

Andean Report by José Restrepo

Narcos' demands terrorize Colombia

Close to winning on extradition, the "Extraditables" now say legalization is their most important concern.

For our military-political organization, the problem of extradition has become of secondary importance," said the latest communiqué released on April 7 by the so-called Extraditables, the narco-terrorist organization led by drug kingpin Pablo Escobar Gaviria.

The communiqué was issued after President Virgilio Barco promised from Europe that if Pablo Escobar or other traffickers surrender, his government would not extradite them.

With that, the narcos decided they had sufficiently terrorized the country to issue new demands. Assassins hired by the mafia had killed the presidential candidate of the Patriotic Union party and two other political leaders, and kidnaped the Antioquia state campaign manager of Liberal Party presidential candidate César Gaviria, all in less than two weeks. They also attacked the police of Medellín. On April 3, ten policemen were killed in the city, and more killings followed.

The Bush administration's ambassador, Thomas MacNamara, joined the attack on extradition. "Let me repeat what I have said many times in Colombia: Extradition is a useful tool with a strong foundation in the international law. However, it is not the long-term solution for the problems of Colombia's justice system," he stated on April 7.

Most of Colombia's major political figures have reacted by fearfully softening their line on the drug traffickers. Proposals range from pardon to peace treaties and international verification commissions for "verifying" pacts with these killers. In each case,

the first step of the proposals is the suspension of extradition.

The kidnaping of Sen. Federico Estrada Vélez in Medellín on April 3 exemplifies how Colombia's political system is being destroyed by the same kind of systematic terror which castrated the judicial system.

Estrada, Gaviria's campaign manager in Antioquia (the state which includes the cartel's center, Medellín) was kidnaped just after he issued a statement opposing ongoing negotiations between the Extraditables and the so-called "Notables," led by former President Alfonso López Michelsen. Estrada was released three days later, but immediately called on the government to stop its war against trafficking.

Juan Gómez Martínez, Medellín's pro-narco mayor, announced that he had contacted the Extraditables to negotiate Estrada's release. Gómez Martínez, who has repeatedly urged the government to hold dialogue with the narcos, called Estrada's release an example of how negotiations are better than war.

The Social Conservative Party's presidential candidate, Rodrigo Lloreda Caicedo, then issued an elaborate proposal for how "Colombia should force through and initiate internationally the legalization of cocaine." He went so far as to propose an international commission be established to verify agreements with the drug traffickers and the "surrender" of the drug lords.

Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, a dissident Conservative Party presidential candidate, proposed April 9 to pardon the traffickers as part of a universal

legalization of drugs. "You can talk to them. Ask them what they want and see what can be given to them," he said.

Military officers replied to the chorus that extradition should end, by reminding the politicians that there will be no justice system as long as the drug mafia is not defeated.

"Nobody in Colombia dares to accuse a drug trafficker. Nobody reaffirms before a judge what they have previously said to the military authorities or the police," said Gen. Harold Bedoya Pizarro, commander of the Fourth Brigade, headquartered in Medellín.

"The potential witness knows that he does not face a hired assassin or a drug trafficker, but an entire criminal organization. No witness dares to declare before a judge when his or her denunciation could cause his or her own death."

Every judge who has attempted to indict Pablo Escobar for his crimes of mass murder and assassination is dead or in hiding outside the country—an indication that the criminal organization must be destroyed in order to have a "solution to Colombian justice system."

Military and police have continued the fight, despite the wavering. On April 7, police announced the capture of Jairo Rodrigo Rodríguez, who is the successor of the late cocaine czar Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, who is wanted for extradition. On April 8, police in Medellín captured eight hired assassins who had killed 18 policemen the previous week.

On April 7—the same day the U.S. ambassador was insisting extradition must become a thing of the past—President Barco reversed himself. "The government has not, and will not, suspend extraditions to Europe and the United States," he stated.