

Andean Report by Javier Almario

Colombia responds to terror

President Barco backs military, decrees life imprisonment for narco-terrorists, in a major policy reversal.

After the Nov. 22 near-miss assassination attempt against Colombian Defense Minister Gen. Manuel Jaime Guerrero Paz, President Barco went on national television to decree "a state of siege to establish the punishment of life imprisonment for the authors of massacres and homicides committed in terrorist assaults against officials and leaders." He further authorized the re-supplying of the Armed Forces, to ready them for battle status.

The President's abrupt change in line, from a policy of "dialogue" and virtual coexistence with Soviet-sponsored irregular warfare troops, to one of long-overdue wartime measures, was especially urgent in view of the dramatic renewal of narco-terrorist violence in the country. Considered the most experienced irregular warfare force in Ibero-America, the Colombian narco-guerrillas are the spearhead of Soviet strategy for seizing control of the geopolitically strategic "Andean Spine." Thus, the importance of President Barco's speech for all of Ibero-America.

Several retired Colombian generals had recently expressed their fury that while guerrilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) had the political support of the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) and the Patriotic Union (UP), the Armed Forces had been left virtually bereft of the support of the country's traditional political parties and of the government itself, because of the announced policy of pursuing

"dialogue" instead of confrontation with subversion.

Among the measures which President Barco announced in his Nov. 25 speech was "a mechanism to expedite the apprehension and jailing of persons against whom there is serious evidence of their assaults on the public peace." He also reported to the nation that a meeting of the top military command "has agreed to carry out an emergency plan for increasing the troop strength of the military forces and military police. . . . We are going to demonstrate that we are not a terrorized and silenced majority, but a vibrant nation that does not surrender to terrorism."

The next day, on Nov. 26, the government's long-standing truce with the FARC not to touch its headquarters, known as the Green House, was shattered when combined Army/Air Force troops assaulted the security detachment charged with guarding the FARC command. A vast arsenal was seized. At the same time, Army Commander Gen. Nelson Mejía Henao announced that from here on in, the Army would no longer wait for the guerrillas to ambush them, but would take first-strike action against known terrorist concentrations. "We have to win, and that's it," he said.

In his speech, Barco made a point of warning the Communists and the UP, the latter created as a legal front for the FARC, that it would no longer be permitted for "someone to still have the audacity to say that terrorism or

violence are the path for change or for the reforms most needed by the country."

Barco was specifically referring to the fact that for its upcoming year-end congress, the PCC has already announced plans to present its thesis that "the combination of all forms of struggle," presumably including armed struggle, are permitted. In documents already in circulation for discussion at that congress, the PCC states that it will no longer be limited to "legalized mass action, whose range is increasingly more restricted. . . . We should take what might be called informal actions."

That the Communists are prepared to move openly into violent action was made clear by their first-ever acknowledgement of their links to such "armed branches" as the FARC: "Armed struggle has gone through different phases of development. In the last period, it has acquired much greater political importance. . . . The openness to mass action, the conquest of new political space, and the left's escape from outcast status were all decisively influenced by the . . . armed movement and its impact on political life and the social movement of the working class."

Barco's response to the Communists was his strongest ever: "It is completely inadmissible for one to argue that progress and well-being can be won through violence." Barco also addressed those pro-terrorist forces who would straitjacket the government with pious "human rights" appeals, such as Amnesty International, which has repeatedly accused the government and military of running a "dirty war" against the citizenry: "We are not going to allow, under the fallacious pretext of purifying our democratic credentials, that society and its institutions be left defenseless."