

Andean Report by Javier Almario

Another Colombian narco-financier falls

The arrest of a top narco, and his possible extradition to the U.S., is giving some politicians sleepless nights.

The April 17 capture of Colombian drug trafficker Justo Pasto Perafán in San Cristóbal, Venezuela, means that a new chapter may be opening in the story of the secret links of the continent's drug-trafficking networks to the ruling classes of Colombia, other Ibero-American nations, and even the United States.

In Colombia, Perafán is wanted on charges of illicit enrichment. In the United States, he is wanted on eight counts, including drug trafficking, which charge could carry one or more life sentences.

Colombian narco-President Ernesto Samper Pizano was frustrated in his first attempt to get Perafán back to Colombia through the quickest route, deportation, with the obvious intent of blocking his extradition to the United States, where his conviction is virtually assured. In the United States, Perafán could become a witness against Samper and Interior Minister Horacio Serpa Uribe, who is slated to become Samper's successor in 1998, at the head of a narco-dictatorship.

According to documents in the possession of the Prosecutor General's office in Colombia, Perafán contributed at least \$250 million to Samper's 1994 Presidential campaign, and offered that campaign the use of his luxury hotel, Chinauta Resort. Perafán reportedly also helped finance the (failed) senatorial campaigns of Samper's former defense minister, Guillermo Alberto González Mosquera, and of Samper's comptroller, David Turbay. It is also known that several members of the Accusations Committee of the Colombian House of Repre-

sentatives, which last year absolved Samper of being on the drug cartels' payroll, had received money from Perafán.

On April 19, three hours before Colombia's formal extradition request for Perafán was lodged with Venezuelan authorities, the United States registered its extradition petition. A similar case occurred in Spain in 1985, when leading drug traffickers Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela and Jorge Ochoa Vásquez were arrested there. At the time, the drug traffickers' strategy was to get themselves accused of minor crimes in Colombia, to avoid extradition to the United States. The strategy paid off: Within months, Ochoa was sent to Colombia and freed, after paying a fine for illegally importing bull semen! Rodríguez went free within the year, effectively nullifying the evidence against him because "one cannot be tried twice for the same crime."

Since Feb. 4, 1987, when the Medellín Cartel's Carlos Lehder was extradited to the United States, not a single Colombian drug trafficker has been extradited to that country. Many Colombian congressmen, and perhaps some former Presidents and Presidential hopefuls as well, have not been sleeping well since Perafán's arrest, because the billionaire head of the so-called Bogotá Cartel knows too much. Narco-President Samper correctly fears that an extradited Perafán, together with former Cali Cartel treasurer Guillermo Pallomari and other informants currently in the United States, could prove a devastating witness in a U.S. judicial proceeding

against him.

Former Colombian President César Gaviria, now secretary general of the Organization of American States in Washington, a post obtained through the good graces of George Bush, also has reason to be concerned. It has yet to be explained why Perafán, who was an invited guest at Gaviria's 1990 inauguration, was named by that government to a 1994 mission to the Far East led by then-Foreign Trade Minister Juan Manuel Santos. Perafán went as a Colombian entrepreneur interested in doing business in the region. That same year, Perafán was awarded the Great Cross of the Order of Democracy by then-Senate President Francisco José Jattin, for his "honesty, constancy, and loyalty to the most noble ethical principles."

Former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen, known since 1984 as the "political godfather of the drug trade," also has reason to be concerned about Perafán ending up in the United States. Samper, after all, was his personal project, dating back to the 1970s.

The 51-year-old Perafán, whose vast global commercial empire is currently estimated to be worth \$10-20 billion, is believed to have entered into the drug trade following his retirement from the Army in 1979, where he had been a sergeant for 11 years. The smuggling contacts he developed in the Army served him well when he went into the whisky trade. In 1982, according to Interpol records, he was arrested in Panama with 500 kilos of cocaine, but escaped from jail. Today, he is wanted in at least five countries.

For the moment, the Venezuelan authorities' biggest job will be to ensure that Perafán doesn't die a mysterious death before he is extradited. There are political and financial figures in Venezuela, too, who would rather not see Perafán come to trial.