

Andean Report by José Restrepo

Colombia's drug mafia strikes back

With the help of former President López Michelsen, the cocaine cartel is blackmailing the government.

For first time since the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán in August 1989, the government of Colombia has opened the door for negotiation with the drug cartels, and hesitated in its confrontation with the military apparatus of the drug kingpins. To counter the Colombian government's courageous military war on drugs, a big campaign has been launched in both Colombia and the United States, to accept such "generous offers" of the drug traffickers as to legalize dope.

It all began with the kidnaping by the drug mafia of at least 80 members of the country's leading families. The so-called Extraditables—the drug traffickers wanted for extradition to the United States—set a deadline for the government to negotiate with them, or else, they vowed, they would kill their victims one by one.

Then, they activated their political assets. Former President Alfonso López Michelsen issued a statement on Jan. 15 expressing his agreement with the drug lawyers on the need for "negotiation."

The statement was supported by former President Julio César Turbay Ayala, considered an asset of U.S. interests; the leader of the communist Patriotic Union, Diego Montaña Cuéllar; Bogotá's Cardinal Mario Revollo Bravo; and former President Misael Pastrana Borrero. The statement said: "We are certain that society, given a statement by the Extraditables accepting this appeal and freeing those they hold hostage, and immediately suspending shipments of cocaine

abroad, would look with benevolence upon this final gesture and would make the Extraditables the beneficiaries of a less severe treatment than were they to insist on continuing their criminal actions."

Gen. Harold Bedoya, head of the the IV Army Brigade, with headquarters in the cocaine capital of Medellín, denounced the statement on Jan. 16. "The document that was published yesterday was known about in advance by the drug mafia," he charged. "One of the signers [López], through a lawyer named Guido Parra, had been in contact with [cocaine kingpins] Pablo Escobar and Luis Ochoa, in order to informed them of what would be presented to public opinion. For the drug traffickers, it was not a surprise at all, because they were expecting the statement. . . . It could be said that this is blackmail."

Medellín's Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, who is also the president of Colombian Conference of Bishops, made clear that Cardinal Revollo did not sign the statement in the name of the Catholic Church. "The Conference of Bishops in General Assembly," he said, "should make a statement to the country, which needs the voice of the Church."

The day that the López Michelsen statement was published, the Extraditables freed two of their hostages, who in turn relayed the mafia's response: "We accept the victory of the state, of the institutions, and of the legitimate established government. We will lay down our weapons and abandon our war aims, out of desire for the highest

interests of the fatherland." The cartels said they "have decided to suspend the export of drugs, and we will turn over all weapons, explosives, laboratories, hostages, clandestine airfields, and other elements proper to our former activities, as soon as we receive institutional and legal guarantees." They promised no more bomb attacks and no more executions.

Ernesto Samper Pizano, the political protégé of López Michelsen, as well as former President Turbay, both close collaborators of the U.S. State Department, immediately characterized the drug mafia's statement as an "unconditional surrender."

López Michelsen and his friends are acting with the support of powerful U.S. factions who back the campaign to legalize dope. For instance, the *Washington Post* editorial on Jan. 19 said that the deal proposed by the cartel "is political plea-bargaining writ large, but it is not to be dismissed."

The first political demand by the drug mafia would be to lift the state of siege, which the government imposed in order to take harsh measures against the drug mafia, including extradition and confiscation of properties.

This is far from a mafia surrender. The mere fact that they have 80 people held hostage, means that the drug cartel still has formidable military capabilities.

The anti-drug newspaper *El Espectador* called the López Michelsen proposal "blackmail," in a Jan. 16 editorial. It wrote, "El Espectador has been one of the principal victims of the criminal chain which has tried to subjugate Colombia and which was finally about to be defeated, after the death of one of its chieftains and the military operation against the rest. Whitewashing a deal or a surrender in a battle to which Colombia's dignity is committed would be intolerable."