Colombia's drug war dead and buried

by Andrea Olivieri

U.S. refusal to materially back Colombia's decade-long war against the cocaine cartels has led to a predictable outcome: That war has now been formally called off. In its place, Colombians are being offered a U.S.-modeled "war on crime," complete with the same plea-bargaining arrangements that have turned the U.S. justice system into a mockery.

On Sept. 5, in a major policy address to the nation, President César Gaviria Trujillo unveiled a new legislative decree intended to implement his thesis that there is a distinction between narco-terrorism and drug trafficking. The decree offers drug traffickers the option of trial by Colombian courts and reduction of sentence, in exchange for surrender to and cooperation with the authorities. The decree, Gaviria argued, is intended to "smash and eradicate terrorism as quickly as possible"—by eliminating the threat of extradition to the United States, the single most effective weapon heretofore employed in the war against the cartels. The war against drug trafficking, to Gaviria's way of thinking, is best left to the international arena.

Observers have noted that Gaviria's primary impulse in sponsoring the decree is to protect the ravaged Colombian state from further erosion by uncontrolled narco-terrorism. Anti-narcotics experts in Colombia fear, however, that the decree will only confirm to the cartels that "terrorism pays." If rampant narco-terrorism won us this much, the traffickers may reason, selective terrorism may wrest still futher concessions.

Fabio Ochoa, the arrogant patriarch of the Ochoa cocaine-trafficking clan, has already told an interviewer from the Caracól radio chain in Colombia that the decree was "a step in the right direction," but that it needed to "ripen a little." He said his sons aren't fools, and would never surrender without guarantees.

Armed Forces the sticking point

It has been widely admitted, including by the Colombian government itself, that the cartel chieftains would never accept the government's plea-bargaining offer, as presently constituted. However, there is every likelihood that the traffickers will play the government for a sucker, engaging it in endless negotiations while rebuilding the vast logistical and infrastructure networks that have been severely damaged by joint police-military anti-narcotics operations in past months.

The role of the Colombian Armed Forces will likely be the number one item in any such negotiations. The argument that a winding-down of Colombia's war on drugs makes the Armed Forces expendable has long been promoted by advocates of drug legalization both inside Colombia and in the United States. It is no accident that the pro-legalization Inter-American Dialogue has made a crusade out of its argument that Ibero-America's militaries are "political," "corrupt," and "over-extended," and should be dismantled.

It can thus be expected that the Colombian Armed Forces, which have taken the point in every successful operation against the cartels, will come under intensified attack both from the traffickers and their political allies. In parallel with the Gaviria government's decision to "demilitarize" such cartel strongholds as Medellín, the "dirty war" charges of the human rights lobbies have already begun to escalate. Also, reduction of the military forces is at the top of the agenda of such "reformed" narco-terrorists as the M-19 (now part of the Gaviria government), and pro-drug opposition forces are pushing for "military reform" to be taken up at an upcoming Constituent Assembly.

Empty promises

President Gaviria's unmistakeable election mandate was to prosecute—and win—the war on drugs begun by his predecessor, Virgilio Barco. He has abandoned that war. To be fair, Gaviria was left with little choice in the matter. As he himself declared during his pre-inauguration visit to Washington, D.C. earlier this year, Colombia has spent over $1 billion and sacrificed thousands of lives to fight a "unilateral war" against an international enemy, the drug trade. Without resources from abroad, in the form of war matériel, trade concessions, and financial backing, the indebted Ibero-American nation is incapable of waging indefinite war against the cartels without endangering its very existence.

The Bush administration sent Gaviria home with empty promises and empty pockets, just as it had done to Barco. On Oct. 20, 1989, in the heat of the Barco-ordered offensive against the Medellín Cartel, the *Washington Times* was already citing U.S. officials admitting that Barco's successor was "more likely to strike some sort of deal with the drug traffickers rather than continue to make the necessary sacrifices."

Although a U.S. contingency plan for such an eventuality had yet to be formulated, said the article, "Some sources said the U.S. would accept Colombian proposals for plea bargaining in specific cases or partial amnesties, if these furthered the goal of stopping the shipments of drugs to the U.S. . . ."

A U.S. contingency plan, it now appears, has existed for some time, and President Gaviria has been sold a strategy coherent with Bush's own so-called "war on drugs"—namely, cutting the flow of cocaine by 50% over the next 10 3years. Or, was it cutting it by 10% over the next 50 years?