

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Mafia under the gun in Colombia

Betancur's declaration of war on the drug mafias threatens to go all the way to the top.

With his appointment of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla as the new Justice Minister last month, Colombian President Belisario Betancur shot the opening salvo of a long-overdue war on the drug mafias in that country. The congressional investigation Lara opened up on the infiltration of "hot money" into politics has since turned into a nationwide debate on how the mafias have succeeded in capturing entire chunks of the economy, the government, and even national territory.

In the span of just one month:

- The Colombian Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of that country's extradition treaty with the United States, giving the green light for arrest warrants against leading kapos of the drug mafia, such as cocaine-king and cult leader Carlos Lehder Rivas;

- The government is preparing legislation for the creation of an Italian-modeled Special Investigatory Commission empowered to look into the money flows—origins, destinations, investments—of any and all Colombian citizens;

- The civil aeronautics agency, on orders of the Justice Ministry, has grounded over 100 airplanes belonging to prominent drug traffickers, pending charges against them, and is mapping out the clandestine airstrips used by them;

- The National Narcotics Council has been given strengthened powers, including centralization within its offices of all national purchases of chemicals—such as hydrochloric and

sulfuric acid—used to refine coca paste into cocaine;

- Investigations of several Congressmen—including the Liberal Party's mooted next presidential candidate Santofimio Botero—for involvement in the drug trade and related corruption charges have been opened up, and efforts to get immunity lifted in some cases are already underway;

- The government has proposed political reform legislation which would restrict the electoral campaigns of all political parties to 1) the 90-day period before the election itself and 2) financing from a special government fund, to be complemented by minimal private contributions limited by government law. Self-financing of campaigns, similarly, would be severely restricted.

The effect of putting teeth into the government's war on drugs has been to force the "citizens above suspicion" who stand behind the drug trade—the millionaire lawyers, the pin-striped bankers, the politicians—to surface in defense of their pocketbooks. Former president Alfonso López Michelsen, under whose 1974-78 administration the country was literally delivered over to Dope, Inc. through a series of banking, taxation and investment "reforms," appears to be the number one fish caught on Betancur's hook.

López was first publicly tied to the "hot money" scandal when it was revealed that his former campaign manager, drug legalization advocate Ernesto Samper Pizano, had accepted multi-million-peso contributions from Colombia's "cocaine kings" Carlos

Lehder and Pablo Escobar in return for promises to legalize the drug trade under a López presidency.

López's family, particularly his first cousin Jaime Michelsen Uribe, are Colombia's leading bankers who have accumulated vast fortunes by laundering the marijuana and cocaine dollars coming into the country. Michelsen Uribe, as head of the Bank of Colombia, is currently facing extensive government investigations into his notoriously corrupt banking practices and López is apparently now joining him on the hot seat.

The López machine has done its best to fight back. When Justice Minister Lara Bonilla first opened up his congressional investigations, Congressman Jairo Ortega Ramírez—an associate of trafficker Pablo Escobar—came up with "evidence" allegedly proving that Lara himself had accepted drug money for his electoral campaigns.

Ortega's flimsy evidence, rejected out of hand by President Betancur and the majority of the Congress, was nonetheless picked up by the daily *El Tiempo*, long-time mouthpiece of the López machine and used in an editorial to call for Lara's resignation. The weekly rag *La Semana*, owned by López's son, was the first to publish Ortega's libelous charges against Lara. And two of López's representatives on the newly-formed bi-partisan "Morality Commission" opened up the commission's proceedings with a call for Lara to resign his post, the better to defend himself in Congress.

By taking his war on drugs this far, Betancur has been eminently successful in flushing the enemies of Colombia out of their prestigious hiding places. By using the power of existing laws to their fullest, Betancur now has the unique opportunity to end the empire of Dope, Inc. in Colombia for good.