

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

A 'Shining Path' for Colombia?

Colombia's Communists hope to exploit a weak government and a population desperate for solutions.

What Moscow has thus far failed to accomplish in Peru, it hopes to win in Colombia; namely the triggering of a coup, and consequently, civil war. Unfortunately, all the conditions are there, and ripe for exploitation.

A narco-financed upsurge of violence in recent weeks, including scores of assassinations and death threats against prominent national figures, has the Colombian population clamoring for solutions. Inadequate responses from the Barco government, such as prohibiting weapons sales and banning imports of high-power motorcycles favored by mafia assassins, have met with ridicule.

Tensions are also high in the country because of the ongoing conflict with Venezuela over contested territorial rights in the Gulf of Venezuela, a conflict which could still escalate into armed confrontation. On Sept. 4, the Colombian foreign ministry delivered a formal protest to the Venezuelans over violation of Colombian airspace by two F-16 fighter-bombers. The Venezuelan ambassador to Colombia has claimed it was "unintentional." Deportations of Colombians working in Venezuela, and harassment of border merchants by Venezuelan national guardsmen, have heightened tensions.

Barco has fled the volatile situation at home by undertaking an unlucky trade trip to Asia, where he was taken out of action by the sudden onset of diverticulosis. He is currently hospitalized in South Korea, following emergency surgery. At last report, his defense minister was with him.

A bill to finance the urgently need-

ed upgrading of the armed forces by a 1% increase in income taxes and other taxes, has been answered by a barrage of Communist propaganda, denouncing alleged plans to launch a "dirty war," Argentine-style, against the leftist opposition in the country. Communist Party executive Hernando Hurtado wrote in the party's newspaper, *Voz*, on Sept. 3 that such a proposal seeks "to endow militarism with instruments to improve repression. . . . In other words, this means that political and civil rights, already reduced, will be suppressed."

A lengthy report on the recent wave of assassinations in Colombia appearing in the same edition of *Voz*, is entitled, "Behind the paid assassins are the rulers," and blames members of Barco's cabinet—in particular, the defense and justice ministers—for seeking to impose an "ultra-rightist" anti-terrorist statute against "the people." The article urges a nationwide "civic strike against fascism" and attacks those who "minimize the importance of masses in the streets."

Finally, *Voz* published an alleged letter addressed to President Barco from "discontented policemen," demanding immediate solutions to their wage and other grievances. If solutions are not forthcoming, concludes the letter, "Don't be surprised, Mr. President, that this could be the point of no return in starting a war in Colombia, and also don't be surprised if we join the Unified Labor Confederation (CUT), and go out on the streets on Nov. 5."

Not surprisingly, Communist congressmen are currently demanding

that the Colombian Congress support the police force's right to unionize.

The reference to the CUT in this Communist-concocted warning to Barco is especially significant, in light of the recent confrontation between CUT president Jorge Carrillo, and Communist elements within the federation over who will control that trade union confederation. Carrillo announced that he would never permit the federation to be used by the Communists as a political battering ram against the government. "We have forged the unity of the workers, but not on the basis of abdicating our principles. . . . The CUT [will never] be used by any political party or group to proselytize . . . in disrespect for the labor movement." Apparently, the Communists aren't heeding his warning.

Last May, the Communist Party in Peru tried to take advantage of military and police discontent, an escalation in terrorism, and a government under siege from abroad, to create the conditions for a coup in that country. A suppressed Air Force mutiny was immediately followed by a Communist-directed national strike, a scheduled day of "commemoration" by Shining Path narco-guerrillas, and a Communist-backed rebellion by renegade police seeking "better working conditions."

The immense popularity of the Alan García government, combined with a tough "no-negotiations" stance, proved sufficient to dislodge the rebel police from their strongholds and take the wind out of the sails of the Communist strike. The armed forces' command stayed loyal to García, and the terrorist threat was contained.

But Colombia, endowed with neither a strong nor an especially popular government, is dangerously vulnerable to Moscow's destabilization scenario.