

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Narco-communism in Venezuela

The alliance of drug traffickers and Communists has never been more open than it now is in Venezuela.

Venezuelan Superior Court Judge Carlos Silva Garrido was arrested Sept. 16 by the political police DISIP, after it was learned that he had reversed an earlier court finding and released from jail seven convicted drug traffickers doing 15 years' time for cocaine possession.

Justice Minister Manzo González deplored the deed as "scandalous," and revealed that this was not an isolated case of corruption. He announced that he would shortly be presenting President Lusinchi with a memorandum from his office on at least 300-500 similarly corrupt judicial decisions made in the past six months.

Venezuelan criminal judge Jesus Petit Dacosta lamented Oct. 2 that judges were caught, Colombia-style, between lack of government protection and the death threats and bribery of the drug mob. "In my opinion, conditions do not currently exist to impart justice with impartiality on the question of drugs. . . . The government wants criminal judges to rubber-stamp police actions. . . . The most prudent among them have opted for refusal"—disqualification from the case.

Apart from the scandal of high-level corruption itself, this particular case has the potential to bare some of the political networks that protect and benefit from narcotics traffic in Venezuela.

An investigation of Judge Garrido's behavior, ordered by the presidency, the Interior Ministry, and the Justice Ministry, revealed that the freed traffickers, who included a lieutenant of Pablo Escobar Gaviria, undisputed head of the Colombia-based

"Medellín Cartel" of cocaine runners, had won their freedom with a payment of at least 10 million bolívares (approximately \$350,000) split between the judge and several court employees. The DISIP is currently operating on the assumption that the payment came directly from Pablo Escobar himself.

The individual who received and distributed the bribe was one Damaso Mendoza, a 38-year-old "history student" at the Central University of Venezuela, currently a fugitive from justice following a police raid on his apartment, where quantities of cocaine were found. Damaso Mendoza, it is revealed, has a long history of association with the radical left and with the Bandera Roja terrorist movement. At the time of the raid on his home, he was an active member of the narco-terrorist Venceremos gang.

A longtime associate of Mendoza in his extremist activities is one Adan Navas Nieves, who turns out to be a lawyer for the seven cocaine traffickers, and the man who visited the traffickers at their jail cell the night of their release. Navas, along with three fellow lawyers in the case, has since disappeared.

The biggest scandal, however, may prove to be the involvement of the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) in the sordid affair. DISIP sources report that PCV Congressman Raul Este had frequently accompanied lawyer Navas to the home of the corrupt judge, as well as to the traffickers' cell with the release order. According to Pedro Torres Agudo, chief of Venezuela's Technical Judi-

cial Police (PTJ), Este was photographed in the company of the traffickers before their capture, and Navas and Mendoza reportedly put the final touches on the bribery scheme at the national congress—where Navas served as legal adviser to the PCV congressional bloc!

PTJ official Leonel Avila Oliveros declared Sept. 25 that the police were in possession of substantial evidence on the Venezuelan left's links to the affair: "Lawyer Adan Navas appears to be the visible head of the plan, whom the drug traffickers looked to for the release of the seven narcos. Navas received money from the drug traffickers to violate the legal norms, and for that purpose he used his friends among the left."

The Venezuelan Communist Party responded to these revelations with a paid advertisement in the daily *Ultimas Noticias* of Oct. 1, which made no reference to Deputy Este, but insisted that the PCV "has and continues to categorically condemn the drug trade. . . . The police campaign is all lies and defamation."

The investigation of the entire affair is far from over, however, and more evidence could emerge to further implicate Venezuela's Communists.

What is clear is that their Colombian counterparts are already up to their necks. Exemplary is the case of Venezuela's Sierra de Perija, a mountainous territory bordering Colombia, which is a constant target of bloody cross-border attacks by the Colombia-based National Liberation Army (ELN). The ELN reportedly has a deal with coca and marijuana growers. The ELN protects them from the Venezuelan police and military. This same ELN has just entered into strategic alliance with the Communist Party-protected FARC, and three other narco-terrorist bands.