

Colombia counters narco-blackmail

by Valerie Rush

On Dec. 17, 1986, mafia hitmen assassinated Guillermo Cano Isaza, one of Colombia's most highly respected newspaper publishers, in response to President Virgilio Barco's reinstatement of the challenged U.S.-Colombia Extradition Treaty. The effort to intimidate the Barco government failed, however, and the government's answer was to decree a series of emergency measures which put the war on narco-terrorism under top-down control of the military.

Foremost among the measures announced is the transfer of drug-trafficking cases to the jurisdiction of military courts, including those cases initiated by civilian authorities. This measure not only relieves some of the burden that has been placed on civil justice in confronting the powerful "Medellín Cartel" of drug traffickers, but also challenges the military to take on a much more active role in the war against the drug trade.

The government has also created a witness protection program, offering not only funds but also a change of home, employment, and identity to those willing to inform against fugitive drug traffickers. The protection extends to families of informants as well. The program offers to those on trial or serving time in jail a reduction in sentence of between one-third and one-half, in exchange for information on wanted drug criminals.

Other measures range from prohibition of the sale of the high-speed motorcycles favored by mafia assassins, to the limiting of weapons' licenses to three years (previously licenses were unlimited), with severe penalties for violations of these and similar decrees.

On Dec. 31, the government ordered a new series of measures. Operating licenses for airlines or individual aircraft suspected of involvement with the drug trade were ordered immediately suspended, and also the business licenses of trading or pharmaceutical companies involved in the illegal trafficking of chemicals used by the drug mafia.

The herbicide eradication program that had been employed to great effect against Colombia's once vast marijuana crops under the predecessor Betancur government was indefinitely suspended in the fall of 1986, when the Barco government's anti-narcotics council succumbed to pressure from pro-drug environmentalists. The Council of Ministers has just reinstated the spraying program, while giving oversight of the eradication effort to the national police force.

On Dec. 30, President Barco ordered combined police-military raids on various parts of Bogota and surrounding cities in search of drug criminals, using "state of siege" powers to arrest 118 individuals without recourse to prior court orders. The identities of those arrested have not yet been released. Now the raids are expected to expand to other parts of the country as well. In addition, arrest warrants were issued for 128 individuals, based on a list of known and suspected drug traffickers prepared by the defense ministry for use by the presidency and cabinet ministers.

The raids are the first major anti-drug effort undertaken by the Barco government since it assumed office in August, and promise to go a long way toward remoralizing a population terrorized by the near-daily accounts of mafia revenge slayings that have been directed at the most respected members of Colombia's national institutions—particularly those involved in the judiciary, law-enforcement, journalism, and politics.

A strategy for success

The task immediately facing President Barco is to expand the war on drugs into the areas defined by martyred Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, who fell to mafia bullets in April 1984. Those areas are the political and financial worlds which run the drug trade from the top. The sentiment was best expressed by a Dec. 23, 1986 editorial in the daily *El Espectador*, whose editors have committed themselves to continuing the war against drugs in which the newspaper's owner-director, Guillermo Cano, fell. In that editorial, *El Espectador* urged adoption of the methodology outlined in the bestseller *Dope, Inc., the New Opium War*, published by the editors of *EIR*:

"One must also fully look into existing correlations between narcotics traffic and politics [and] to what degree are intertwined . . . the economic relationships which have been established during electoral periods and beyond. . . . names are on everyone's lips; the connivance can be determined even in the past. . . . It is absolutely essential to work from the standpoint of certain foreigners who presumably have objective knowledge of the case, who point to possible connivance between narcotics traffic and international agencies of political subversion which . . . was already noticeable in the epoch of the so-called Opium War. . . ."

El Espectador's challenge to the Barco government is also a challenge to the continent as a whole. Venezuelan Justice Minister José Manzo González recognized the broader implications of the "drama of Colombia," when he described the Cano murder as "an alert for our country and for the democratic consciousness of our continent." The Argentine magazine *Semana* wrote similarly on Dec. 23: "Colombia is living its most dramatic, its bloodiest moments. . . . The power of drugs has declared war on life in Colombia. The destiny of a nation is at stake. And, perhaps, also of a continent."