

Colombia: Who Is In Control?

by Elizabeth Fennell

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Colombia is a country in Central America that has had many obstacles lately invading its normal day-to-day processes. A major difficulty on the forefront of Colombia's long list of problems are the drug barons. The drug cartel, which has been a deep part of Colombia's history, is actually asserting "a state of 'total war' with the government of Colombia." How is a country supposed to work efficiently if the country's richest are fighting its own government? This is exactly what Colombian President Virgilio Barco is trying to figuring out. Thus far, he has "...ordered a crackdown on the drug traffickers...[by] confiscating millions of dollars worth of property and arresting 11,000 suspects."

An attorney working for the Colombian drug barons named Diego Cordoba contends "...in an interview with a Brazilian newspaper...that drug trafficking has done more to alleviate poverty and hunger in Latin America than any government in the region." This is true in that Colombia's "...cocaine-generated revenues bolstered last year's (federal) economy" by about \$4 billion. (Colombia produces and supplies 80% of the United States' and Europe's total drug supply. But how is President Barco going to be able to do anything for his people if he's constantly looking over his shoulder for a drug cartel to have a gun at his back? Since Barco is working against the country's richest, that is where the government's main focus should be headed. Once resolved, or if, this difficulty becomes a reality, Barco had better work for the peoples of his country instead of inspiring more bitterness by not facing the problems of the country.

Another lawyer employed by the traffickers, Mario Arango, "...wrote in a best-selling book that the drug business has opened new opportunities for the under-privileged classes. 'The money from the drug traffic has acted as a brake on the social and political deterioration of the country...' However, that does not mean that the production and merchandising of drugs is correct for the

Colombians.

President Barco strongly continues with his stance on hard-line and no negotiations, as is President Bush of the U.S. Barco says "we will not be cowed...we shall prevail over the forces that would destroy our democracy and enslave our nation."

Raymond Hesse, one of the top bureaucrats in the State Departments' Bureau of International Narcotics Matters, believes the problem of the drug cartel is too large and widespread for one government to try and control. He forewarns "that unless decisive action is taken soon, the drug traffickers may prevail" through a drug "superstate."

Since a drug cartel is a combination of independent drug businesses who pool their resources together to decrease competition, it is only reasonable that an alliance of drug cartels could originate to form a drug "superstate." This term was used by an assassinated attorney general last year when he mentioned that this "superstate" already "...has a defense establishment, controls large swaths of territory, issues communiques and even boasts what amounts to a 'commerce department,' which assiduously promotes the export of cocaine and other illicit drugs."

Proof of their defense establishment is shown as follows: only 30 helicopters are at the disposal of the Colombian police while Jorge Luis Ochoa, a part of the cartel, "has 50 aircraft and an arsenal of weapons." The main reason for Colombia's hindered arsenal is all the red tape in the government - it takes months "and sometimes years to acquire weaponry for its military" while the cartel "can get what they want in days or even hours."

With the cartel's declaration of "total war" on the government of Colombia, the drug "superstate" is not an impossibility anymore, but rather a very real venture on the horizon. Douglas Payne, the director of hemispheric studies for the Freedom House (a research organization for the promotion of democracy), states that "with the combined economic, political, and military powers of a government... the cartel is now acting like a state and asking to be treated like one."

Recently, a few events have occurred in Colombia to cause much worry for everyone the world over. Last August 18, the Colombian

government formed and put into working action the anti-drug view for a crackdown on drug cartels and traffickers. The catalyst for this crackdown was the assassinations of many important diplomats, one of whom was the late General Luis Carlos Gala. Gala was "the leading presidential candidate and an outspoken opponent of the cocaine barons" which made him a prime target for the barons' blacklists. With the catalyst of these assassinations causing the crackdown, the consequences continue to worsen.

The Colombian government has the drug cartels declaring war on them. In addition, there is an increased amount of terrorist bombings, a higher number of vengeful assassinations, continued hunger and poverty, among many other problems. These are all areas which could instigate further crackdowns.

In a matter of a few weeks, President Barco and the rest of the government have "seized more than 500 estates, office buildings and other properties, including cars, aircraft, yachts, cattle and racehorses..." which proves that the governments' labors aren't all in vain.

The United States is helping by giving at least \$65 million worth of emergency military aid. These shipments are in the process of arriving in the country in order to help the government "convince" the cartels of their determined stance in this crackdown. The types of armaments sent include rockets, grenades, machine guns, rifles, pistols, ammunition, and bulletproof vests along with armored cars for government officials.

In the city of Medellin, which is 215 miles north of Bogota and is home to the world's largest drug cartel, a kamikaze-type man subjected the city's only airport to a shooting rampage killing fourteen. This past Monday, September 4, during the 7:15 morning rush, the as-yet-unidentified man wearing military fatigues apparently stationed a get-away car outside the terminal entrance while randomly firing on victims. The assailant shot three security agents and eleven civilians during his rampage.

One of the survivors, a business executive, claimed the gunman "appeared to be 18 to 20 years old... [and during the rampage] 'everybody panicked and just threw

themselves on the floor, including me."

Since last week a night-time curfew has been placed in Medellin, but terrorist actions are still occurring with increasing frequency. For example, a restaurant was set on fire with gasoline after "...an armed gang forced everyone out...It was not immediately clear whether the attack was related to the cocaine barons' fight against the government." Another instance is the bombing of two banks. Police have no details yet except for two girls, a seven year old and an eleven year old, that "suffered cuts from flying glass and other minor injuries" along with five others who also received minor cuts and bruises. An additional example is the assassination of Angela de Guerrero, the wife of Colonel Carlos Guerrero, a logistics planning officer for the joint military forces. On Tuesday, September 5, Mrs. Guerrero was sitting in her car "outside a supermarket in Bogota's northern suburbs...[when] she was shot four times by two gunmen... Police gave no [direct] motive for the slaying..."

In the city of Monteria, a firebombed transport plane belonging to the initial narcotics division of the State Departments. Acknowledgement of the badly damaged plane was made by the U.S. Embassy; however, its non-confirmation leads to an interesting confrontational situation of whether or not we (the U.S.) are going to get any more involved than we are already.

A police confidante claims that "...the government's crackdown on traffickers has almost paralyzed the nation's cocaine-producing laboratories "showing that the crackdown is working much better than expected. However, the cartel's retaliations against innocent civilians leaves much to be questioned about its future and present authority. Since the cartels have to reassert their authority through bombings and other attacks, it shows that the supposedly concrete foundations of their powers are being cracked wide open and therefore broken down. Once the drug cartels are broken down completely Colombia can work itself out of its poverty-stricken rut and become a self-sufficient country. Hopefully, President Barco's hard-line no-negotiations- allowed stance will be one of the ways in which to save Colombia.