

Andean Report by Andrea Olivieri

Ernesto 'Sandwich' Pizano

President Samper Pizano's star is on the wane, caught as he is between anti-drug pressures and the cartels.

Each day that passes, Colombian President Ernesto Samper Pizano sinks more and more into the quicksand of narco-scandal. Over the next few days, his wife, Jacquín Strouss de Samper, will have to testify before the Prosecutor General on her handling of funds for the Association of Friends of the Environment which she ran during her husband's 1994 presidential campaign; the purpose of that association was not to raise campaign funds.

Also to testify are various cabinet ministers and government officials, such as Communications Minister Armando Benedetti Jimeno, who is under investigation for having taken drug money from the Cali Cartel during last year's campaign.

It has also been learned that agents of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration "have found two accounts at Chase Manhattan Bank in New York, which appear to be linked to the narrow circle around Samper," according to *Time* magazine and the Colombian dailies *La Prensa* and *El Tiempo*. Santiago Medina, Samper's imprisoned campaign treasurer, "said that a Chase Manhattan account was used to launder drug cartel monies into the Samper campaign."

The chorus demanding Samper's resignation grows larger every day, while the blackmail claims that Samper's resignation would destabilize the nation's institutions are fast disappearing, as most Colombians have come to realize that the only thing that is truly destroying the nation's institutional existence is the fact that their President nearly succeeded in turning the country into a "narco-democracy."

And yet, it must be remembered that while the leading Cali Cartel drug lords, as well as Santiago Medina and Samper's former campaign manager (and defense minister) Fernando Botero, are all in jail, the war against drug trafficking in Colombia is far from over. Despite Samper's triumphant claims that "the Cali Cartel is dead," the truth is, that deadly organization is still alive and kicking, and has by no means surrendered. Most importantly, its political and financial structure, and its logistical apparatus, remain intact.

Trapped between the accusations against him, and his pact with the Cali Cartel, Samper has been forced to declare "a state of emergency" and to decree strong measures against the "Third Cartel," that of the FARC/ELN narco-guerrillas, including ordering an investigation of their finances both at home and abroad. But his pact with the drug cartels still stands, as proven by his refusal to increase prison sentences for the captured or surrendered traffickers, and his continued, vehement opposition to restoring the weapon of extraditing traffickers who have been indicted in the United States, which is what they have always most feared.

On Aug. 18, Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdivieso declared that the decision of the 1991 Constituent Assembly to ban extradition was "an historic error . . . that Colombia should think about correcting as quickly as possible." Immediately, President Samper responded that "extradition is not part of my government program."

Further, in what can only be seen as a message of appeasement toward

the traffickers, Samper announced that he would dismantle the "Search Bloc," made up of personnel selected from elite squads from the National Police, Armed Forces, and Department of Administrative Security (DAS), and created specifically to combat the cartels. Samper insists that the "Bloc" has finished its job, because "the Cali Cartel is dead."

Still, Samper will find it difficult to fulfill his commitments to the traffickers, stemming from the more than \$7 million they paid to get him elected President. Samper is walking a tightrope, because of the mounting evidence against him; at any time, he may be forced to step down from the presidency. Further, pressure from the Clinton administration, and from the Colombian population itself, is intense, and any overt action in favor of the traffickers could trigger a new scandal, such as is now occurring around the extradition issue.

Although the Cali Cartel thus far has been careful not to make public threats, the widow of murdered presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán was forced to flee Colombia, with her children, after receiving numerous death threats. Despite these threats, Prosecutor Valdivieso—also Galán's first cousin—has decided to reopen the investigation into Galán's 1989 assassination.

In mid-August, the police deactivated a powerful bomb, capable of destroying any armored protection, which had been placed in a street which Valdivieso had to traverse daily to arrive at his office. Nonetheless, the prosecutor insisted that he is prepared "to go all the way" in tracking and convicting the drug traffickers. Paradoxically, if anything should befall Valdivieso, the suspicion would fall not only on the Cali Cartel, but, above all, on President Ernesto Samper Pizano.