

Peru's Bust of Drugs-for-Guns Ring Alerts Region to 'Vietnam' Threat

by Valerie Rush

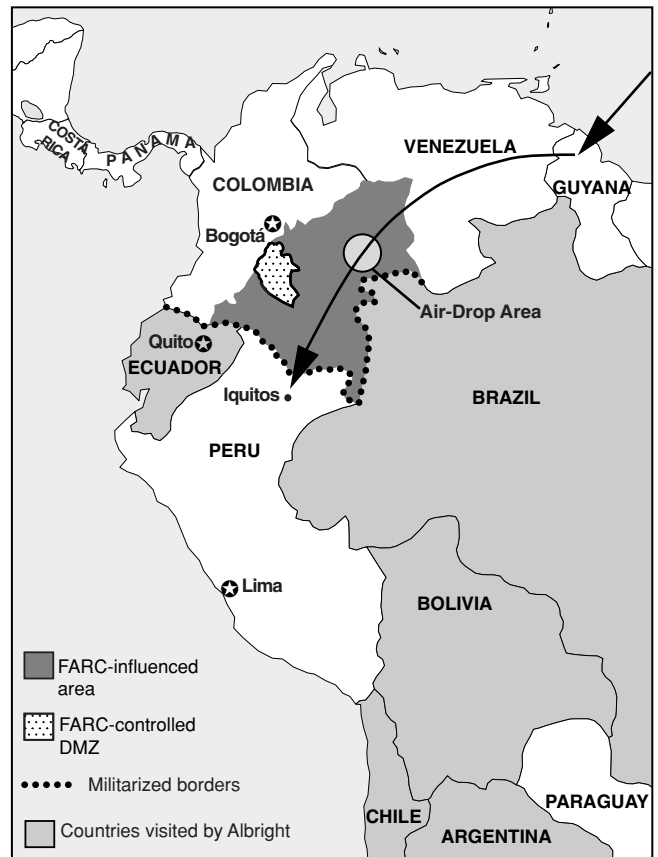
At an Aug. 21 press conference in Lima, Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori reported that his government — with the help of intelligence agencies from several countries — had just successfully dismantled a vast drugs-for-arms trafficking network which had been supplying narco-terrorists in neighboring Colombia. His description of thousands of assault rifles literally dropping into Colombia's convulsed south, directly into the hands of the narco-terrorist FARC guerrillas who are engaged in a full-scale war against that nation, has sent shock waves throughout a region already girding for the "spillover effect" of Colombia's war.

President Fujimori stated in his press conference that these revelations "must be taken in a positive sense, because we make them with the best intention of alerting the region to take security measures." He emphasized that this huge influx of weapons into the hands of the FARC terrorists means that, along with U.S.-sponsored efforts to promote a multinational military operation in the region — under cover of the Colombian government's purportedly anti-drug strategy, known as "Plan Colombia" — are creating the potential for detonating "a little Vietnam," with dire repercussions for the entire region. The three countries which border Colombia in the south — Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil — have already gone on full alert, and militarized their borders (see **Figure 1**).

As he spoke, Fujimori was flanked by his Defense and Interior ministers, as well as by the head of Peru's National Intelligence Service (SIN) and by top SIN adviser Vladimiro Montesinos, who headed the several-years-long investigation of the trafficking ring. Fujimori told reporters that the arms traffickers had used a "triangular" route originating in Amman, Jordan, where Russian-made Ilushin-72 airplanes were loaded with thousands of Kalashnikov assault rifles, with the complicity of several high-ranking Jordanian military officials, including a brigadier general whose name was given as Abdul Razak Abdullah.

From Jordan, the weapons were flown — via the Canary Islands and Guyana — to Iquitos, Peru (see **Figure 2**). However, before the planes landed in Peru, the rifles were dropped from 20,000 feet by parachute over Colombia, directly into the hands of waiting FARC terrorists. According to Fujimori, at least 10,000 weapons were delivered this way in three separate shipments, before the Peruvians moved in and brought the operation to a halt. There are indications, however, that

FIGURE 1
The FARC Weapons Air-Drop Route

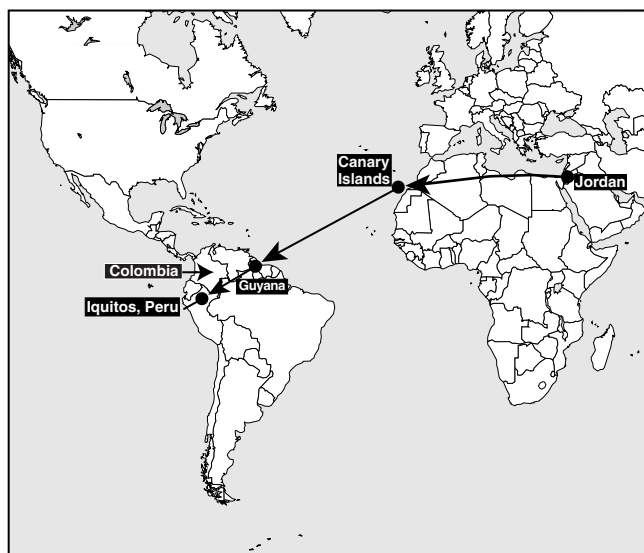


thousands more rifles were flooding into southern Colombia before Peru's authorities even began their probe in 1998.

In the Aug. 17 raid, several arrests were made, and a number of warrants were issued for the arrest of fugitives, of various nationalities, who have been identified as part of the smuggling network. It appears that the ringleaders — at least on the Peruvian side — are the multi-millionaire Aybar Cancho brothers, whose several companies, in Lima, Iquitos, and elsewhere, have served as fronts for drug smuggling and money laundering since at least 1995. In 1997, according

FIGURE 2

Arms Trafficking Route Supplying the FARC



to Peruvian intelligence sources cited by the Peruvian daily *Expreso*, the Colombian FARC turned to the Aybar Cancho brothers as their new weapons suppliers.

Although Fujimori did not publicly go into any details on a possible Russian side to this network, it is noteworthy that a report published by MSNBC back in April of this year, cited “high-level U.S. intelligence sources” identifying a drugs-for-guns smuggling network originating in Russia, and extending through Jordan and into Colombia. One source was quoted describing the trafficking operation as an “industry,” which threatened to overwhelm the Colombian government.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to learn that the Aybar Cancho brothers have suspicious links to Russia. According to *Expreso* of Aug. 26, not only do the brothers have relatives who have lived and studied in Russia, but in 1998, they set up a company, known as the International Entertainment Corporation (Corpindes), with several Russian partners, one of whom, Vitor Ivachine, was arrested in the Aug. 17 raid. Ivachine has been identified by Peruvian state security agencies as a known arms trafficker, with extensive links to the Colombian drug cartels going back to 1990.

Through Corpindes, reports *Expreso*, the Aybar Cancho brothers and Ivachine brought arms traffickers into Peru under cover of “artists” and “performers.” In mid-1998, for example, Corpindes arranged for the Moscow Circus to come to Lima. Among the circus performers who came, says *Expreso*, were Russian arms smugglers, who met secretly with the Corpindes directors to arrange the elaborate smuggling routes leading to the first weapons drops over Colombia later that year.

The April report by MSNBC claimed that planes departed from Russia or Ukraine loaded with weapons, and stopped to refuel in Amman, Jordan—where corrupt officials allowed them to bypass usual customs checks—before heading on to Colombia and the FARC. *Expreso* of Aug. 28 cites reports prepared by Peru’s state security agency DINSE, more or less describing the same scenario. Both sources confirm that the FARC paid for its weapons with many tons of cocaine, which were sent back to Russia and Ukraine, on both ship and airplane, via Spain and Jordan.

Anti-Peru Tantrums

Instead of congratulating the Peruvian government for a job well done, the responses to Fujimori’s announcement from both Colombia and Jordan can only be characterized as tantrums. The drug mafia-corrupted Colombian government immediately attempted to undermine Peru’s achievement, by insisting that its intelligence services had been fully familiar with the FARC’s weapon supply network—down to the drop site locations and the number of weapons smuggled in!—and that Fujimori’s revelations were “nothing new.” The Colombian authorities even made the not very credible claim that they had shared that information with their Peruvian counterparts.

Fujimori was forced to call a second press conference on Aug. 23, in which he clarified that “Operation Siberia”—the name given to the Peruvian investigation of the weapons-smuggling ring—had been conducted in coordination with the intelligence communities of various countries, *with the exception of Colombia*, “because the information could leak out somehow.” Said Fujimori, “Thus, I lament that I must deny that there was shared participation [in the operation] with the Colombian government.” And Fujimori proceeded to ask the obvious question: “If the Colombian Defense Minister knew of these shipments, why did he not intercept a shipment as considerable as 10,000 Kalashnikov rifles? And if the triangulation was between Jordan, Colombia, and Peru, with the weapons left in Colombia en route, why did the Colombian Defense Ministry not inform us? We have absolutely not received a single note.” The next day, an official Colombian spokesman urged that “the polemic with President Fujimori be laid to rest.”

The answer to Fujimori’s embarrassing question was suggested by former Colombian Armed Forces Commander Gen. Harold Bedoya (ret.), who told Peruvian radio that Colombia’s failure to dismantle the supply network to the FARC is because this is “a group of drug traffickers and terrorists to whom the Colombian government has given political status.” Bedoya added that the news from Peru upset the policy of the government of Colombian President Andrés Pastrana, which is to eternally pursue “an absurd peace process [with the FARC], which respects neither sovereignty, nor freedom among Colombians, nor property.”

The Jordanian government’s response, in the meantime,

was to assert that thousands of Kalashnikov assault rifles had been sold to the Peruvian Armed Forces in 1998, in a completely legal transaction, and that culpability for their passage into the hands of the FARC terrorists therefore belonged entirely to Fujimori's government, and to Peru's ostensibly corrupt military. Colombian Armed Forces Commander General Tapias took Jordan's claim at face value, insisting that "Peru and Jordan should assume responsibility for the trafficking of 10,000 rifles to the FARC guerrillas," and for the deaths these have caused to innocent Colombians.

The Clinton Administration gave credence to this lie, when U.S. Undersecretary of Defense Thomas Pickering declared on Aug. 24 that "the Jordanians thought they were legally selling [the weapons] to . . . Peru, and that one way or another, they ended up in Colombia." The ambiguity of Pickering's statement was unforgivable, since U.S. intelligence knew the Jordanians were lying, given evident U.S. involvement in "Operation Siberia."

Of course, it took British expertise to turn this scenario into a genuine psychological warfare operation against Fujimori. The British news service Reuter "reported" in an Aug. 24 dispatch that Pickering had actually confirmed Jordan's claim that it had legally sold the weapons to Peru. Only later did Reuter admit to a "mis-quote," but the damage had already been done. The anti-Fujimori opposition in Peru, and media around the world, were already running with the original Reuter version, suggesting that perhaps the "mis-quote" had been intended for precisely such an effect.

Thus, Fujimori was suddenly presented to the world not only as a liar and fraud, but as a corrupt arms trafficker and collaborator with the FARC! Why this attempt to undercut Fujimori, and to tar his government's successful effort against the drugs-for-guns trafficking ring? For no other reason than the fact that Fujimori had proven that narco-terrorism can be successfully fought; because he had exposed the hypocrisy of President Pastrana's U.S.-backed appeasement policy toward the FARC; because he had laid bare international corruption in high places; and finally, because his revelations have set off continent-wide alarm bells over a potential "Vietnam" scenario in the region.

In the face of this latest attack on his government, Fujimori was forced to offer yet another press conference, at which he stated categorically that the Peruvian Armed Forces do not

possess a single Kalashnikov rifle, and that there has not been a single purchase of weapons from Jordan in the past 20 years. He was emphatic that "there has been no sale to the Armed Forces [of Peru]. If this had been our intent, authorized representatives would have been involved, and a technician or a lieutenant would not have gone to Jordan to buy 10,000 rifles. They were definitely arms traffickers." In response to Jordan's charge that Peru was responsible for not "controlling this irregular purchase," Fujimori retorted, "The seller should know whom he is selling to."

Border Vigilance Intensified

Fujimori's warnings that a dramatic increase in the flow of weapons into Colombia could lead to a region-wide conflagration, has been taken very seriously by the affected countries. Ecuador has already taken the majority of its troops who were patrolling the border with Peru, and has transferred them to its northern border with Colombia. Enrique Ayala, dean of the Andean University of Ecuador, pointed out that the "anti-drug" offensive slated to begin within the next few months in Colombia, will target the department of Putumayo, directly on Ecuador's border. This could mean a flood of 25,000 coca farmers into Ecuador, he warned, adding that Quito, the capital of Ecuador, is much closer to that Colombian war zone than Bogotá itself.

Peru, which has maintained a constant mobilization of its forces along the border with Colombia for more than a year, is girding for a punishing offensive from the FARC. Most dramatic has been Brazil's response to the situation, including setting up a crisis command center to defend its 1,640-kilometer border with Colombia. This operation, dubbed "Operation Cobra," will be directed out of Tabatinga, in the Amazon, which is just across the border from the city of Leticia, a known Colombian drug depot.

As we reported in "Mad Madeleine Pushes for War in South America" (*EIR*, Sept. 1, 2000), the Brazilian government is especially wary of efforts by the U.S. State Department to pull it into any multilateral "collective action" scenario against Colombia. During U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's Aug. 15-19 tour of South America, she made a point of seeking active endorsement from the countries she visited for a possible multilateral intervention into Colombia. She was unequivocally rejected by the Brazilians, who have a long history of guarding their own Amazon from would-be foreign invasions.

In his Aug. 21 press conference on Operation Siberia, President Fujimori took the opportunity to comment on Albright's deliberate slight against Peru during her tour the week before, over its supposed failure "to defend democracy." "The greatest support to regional security comes from Peru, the country she failed to visit," Fujimori said. "If Albright had come to Peru, she would have received this information first hand, precisely regarding regional security and preservation of democracy."

To reach us on the Web:
www.larouchepub.com