

Has the Narco-Terrorism Lobby Been Stymied in Colombia?

by Valerie Rush

Ecuadoran law enforcement officials moved in and arrested Ricardo Palmera on the streets of Quito on Jan. 2, after video surveillance tapes sent to their Colombian counterparts had confirmed that their quarry was indeed the infamous Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) commander “Simón Trinidad,” wanted in Colombia on multiple charges of murder and terrorism. One of the highest-ranking FARC leaders to be captured in decades of war against that narco-terrorist organization, Trinidad had also been one of the FARC’s most prominent negotiators during several years of futile “peace talks” with the previous Pastrana government in Colombia.

Trinidad’s capture is not just a timely strike against that criminal organization, but represents, as well, a strategic setback to the plans of those national and international financial interests, functioning as a virtual lobby for the narco-terrorists, which seek to foist an agenda of power-sharing talks with the FARC, and ultimately drug legalization, on the current Alvaro Uribe government. Notorious in this regard is the role of Wall Street bigwigs such as former New York Stock Exchange president Richard Grasso, who met with top FARC commanders in 1999 to discuss “joint investments.”

It is reliably reported that the Ecuadoran capture of Trinidad was the result of significant, behind-the-scenes coordination with Colombian and U.S. intelligence circles, who were interested in throwing a monkey-wrench into the negotiations and the drug legalization drive. Evidently, not everyone in Washington is on the “Grasso” track.

Reports already circulating in Bogotá are that foot-in-the-door negotiations for a prisoner/hostage exchange with the FARC, reluctantly agreed to by President Uribe under pressure from the human rights lobby and some of the hostages’

families, may now be dead in the water, as a result of the Trinidad arrest.

The Two Faces of ‘Trinidad’

The 53-year-old “Simón Trinidad” was born into a wealthy Colombian family from Cesar province. The product of privilege and a Harvard education, he worked as a bank manager and economics professor before joining up with the drug-dealing FARC cartel more than 20 years ago. Among other things, Trinidad is charged with the kidnapping and ultimate assassination of former Colombian Culture Minister Consuelo Araujo, during a botched kidnapping in September 2001. And in 2002, Trinidad reportedly led an armed raid on a town that was refusing to surrender to FARC blackmail, in which 119 men, women, and children burned to death when the church they took refuge in was blown up by FARC mortars.

Trinidad’s oligarchic veneer served him well while deploying as the FARC’s well-spoken representative abroad and negotiator at home, during the 1999-2002 years of President Pastrana’s infamous appeasement policy. His face often appeared in newspaper photos and television broadcasts covering the negotiations farce. During those years, Pastrana had granted the FARC a vast demilitarized zone in the country’s southern cocaine heartland in which to operate, while playing its game of on-again/off-again “peace talks” with the government. The protected “DMZ” enabled the FARC to pursue its cocaine and heroin trafficking while conducting a mass kidnapping and blackmail campaign and murderous ambushes of military and police outposts, all the while expanding its stranglehold over the Colombian countryside.

When Uribe was elected in 2002 as a hard-line “war on

terrorism” President, the population breathed a collective sigh of relief, and allowed itself to hope that the nation could be recovered from the drug lords. And yet, despite his successes in strengthening the nation’s defense forces, passing tough anti-terror legislation, and standing firm against the terrorists’ apologists in the human rights non-governmental organizations, the Harvard-trained Uribe’s embrace of the same neo-liberal economic policies that facilitated the rise of the drug trade and stripped the nation of its defenses against cartel predators like the FARC, has seriously weakened his 18-month-old Presidency.

In Fall 2003, Colombians went to the polls in a national referendum organized by Uribe, and trounced his government’s proposed series of draconian new austerity measures that were demanded by the International Monetary Fund—and the Bush Administration—as a condition of continued financial aid. President Uribe and his Interior Minister Fernando Londoño had foolishly thrown all their political capital into the fight for the IMF measures, and lost. Londoño, who had served as Uribe’s vital strong arm in the fight against narco-terrorism, was forced out of the government shortly thereafter.

Colombia’s Dirty Old Man

Uribe has come under growing pressure to drop his hard line against the FARC, and revisit the negotiating strategy that had proven such a disaster under Pastrana. Several former Colombian Presidents, led by the 90-year-old Alfonso López Michelsen, publicly called on Uribe to open negotiations for a humanitarian exchange of terrorists being held in prison for hostages being held by the FARC.

López Michelsen, a London-linked oligarch whose 1974-78 Presidency first opened the door to the drug trade by legalizing the laundering of drug dollars, never met a cartel he didn’t like, and the FARC is no exception. He has long been an advocate of drug legalization, and became known as “The Godfather” in 1984, when he stunned the nation by meeting personally with the fugitive heads of the Medellín Cartel, one week after they assassinated their nemesis, then Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. Although his efforts to negotiate an amnesty for the cartel druglords failed, it was not for lack of trying. In 1990, López again tried to negotiate a plea-bargain for the druglords, but ran into trouble when some of his colleagues were arrested by the military on charges of aiding and abetting narco-terrorism. One year later, López tried again, this time with the FARC-inspired Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinator, but once again, the taint of corruption doomed his efforts.

It is this creature who—exploiting Uribe’s political vulnerability in the aftermath of the referendum debacle, and with some major international arm-twisting from his banker cohorts—got himself named in December 2003 to a facilitating commission, to initiate prisoner-swap talks with the FARC. One of his first moves was to declare that he was

assuming full autonomy to negotiate as he saw fit, despite President Uribe’s insistence that the release of any FARC prisoners would be conditional on their giving credible guarantees that they would not return to the FARC’s ranks. Said López, “My opinion is that, if they are going to be freed, no conditions can be put on them. Freedom consists of not having any conditionalities on your behavior.”

López also defended the FARC and its tactic of kidnapping hostages for a prisoner swap: “You have to put yourself in the shoes of the other party. The recourse to arms or to attacks to produce certain results, in the eyes of those who commit them and those that inspire them, is a method to achieve the aims of social justice. In their hearts, they themselves do not consider themselves criminals, but promoters of a doctrine different than that of the state.”

Operation ‘Black Cat’

The arrest of Simón Trinidad may well have thrown a monkey-wrench into López’s insidious negotiations strategy. In this regard, there are important similarities between the Trinidad arrest, and an anti-FARC operation in early 2001. In February 2001, in a military operation dubbed Black Cat, some 3,000 Colombian troops descended on the drug-porous Colombian-Brazilian border, in a series of lightning raids, conducted—like the Trinidad arrest—in collaboration with regional allies and decisive input from U.S. intelligence.

During those raids, hard evidence was discovered linking the drug trade to the top echelons of the FARC. The evidence included 10,000 hectares of coca under FARC “protection” and 12 laboratories capable of producing two tons of cocaine a week, also under FARC “protection.” The discovery led then-Army Commander General Mora to provoke a political storm inside the country by publicly declaring the FARC to be the largest drug cartel in the country, and insisting he would not negotiate peace terms with drug traffickers.

Two months later, on April 11, evidence from those raids led to the capture, in a joint Colombian-Brazilian army operation, of Luiz Fernando da Costa (a.k.a. Fernandinho Beira-Mar), and his deportation to Brazil to face homicide, kidnapping, and drug-trafficking charges. Da Costa, who is said to have controlled 60% of the Brazilian drug trade, was one of the largest cocaine suppliers to the U.S. market. His supplier, it turned out, was the FARC, which reportedly derived 80% of its income from Da Costa’s operations.

The significance of Da Costa’s arrest is that it occurred on the same weekend as the Summit of the Americas in Canada, where then-President Pastrana was attempting to present his negotiations with the FARC guerrillas as the solution to Colombia’s problems. Just like López, Pastrana attempted to portray the FARC as “fighters for social justice” in their own way, with whom peace terms could be worked out.

As Operation Black Cat so clearly proved, the war against narco-terror can be won, as long as there is the political will to retire the godfathers, and their ilk.