

Colombia's Samper in trouble as U.S. decertification nears

by Valerie Rush

Colombian President Ernesto Samper Pizano is once again in serious political trouble, as the March 1 deadline approaches for a U.S. decision on whether his drug cartel-dominated government will again be “decertified” as failing to cooperate in the war on drugs. Despite his big claim to fame (that the leaders of the criminal Cali cocaine cartel are behind bars), it is now evident to all that they are there *by choice*, having pre-arranged the terms of their incarceration: no extradition, short sentences, and, most importantly, business as usual.

And yet, although the drug cartels have most of the government in their pocket, separate scandals are currently threatening Samper Pizano's corrupt hold on power, and their future along with it.

The relatively quiescent U.S. certification process blew up on Jan. 17, when an anonymous (“faceless”) judge in the city of Cali sentenced brothers Gilberto and Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela—kingpins of the Cali cocaine cartel—to 21 and 18 years in jail, respectively. Because of the Rodríguez brothers' so-called “confessions” to various individual counts of drug trafficking, their sentences were immediately halved under a cartel-dictated “law of submission to justice,” enacted by the previous César Gaviria government and enforced by the Samper administration. Those sentences were then halved again under a combination of work-release and other benefits, also encompassed by that law. Thus, two of the most powerful narcotics traffickers in the world, will be strolling out of jail in five years or less, their illicit fortunes—and drug-trafficking networks—intact.

The absurd sentences, which prompted the *pro forma* moderate protest from Samper and his cabinet, nonetheless fully exposes the blood pact Samper signed with the cartels when he accepted their millions of narco-dollars to finance his 1994 Presidential campaign. Samper had ample opportunity to alter the “law of submission” in 1994, his first year in office, but had refused to do so, always claiming the moment or the politics was “inopportune.”

The Clinton administration is furious, and has rightly laid the blame for this travesty at President Samper's door. White House drug policy adviser Gen. Barry McCaffrey condemned the sentences as “the result of the corrupting power of \$30 billion of drug money on the institutions of

democratic government,” and blamed the Samper government for its “inadequate support” of Colombia's law enforcement agencies. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns warned that the sentencing “will be a factor” in the U.S. certification decision, and insisted, “As the Executive part of the Colombian government affects the judicial authorities, it is up to them to make sure that the laws are respected and . . . are consistent with international standards.”

The *Washington Post*, with unusual severity, described Samper's war on drugs as “a bad joke” and Samper himself as “an unconvincing anti-drug crusader.” Its Jan. 21 editorial even went so far as to suggest that Samper abandon the Presidency: “Colombia will be fighting the drug traffickers with one hand tied behind its back as long as its favorite candidate is still President. His tenure weakens the hand of the Colombian police and prosecutors who actually are fighting the cartels.”

But Bogotá was fully prepared for the U.S.'s anger. Exploiting the British-inspired obsession which permeates much of Washington, with putting a “democratic” face on the continent of Ibero-America, even as whole nations succumb to impoverishment and narco-terrorism, various of Samper's mouthpieces aggressively insisted that the Clinton administration has no choice but to accept a drug cartel government in Colombia, since it was duly and democratically elected.

For example, Justice Minister Carlos Medellín blustered, “Just as in the U.S., one of the principles of Colombian democracy is the doctrine of separation of powers, which establishes an independent judiciary. . . . When the *Washington Post* and Clinton administration so severely criticize the Colombian government because of these sentences, are they perhaps suggesting that the Executive can give orders to the Judiciary, contravening the principles of the Constitution? What kind of message do they want to give Latin America with respect to democratic institutions? . . . What's happening with U.S. respect for Latin American democratic processes?”

Samper's Foreign Minister María Emma Mejía went even further in a direct answer to McCaffrey, not only demanding that the United States accept the sentences “as

the only viable means to maintain democratic order,” but insisting: “In this regard, I would like to respectfully suggest that the time has come for you and the United States to accept that democratic institutions and processes in Colombia have acquitted President Samper, and that this particular chapter of his Presidency is over.”

The U.S. response to this cynical defiance has, thus far, been silence.

The Mauss scandal

The scandal that has broken in Colombia around German “superspook” and terrorist agent Werner Mauss, has revealed that a power-sharing deal—mediated by the German government between the Samper regime and the country’s drug cartels and narco-terrorists—was well advanced at the time of Mauss’s arrest in Medellín last November. In an interview with the Bogotá daily *El Tiempo* of Jan. 19, U.S. Ambassador Myles Frechette confirmed an earlier admission by Samper’s special envoy to Germany, Carlos Villamil, that a “peace treaty” with the cartels had in fact been under discussion. Frechette declared that the United States had firmly rejected any such deal with the narcos, when the Kohl government sought its approval.

The German government has denied that such an exchange occurred, but Frechette has reaffirmed his charges.

However, Frechette went on to insist that the United States did not view Colombia’s narco-terrorists with the same antagonism as the drug cartels. Said Frechette, “A cartel is an organization [that] has the power to sell its product anywhere in the world, and whose objective is pure profit. I don’t believe that the guerrillas are simply after profit. . . . The United States government will not give Colombia any assistance to fight the guerrillas. Why? Congress, the NGOs, and our Executive are concerned about human rights. But we are going to give aid, and we are doing so, to fight the narcos.”

This, despite the fact that the interface between the narcos and their terrorists has been thoroughly documented, inclusively by this news service. The Colombian Army, for its part, recently published a book, *The FARC Cartel*, which thoroughly documents the extensive, and growing, involvement of the country’s largest “guerrilla” movement in every aspect, from protecting drug plantations and illegal airstrips, to refining the drugs, to smuggling them out of the country. It is with millions of narco-dollars that the FARC has heavily equipped its own parallel army, seized a large chunk of the national territory, taken over dozens of local and municipal governments, infiltrated the national economy, and now holds the entire country hostage to its terrorist blackmail.

Although not everyone in Washington shares Frechette’s concern for the “human rights” of Colombia’s “not-for-profit” terrorists, that false view is nonetheless widespread and fostered by the British and their allies, and is a major vulnerability that the narco-terrorists and their international

human rights apologists are fully exploiting. If it is allowed to dominate Washington, along with sophistry about defending “democratic” narco-institutions, it will help the drug cartels greatly in their goal to completely take over Colombia, not only through the front door of “independent democratic institutions,” e.g., the corrupted judiciary, legislature, and Presidency, but also through the back door of power-sharing deals between the government and “the Third Cartel.”

‘An unburied corpse’

Although the Mauss scandal put a temporary dent in Samper’s plans to “legalize” the cartel-guerrilla capture of Colombia through “peace negotiations,” that scenario is still alive. In fact, Foreign Minister Mejía has just announced from Europe, where she is on a tour to bolster support for Samper against U.S. pressures, that Spain is offering to mediate peace talks between the government and the FARC narco-terrorists, just as soon as the FARC releases the 60-70 soldiers it is holding captive. Mejía said that the recent installation of an office of the UN Human Rights Commission in Bogotá could greatly facilitate such a “peace process.”

There are many Colombians who are increasingly convinced that their crumbling nation would not survive such a “peace process,” and which cannot afford to wait out the 18 months of Samper’s Presidency. Speaking for these anti-Samper forces is the opposition daily *El Espectador*, whose Jan. 23 editorial calls the Samper regime “An Unburied Corpse”: “We Colombians are facing the dissolution of our political institutions and the definite coming of chaos. And the President and his ministers continue to lie to us. Social discontent is growing, on the verge of a massive explosion that will not leave a stone in place. The economy is being ripped apart. Public disorder is metastasizing to every corner of the national territory, virtually surrendered to terrorism and under the imminent threat of the methodical takeover of our cities. . . .

“The government is holding a bomb, and it is going to explode in its hands. The fuse is lit, but the government only covers its ears. And we Colombians don’t even know if our government is just a fading image of an apocryphal portrait, or of an unburied corpse. We Colombians are more convinced every day that the only patriotic solution the President has, is to resign immediately, along with his cabinet.”

El Espectador’s editorial has already been endorsed by several prominent figures, such as Sen. Enrique Gómez Hurtado and businessman Hernando Echavarría Olózaga, who are calling for civil resistance against the Samper regime, “if necessary.” Part of this resistance could also come in the form of an indefinite general strike planned for Feb. 11 by leading labor federations, and backed by the opposition Conservative Party. Samper’s recent decree that public sector wages will be kept to 13.5%, well below the nearly 22% inflation rate in 1996, has stoked the flames of discontent.