

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

The right to defense

As civilian authorities shrink before the narco-terrorist rampage, a military response becomes the only solution.

The deterioration of the Colombian justice system in the face of prolonged, concerted assault by armies of narco-terrorists has created a vacuum of authority inside this country, leaving a terrorized population bereft of the security that a functioning judiciary should provide. Into that vacuum has stepped the military, which understands that it takes an army to defeat an army.

With the overturning of the Colombia-U.S. extradition treaty by the courts earlier this year, Colombia was stripped of the single most effective legal weapon in its arsenal against narco-terrorism.

Since then, the courts have freed one of the world's leading drug traffickers, Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, revoked arrest warrants against the most infamous cocaine traffickers in the country, the heads of the "Medellín Cartel," and absolved them of complicity in the 1984 murder of the anti-drug Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, among many other murders.

In horror at these retreats, former Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González returned to Colombia Aug. 8 to warn the government to act before it is too late. Friend and successor to Lara Bonilla, Parejo González was made ambassador to Hungary by the Barco administration in order to place him beyond the reach of the vengeful drug mafia.

Yet, last year, Parejo was shot, and almost killed, on the streets of Budapest by a hired assassin.

Parejo said, on this first visit home: "We know that there exists a link between the arms traffickers and the powerful international organizations which run—worldwide, and also unfortunately within our own borders—the dirty drug trade. . . ."

"Our constitutions have begun to weaken through the corrupting effect of the drug-traffickers. There are reasons to be justifiably concerned for our future, if we don't perceive this truth, if we don't hasten to contain this phenomenon. . . . In this regard, the action of the government is inadequate."

The strategy of creating civilian militias under the sponsorship of the Colombian armed forces is now at the center of a fierce debate inside the country. Defense Minister Rafael Samudio Molina stated on July 25, "It is a natural principle. Everyone has the right to claim the legitimate right of self-defense, and if the communities organize themselves, one must view it from the point of view that they are protecting their goods. . . ."

When the Communist Party-run front group, the *Unión Patriótica* (UP), demanded Samudio's resignation, he answered: "I don't understand why the UP calls on the government to cease its operations, when what the people should be calling for is the demobilization of the FARC [communist-linked guerrillas], and that their members hand their weapons over to the government. . . ."

An emergency plan is reportedly being put together to better equip the

armed forces. General Samudio's comment was: "The idea is not to participate in an arms race, but to update the provisions of the armed forces, which are facing marked limitations in several areas." He was referring to the well-known fact that the narco-terrorists are much better armed than the military forces.

Following Samudio's defense of armed civilian units, a chorus of liberal protests surfaced in the media warning of "organized civil war" and "parallel armies." Presidential "peace adviser" Carlos Ossa Escobar, the man entrusted by President Barco with negotiating the guerrilla-military cease-fires and verifying their compliance, responded to the protests by saying that the armed self-defense groups "seek to avoid attacks by the guerrillas and criminals, and their weapons are legally procured." He said that these groups were known to the local army brigades, and "neither patrol, nor wear uniforms. . . . Everyone has the right to defend his home and hearth," he insisted.

The Catholic Church, the only institution aside from the military which has retained the authority to pronounce on such matters, has stepped into the fray as well. In the Aug. 9 issue of the magazine *El Catolicismo*, the Colombian Church editorialized: "When the forces of order and the representatives of the law are absent, it would be unjust for peasants, townspeople, or any other citizen to see all hope lost without remedy. . . ."

The editorial then comments sarcastically: "Neighbors in the fields and towns are not allowed to arm and defend themselves, and yet it is tolerated that the guerrillas, with all the privileges and advantages, condition their continued dialogue [with the government—ed.] and ever more threatening."