

Andean Report by Andrea Olivieri

The fight to retake Medellín

Military and police forces are deadly serious about recapturing Colombia's "drug capital" from the narcos.

The Colombian National Police is engaged in an unprecedented restructuring and redeployment of its forces, in an effort to rescue the city of Medellín from the grip of drug cartel narco-terrorism. From January to mid-June of this year, more than 3,000 people, including 136 policemen, fell victim to the Medellín Cartel's battle to retain the region as its base of operations.

In an effort to wipe out corruption, commanding officers in the Medellín police hierarchy have been transferred to other parts of the country or retired, along with 120 detectives in the intelligence division. In their place, 330 new secret agents have been brought in. Fifteen hundred new police officers from around the country have been transferred to Medellín.

There has been a concerted effort to increase recruitment to the elite corps of the National Police, who are specially trained in counter-terrorist operations. Sophisticated computer equipment for voice tracing has been installed, along with a novel tracking system intended to monitor the movements of all 4,200 agents of the Medellín metropolitan police. Both national and local police agents have been the special targets of the cartel, which has offered a \$4,000 per head bounty.

At the same time, Medellín and the surrounding Aburra Valley have been placed under martial law, with the headquarters of the First Army Brigade—formerly based on the Caribbean coast—being moved to Medellín to augment the troops of the Fourth Army Brigade.

The Army has opened up a new front in its war on drugs, by making a special effort to win over the terrorized population, to serve as its eyes and ears and as a base of support for its operations. Its Engineers' Battalion has deployed into the poorest areas of the city to build public kitchens and laundries, while its medical corps is engaged in vaccination and health screening programs. On the agenda are more civic-military projects.

The first dividend of these efforts was the June 13 death of Medellín Cartel lieutenant John Jairo Tascon Arias in a Medellín fire-fight with the Elite Police Corps. As the cartel's number five man, Tascon coordinated assassination squads and car-bombings.

Tascon's death, reportedly the result of tips from Medellín citizens, met with immediate cartel retaliation in the form of a 180-pound car-bomb outside the headquarters of the Elite Corps, in a busy shopping area of Medellín. At least 3 people were killed and 42 wounded in the blast, which also destroyed 3 buildings, badly damaged 25 stores, and wrecked 33 cars. On June 26, a 250-pound car-bomb was deactivated outside the Bolivarian University in west Medellín. Three days later, another car-bombing in front of a Medellín police station killed 11 and wounded 30, leaving a crater 5 feet deep and 11 feet wide. On July 4, a car-bomb targeting a military convoy was deactivated on the Medellín-Bogota highway. It contained nearly 900 kilos of dynamite.

While this war goes on, a different

kind of war is being fought out among Colombia's political elites. The newly elected mayor of Medellín, Omar Flores Velez, is blaming poverty, unemployment, and indifference—rather than the cartel—for the violence in his city. Flores, like his predecessor Juan Gómez Martínez, is an advocate of holding "peace dialogues" with the drug traffickers, aimed at granting them a government-sanctioned amnesty.

Flores's sociological pitch for compassion for the cartel butchers was answered on July 4 by former Interior Minister Carlos Lemos Simmonds in the daily *El Tiempo*. Lemos was forced to resign his post earlier this year, after causing a scandal with his charges that "certain sectors" of the government of President Virgilio Barco had effectively abandoned the war against the cartels. Lemos indicted Flores and others who say, "Those who assassinate in cold blood, set bombs, kidnap or extort . . . are not responsible for anything. Blind instruments of historic fate, of class conflict, and of the aberrations of capitalism, should not be punished but understood. It is society which should be severely punished, and even condemned to death."

This line of thinking, said Lemos, stems from the infection of "positivism and Marxism, [which] did away with the principle of individual responsibility. No one is held guilty for his actions. The hand of the assassin or the guerrilla who murders his hostage . . . is guided by circumstances, the environment, one's surroundings, the law of social causality, one's fellow man. . . . The worst criminal is in reality a misfit, a martyr, a potential innocent. One must not judge him, but pardon him." In effect, concluded Lemos, this line of argument is but a "cowardly pretext for leaving things just as they are."