

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

A military war against drugs?

The Colombian government's blind-sided approach to fighting drugs has forced the military to the fore.

A communiqué released by the Colombian Air Force on March 2 revealed that an illegally registered Aerocommander airplane owned by the Medellín Cartel of drug traffickers was seized by officials after its discovery at an airport in the city of Pereira. So highly sophisticated was the craft, including its own onboard computer, that a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) pilot was brought in to fly the plane back to a military airbase in Bogotá.

The drama heightened on March 1, when two individuals disguised as Air Force officials entered the base, boarded the plane, and flew it out of custody before they could be identified. In the past, such a story would have ended here. But the Colombian military has apparently decided to draw the line against such impunity. This time, Air Force planes were sent in hot pursuit after the fugitive Aerocommander.

An attempt by the drug traffickers to land the craft on an airstrip inside the estate of Medellín Cartel chieftain Pablo Escobar was foiled, when the Air Force planes circled overhead, strafing the strip and the craft and ultimately destroying it. A second Aerocommander on Escobar's property was also destroyed, but it is not yet clear whether by the Air Force or by the mafia itself.

There were several casualties among Escobar's personnel, and at least 50 were arrested, among them those suspected of having stolen the airplane. On the estate itself was found a machine capable of manufacturing counterfeit registrations for airplanes.

Although Escobar himself is a fugitive from justice, his properties are protected from confiscation by Colombian law. Despite periodic raids on the vast estate, it is always returned to the hands of Escobar's employed "caretakers" and their operations.

According to the Air Force communiqué, the captured airplane's computer contained the coordinates for private smuggling airstrips throughout Colombia. By noting that the Aerocommander also possessed the capability of making *non-stop* contraband flights, including low-visibility ones, to anywhere in Ibero-America and the United States, the communiqué also suggested that similar coordinates existed in the computer program for smugglers' landing sites continentally.

The military's forceful response to the brazen behavior of the traffickers has drawn the outrage of the godfather himself. In a letter sent "from clandestinity" to the major Colombian media March 3, Escobar protested that the Aerocommander had not landed on his property, but that its pursuit was used as an excuse to shoot up his estate. He further charged that among the casualties were "simple domestics and peasants from the region." He vowed, "We will immediately sue, and will not rest until those miserable official assassins . . . pay with the full rigor of justice for such an abominable crime." Escobar is responsible for ordering the assassinations of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, newspaperman Guillermo Cano, Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyos, and hundreds of others.

The military command has taken the point politically, as well. In an interview with the daily *El Tiempo* of March 6, Defense Minister Gen. Rafael Samudio Molina and Armed Forces Commander Gen. Manuel Guerrero Paz stressed the need for a professional army, made up of educated men "with a degree, hopefully an engineer or an economist of 24 years of age. A man with culture thinks more, has better criteria, knows how to handle weapons better." General Guerrero Paz, in particular, noted the lack of sophisticated weaponry, the squandering of military capability on purely police duties, and the lack of appropriate legal instruments to advance their efforts against narco-terrorism.

The daily *El Espectador*, known for its anti-drug sentiments, editorialized March 6 on the Air Force incident, noting that "where power is truly exercised with the responsibilities it bears, acts of government have already been carried out which official indolence silently refuses to assume." The newspaper's editors referred angrily to Escobar's threat to sue, writing that "it is the nation, the Colombian people, humanity, which should sue for restitution against the [mafia's] crimes, be they for known homicides or for the moral degeneration to which large sectors of society have been brought."

The next potential escalation in the military's move against narco-terrorism could be on March 30, when the operating licenses for all private security agencies in Colombia will simultaneously come up for review—by the defense ministry. It is widely reported that a careful scrutiny of applicants will be conducted to identify the vast numbers of such agencies set up as legal fronts for the private armies of the narcotics mafia.