

Colombian government blames violence on narco-guerrilla feud

by Valerie Rush

Soviet irregular warfare in Ibero-America received a setback Nov. 13, when Colombian Justice Minister Enrique Low Murtra reported on a nationwide television and radio broadcast that one of the four murderers of Communist Party (PCC) leader Jaime Pardo Leal had been captured, and he had revealed that the \$11-million-contract assassination had been ordered by the Medellín Cartel of drug traffickers, and not by the “right-wing, militarist” armed forces, as the Communists have maintained.

With that stroke, the Barco government, which had been backed into a seemingly indefensible corner by the Communists, has retaken the high ground politically. The spotlight is now pointed at precisely the narco-terrorist combination that has been ravaging the nation.

The brutal Oct. 11 killing of Pardo Leal, a Communist Party executive committee member and president of the Communist electoral front known as the Patriotic Union (UP), was ordered, according to Minister Low Murtra, by the Medellín Cartel’s “number-five boss,” José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. Low Murtra’s hypothesis is that the killing stemmed from “economic differences” between the cartel and the Moscow-run FARC guerrillas. In short, a “falling-out among thieves.”

‘No honor among thieves’

Colombian press in the days following the revelation were suddenly filled with “icebox” stories describing how the narco-guerrilla feud evolved. A columnist for the daily *El Tiempo* reported Nov. 14, “In certain regions, the interests [of the drug-runners and the guerrillas] coincide. The guerrillas protect coca crops. The mafia pays them. . . . It is a pragmatic alliance, but not an eternal one. And it now appears to be in crisis.”

One scenario offered by *El Tiempo* is that several years ago, three cocaine families (Plata, Córtez, and Tolosa) tried to set up shop in FARC-controlled territory without paying protection money; the FARC raided one of their cocaine laboratories and stole \$500,000 and 280 kilos of coca. The traffickers responded by murdering an elected representative

of the UP, Octavio Vargas Acosta. The FARC retaliated by killing Hugo Plata Cabeza, of the Plata mafia family in Meta province.

A second scenario was put forth by Liberal Party politician Iván Marulanda, who told the *Washington Post* on Nov. 14 that the drug traffickers see their extensive land holdings in rural Colombia threatened by the rising influence of the UP, which the *Post* describes as “the most successful leftist party in Colombian history.” UP and FARC efforts to “unionize” the thousands of poor families who grow coca for the traffickers have “stepped on a few toes,” said *El Tiempo*.

Whatever the actual chronology of events, the narco-guerrilla feud has caused a dramatic escalation in killings across the country. The deaths of hundreds of UPers over the past nine months had given the Communists a pretext to garner political capital by denouncing a military-sponsored “dirty war” against them. The killing of UP head Pardo Leal in front of his family—the “final straw”—triggered a wave of sympathy within Colombia’s otherwise anti-Communist population, which enabled the Communists to take the offensive. The UP demanded the “civilianization” of the country’s defense ministry, national police, and intelligence services; the Moscow-linked Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinating Group—the recently created umbrella group of terrorist armies—demanded the opening of “dialogue” with the government, which the Church endorsed with an offer of mediation. A number of anti-terrorist generals targeted by the Communists were ousted in an unscheduled personnel shuffle ordered by the government.

Worst of all, the conditions were being created for a significant UP showing in the March 1988 mayoral elections. A Communist victory, according to political observers, would be viewed as intolerable by the Colombian Armed Forces, and might ultimately pave the way for a military coup. As *EIR* has previously reported, this scenario is precisely Moscow’s design; a right-wing coup would turn today’s terrorist bands—overnight—into a mass-based resistance movement, thereby extending the chaos of Central America down into the Andes.

The enemy is down, but not out

The narco-terrorist alliance has by no means been shattered. The Guerrilla Coordinating Group has yet to expel the Quintín Lamé Brigade, founded and funded by cocaine king Carlos Lehder Rivas, from its midst. It also has yet to pronounce in favor of extradition of drug criminals, or against the drug trade. A media interview with the M-19 leader who headed up a recent commando assault by the terrorist MRTA in Peru, revealed that the alliance is still pursued, where convenient. Said the guerrilla chief, "We know that united we work better, but the drug traffickers are not indispensable to us."

The Colombian press of Nov. 14 reported that the country's intelligence services had just uncovered a plot to assassinate the chief of the DAS (security police) and the head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in Colombia. According to high-level sources, a meeting sponsored by the Medellín Cartel had been held just two weeks earlier, attended by representatives of the M-19, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), and the Ricardo Franco Front, a split-off from the FARC. At that meeting, the mafia spokesmen committed themselves to paying—in money and weapons—for a "political hit" by the guerrillas against the two anti-drug officials.

Although the sources claim that the deal failed to be concretized at the meeting, activity pointing to the plot's implementation has since been identified.

The DAS and DEA chiefs are not the only ones targeted by the Medellín Cartel. Immediately following his national television address on the murder of Pardo Leal, Justice Minister Low Murtra began to receive death threats from the mob. An official visit by the minister to the city of Medellín was cancelled out of fear for his life.

Although only in his post a short time, Justice Minister Low Murtra has picked up the mantle left by his predecessor, the martyred Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. Lara Bonilla was justice minister from 1982 through 1984, and was dedicated not only to exposing the high-level connections between the drug traffickers and political and financial circles in the country, but also to full implementation of the U.S.-Colombian extradition treaty. He was murdered by mafia assassins on April 30, 1984, but the backlash to that assassination gave then President Betancur the political muscle to force through numerous extraditions of drug traffickers wanted in the United States.

The last "big fish" of the drug underworld to be delivered to American justice under that treaty was Carlos Lehder Rivas, captured in February of this year and currently standing trial in Jacksonville, Florida on a host of charges that could add up to life imprisonment. Other "big fish," like Pablo Escobar and Jorge Luis Ochoa, have been allowed to slip through the net, the result of the overturning of the Colombian-U.S. extradition treaty by a terrorized Supreme Court earlier this year.

In the interview, entitled, "The government wants to

continue extraditing," Low Murtra offered several different options available to the Barco government for reviving an extradition treaty with the United States, which he said "cannot be unilaterally broken," a reference to the Supreme Court decision.

That same week, the wife of Alfonso Patiño Roselli, one of the 12 Supreme Court magistrates murdered in the M-19 assault on the Colombian Justice Palace two years ago, revealed to the press the presentation her husband was to have made the day after the siege, in which he argued that the fate of a public treaty, such as the Colombia-U.S. extradition treaty, could not be decided in the courts and was instead the purview of the Executive.

In his interview, Justice Minister Low Murtra insisted that the Justice Palace holocaust was a clear example of narco-guerrilla collaboration to terrorize the court into surrendering to the mob. In the process, honorable men like Patiño were eliminated. In the interview, Low Murtra pre-saged his later nationwide broadcast by asserting that the violence wracking the nation came from "those who handle gigantic sums of money, more than the ministries themselves." He rejected the Communist charges that "paramilitary" squads were behind the killings, saying, "I don't like the word paramilitary, because it is a distortion. I have immense respect for the Armed Forces. To speak of 'paramilitary' is to equate the military with armed bandits."

The 'narco-políticos' return

Low Murtra's intervention on the thorny extradition question was especially timely, given the resurfacing of a faction pushing acceptance of a 1984 mafia offer to pay the national debt in exchange for amnesty. The former attorney general of Colombia, Carlos Jiménez Gómez, who stunned the nation in 1984 by holding unauthorized negotiating sessions with the Medellín Cartel leadership concerning their offer, told the daily *El Mundo* Nov. 2, "We should have talked with the narcos. . . . I believe it was an enormous error to have wasted the opportunity."

Equally outrageous was the public proposal by the influential Medellín-based Liberal Party's Sen. Bernardo Guerra Serna, that the government open up a "dialogue" with the narcos. He noted the vast resources the drug traffickers appear willing to share with a lenient administration.

But most shameless of all was a forum, sponsored by the pro-drug daily *El Tiempo*, on how to resolve the crisis in Colombia. The forum heard economist Victor Renán Barco detail the vast resources at the command of the drug mafia, and particularly their extensive investments in rural land and infrastructure as their "symbol of power." Renán Barco concluded his presentation by noting that, "because of the confidence inspired by the court's attitude toward the extradition treaty, they are investing [in the country]. It is also worth noting that they are terribly anti-Communist and excessively nationalistic, in their way."