

Colombia takes offensive again; more aid is urgent

by José Restrepo

The government of President Virgilio Barco in Colombia issued a series of new decrees Sept. 14 which recaptured the offensive in that nation's war with the cocaine cartels. The decrees 1) provided for the appointment of military commanders with wide-ranging powers in regions under siege; 2) gave military judges the right to order searches anywhere that the crime of drug trafficking and related activity is suspected; and 3) ordered the lawyers of the drug cartels to present their clients in person, in any appeal of the extradition orders against them.

And yet even as the Barco government pursues this new offensive, there has begun to spread a certain degree of alarm over its ability to financially sustain the war against the cartels. Despite the minimal assistance it has received from Washington, D.C., largely in the form of military equipment and supplies, Colombia is facing the very real question of whether it can even provide its troops with boots, uniforms, and food. Fifteen thousand troops will shortly be finishing their tour of duty, and the Barco government lacks the money to outfit their replacements. Further, by the end of this month, the Colombian Army will have used up its entire gasoline allotment for the year; its tanks may quite literally stall in mid-field. Experts have estimated that it will take infusions of at least \$2 million a day to give Colombia what it needs to rout Dope, Inc. from its territory.

Re-taking the high ground

President Barco's Decree No. 2105 requires such "extraditables" as Pablo Escobar, the Ochoas, Rodríguez Gacha, and others to *personally* appear before the judicial authorities if they wish to legally challenge warrants against them. Heretofore, the cartel bosses have swamped the courts with batteries of highly paid attorneys trained to trammel up the

country's judicial processes, while keeping the drug czars abreast of the latest decisions of the courts. Decree No. 2103, on the responsibilities of military penal judges, basically hands over responsibility for ongoing investigations of the drug cartels to the Colombian Armed Forces.

The appointment of military commanders to narcoterror-besieged regions under Decree No. 2099, is especially significant. By giving these commanders broad-ranging powers to enforce public order—from imposition of curfews, regulation of public gatherings, and banning of liquor consumption, to the pursuit and capture of fugitives from the law—the government effectively circumvents the protests of a handful of self-interested political figures, who one week earlier had succeeded in forcing the suspension of a presidential order providing for the replacement of elected mayors by military counterparts where necessary.

President Barco's latest measures follow an outpouring of urgent appeals to the government to uphold the concept of martial law, in time of war. An editorial in the Sept. 9 issue of *El Espectador* insisted: "We are in truth at war, an open war that has been unleashed with all the explosive ingredients of terror. In a state of war, there is martial law . . . such that the presence of military men as the supreme authorities within territories occupied by violence, be it political or criminal, is not strange in that context. . . ."

A Sept. 13 column by respected journalist Ramiro de la Espriella stated emphatically: "War, the state of war, has its own laws, martial law, which is the only apt response to the shattering of our system of law from without." Wrote Colombia's leading constitutional expert Luis Carlos Sachica, in *El Espectador* of Sept. 7, "It is impossible to wage war by the book. A body of judges is not the most adequate forum for determining how to deal with the enemy. . . . If one

wants to save the country, it is necessary to return to the concept . . . of discretionary [presidential] power.”

Even as the Colombian government is still hammering out its war-time strategy against the drug cartels, the offensive against the traffickers continues. The Army and police are continuing to conduct daily raids and seizures of drug traffickers' properties, while at the same time following the paper trail that is helping them to dismantle the drug cartel's Colombian infrastructure.

In fact, based on some of the information gathered in the raids, the Colombian government has announced that it intends to provide the United States and other countries with the intelligence necessary to freeze and confiscate foreign bank accounts of the mafia abroad. “We do not have the specific names of the banks, but the money is in the United States, more than any other place, and also in Europe,” said acting Justice Minister Carlos Lemos Simmonds. “The money is there, the cocaine increases its value there; the money doesn't return to Colombia. They don't need much money in their own home.”

If Colombia succeeds in winning international support for this endeavor, the mafia will be stripped of its ability to finance its terrorist activities inside Colombia. The confiscated accounts would also permit the continued financing of the war on drugs, using the resources of the enemy himself.

Outrage, not fear

Throughout the country, but especially in the targeted city of Medellín, the drug traffickers, on a daily basis, are bombing and burning factories, restaurants, offices, farms, trucks, buses. Airports are receiving bomb threats. The communications media are under constant threat of attack. Parents are forced to personally transport their children to school, because school buses have been taken out of service to prevent mafia attacks. Housewives are forced to collect and transport large quantities of water because the drug traffickers have threatened to poison the aqueducts.

And yet the reaction is one of outrage, not fear. The common citizens who attended funeral services for the assassinated presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán demanded that President Barco enforce extradition against the drug mafiosi. “Shoot the narcos, and we will back you!” they clamored. The response of *El Espectador's* directors immediately after the bombing of their building by the mafia—a front-page headline declaring “We will proceed!”—reflects the general attitude of a people disgusted with an enemy so perverse as to murder the wives and children of soldiers and judges.

According to a poll taken by the daily *El Tiempo* and the Caracol radio chain, 75.8% of Colombians back President Barco's emergency decrees against the drug traffickers; 63.4% backs the extradition of these criminals, 77.6% supports confiscation of mafia properties; 78.1% agrees with the confiscation of the drug traffickers' bank accounts; 77.6% supports



President Virgilio Barco of Colombia (right): 76% of Colombians back his emergency decrees against the traffickers.

punishment of holders of ill-gotten wealth; and 92.2% backs the actions of the armed forces against the mafia chieftains. The poll results are an undeniable slap in the face to the so-called “human rights” and pro-drug legalization lobbies at home and abroad, who have tried to paint the Colombian military as corrupt and ineffectual, and the war against drugs as unwinnable.

Bankers and the drug trade

Financial pressure, along with savage brutality, is the key weapon being applied to prevent Colombia's successful prosecution of a war against the drug cartels. The pro-drug lobbyists have long lied that the Colombian economy could not survive without the profits of the cocaine trade, especially given the debt burden imposed by its international creditors. As long ago as November 1983, the Swiss bankers' newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* wrote, “In the past decade, Colombia could depend annually upon \$2-3 billion which was available to the country from uncontrolled exports. Were the moralizing [anti-drug] campaign of the government to reduce this source of funds, Colombia would find itself no longer in a position to earn the foreign exchange necessary for its economy.”

And as recently as Sept. 12, 1989, the European edition of the *Wall Street Journal* devoted a front-page commentary to asking the question, “If drug money helped the economy boom, what happens if the drug war succeeds?” The article argues that the drug trade is “undeniably” a stimulant to the economy, and suggests that it should be legalized rather than eradicated. This same line has been repeatedly reflected in editorial columns and commentaries throughout the Colombian press.

The daily *El Espectador* published a definitive response to that argument in its Sept. 6 editorial which, after reviewing the claims of the pro-legalization lobby, headed by presidential candidate Ernesto Samper Pizano, asserts that the drug

trade causes "vastly greater" damage to the economy than the "apparent advantages it represents. . . . The cattle raisers and farmers who would not hand over their land have sold them, at any price, so as to avoid having undesirable neighbors or find themselves besieged by one of the sides of the war of the cartels. The rising cost of living in certain cities is astronomical, precisely because the prices imposed by that [drug] trade are unpayable by anyone living from honest work. At the same time, one could say that one of the causes of disincentive for private investment, above all in the industrial sector and in securities, is the threat posed by the spreading tentacles of that abominable activity. . . . The much-discussed underground wealth of the cartel's narco-economy is therefore a deception to justify a lack of solidarity by various national sectors. . . ."

What will the U.S. do?

The ambivalent policy of the Bush administration toward Colombia's war on drugs also came under scrutiny when President Barco wrote a letter to President Bush, criticizing the United States for undermining Colombia's biggest legitimate export when the country is struggling to get free of the stranglehold of the cartels. Barco's linking of U.S. policies that sabotage developing sector economies with the growth of the drug trade, represents a new attitude on the part of the Colombian President, who used to be a vice president of the World Bank, an institution dominated by international high finance and hostile to large-scale development projects in the Third World.

Barco's letter protests the July decision by the United States to collapse the World Coffee Pact, which collapse has led to a 50% fall in coffee prices on the world market. That price fall could cost Colombia as much as \$400 million a year, a figure which stands in stark contrast to the paltry \$65 million in military equipment the United States has pledged to assist the Barco government in its anti-drug efforts. Barco urged Bush to prepare an emergency plan for reviving the Coffee Pact, before Colombia's legitimate economy is irreversibly undermined.

Colombia's war against drugs is, of course, costly, but it is a war that must be fought for the benefit of every nation. The help that Colombia has received thus far is inadequate. The United States and other countries of the advanced sector have apparently taken the view that Colombia's war against drugs is a domestic affair of that country, and have yet to mobilize their citizens behind Colombia's courageous efforts. As of this writing, none of the vast properties and bank accounts of the drug traffickers abroad have been touched. Equally important, there have been no challenges to the austerity conditionalities of such institutions as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies which have fostered conditions for the growth of the drug trade in Ibero-America and elsewhere.

Syria: narcotics center of the Middle East

by Middle East Insider

The following dossier was printed in the Sept. 16, 1989 issue of the European-based newsletter Middle East Insider.

Since the mid-1980s, Syria has played an increasingly important role in the international drug traffic, expanding from Lebanon and the Middle East into Europe and Ibero-America. Proceeds from the trade have not only made some of the leading Syrian personalities wealthier, it became indispensable to the functioning of the collapsing Syrian economy, as well as to the financing of its military and intelligence operations abroad.

Narco-terrorism is not merely an Ibero-American phenomenon: It started in Lebanon under Syrian sponsorship in the early 1980s. Officials of the Syrian government in Damascus have repeatedly been caught dealing in drugs over the past years. In 1984, several Syrian diplomats in Madrid, including the Consul Hajj Ibrahim, were expelled when Syrian-sponsored drug laboratories were discovered in the Costa Brava of Spain. In 1986, three Syrian diplomats were expelled from Rome when a gang of seven drug smugglers, including Syrian and Lebanese nationals, was caught in the north Italian port city of Trieste. Syrian diplomatic pouches are notoriously used to illegally transport both weapons and drugs into Europe.

Yet, any mention of the Soviet client state of Syria is singularly missing from U.S. President George Bush's newly declared worldwide war on drugs. For several days, *MEI* requested from Bush's drug czar William Bennett at the White House precise answers on the effect this new war would have on the drug production and drug smuggling activities in the Middle East, but Bennett's office declared itself as "lacking expertise to make any comment."

Why such an omission? In the present conjuncture, one reason is that Damascus plays a vital role in the ongoing discreet, albeit not secret, negotiations between Washington and Teheran for a rapid normalization of relations between the two countries. The same rationale prompted the State