

## Andean Report by Valerie Rush

### No to 'narco-tolerance'

*Venezuela's justice minister has taken off the gloves against high-level drug corruption.*

A fight has broken out inside Venezuela over whether widespread drug corruption in high places will continue to be tolerated. Speaking for the anti-drug faction is Justice Minister José Manzo González, whose keynote address to the Aug. 15-19 South American Conference on Public Security held in Caracas was a powerful call for crushing the drug trade and its terrorist counterpart.

That conference, at which police forces from across Ibero-America unanimously agreed that nothing less than a collaborative continent-wide war against the drug trade could hope to win, set the tone for the battle now unfolding in Venezuela.

The early August acquittal on drug charges of multi-millionaire businessman *Ciro Martínez Marquina*, along with five of eight others imprisoned in connection with a multi-million dollar cocaine bust linked to the *Francisco Ocando Paz* ring, set off a public furor over the evident corruption of the presiding judge. Justice Minister Manzo used the occasion to send a public letter to the Attorney General's office, in which he protested the sabotage of the government's anti-drug efforts. In his letter, published in the press nationally Aug. 16, Manzo demanded an immediate investigation of the affair, the assignment of a special attorney to the case, and recommended a change in venue of drug trials to avoid future such incidents. The judge's decision has since been appealed by the Attorney General's office.

Attention is especially focused on

the issue of corrupt judges because of the "provisional" release in Colombia of cocaine trafficker *Jorge Luis Ochoa* on Aug. 15. Ochoa, who had been sentenced to two years in jail for illegal smuggling of bulls, had posted bail and, as expected, disappeared for parts unknown. Ochoa is not only one of the most infamous of drug traffickers internationally, but has been named as one of the authors of the April 1984 assassination of Colombian Justice Minister *Rodrigo Lara Bonilla*. He is sought by U.S. authorities as a key link in the drug-smuggling chain that includes Nicaragua's Sandinista government.

In fact, judges across the continent have been targeted as a weak link in the fight against drugs by the international dope mafia. In Colombia, judges have been threatened, tortured, and murdered by the score to create a mafia-controlled environment in the courts. When enforcement of a U.S.-Colombia Extradition Treaty threatened to disrupt that controlled environment, the mafia sent in the narco-terrorist *M-19* to murder half the Supreme Court justices in last November's Justice Palace atrocity in Bogotá.

In Venezuela, the case of *Ciro Martínez Marquina* is hardly the first incident of such "narco-tolerance" among judges. In fact, the phrase "narco-complacency" appears regularly now in the national press of that country.

Just before issuing his public warning to Venezuela's judges that

they are being watched, Minister Manzo González had spoken to the Council of Generals of Venezuela's Superior War College of his resolve to "redouble and triple our efforts" against the drug mob and its allies, the national and international drug banks. Said Manzo González, "Anyone from a slum dweller to the most respected banker who launders the dollars coming from drug sales can participate in this crime."

The justice minister added, "We have never seen a banker with a gun in his hand assaulting a citizen; if that happened, I think it would be an exceptional case. . . . But there are many bankers, here and elsewhere in the world, who have agreements with the narcotics traffickers in which they get the revenue from cocaine sales as commissions; that is, they are part of the criminal apparatus and organization." Manzo was putting on notice those Venezuelans who believe that their white collars and Gucci shoes disguise their criminality.

It is well known that there is growing discontent within military and related law-enforcement circles inside Venezuela over the constant sabotage of their anti-drug efforts. The National Guard of Venezuela, described as the institution which "wages war in peacetime" against such enemies of the nation as the drug mafia and terrorism, has announced that, for the first time, they are uncovering substantial cultivation of drugs—marijuana and cocaine—on Venezuelan territory. Some 900 hectares of both drugs were recently uncovered in the *La Perija* region along the Venezuela-Colombia border, and the National Guard commander in the region, *Gen. Corredor Ruiz*, has asked for logistical support to patrol the 238,000 hectares of the mountain range, "which is being eyed by the international drug trade."