

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Still playing footsie with terrorists

Colombia caved into a major demand of the nation's enemies—ceding military control of the Defense Ministry.

The Gaviria government of Colombia entered its third round of "peace talks" with the narco-terrorist Simón Bolívar National Guerrilla Coordinator (CNGSB), in Caracas, Venezuela on Sept. 4. Both sides voiced confidence that progress this time would be made. Indeed, "progress" had already been made, from the CNGSB's standpoint, before the talks even started, for without yielding to a single government demand—release of kidnap victims, termination of assaults on towns and energy and transport infrastructure, suspension of attacks on military and police posts, etc.—the subversives were granted their key demand: the ousting of the military from the Defense Ministry.

Colombia's half-century tradition of keeping a military man at the head of the Defense Ministry was shattered Aug. 22, when President César Gaviria forced the resignation of Gen. Oscar Botero Restrepo and replaced him with a civilian, Rafael Pardo Rueda, the presidential security adviser who was instrumental in negotiating a 1989 amnesty for M-19 narco-terrorists.

The circumstances of Botero's "resignation" were especially revealing. According to the Colombian weekly *Hoy por Hoy*, Gaviria had demanded that General Botero appoint a military officer to attend the new round of talks with the CNGSB. Botero refused, saying, "I could not permit an officer to be seated at the same table with our enemies, whom we have been fighting for the past 35 years." When Gaviria insisted, Botero said, "Not while I am minister!" and tendered his resignation. His civilian replacement was named

moments later.

Former Defense Minister Fernando Landazábal Reyes said, in an Aug. 23 interview with the daily *La Prensa*, "President César Gaviria's decision to name a civilian to the Defense Ministry is a mistake, a contradiction, one more concession to the guerrillas. . . . Colombia does not have the public order that would warrant relieving a military man of that charge. . . . We are in an internal war and that must be understood."

With news of Botero's ouster, the usual collection of communists, sociologists, and assorted fellow travelers stepped up their demands that Gaviria finish the job the mafia- and terrorist-dominated National Constituent Assembly began last July by shutting down Congress and emasculating the Supreme Court: the "democratization" and "demilitarization" of Colombia's police and armed forces.

Sociologist Francisco Leal Buitrago stated at a late August round-table at National University in Bogotá: "If the new constitution exchanges the principle of sovereignty for that of popular sovereignty, then we should also exchange the notion of national security for that of popular security." While Leal doesn't specify what "popular security" means, the term dovetails neatly with the long-standing demand of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), for incorporation of their narco-terrorist ranks into that of the Colombian Armed Forces. The FARC is the armed wing of the Colombian Communist Party, and the central force within the CNGSB.

While the Communist Party's newspaper *Voz* waxed ecstatic over the appointment of civilian Pardo Rueda to the defense post, an editorial insisted that the "purge of the Armed Forces was an important aspect to be addressed" at the Caracas talks. FARC second-in-command Alfonso Cano told the opening round at Caracas that "demilitarization of society and revision of the doctrine of national security" was now the CNGSB's number one demand.

While President Gaviria dreams about boosting his popularity with a cease-fire, the CNGSB has no such plan in mind. On the eve of the Caracas talks, the CNGSB's Francisco Galán told the daily *El Tiempo* that "naturally, the attacks will continue. One must understand that a confrontation is under way." It was revealed Aug. 29 that the CNGSB has been threatening to assassinate candidates for the Oct. 27 congressional elections who are unsympathetic to their cause. One Liberal Party candidate barely escaped an attempt, but his wife and three bodyguards were killed.

Although the CNGSB has repeatedly denied it is holding any kidnap victims for ransom, Venezuelan cattlemen who are being heavily victimized along the border region with Colombia have in fact been forced to organize self-defense squads. The Gaviria government has even prepared a list of Venezuelan kidnap victims in the hands of the CNGSB, to be submitted to its Venezuelan counterpart. The Venezuelan daily *Diario de Caracas* protested Aug. 26 that the Venezuelan government was hosting the CNGSB-Gaviria peace talks "for some unknown reason" despite the "35 kidnappings of Venezuelan agrarian producers perpetrated along our borders since the guerrillas were last here and made their insincere promises" to halt further assaults.