

Colombia counterattacks against the drug mafia

by Valerie Rush

Colombian President Virgilio Barco, in a nationally televised speech to the nation Aug. 25, formally declared war on what he termed the "narco-terrorist" mafia, and vowed to wage "a crusade which doubtless will leave more blood, pain, and suffering, but from which I am sure we will come out victorious." Exactly one week earlier, the drug mafia had brutally murdered Luis Carlos Galán, Colombia's front-running presidential candidate, striking him down in a hail of bullets as he prepared to address 7,000 supporters at a televised political rally in southern Bogotá. Galán represented the leading political force in the country which had not been bought or terrorized into submission by the cocaine cartels. His shooting, as the television cameras rolled, was meant to terrorize the entire nation, and the world.

But government actions taken since the murder of Galán and two other prominent persons the same week, show that the drug mafia's calculations have backfired. In his Aug. 25 speech, Barco finally did what many have urged for years, declaring that "Colombia is at war." He added, "This is not a simple rhetorical expression. This country is at war against drug traffickers. We will find the barons and bring them to justice. We are dismantling their networks of support."

Even as he was speaking, the nation's police and armed forces were carrying out the latest in a week-long series of raids intended to cripple the drug mafia's logistical apparatus. On Aug. 25, the vast economic empire of the drug lords of the city of Cali, Gilberto and Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, was seized, including hotels, a drug store chain, apartments, and 44 ranches, with 26 people arrested. And in Pacho, a suburb of Bogotá, the vast headquarters of José Gonzalo

Rodríguez Gacha were taken over. Captured were Gacha's computerized telecommunications network and all of his financial records, including those concerning his income, payroll, and the names of lawyers he controls.

It was Galán's murder, coming on the heels of the two other mafia hits in the same week, that prompted this dramatic policy reversal on the part of the previously inactive Colombian government. That night, Aug. 18, Barco went on national television to issue a series of state-of-siege decrees permitting the extradition of drug traffickers and the confiscation of the drug mafia's ill-gotten properties and wealth. The army and police immediately began raiding known or suspected mafia properties, searching more than 800 in three days and arresting 11,000 suspects, who can be held incommunicado for up to one week under the state of siege.

Already prior to the latest seizures, government forces had expropriated, largely in the Medellín area, vast ranches and plantations, mansions, restaurants, office buildings, hundreds of airplanes, helicopters, yachts, cars and trucks, millions in cash and gold, sophisticated weapons arsenals, tons of coca paste, and undisclosed quantities of cocaine-processing chemicals. Great damage has already been done to the cocaine cartel's logistical operations, and mop-up operations are continuing.

Why Galán?

Galán was the founder of the New Liberalism current within Colombia's ruling Liberal Party, the same faction which the late Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla had been part of before he was gunned down on April 30, 1984, by the

same Medellín Cartel which has now slain Galán. New Liberalism was founded in 1981 as a political counterweight to the presidential candidacy of former President Alfonso López Michelsen, the man who has urged a government-negotiated amnesty for the cocaine traffickers ever since his clandestine meetings with them in 1984.

In 1982, Galán charged that “the drug trade wants to destroy New Liberalism, because it knows that it is its enemy in Colombia.” Galán and Lara Bonilla expelled Medellín Cartel chieftain Pablo Escobar from New Liberalism’s ranks; Escobar immediately sought out and was accepted into the ranks of the López Michelsen forces in the Liberal Party, through the auspices of Alberto Santofimio Botero, today a presidential candidate.

When his friend Lara Bonilla was murdered by the mob, Galán publicly resolved “to defend the values and principles for which Rodrigo Lara gave his life.” He especially defended extradition as “one of the principal tools to confront the drug traffickers. We must use it without fear.” As Galán’s son declared at his father’s graveside, “My father . . . was never unfaithful to his ideology and to his convictions. . . . I pray to God that this sacrifice will serve finally for society to react and to unite, backing the government and the institutions, but at the same time demanding more effective labor, without being intimidated by the assassin, the kidnaper, or any other manifestation of violence.”

Galán was the third prominent figure to fall victim to mob revenge in less than a week. Earlier that same day, Col. Valdemar Franklin Quintero, the police chief of Medellín, where the cocaine cartel has its base, was killed. Quintero had earned the enmity of the mob back in May, when he arrested the son of Medellín Cartel “enforcer” Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, a.k.a. “The Mexican.” Shortly after Quintero’s murder, press releases claiming responsibility for the assassination and signed “The Extraditables,” began to circulate.

And two days earlier, Bogotá Superior Court magistrate Carlos Valencia García was gunned down. Judge Valencia García had just upheld an arrest warrant against Medellín Cartel chieftain Pablo Escobar for the 1987 assassination of newspaper owner Guillermo Cano. The magistrate was also investigating the assassination of Jaime Pardo Leal, the president of the leftist Patriotic Union party. Pardo Leal’s murder has been attributed to Rodríguez Gacha.

A declaration of war

By declaring a state of siege on Aug. 18, Barco deliberately circumvented the June 1987 ruling of a terrorized Supreme Court against the U.S.-Colombia extradition treaty, and gave back to the nation its single most powerful weapon against the drug mob. Defense Minister Oscar Botero immediately welcomed the decrees, saying that the President’s measures “give the military and police a great capacity for

action at this moment. We are now in a frontal war against the violence.”

And on Aug. 25, Barco decreed that owners of seized properties have only three days to prove legitimate ownership—which few are expected to even try to do—after which seized lands will be distributed to landless peasants, and other assets will go to the police and military, the Justice Ministry, the national farm institute, and welfare agencies. Barco also decreed an investigation into the legitimacy of all rural airstrips in the country, with orders to “make unusable” all unauthorized runways.

Reacting with predictable fury, the drug cartels sent a message sent to the country’s major radio stations, signed “The Extraditables”: “We will continue our fight and our total war against the anti-nationalists and sellouts, and we declare absolute war against the government, the industrial and political oligarchy, against journalists who have attacked and humiliated us, against the judges who have sold out to the government, against the extraditing magistrates, against the presidents of the trade associations and unions, and against all those who have attacked and persecuted us. We will not respect the families of those who have not respected our families, and we will burn and destroy the properties of the oligarchy.”

To emphasize their point, the offices of the Conservative and New Liberalism movements in the city of Medellín were dynamited early Aug. 24, leaving one person killed. The farms of two Colombian politicians were burned, and dynamite bombs at several of Medellín’s radio stations were defused by police.

But so far the government has the upper hand, and could well shut down the cocaine cartel’s operations in Colombia. By closing their airports and confiscating planes, boats, and trucks, Barco’s decrees choke off the cartel’s smuggling pipeline, while the seizure of weapons, vehicles, homes, and offices dramatically interferes with the traffickers’ logistical capabilities. While it is true that the cartel, with its vast financial resources internationally, could relocate to another country, it is equally true that a continent-wide mobilization carried out with the intensity of Colombia’s and backed by the United States, could “poison the well” everywhere, and bring Dope, Inc.’s operations in Ibero-America to an end.

U.S. offers \$65 million in hardware

After speaking with President Barco twice by phone, President Bush authorized on Aug. 25 the release of \$65 million worth of U.S. military hardware, in the first significant material aid to the Colombian war on drugs to come from Washington in a very long time. To be transferred to Colombia very soon, along with U.S. advisers to train Colombians in their use, will be 20 Huey helicopters, assault boats, jeeps, fixed-wing aircraft, grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons, small arms, and machine guns, among other

items. This array of badly needed equipment will begin to even the balance of military hardware against the drug armies, which heretofore have often been better armed than government forces. Items such as the armed launches and helicopters will be especially important for going after mafia hideouts in the nearly impassible Amazon region, where most top narco leaders are believed to have fled.

It is precisely this equipment that Colombia does need, and not U.S. troops, as some have proposed. The deployment of U.S. troops would undermine Colombia's armed forces, and provoke an anti-American backlash that would feed the drug mafia's "nationalist" campaign for power. As U.S. military leaders familiar with Colombia have testified, that country's armed forces are ready, willing, and able to wage an effective war against the narco-terrorist enemy.

Use of U.S. troops would feed the campaign of groups such as the Inter-American Dialogue, which seeks to dismantle the military in every Ibero-American country on the grounds that, by daring to fight against narco-terrorism, they violate human rights and "threaten democracy."

Documentation

Colombian narco-terrorism, U.S. hypocrisy: a timeline

December 1983. The small but vocal Colombian Anti-Drug Coalition is a target of threats and harassment from the drug mafia. In response to an appeal from the ADC, then Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla wrote to ADC leaders Maximiliano Londoño and Fausto Charris:

"It is with great concern that I have learned of the threats and attacks that you are being subjected to by unknown individuals, and as a result of the laudable work which you have been carrying out as leaders of the National Anti-Drug Coalition. From the moment at which, as a Senator of the Republic and as Justice Minister, I have upheld a strong position of fighting against the mafias and the drug trade, I have known what it means to feel threatened. And for this reason, I express my full solidarity with you and I offer you

my total willingness to cooperate and help. I am contacting the security authorities of the state, asking them to provide you with full protection and support. I ask you to please advise me of any situation that might arise in this regard. Your servant and friend, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla."

March 1984. The Colombian Armed Forces, under the direction of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, conducts raids against the largest mafia cocaine laboratories ever discovered, the "cocaine city" known as *Tranquilandia*, deep in the southern Colombia jungle.

April 30, 1984. Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla is assassinated by hired killers of the drug mafia.

July 26, 1984. Patricia Londoño, wife of ADC president Maximiliano Londoño and editor of the ADC magazine *Guerra a las Drogas (War on Drugs)*, is kidnaped on the streets of Bogotá, and subjected to mental and physical torture by her abductors, who later prove to be linked to the drug mafia.

Nov. 6, 1985. M-19 narco-terrorists carry out a bloody siege of the Colombian Justice Palace in Bogotá. The national legal archives are gutted and 100 killed, including half the Supreme Court magistrates, in the ensuing conflagration. It is later discovered that the M-19 had been paid \$5 million by the Medellín Cartel to carry out the action, which was conducted on the day that Colombia's Supreme Court magistrates met to consider a legal challenge to the U.S.-Colombia extradition treaty brought by lawyers for Medellín Cartel chieftain Jorge Luis Ochoa.

July 31, 1986. Supreme Court magistrate Hernando Baquero Borda is gunned down by the drug mob on the streets of Bogotá.

Oct. 17, 1986. Supreme Court magistrate Luis Enrique Aldana Roza suffers a heart attack after receiving a mafia-delivered coffin at his home. Flown to Houston, Texas for emergency surgery, his oxygen line is mysteriously cut and he dies of "complications."

Nov. 17, 1986. The country's leading anti-narcotics law enforcement official, police Col. Jaime Ramírez Gómez, is assassinated by the mob. Ramírez had been the officer in charge of the largest drug bust in Colombian history, the raid on *Tranquilandia* in March of 1984. Ramírez had also been the right-hand man of then Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla.

Dec. 17, 1986. The drug mafia assassinates Guillermo Cano, owner and director of the prominent national daily *El Espectador*, and one of the most highly respected journalists in the country. He had repeatedly indicted the "citizens above suspicion" who fronted for the mob in Colombia, and one of his last editorials had denounced congressional advocates of drug legalization.

January 1987. Mafia hit-men in Budapest, Hungary, attempt assassination of Colombian Ambassador Enrique Parejo González, who had succeeded the murdered Lara Bonilla

as justice minister. Parejo González is wounded, but survives.

June 25, 1987. Colombian Supreme Court votes 13-12 to overturn the U.S.-Colombia extradition treaty, which in turn forces the Barco government to scrap a series of arrest warrants against the leadership of the Medellín Cartel.

Nov. 21, 1987. Medellín Cartel boss Jorge Luis Ochoa is arrested for speeding by a highway patrolman in Colombia. The cartel responds with a public warning that if Ochoa is extradited, it will "declare total and absolute war against the entire political and leadership class of the country." Two days later, the Barco government revokes its standing arrest warrant against Ochoa, accepting Ochoa's lawyers' argument that the non-validity of the extradition treaty nullifies the arrest order.

Dec. 30, 1987. Medellín Cartel boss Jorge Luis Ochoa walks out of a Colombian jail on a legally secured writ of *habeas corpus*, purchased at the cost of several million dollars in bribes.

Jan. 20, 1988. Bogotá mayoral candidate Andrés Pastrana is kidnaped by the Medellín Cartel.

Jan. 25, 1988: Colombian Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyos Jiménez is kidnaped by the Medellín Cartel in a shootout that leaves two bodyguards dead. His body is discovered later in the day, bound, blindfolded, and shot a dozen times in the head. Hoyos was not only the Barco administration's sole advocate of reviving the U.S.-Colombia extradition treaty, but also proposed investigating the money flows behind the drug trade. He also personally stood up to efforts by such prominents as the head of President Barco's Council of State, to promote the legalization of drugs as a "solution" to the drug trade.

Jan. 25, 1988. Pastrana is rescued by police from a ranch owned by one of the cartel chieftains. A fabulous arsenal is seized at the ranch, including infrared visors for night operations, devices to eliminate the flashes from machine-gun fire, high-power rifles with top-quality telescopic sights, bulletproof vests, etc.

May 29, 1988. Narco-terrorist M-19 kidnaps Conservative Party leader and former presidential candidate Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, and demands as his ransom the dismantling of the Armed Forces' anti-subversive campaign and the establishment of a "peace dialogue" by the government.

Oct. 29, 1988. A Colombian Communist Party document, prepared for its 15th annual congress, recommends legalization of drug trafficking and consumption and the free import of capital from the drug trade, to be invested in productive activity inside the country.

U.S. hypocrisy

The State Department has regularly financed and promoted that wing of the Colombian labor movement which is notorious for its links to the drug-trafficking cartels, since the

early 1970s. This has been the subject of major exposés for more than three years:

Feb. 6, 1986. At a press conference in Washington, D.C., Schiller Institute spokesman Dennis Small reveals that during the mid-1970s in Colombia, the State Department-funded American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) bankrolled the founding of the Banco de los Trabajadores, later accused of involvement in drug money laundering. The money came through a grant to the mafia-controlled UTC labor federation, then run by Tulio Cuevas, an AIFLD trustee. In 1978, Cuevas sat on the bank's board together with one Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, reputed head of the Cali cartel of drug traffickers.

Cuevas's successor to the UTC presidency, Victor Acosta, traveled to Madrid in 1986 to attest to the "good character" and "honesty" of Rodríguez Orejuela and Medellín Cartel chieftain Jorge Luis Ochoa, both captured by Spanish authorities and held on drug trafficking charges pending deportation hearings. Acosta's successor in the UTC leadership, one Mario Valderrama, is based in Medellín and is widely known for his links to the drug cartel in that city.

The U.S. State Department has maintained its backing for the UTC mafia, despite repeated exposures of this corruption, (see *EIR* Vol. 13, No. 11, March 14, 1986.)

Feb. 8, 1988. Gen. Paul Gorman (ret.), former commander of the U.S. Southern Command, testifies before a Senate Committee on Foreign Relations subcommittee on narcotics and terrorism that his warnings that the drug trade represents a national security threat to the U.S. have gone unheeded because the Pentagon believes that "East-West" relations are the priority. He protests that "We have been promising the Colombians materiel help [in fighting drugs] since 1983. We have simply not delivered." He said that cynical U.S. embassy personnel had told him to expect no help from the Colombian military in fighting drugs, but that, in fact, "There were a number of senior Colombian officers . . . who held a very different view from that reported by our embassy. They recognized what the drug traffickers really meant . . . as a long-term threat to the whole social fabric of Colombia."

March 1988. The State Department's International Narcotics Control Strategy Report states: "From different vantage points, there are both positive and negative perceptions of the effects of narcotics money laundering. Proceeds from drug trafficking are used to finance other criminal activities . . . to threaten governments . . . and support insurgencies. . . . Despite these serious problems, laundering criminally derived money can provide benefits to some otherwise economically unattractive countries. Such monies create an influx of capital which can lead to a stimulation of the country's economy. The increase in capital created by the criminally derived money increases money reserves, lowers interest rates, creates new jobs and, in general, encourages economic activity."