

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Dope, Inc. and the insurance business

The Colombian dope mob, buoyed by Betancur's imminent departure, gets ready for the big-time.

Taking their cue from such prestigious institutions as Lloyds of London, the top Colombian mafia families have discovered how to take the risk out of the dope trade—by going into the insurance business.

According to the Colombian daily *El Espectador* of March 29, "The drug trafficker who is going to send a shipment of cocaine to the U.S. buys insurance from the 'capo,' who guarantees him, if caught by the U.S. authorities, restitution of the total value of the investment he made to get the drug to the destination country. If, on the other hand, he manages to get the cocaine to the U.S. distributor, the insurer receives 30%-50% of the profits."

Not a bad deal! And certainly more respectable for would-be shareholders in the next Colombian government, which takes office this Aug. 7. "Capos" like Pablo Escobar Gaviria, Jorge Luis Ochoa, and Carlos Lehder had already made their investments back in 1982, in the form of hefty donations to the presidential campaign of former President Alfonso López Michelsen. López was, however, smashed at the polls by Belisario Betancur, who proceeded to wage war against the criminal networks who had a stranglehold on Colombian politics.

True, López did his best to earn his pay. In May 1984, just after the mafia murder of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, López attempted to sell the Betancur government and Colombian public on a mafia proposal to

repatriate billions of narco-dollars in return for an amnesty. The proposal was turned down flat by President Betancur, but there is every likelihood that his successor—a frontman from the López Michelsen stable—will conclude the deal in short order.

The crime chieftains have already called a summit meeting to end internecine warfare among their families, cement alliances, and prepare for the bonanza. It will reportedly be hosted by the Nazi/communist cocaine king Carlos Lehder. Pablo Escobar will be sporting a new look, courtesy of his plastic surgeon, and Jorge Luis Ochoa—currently in a Madrid jail cell—is hopeful that his extradition to Colombia will take place in time to permit his attendance as well.

Ochoa's extradition to Colombia, rather than to the United States, was approved March 24 by two of three Spanish magistrates who argued unconvincingly that Ochoa would get a "fairer trial" in Colombia, where he is "familiar with the justice system." The dissenting judge protested that the decision appeared "tailor-made" by Ochoa, whose family has boasted that he will be walking the streets within days of his return. It could also have had something to do with the fact that Barry Seal, the star witness against Ochoa in the United States, was recently killed by a Colombian hit team.

Ochoa faces charges of "bull smuggling" in Colombia, undoubtedly also tailor-made by Ochoa himself.

The dope mob is not waiting for

Betancur's departure to flex its muscles, however. One of the continent's most wanted drug traffickers, Honduran Ramón Matta Ballesteros, avoided pending extradition to the United States by waltzing through seven locked gates at the "Modelo" jail in Bogotá March 19. One week later, he casually turned himself in to Honduran authorities, fully aware that his country's constitution prohibits extradition of nationals.

Matta Ballesteros was accused of being the brains behind last year's torture and murder of Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique Camarena in Mexico. After his 1985 capture by Colombian authorities, several escape attempts were thwarted before he succeeded last month in buying his way out of the Colombian jail, reportedly for a cool million dollars in cash.

A disgusted Colombian Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González fired his country's four top prison officials and launched a broad probe of corruption in the jail system, even while noting that "decay and corruption reign in many of the country's jails, which has not been able to be completely solved because, in many cases, it is fed from abroad."

As the Matta Ballesteros case reveals, an anti-drug war pursued on the ground floor will not succeed. As shown by the Colombian thugs' move to the boards of directors of Dope, Inc., high finance is the lifeline of the drug trade. New revelations in the Colombian weekly *Semana* show how imprisoned drug trafficker Rodríguez Orejuela washed his narco-millions through a banking network that stretched from Los Angeles and New York, to Miami and Panama. The main "laundromat" turned out to be the Colombian Banco Cafetero, whose heavy cash flows from coffee sales served to mask Rodríguez's "mere" \$46 million.