

Colombia's Samper faces decertification

by Andrea Olivieri

The question of whether the Colombian government of President Ernesto Samper Pizano will be certified by the Clinton administration as "a fully cooperating partner in the war on drugs," moved to the front burner, after the Cali Cartel's number-three drug lord, José Santacruz Londoño, escaped from La Picota prison in Bogotá on Jan. 11. All eyes are now on what Washington's policy toward the Samper government will be.

Notwithstanding volumes of evidence, both in the public and private domain, of the narco-corruption of the Colombian government, reaching all the way up to Samper himself, that government was certified by the United States on a "national interest waiver" last March, on the condition that the Cali drug cartel would be dismantled, its leaders put behind bars for a long time, its assets seized, and anti-drug legislation strengthened. The rapid-fire arrest of six of the seven top cartel bosses in the succeeding months, confirmed that the traffickers were never out of the reach of the law, and that only the motivation to enforce the law had been lacking.

Despite the arrests, however, the Samper government has dragged its feet on reforming the legal system, so essential to enforcing serious prison sentences and busting up the financial, legal, and business networks that make up the cartel's machinery. Charges that the cartel bosses were conducting their dirty business from their jail cells have repeatedly surfaced in the media. And there have been many instances of backpedaling on enforcing what minimal anti-drug legislation does exist on the books, prompting repeated "or else" warnings from the United States.

A self-mandated "investigation" of Samper by the bought-and-paid-for congressional "Accusations Committee," which led to the finding of "lack of evidence," did not sit well with Clinton administration hard-liners such as Assistant Secretary of State for Narcotics Affairs Robert Gelbard, who publicly declared the "investigation" unserious, thereby triggering a wave of decertification rumors. But with six cartel bosses behind bars, Samper apparently felt he could weather any storm. The escape of Santacruz Londoño knocked that hope into a cocked hat.

U.S. reaction to the Santacruz escape has been uniformly furious. In an strongly worded statement, the State Depart-

ment charged, "The escape of Santacruz Londoño is just another example of the power of narco-corruption in Colombia." The U.S. Embassy in Bogotá declared that the escape "will hurt Colombia internationally, especially in the Congress of the United States and with the Executive. . . . This escape will have some effect on the certification process." The Drug Enforcement Administration's Thomas Constantine revealed that he had warned the Colombian authorities last November that jail security was inadequate to hold the cartel bosses, apparently to no avail. U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette said U.S. policy was now to "insist" on restoring extradition between the two nations.

Cartel says 'no' to extradition

The escape of Santacruz Londoño—not unlike the 1992 jailbreak of his more famous predecessor, the late Medellín Cartel boss Pablo Escobar—offered proof positive of rampant corruption, from the prison system on up. According to press reports, Santacruz paid off prison guards, and possibly officials of the Colombian Attorney General's office and others, to gain entrance to an "interrogation room" with access to a parking garage used by prosecutors to park their unguarded armored cars. Santacruz was whisked out of the prison in just such a car, or in a look-alike vehicle, during an unscheduled "interrogation" session.

In a letter to the Colombian media and distributed as a leaflet following his escape, Santacruz charged that he fled jail because the U.S. and Colombian governments were not living up to their part of the bargain with the Cali Cartel. In a Jan. 13 open letter sent to the press, and addressed to Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdivieso, Santacruz made it clear that it was the renewed threat of extradition, under U.S. pressure, that had prompted his flight.

While outlining certain "favorable conditions" under which he would consider surrendering (including residence at the Palmira prison near his hometown of Cali, whose warden was assassinated that same day), Santacruz added that a Medellín-style holocaust of narco-terror would be launched if Samper continued to yield to pressure from the United States: "We don't want to cause violent actions like those used by Pablo Escobar, which cost the lives of thousands of innocents, but neither will we allow more abuses, or the use of our criminal cases as conditionalities in political and trade relations between Colombia and the U.S."

Clearly more afraid of Santacruz's assassin teams than of the Clinton administration, Samper has insisted that reviving extradition "is not on my government's agenda." It is now Clinton's move. Decertification of the Samper regime would not only deprive the country of U.S. financial aid and preferential trade arrangements, but would mean a U.S. veto of any loan credits from a multilateral agency in which the U.S. has membership. The stigma of being a narco-dictatorship has not yet brought Samper's corrupt reign to an end, but shutting down its financial pipeline may.