

# Anti-Samper movement grows in Colombia

by Javier Almario

Despite narco-President Ernesto Samper Pizano's stubborn will to stay in office, and despite the club which he has been using against his opponents from his position of power, a national movement is emerging to demand his resignation and the Prosecutor General's office is moving firmly ahead on its investigations of Samper's corrupt entourage.

First, Pope John Paul II implicitly backed the request of the Colombian Catholic Church for President Samper to resign in order to begin freeing the nation from the evil influence of drug trafficking. "Your country is morally sick," said the pope at an audience with Msgr. Pedro Rubiano Sáez, archbishop of Bogotá and president of the Bishops Conference, through whom the pope urged the Colombian Church to "assume without delay a renewed effort of moral orientation." "In the face of the spread of corrupt, unjust, and violent behavior, which undermines the very foundations of human coexistence, the moral question is especially urgent," remarked the pontiff.

Second, reeling from the initial impact of U.S. "decertification" (on March 1, the State Department removed the Colombian government's certification as a country cooperating in the fight against drugs) and the threat of the loss of trade privileges in the U.S. market and other disciplinary actions by the Clinton administration, which hit them in the pocketbook, the Fraternal Council of Businessmen, representing almost all sectors of productive industry, trade, and banking, timidly asked for President Ernesto Samper to step down so that the economy could get back into gear and the United States would eventually "recertify" Colombia.

## Off to the slammer

Meanwhile, one of Samper's main legal defenders, Attorney General Orlando Vásquez Velásquez, has been under arrest since May 3 on order of the Prosecutor General's office. Vásquez's failed campaign to get reelected as a pro-Samper senator was financed by drug monies. Further, Vásquez did his utmost to sabotage the investigations of the Prosecutor General's office and tried a legal ruse to get Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdivieso Sarmiento sacked, thus ridding Samper of the nuisance of an honest prosecutor. Utilizing the Attorney General's function of oversight and sanction of public employees, Vásquez "ordered" Valdivieso

to withdraw over alleged irregularities supposedly committed five years ago when he was education minister. Now, Vásquez himself has been suspended from office on charges of obstruction of justice, which will be added to the bill of indictment by the Prosecutor General's office.

On May 11, the Prosecutor General is expected to order the arrest of three of Samper's cabinet ministers for their role in procuring funds from the narcotics trade to finance the Presidential campaign that brought Samper to power. They are Rodrigo Pardo García Peña, foreign minister; Juan Manuel Turbay, communications minister; and Horacio Serpa Uribe, interior minister, considered Samper's "left-hand man" and top political defender. Serpa runs the national intelligence service, the umbrella for several state security organizations, and is also known as an ally of the narco-terrorist National Liberation Army (ELN). Already in jail are seven Samper-allied congressmen, one ex-minister, two former officials of Samper's Presidential campaign, controller David Turbay, and the attorney general. In line to go to prison are another 15 congressmen, under investigation for drug-money offenses.

But Samper is ready to provoke civil war to stay in office. To silence the opposition, he has wielded not only state force but populist rhetoric. His government has tried to strip the church hierarchy of their right to speak out as Colombians on the situation in the country. He calls the businessmen "fascists" because, in his logic, when economic sectors participate in politics, they turn "corporativist," and he threatens to launch class war against them, using his supposed popular support. He also reminds them that the drug trade has infiltrated many economic activities.

Samper no longer dares to proclaim his innocence as he did in past months, when he would say that the drug money got into his campaign "behind his back." Now, he argues in his defense that no one in Colombia can cast the first stone because everyone has benefitted from drug money. If the drug trade is in the whole country, why not in his campaign? he asks. "We are all invaded by the drug traffic," said Samper during a May 7 televised interview. "You cannot say: Cut off the President's head to see if the drug traffic will stop infiltrating the banks, tourism, the various activities. . . . Let us not be hypocrites and Pharisees. The country has been tolerating drug trafficking."

During the same interview, Samper said that the solution to the political crisis is "for me to stay" in office. However, Samper can't walk even to the corner without being booed. At his last public speech, to the Banking Association's national convention in Cartagena, when Samper started to speak, a bunch of bankers left the conference room after booing the President. The rest of the audience walked out one by one, and each time one left, the ones outside sent up a roar to interrupt the President's speech. The police had to lock the doors to keep the room from emptying. In the end, only the Presidential entourage applauded.