasks, it will threaten the essence and *raison d'être* of the Armed Forces.

In summary, we have today an Armed Forces with no clear definition of its mission, immersed in the utopia that hypotheses of conflict are unnecessary, bereft of professional incentives, the quality of its personnel increasingly decapitalized, without reserves, trapped in an economic austerity which noticeably limits its training, supply, and maintenance of matériel; questioned, assaulted, and blamed for all the ills of the past.

In part, this situation has come about because of a conceptual deformation of certain sectors of our political class which, with a corporatist mentality, still view our Armed Forces as more of a voice of a military pseudo-party, than an institution of the Republic. Also responsible for creating this crisis, particularly recently, are those government technocrats who run the economy; and who, with a globalist mentality, consider the Armed Forces to be too retrograde an institution for the times we live in, and refuse to meet its economic needs, arguing that this is an unprofitable investment. An additional aggravating element is the unconditional imposition of [financial] adjustment, dictated by foreign interests.

Some might object to what we have conceptually outlined thus far, but it reflects an unquestionable reality as far as the Armed Forces are concerned, if examined objectively, without ideological or sectarian bias. That reality reveals that "the military factor" is one of the most socially troubled sectors, as well as the most undervalued in the institutional structure of the Republic. This creates a dangerous vacuum for Argentina's future.

Faced with a generalized indifference outside the Armed Forces toward resolving these problems, the Retired Generals' Forum hopes to fill this vacuum, with no intention of offering absolute truths or provoking confrontation.

Its members are conscious of the fact that, in their active professional lives, they had the opportunity to present solutions to some of the current problems. They assume responsibility for their errors, made by commission or omission, in the knowledge that, as human beings, they were capable of making mistakes. However, this doesn't disqualify them now from contributing the serene judgment which comes with age and experience.

To attain this goal, we shall use all the legal means at our disposal, to be more convincing. And thus we begin the difficult fight, with no hidden agenda, and with the firm objective of continuing to serve our vocational ideal, in the conviction that the military profession is a noble, dignified, honorable, and indispensable activity for the existence of organized society.