

Colombian kidnaping signals Soviet escalation of irregular warfare

by Valerie Rush

Former Colombian presidential candidate and Conservative Party leader Alvaro Gómez Hurtado was kidnaped by five heavily armed individuals, and his bodyguard murdered, just as he was leaving church services Sunday, May 29. Unconfirmed reports have it that Gómez was wounded in the attack. The kidnaping of Gómez, a spokesman for the hard-line anti-guerrilla elements of the Colombian military, represents a major escalation on the part of Soviet irregular warfare forces to destabilize Colombia and to capture the entire Andean region.

Gómez, director of the Bogotá daily *El Siglo*, is the son of former Colombian President Laureano Gómez, and brother to former Ambassador to France Enrique Gómez Hurtado. Enrique Gómez rocked the Colombian nation in January of this year when he wrote an open letter to Colombian President Virgilio Barco, urging the declaration of a one-year state of emergency under which to pursue a full-scale military war against the narco-terrorism ravaging the nation.

In mid-May, Alvaro Gómez wrote a public letter to Barco insisting that "the presence of the authorities throughout the country should be reinstated. The proven incompetence of any law should lead to its overturning. . . . Colombia must be a nation without guerrillas. The civilian and military authorities should recover the initiative in management of public order. Today there exists a unilateral state of war, in which on the one side are the terrorists and insurgents in a state of belligerence, while the forces of order are in a defensive situation, without the use of the powers that a state of law provides them in case of internal chaos."

Chaos and confusion

The rumors as to who is holding Alvaro Gómez are many, and all remain unconfirmed as of this writing. Initial reports were that it is the "Extraditables," the name assumed by the fugitive kingpins of the cocaine-trafficking Medellín Cartel, who allegedly seized Gómez in order to demand the release of convicted drug smuggler Carlos Lehder in exchange. A communiqué issued by the "Extraditables" has since appeared in the Colombian press, denying responsibility for the Gómez kidnaping, but threatening "a just military war" if the Barco government does not abandon all anti-drug efforts.

The latest rumor blames the Gómez kidnaping on the National Liberation Army (ELN), a Castroite guerrilla force known for its working alliance with the drug trade. The ELN, whose multiple assaults on Colombia's oil and gas pipelines have caused multimillion-dollar losses to the Colombian state in recent years, has most recently been active in bloody ambushes of military patrols and in organizing "anti-military" peasant marches. In March, the ELN carried out a "propagandistic" wave of kidnapings of foreign and local journalists and businessmen.

Despite the decision by both the Barco government and the Gómez family to keep all conjecture about the kidnaping out of the press until information is officially confirmed, at least one prominent media personality has more than contributed his share to the chaos and confusion surrounding the case. Edgar Artunduaga, director of Todelar Radio and formerly the director of the drug mafia-owned Grupo Radial Colombiano, claimed to have received several calls from Gómez's captors, and presented authorities with the tape of one such call which purportedly included the tormented words of a dying Gómez. Todelar then broadcast a promise of "terrible news" to come. Later communications from the alleged captors denied that Gómez's wounds were serious.

Artunduaga was forced to resign from the Grupo Radial Colombiano in 1984 by Betancur government, which was investigating the newscaster's reputed complicity in setting up Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla for assassination. In response to Artunduaga's latest panic-mongering, the Barco government ordered a three-day suspension of his broadcasts.

Destabilizations

The Gómez kidnaping occurs at an especially tense moment in Colombia. At least six major provinces have been rocked by "civic strikes" and peasant marches numbering in the tens of thousands, the majority of them organized by communist and guerrilla organizations. The demands of the protesters range from military withdrawal from guerrilla-infested regions to pleas for such basic services as sanitation, health, education, and housing.

In the capital city of Bogotá, 300 neighborhoods called a

24-hour civic strike to protest the lack of drinking water for some 2 million inhabitants. In the major petroleum center of Barrancabermeja, a 24-hour strike was called to protest the murder of a prominent labor leader; buses were burned, a gas pipeline bombed, and the residence of Attorney General Serpa Uribe stoned.

A march of some 30,000 peasants toward the key port city of Bucaramanga turned into a bloody showdown May 30, when terrorist infiltrators in a feeder march from Santander province opened fire with automatic weapons on army personnel. Violence in the department of Arauca, bordering Venezuela, led the interior ministry to order a curfew and dispersion of peasant marches there by army troops.

Simultaneously, bombings and confrontations with police have shaken the National University of Bogotá, and a bombing spree against major shopping centers in the city of Cali was only partially averted by discovery of 10 explosive devices. The Mexican embassy in the capital city was seized by 40 members of the M-19 guerrilla group. Bullet-riddled bodies have begun to turn up in isolated areas of Bogotá, stamped with the symbol of the "Black Hand" death squad.

Reports now say that people have begun to arm themselves in anticipation of a revival of the *Violencia*, the civil war of the 1950s, which claimed half a million lives.

The only clear voice is coming from the Armed Forces. In an interview with Radio Cadena Nacional (RCN), Armed Forces Commander Gen. Jaime Guerrero Paz declared that his forces were in a fight to the death with the forces destabilizing the country. He echoed a statement by Defense Minister Gen. Rafael Samudio Molina the previous day. "This is not a problem of the guerrillas against the Army, but of the guerrillas against the government."

Declared Gen. Guerrero Paz, "The Colombian army today is, as the defense minister announced yesterday, 100% committed to fulfilling its task of reestablishing and maintaining public order, so that the country can develop peacefully, without the threat of a demented subversion, of a rampant drug traffic, of organized crime that threatens the lives, goods, and honor of our citizens.

"It is true that we lack resources, we haven't the resources. The government has made a gigantic effort to give the military forces the resources it requires to fulfill its task. But until now, this very day, we have not received the first pair of boots, the first bullets. However, with this limitation of resources, the military has not spared a single effort. . . . The Colombian army at this moment finds itself in the north and south, east and west, in the fields, in the hills, in the jungles, in the plains, in the mountainous wild, to fulfill our task."

It is a fact known in Colombia that the drug traffickers and their guerrilla allies possess weaponry which, in both number and quality, is superior to the military's. The weapons are purchased with the proceeds of the drug trade, and by "protection money" paid by companies like Occidental

Petroleum, owned by Moscow agent Armand Hammer.

During his interview, Gen. Guerrero Paz responded to RCN's inquiry about a mooted "military solution" to Colombia's crisis. "I have declared categorically: our military forces are trained to defend the country, not to govern it. Political problems are for politicians to solve, economic problems for the technicians. . . . It is for we in the military to defend the nation. . . ."

A vacuum of leadership

Aggravating the crisis is the fact that President Barco, on a several-nation, 14-day tour of Europe and the United States, has refused to come home to take control of the situation. In a statement to the press from Madrid, Barco lamented the Gómez kidnaping, but insisted, "Now, more than ever, my presence on this tour of Europe and the U.S. is necessary, to explain to the world the reality of what is happening in Colombia." Interior Minister César Gaviria Trujillo, serving as Acting President during Barco's absence, told the nation that the situation in the country is "delicate," but under control.

Political analyst Juan Añez responded in the daily *El Tiempo* May 31, "In this atmosphere of crisis, the continuation of the presidential trip may have its effects abroad, but within the country it can have other connotations, with risks to the government. The idea of a vacuum of power. . . The absence of Foreign Minister Londoño and Communications Minister Cepeda, leading figures in the present government, accentuates the disquieting impression that the masters of the house are on a trip while the curtains are starting to burn."

Conservative party leader and President Misael Pastrana has called publicly for President Barco's immediate return to the country. He described the nation as "in flames" on all sides, and requiring the leadership it elected. The opposition Conservative Party issued a communiqué defining the need for public order as the highest priority of the State. "Therefore, the Conservative Party patriotically demands, with all due consideration to the person of the President. . . his return to the country."

There is no small tendency toward capitulation among leading strata in Colombia. Liberal Party executive Santofimio Botero has insisted on the need for "dialogue," with both the guerrillas and the drug mafia, in order to "have peace." Even the Church continues to insist on the need for a "dialogue of reconciliation" with the guerrillas. A communist-inspired campaign to discredit the military around alleged "human rights" violations, continues to be echoed in the columns of all the major national dailies.

The daily *El Tiempo* devoted a major portion of its Sunday supplement May 29 to favorable coverage of the push for drug legalization in the United States. And, according to rumor columns in several newspapers, the political "godfather" of the drug mob, former President Alfonso López Michelsen, is maneuvering to replace the sickly, frightened Barco for the remaining two years of his term.