

## What is Colombia's M-19?

The April 19 Movement, better known in Colombia as the "M-19," has been described by journalists as "increasingly the most important urban terrorist group in Latin America." It sprang into international prominence one year ago when one of its "commandos" seized the Dominican Republic embassy in Bogotá during a gala party, taking more than 50 people—including 15 ambassadors—hostage. Since then, it has won the growing sympathy and even outright collusion of leftist and other layers inside Colombia.

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The M-19 was formed in 1970 as a subversive splitoff from the right-wing ANAPO party of former military dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. Its ranks were comprised primarily of ex-military officers as well as former and active members of the Society of Jesus. Its first publicity stunt was to steal the sword of Colombia's "Liberator" Simón Bolívar. After that it effectively disappeared for several years, with only occasional Robin Hood-style hijackings of trucks carrying chickens or milk for distribution to the poor.

In February 1976, the M-19 stunned Colombia with the kidnapping and subsequent murder of José Raquel Mercado, the president of Colombia's largest trade union federation. Despite evidence of military complicity in the affair, court-ordered investigations under the control of a military tribunal failed to produce any convictions. From that point on, the M-19 embarked on a career of assassinations and other terrorist acts with total impunity. In September 1978 members of the so-called Workers Defense Movement (MAO), a front group of the M-19, murdered former interior minister Rafael Pardo Buelvas. The M-19 simultaneously took over several radio stations to threaten that other ministers would face the same fate. In January 1979, 4,000 weapons were seized by the M-19 in a spectacular raid on a major military arsenal. In February 1980 the Dominican embassy was seized.

The ease with which the M-19 has struck again and again, garnering huge ransom fees and extensive publicity along the way, is not surprising when one looks closely at the controllers pulling its strings:

- **Society of Jesus:** Colombia's leading Jesuit, the "right-wing" Sen. Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, is reliably reported to be a principal controller of the "revolutionary" M-19. The newspaper Gómez directs, *El*

*Siglo*, employed one Camelo Franco, the MAO member who was arrested for the 1978 murder of Interior Minister Pardo Buelvas. Arrested with Franco were two Jesuit priests, Luis Alberto Restrepo and Jorge Arango, who were leftist activists working out of the Jesuit social action center, CINEP (Center of Popular Research and Education.)

The M-19 holds as its "patron saint" the murdered guerrilla-priest Camilo Torres, who during the sixties served as a Jesuit asset for channeling social ferment into "revolutionary violence" on the continent.

- **Socialist International:** The M-19 issued statements to the press at the time of the Dominican embassy takeover describing themselves as "social democratic" in orientation. The model for the kind of society they want to create in Colombia is Austria's "popular democracy," in the words of the M-19's "Comandante Uno." Not accidentally, Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, a leading member of the Socialist International, participated in the M-19/embassy negotiations, and eventually sent the M-19 a telegram thanking them for their early release of the captive Austrian ambassador. When the hostages were finally released, part of the negotiated deal with the M-19 was to provide passage to Cuba, and then to Austria, where the terrorists had been offered asylum.

- **Military Intelligence:** When the M-19 first publicly emerged in 1974, it was widely acknowledged to be a paramilitary rightist creation whose members maintained close links to at least one faction of Colombian military intelligence. As recently as February 1980, the Colombian ambassador to Mexico told the press: "The M-19 was founded by ultra-rightists. . . . The fascists of the battered ANAPO group constituted themselves as a subversive group."

Striking is the case of Tony López Oyuela, a former magistrate of the Superior Military Tribunal and chief of the Judicial Police of the political police (UAS). In 1976, López Oyuela was in charge of the investigations into the murder of labor leader Raquel Mercado. The leading witness in the case was inexplicably dismissed by López Oyuela. Since then it has been unovered that the witness was a close friend of López Oyuela. In 1979, López Oyuela—one of the highest judicial officers in the Colombian military—was arrested for criminal collusion with the M-19.