

Andean Report by David Ramonet

Extradition battle heats up in Venezuela

The Venezuelan Labor Party is heading up the charge to get the narco Perafán extradited to the United States.

Congressman Walter Márquez, bishop of the so-called "Universal Christian Gnostic Church" in Venezuela, is demanding a judicial investigation of the circumstances under which suspected Colombian drug kingpin Justo Pastor Perafán (currently in a Venezuelan jail), was issued documents to enter Venezuela more than a year ago. By this means, Márquez hopes to get Perafán charged with some minor infraction in Venezuela, which would impede his extradition to the United States on drug-trafficking charges.

Perafán was the last of the big Colombian kingpins still at large, until his arrest on March 17 in San Cristóbal, in the state of Tachira bordering Colombia. His arrest resulted from meticulous intelligence collaboration between the Colombian police and Venezuelan National Guard. He was arrested leaving a barber shop, in a mall where he was notorious for his ostentatious spending and tipping, under an assumed name.

Perafán, his face changed by plastic surgery, was living on the outskirts of San Cristóbal, in a home purchased through local contact Humberto Santos Yasuca. All of the Venezuelan media stressed that he was living "on the road to Rubio," the hometown of former President Carlos Andrés Pérez (CAP), where television magnate Gustavo Cisneros Rendiles has erected a "CAP Museum."

According to journalist Andrés Martin, of the newspaper *2001*, Perafán launched his business activities in Venezuela by laundering money through "a powerful economic group

against which Fogade intervened." Fogade is the government's banking oversight agency, which was forced to take over a number of banks that went belly-up during 1994-95. It is widely known that the bankrupt Banco Latino (linked to CAP and the Gustavo and Ricardo Cisneros brothers) dominated the entire border area with Colombia, after absorbing nearly every regional bank. The bankruptcy of Latino was, in fact, preceded by a brilliant operation against money-laundering activities by the myriad exchange houses that operated in Tachira state, according to intelligence sources. That operation dried up the bank's liquidity virtually overnight.

U.S. Ambassador to Caracas John Maisto got in ahead of his Colombian colleague in registering an extradition request for Perafán, on drug-trafficking charges stemming from 1995. In Colombia, the kingpin is wanted only for illicit enrichment and use of false documents. There is well-founded fear that if sent to Colombia, he will be confined in a "five-star" prison, or even released right away. Venezuelan authorities now have Perafán's case before the Supreme Court, pending a ruling.

Márquez is moving rapidly, and has already managed to get the Domestic Policy Committee of the Chamber of Deputies to undertake an investigation on how Perafán obtained his Venezuelan residency papers. On April 23, Judge Mildred Camero revealed that Márquez had appeared before her to request, in the name of the Committee, that she garner evidence on how Perafán got his Venezuelan documents. Camero said she was un-

der a legal obligation to carry out the investigation, but warned that this could block the extradition process.

On April 28, Interior Minister Andueza stated that Márquez's call for an investigation has as its purpose, "not to investigate if [Perafán] has committed an irregularity, but rather to try to paralyze the case currently being pursued by the Supreme Court of Justice" to extradite him to the United States. Andueza reiterated his accusation before the Domestic Policy Committee, behind which Márquez hides.

Only days earlier, Channel 2 television had reported on the "open letter" to Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera, by Venezuelan Labor Party Chairman Alejandro Peña Esclusa, warning that "there are clear indications that, at this very moment, the international drug trade is mobilizing its political and financial machinery to prevent Perafán's extradition to the U.S."

On April 30, the newspapers *Ultimas Noticias* and *El Universal* reported on another statement by Peña, in which he said, "It is no accident that Congressman Walter Márquez seeks to block the extradition of narco Justo Pastor Perafán to the United States, as Minister José Guillermo Andueza correctly charged yesterday, since Márquez heads a satanic sect linked to the drug trade," the Universal Christian Gnostic Church, which bases itself on the sexual perversities of Samael Aun Weor, and which has just been banned in Ecuador.

In a press conference on May 6, Peña detailed Márquez's dirty history, stressing the role he played in eliminating CEJAP, an agency that coordinated military and police actions against narco-terrorism until 1989, when it was dissolved by CAP. Since then, kidnappings and attacks by Colombia's narco-terrorists against Venezuelan territory, have soared.