

Andean Report by Andrea Olivieri

Tug of war for Samper presidency

The President of Colombia is having difficulty forcing through his deal with the drug cartels.

A greasy-palmed Ernesto Samper Pizano took office as President in Colombia last August with a "surrender" package pre-negotiated with the Cali drug cartel set to go. Extradition had been banned by a corrupted Constituent Assembly back in 1991, drug consumption was now legalized in the country, the country's penal code had been rewritten by drug cartel lawyers, and now all that remained was to purge the cartel bosses' criminal records with a few years of self-imposed "rest and relaxation" behind bars. With billions of dollars already invested in the country's most respected enterprises, Colombia's drug kingpins looked forward to emerging from jail and into the catbird seat.

What neither President Samper nor his shadow partners took into account, however, was the degree of resistance to such a scenario—both inside and outside the country. Samper's accession to the presidency took place amid a swirl of scandal facilitated by anti-drug forces in Colombia with the assistance of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The surrender of the Cali Cartel kingpins was put on hold.

Samper's efforts to negotiate a "peace pact" with the country's recalcitrant narco-terrorist movements, the FARC and ELN, ran into similar problems when elements within the Colombian military proposed creating armed citizen militias (on the Peruvian model) to work in tandem with the Armed Forces to beat back narco-terrorism. The FARC, in particular, currently dominates entire chunks of the country, politically and economically as well as militarily, and the Colombi-

an Army (itself under siege from the human rights lobby's demilitarizers) is ill equipped to fight them alone.

Support for the militias was sufficiently strong that the Samper government would have had to approve them had the United Nations not sent its heavy gun, High Commissioner on Human Rights José Ayala Lasso, to crush the initiative.

Intense pressure from the Clinton administration also forced Samper to sponsor "Operation Splendor," a DEA-authored program to eradicate through chemical fumigation thousands of hectares of coca and opium poppy, the raw materials for cocaine and heroin, which proliferated in Colombia under the previous Gaviria administration. When the cartels and their FARC muscle in the states of Putumayo and Guaviare forced thousands of peasants under contract to the traffickers to protest the fumigation program by seizing airstrips and oil-pumping stations, Samper was more than happy to beat a retreat.

And so, despite the insistence of the military and national police that the peasants were being deployed by the cartels and FARC terrorists, a negotiating team was sent by Samper to those southern states on Dec. 15 to sign the so-called San José Pact with the "coca farmers." The pact not only committed the government to suspend aerial fumigation of coca crops of less than three hectares, but also to consult the coca growers, the pro-terrorist Attorney General, and the country's pro-terrorist non-governmental organizations before attempting to fumigate larger plots!

The agreement was furiously de-

nounced by Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdivieso as a virtual coup d'état by the traffickers, and as a blatant violation of the law which prohibits any cultivation of illegal crops on national territory. The major Bogotá daily *El Tiempo* on Dec. 16 editorialized that Guaviare state could become "an independent republic," and insisted that what cannot be permitted "is the existence of one part of Colombian territory in which the state cannot act to enforce the law." In response, Samper's Government Minister Horacio Serpa Uribe crowed that Guaviare "will be made into a kind of pilot program for the whole country."

Before it could congratulate itself, however, the Samper government took another hit. A highly detailed report released on Dec. 19 by the National Police, proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the FARC and ELN guerrillas were heavily involved in drug trafficking. The report was designed both to block Samper's ongoing efforts to grant amnesty to the narco-terrorists, as previous governments had done with the M-19 and other narco-guerrilla groups, and to bury the San José Pact.

What other pressures were brought to bear on the President can only be guessed at, but the upshot was that on Dec. 21, the government made yet another 180-degree policy shift on eradication, pledging to eliminate 50% of all coca and poppy crops over the next 12 months and announcing the deployment of an additional five U.S. armored helicopters and other U.S. aircraft to assist in the fumigation.

The traffickers struck back with an assassination plot against Prosecutor Valdivieso, fortunately stopped in time. Valdivieso in turn urged restoration of the extradition weapon against the cartels, causing Samper and company gulp audibly. Whether that bold initiative succeeds remains to be seen.