

Colombia is winning the people's war on drugs

by José Restrepo

The Colombian drug cartel kingpin, Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, known as "El Mexicano," was killed Dec. 15 in a police raid near Covenas, the oil port on Colombia's Atlantic coast. "This victory was possible thanks to the cooperation of the people," said Gen. Miguel Antonio Gómez Padilla, general director of Colombia's National Police, in a press conference convened to officially report the fact.

The killing of Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, his son Freddy, and 15 bodyguards, is a very important event that remoralized Colombia's population, which had demanded that President Virgilio Barco launch a war on drugs. Rodríguez Gacha, as well as Pablo Escobar, had escaped two weeks earlier from a police raid. That time police were trying to capture them alive to extradite them to the United States.

Interior Minister Carlos Lemos Simmonds, in a brief statement to the press the same day, said that "one should not be happy with somebody else's death; however, I feel a great sense of relief."

U.S. Drug Policy Adviser William Bennett reported that Colombian President "Virgilio Barco told me that this operation is very important psychologically for the Colombian people. . . . Barco believes that doubts about the Colombian government's resolve and ability to defeat the cartel should now be put to rest."

This victory, however, is the consequence of many small victories won since the Colombian people and President Barco made the decision to launch an all-out war against the drug mafia after the August 1989 assassination of popular leader and front-runner in the 1990 presidential race, Sen. Luis Carlos Galán.

Galán's assassination

On Friday, Aug. 18, Galán, then the front-runner in all the presidential polls, was killed by a special hit squad of the Medellín Cartel. That assassination was designed not just to kill an anti-drug leader, but to terrorize the population and to show that drug kingpins could do whatever they wanted with impunity.

The assassination took place before more than 10,000 people attending a political rally for the presidential candidate. Television cameras captured the entire incident. After the President, Galán was the most carefully guarded political figure. State security had assigned him more than 20 body-

guards and at the time of his death, Galán was wearing a bulletproof vest. The assassins shot him when he raised his arms to salute his political followers, whereupon bullets hit parts of his body unprotected by the vest and killed him.

However, contrary to what the drug traffickers expected, that a threatened people would kneel and accept the drug cartel's tyranny, citizens demanded that justice be done. "Justice, justice, justice" was the demand of hundreds of thousands of persons who attended Galán's funeral in Bogotá. People waited outside the capital's cathedral for President Barco, to tell him what to do. "Shoot the narcos, and we will back you," they clamored. "Extradite the narcos," they said. The President responded that he would do "what the people want."

The same day Galán was assassinated, President Barco announced that using the decrees of the state of siege, the government would confiscate all the properties of the drug traffickers and extradite them to the countries that wanted them for different crimes.

Since Aug. 18, government forces have seized some of Rodríguez Gacha's and Pablo Escobar's most trusted men and their intelligence centers. Government security agencies have seized from the traffickers 1,343 properties, 1,413 weapons, 276 airplanes. They have arrested 497 and extradited nine middle-level commanders of the drug cartel to the United States.

Drug legalizers

The drug mafia responded in two ways: One was to launch a terror campaign against the people; the other was to promote a national and international campaign for drug legalization.

The government ordered all TV channels to run an ad with clips of Galán's funeral, encouraging people to turn in the drug traffickers, and to cooperate by providing information to the police. All the basic intelligence to attack the cartels has come through these phone calls from citizens. Forty percent of the calls have been to congratulate the Armed Forces for what they are doing. People who, before Galán's assassination, were afraid to give information, began to talk. Normal people began to think like heroes.

In response to government action, the first communiqué from the "Extraditables," as the drug mafia calls itself, stated that "we declare absolute war against the government, the

industrial and political oligarchy, against journalists who have attacked and humiliated us, against the judges who have sold out to the government, against the extraditing magistrates, against the presidents of the trade associations and unions, and against all those who have attacked and persecuted us. We will not respect the families of those who have not respected our families, and we will burn and destroy the properties of the oligarchy.”

Following that communiqué, drug traffickers began a series of terrorist attacks against industries, businesses, and banks, and psychological warfare against the population. Airports and schools were threatened with bombings. Phone calls announcing that water supplies had been poisoned were received by housewives around the country. And yet the popular reaction was one of outrage, despite the fear.

The mass media were targeted. The anti-drug newspaper *El Espectador*, whose editor Guillermo Cano had been assassinated by the drug mafias in 1986, was bombed. The day following the bombing, *El Espectador*'s headline was: “We Will Go Forward.” *Vanguardia Liberal*, another daily close to President Barco, was bombed by a car bomb; the famous anti-drug journalist Jorge Enrique Pulido was killed. Several judges, especially in Medellín, were killed, as well as wives of police officials.

The objective was to launch an international campaign in favor of drug legalization and dialogue with the drug traffickers. Statements by Fabio Ochoa Restrepo, father of drug kingpins Fabio and Jorge Luis Ochoa Vásquez, received extensive coverage in the European press. Ochoa asked for dialogue with drug traffickers in order to “save lives.” The British *Economist* magazine published a long article predicting Colombia will lose the war and asking for legalization.

On two separate days, the daily *El Siglo*, edited by pro-drug conservative Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, republished the *Economist* article which quotes U.S. quack economist Milton Friedman's utterings in defense of drug legalization.

The Mayor of Medellín, Juan Gómez Martínez from the Social Conservative Party, openly supported the narco-dialogue and said that he personally would agree to talk to the drug kingpins and offered himself as a mediator in this “no-win war.” Presidential pre-candidate Ernesto Samper Pizano, the official spokesman of Colombia's pro-legalization lobby and Luis Carlos Galán's most important rival, said that “if the war cannot be won we have to look for other solutions,” a diplomatic way of supporting drug legalization.

Ernesto Samper Pizano gained notoriety in 1979 when, as president of the National Association of Financial Institutions (ANIF), he launched a campaign to legalize marijuana. ANIF was a front organization for narco-banker Jaime Michelsen Uribe, cousin of former President Alfonso López Michelsen. Samper was generously financed by the U.S. drug lobby's organization, NORML, and made a number of international contacts in the course of organizing the campaign. Samper left ANIF when his political godfather, López Michelsen,

named him coordinator of his campaign, by which he sought to be reelected President. Pablo Escobar, Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, and Carlos Lehder—the last now in a U.S. prison—contributed enormous sums to Samper for the López electoral campaign. Lehder subsequently reported that that money had been given on the condition that, if López were elected, he would legalize drugs.

Fortunately, Alfonso López was not elected. In his previous term in office (1974-78), he was responsible for the opening up of the “sinister window” at the central bank, where large amounts of dollars could be exchanged with no questions asked. This measure, along with a financial reform, laid the basis for the take-off of the drug trade in a big way. In 1984, after Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla had been assassinated by the drug mafias, López Michelsen met Pablo Escobar and Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha in Panama. In a long interview with the daily *El Tiempo*, he defended the drug traffickers' proposals and the legalization of drugs.

While the advocates of narco-dialogue and drug legalization promoted their plans, no public figure dared to contradict them, with the exception of *El Espectador*, the government, and a few columnists. Narco-dialogue got publicity every day in the press and electronic media. Meanwhile, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other U.S. media told the American people that Colombia was getting “tired” of the war on drugs and portrayed Gómez Martínez and Ernesto Samper Pizano as representative of what the Colombian population allegedly thought. The U.S. media described Samper as Barco's most likely successor, although César Gaviria Trujillo, Galán's actual successor and currently a presidential candidate, leads according to all recent polls.

César Gaviria had been Barco's interior minister but had resigned to join the presidential campaign of anti-drug candidate Luis Carlos Galán. At Galán's funeral on Aug. 21 in Bogotá, Galán's son Juan Manuel identified Gaviria as his father's successor. “May you become the President that Colombia needs,” he said. Once Galán's political movement confirmed Gaviria as their candidate, the war against the drug mafias has been one of main planks in his platform.

On Dec. 6, César Gaviria reaffirmed his “unrelenting decision to combat the crime of drug-trafficking with absolute rigor and to make the entire weight of our law fall upon the criminals.” Although Gaviria is the candidate most likely to win the presidency, the U.S. and international press never quote him in their coverage of Colombia.

The liberal businessman Joaquín Vallejo Arbelaez, godfather to Pablo Escobar Gaviria, pushed for a dialogue with the drug traffickers and said that the traffickers asked for Henry Kissinger's advice in order to find a way to legalize drugs in the United States. Vallejo himself met with Pablo Escobar and other Medellín Cartel kingpins to plan the negotiations. “Even Kissinger's name was thought of,” said Vallejo. “They knew what Kissinger costs. However, they said they were ready to pay that cost for the purpose of convincing

the American government of the appropriateness" of such a deal.

Colombian Communist leader Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa also demanded dialogue with the drug mafia, and the Communist Party began to organize internationally against the war on drugs as a "farce and an excuse to fight guerrillas." He traveled through Europe to tell the Socialist International that there was no war on drugs at all in Colombia, but rather persecution of leftist forces. On Oct. 26, *El Espectador* revealed that the international human rights lobby, which includes organizations like Amnesty International, were plotting a "genuine international conspiracy" against the nation, and would be meeting in Amsterdam to accuse the Colombian government of using the war on drugs as a pretext for directing a "dirty war" of repression against the Colombian left.

On Nov. 3, the Drug Policy Foundation, another drug lobby front group, met in Washington, D.C. to discuss how to use the mass media to escalate the brainwashing of the American people in order to get them to support drug legalization. Former Secretary of State George Shultz sent a letter to this meeting supporting drug legalization. No wonder President Reagan's war on drugs did not work.

Domestic saboteurs

Inside Colombia, López Michelsen strongly attacked President Virgilio Barco for having declared a war on drugs, which, he said "constitutes a new element of destabilization" in the country. "Why is it that only in Colombia has the fight against the drug trade turned into a war between the state and the mafias? How has it come about that a problem to be handled between the local police and criminals, as occurs in other countries, has become a great national concern, affecting the economic, social and even political life of the entire citizenry? . . . What came first, the Ministry of Justice classifying the war against drugs as a problem of state, or the chain of homicides that terrorizes society?" López cynically asked. "It seems to me that to claim it was the assassinations that forced us to raise the level of the conflict inverts the terms; it was by giving it the character of a war that Colombia has become the only country where such atrocious events have spread throughout the national territory."

On the domestic front, the drug traffickers decided to buy off the Congress in order to launch an opposition to Barco's government from the same Liberal Party that elected Barco as President. One of the goals of drug traffickers was to include the issue of extradition in a referendum scheduled to be held on Jan. 21. They thought they could control the vote process through threats and bribes. However, at the last minute on Dec. 14, there was no quorum in the Senate to approve the drug traffickers' proposal. Many of the congressmen will have to go to hell to receive their payoffs from Rodríguez Gacha.

However, the offensive for drug legalization and for nar-

co-dialogue exposed the drug-trafficking networks and supporters. As political prisoner Lyndon LaRouche has said, there is no difference between drug traffickers and drug legalizers. At this moment, Congress and most of the politicians have lost all credibility. The drug mafia thought that buying off or killing the nation's leadership would let them take over the country. Instead, people have become increasingly enraged at the traffickers and the politicians on the mafia's payroll.

After the Extraditables placed a bomb in an Avianca jet which exploded and murdered 111 people Nov. 27, and killed another 67 with the car bomb left at the headquarters of the security police, the Department of Administrative Security (DAS), on Dec. 6, the Colombian people responded with fear, but also with real anger, redoubling their support for the effort to totally defeat the mafias. They also saw Alfonso López Michelsen, Ernesto Samper Pizano, and the Congress as traitors.

As an Oct. 25 editorial in *El Espectador* pointed out, "what is inadmissible in a nation at war, is that there be deserters and traitors who lead such desertion and such treason. With all due respect, Mr. Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces [President Virgilio Barco], you are being betrayed by your own party colleagues, [and] it is unpardonable that they not be punished following summary trial."



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