

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

One step forward, two steps back

Drug busts in Colombia are at an all-time high, but the narcos are walking free and profits were never better.

Colombia's anti-narcotics forces scored a number of stunning hits beginning June 9, with the joint military-police raid on a vast cocaine complex in Cundinamarca, the central province of which Bogota is the capital city. In addition to 10 modern refining laboratories, at least 200 hectares of coca plants were also discovered.

It was a shock to authorities, who thought coca cultivation was confined to the outlying jungle regions. A score or more of the 400 coca-pickers employed by the owners of the complex were captured in the raid, and at least 70 drug storage depots have been turned up as well.

Less than a week later, anti-narcotics police launched a six-day operation in the jungle region of Putumayo, near the Ecuadoran border, and discovered that entire villages were employed—Peruvian-style—in growing coca, covering at least 50,000 hectares with the illegal crop. In just the first two days, 31 laboratories for processing the coca were seized, along with more than half a ton of coca base—in each! Peasants claimed that because they weren't receiving a living wage for their traditional crops, they were forced to grow drugs to survive.

The uncovering of these huge chunks of the Colombian drug infrastructure notwithstanding, anti-drug forces in the country are finding their hands tied when it comes to follow-up. The Cundinamarca police commander in charge of the operation, Luis Alberto Quijano, complained bitterly that, because the National Drug Council

has banned use of herbicides against coca crops—under pressure of the ecology movement and a green-tinted health ministry—his men are being forced to manually uproot the crops—plant by plant. At the current rate, he estimates that it will take the equivalent of 3,000 men working for three months to eradicate the area.

No one is even willing to hazard a guess at the resources that would be required to destroy the Putumayo drug crops discovered, and the national police have already appealed to the drug council for authorization to spray glyphosate, the only herbicide that has proven effective against marijuana and coca.

Even more discouraging for anti-drug forces is the degree of penetration of the narcos into Colombian political circles. Recently named Justice Minister Edmundo López Gómez just resigned his post amid a flurry of charges and countercharges that he and his political rivals in the province of Cordoba are both linked to the drug trade. Executive member of the ruling Liberal Party Alberto Santofimio Botero has just demanded a national referendum to overturn the U.S.-Colombia Extradition Treaty. One national daily editorialized in response that such a move would eliminate the last legal weapon against the drug mob, since it is only fear of trial by the U.S. courts which has kept the narcos from total breakout.

Perhaps most discouraging of all is the sorry state of Colombia's judicial system, with magistrates literally cringing before the power of the drug

mafia. When the terrorized Supreme Court declared itself "incompetent" to pronounce on the validity of the standing Colombia-U.S. extradition treaty, the ball was thrown into the executive's court. The Council of State, a presidential advisory body on constitutional matters, demanded that the Supreme Court issue a finding, at which point the leading magistrates of the nation came up with a tied 12-12 vote. The search for an outside judge to break the tie has turned into tragedy-comedy, with three different choices declaring themselves "incompetent" to accept the responsibility.

In the meantime, President Barco has rejected U.S. extradition petitions on three of five wanted drug traffickers. One of the traffickers who thus escaped U.S. justice is Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, a top financier of the infamous "Medellín Cartel" of drug traffickers and a liaison between the drug mob and Project Democracy's American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD).

In 1984, Rodríguez Orejuela was busted in Spain, along with mafia chieftain Jorge Luis Ochoa, on drug-trafficking charges. Corrupt elements in the Spanish judicial system extradited the pair to Colombia, despite an earlier U.S. extradition petition against them, and Ochoa—considered one of the kingpins of the world's cocaine trade—was released on bail from a Colombian jail cell days later. He has since disappeared.

Rodríguez Orejuela remained in jail. His trial on drug charges, currently ongoing in the city of Cali, has been repeatedly sabotaged by the judge, who has restricted the introduction of U.S. evidence against the defendant. A petition by the Colombian Attorney General's office to force admission of the evidence has prompted the judge to take himself off the case entirely.