

Andean Report by Carlos Potes

Drugrunners' human rights campaign

A convicted murderer is being turned into a Colombian national hero . . . to protect the country's drug interests.

Courts in the U.S. gave a last-minute reprieve May 3 to Luis Carlos Arango, a Colombian cocaine trafficker sentenced to death in the electric chair for the brutal death and mutilation of another Colombian drugrunner in his apartment last year in Miami. Quite apart from the moral issues stirred up by the death penalty itself, which does not exist in Colombia, Arango's case has become a cause célèbre there, owing to a high-level propaganda campaign waged on his behalf.

Most notable is the recently created Movimiento Latino Nacional (MLN), which has paid for a series of double-page advertisements in several of Colombia's most important newspapers, arguing that the sentencing to death in the United States of a Colombian national violates elemental principles of sovereignty. The MLN goes on to say that the Colombian government should therefore abrogate existing extradition treaties with the United States, even though Arango was in Miami at the time of his arrest.

It is noteworthy that the Betancur government has recently extradited other Colombians wanted by U.S. justice for drug-related crimes—the first time in many years that existing extradition treaties have been put into effect.

The previous administration had refused to extradite Leandro Barozzi, a Red Brigades fugitive wanted by the Italian government for alleged involvement in the Aldo Moro assassination. The Colombian supreme court classified Barozzi, then residing in Cali and teaching at the Universidad del

Valle, as a political refugee, although he had never officially requested asylum from the Colombian government. The court's decision in effect institutionalized the country's status as a haven for terrorists and drugrunners from around the globe. However, now the Betancur government is determined to root out the drug and dirty money apparatus which is at the root of Colombia's financial collapse.

One of the founders of the MLN, Carlos Lehder, took to the pages of the national press a few months ago when word got out that the herbicide paraquat was being considered for use to exterminate huge marijuana plantations along the country's Atlantic coast. This was an "imperialist design" to undermine Colombia's preeminent position in the international drug markets, Lehder charged in a multimillion-peso advertising campaign, and would jeopardize the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of hard-working peasants. The country must legalize marijuana, he declaimed.

In a prior, equally expensive "public statement by a private citizen," Lehder had defended the paramilitary MAS (an acronym in Spanish for "Death To Kidnappers"), a right-wing death squad organized by the Colombian drug mafia, of which Lehder himself is suspected to be one of the founders. Outrage has been intense over a wave of executions of trade-union and political organizers during the past six months at the hands of the MAS.

The MAS first arose out of a fallout between the Colombian drug ma-

fia and the left-wing terrorist group M-19, whose drugs-for-arms relationship had been upset when Mexican authorities nabbed Colombian drug trafficker Lara Guillot en route to deliver arms to the M-19. In urgent need of liquidity for the acquisition of weapons elsewhere, the M-19 resorted to kidnapping for ransom members of wealthy families in the drug trade.

After a brief exchange of retaliatory executions on both sides, an apparent balance of power was achieved, and the MAS was retooled for the purpose of eliminating political "troublemakers" in the left and labor movements. When Betancur's attorney general issued a statement late last year exposing MAS links to active military officials, the MAS created a "front group" in the form of the MLN.

The MLN's influence appears to extend well into spheres of government, judging by statements made April 27 by Bernardo Guerra Serna, president of the Colombian Senate, asking the executive to intercede before the U.S. government on behalf of Arango's life; his arguments coincided in full with MLN's arguments against the extradition treaties.

Movimiento Latino has a very interesting program: nationalization of the banks and transportation, debt moratorium, and credit for development, all popular calls which have been advanced by President Betancur and his supporters. The organization's high-profile activities lend it a respectability that right-wing death squads can no longer count on in Colombia, and are typical of a pattern of "respectable, ultra-nationalist" organizations cropping up in Central America, as in the case of the CAUSA organization in Honduras, which influences the highest levels of government and is run by Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church.