

## Andean Report by Valerie Rush

### Criminals or 'belligerents'?

*Colombia's military wants total war on the drug mafia, but the government is considering a "scorched surrender."*

Colombia's political class is currently in the throes of an insane debate over whether to apply the Geneva Convention to the narco-terrorist plague that is ravaging that nation. Former President Alfonso López Michelsen, known as the political "godfather" of the cocaine-trafficking Medellín Cartel, caused an instant sensation when, in a recent address to U.S. political scientists, he suggested that the Barco government was fostering serious confusion among the Colombian population by waffling between treating the guerrillas as "common criminals" and, alternately, as wartime belligerents.

López argued that when the Barco government tacitly endorsed negotiations with the M-19 kidnapers of former presidential candidate Alvaro Gómez Hurtado to secure his release, what it did was "abandon their treatment as criminals, and grant them the status of a military organization" in a period of civil warfare. He pointed out, too, that the Colombian "Catholic Church itself offers to mediate among conflicting forces, granting equal treatment to the legitimate government and to its subversive adversaries." López personally urged such an approach be adopted by the Colombian government.

While numerous communist mouthpieces around the country leaped to back López's thesis, one newspaper columnist hit the nail on the head when he observed Aug. 5 that the "provocative" former President would have the strictures of the international Geneva Convention imposed on Colombia's battle against the criminal under-

world, "tying the hands of the government and armed forces." Concluded *El Espectador* columnist Rodrigo Rivera Salazar, "For whom is former President López working this time?"

The Colombian military has absolutely rejected any army participation in the "peace dialogue" the narco-guerrillas hope to rope the Barco government into, and then warns that the guerrillas will use the "dialogue," as in the past, to build up their forces and forge "independent terrorist republics" on Colombian territory.

Asked to comment on the López Michelsen proposal, Defense Minister Rafael Samudio Molina told the Congress Aug. 3, "Common crimes like rebellion are defined clearly in the penal code as punishable acts." Minister Samudio had been summoned to appear before Congress to answer an interrogation on the military's response to the November 1985 narco-terrorist seizure of Colombia's Justice Palace. The interrogators were counseled by lawyer Juan Manuel López Caballero, son of Alfonso López Michelsen.

When, despite his Defense Ministry's warnings, President Barco announced his willingness to meet with the self-appointed "commissioners" of the dialogue charade and discuss an agenda for "pacification" of the country—including possible safe-conduct for the guerrilla chieftains to attend public "dialogue" sessions—the military made public a document captured in 1985 from the principal guerrilla movement in the country, the Moscow-run FARC, which elaborates a well-defined plan to seize power in

the country by 1992.

According to the document, the FARC strategy is to seize control of the eastern mountain range (one of three splitting Colombia top to bottom) and the sparsely populated Eastern Plains beyond them, then to build up an army of 120,000 with the intention of establishing a provisional guerrilla government and isolating the capital city of Bogotá. The plan would utilize the hundreds of elected officials of the Communist Party's front group, the Patriotic Union, from around the country, as well as guerrillas infiltrated into the military and police forces.

Tactics ranging from national strikes, kidnappings and assassinations, car-bombings, and assaults on isolated army patrols and barracks are detailed. In the event of failure, says the document, the jungle and mountain regions under guerrilla control would offer the ideal protection for retreat, retrenchment, and permanent guerrilla warfare.

As loud as the Armed Forces are talking, President Barco appears unable—or unwilling—to listen. In a presentation to a military ceremony celebrating the 169th anniversary of the founding of the Colombian Army, Barco said it was "unacceptable" to place criminals and subversives on the same plane. He said his government would not renounce its policy of generosity, and argued for "national reconciliation" instead of "options that limit us to a strategy of either scorched earth or political surrender."

President Barco is in for a rude surprise, however. Late reports are that the "commissioners" of the so-called peace process the President now appears willing to embrace are urging inclusion of the country's murderous drug-trafficking cartel in their dialogue.