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## **Alleged Links to Drug Cartels Threaten Colombian President Samper**

*by LADB Staff*

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Since his inauguration in August 1994, President Ernesto Samper has been under the shadow of allegations that he is tied to drug traffickers. Now, following the arrest of his campaign treasurer and the resignation of his defense minister, Samper is at the center of Colombia's worst political crisis in more than two decades. Samper has consistently denied links to the drug cartels and insisted that if any drug money found its way into his campaign, it was without his knowledge. Two days after Samper was elected in a very tight race in June 1994, losing candidate Andres Pastrana turned over audio cassettes that he said had been sent to him anonymously. The tapes contained conversations between Cali drug lords Miguel and Gilberto Rodriguez Orejuela and journalist Alberto Giraldo discussing contributions to the Samper campaign. Before leaving office, then attorney general and now ambassador to Mexico Gustavo de Greiff closed the investigation into the matter citing lack of evidence (see NotiSur, 06/24/94 and 05/05/95).

Nevertheless, the accusations have not gone away. In addition, by early 1995, the Clinton administration had become increasingly skeptical about Colombia's seriousness in fighting drug trafficking and threatened to cut off aid if more progress was not made in dismantling the Cali cartel (see NotiSur, 02/17/95 and 04/14/95). Against this backdrop, in July the government launched a major campaign to crack down on the Cali cartel, leading to the arrest of most of the cartel's top leaders. Still, despite the government's renewed vigor in the anti-drug war which has won praise from the US Samper now finds himself in even more of a precarious situation than before. In fact, the president could be forced out of office and he and several members of his cabinet could face criminal charges if the latest revelations that drug money was used in Samper's campaign are proven to be true.

Ironically, it is the recent success in nailing several Cali leaders that has created new problems for the Samper administration. Documents allegedly belonging to Cali drug lord Miguel Rodriguez Orejuela, found in recent police raids, listed seven congressional delegates all belonging to Samper's Partido Liberal and eight persons associated with a professional soccer league among more than 2,800 people who had received payments from the cartel. Attorney General Alfonso Valdivieso said the documents showed that the cartel paid more than US\$3.7 million per month in bribes to public figures across the country. Valdivieso's office, the Congress, and the Supreme Court are all involved in investigating whether the Cali cartel funneled millions of dollars in contributions to the campaigns of Samper and the Partido Liberal deputies.

More directly damaging to Samper, evidence showed that Samper's campaign treasurer, Santiago Medina, endorsed a check for US\$50,000 drawn on an account used as a front by the cartel. Medina was arrested on July 26 and remains in custody. According to the attorney general's office, in addition to accepting the check, Medina had not entered the amount in campaign financial books.

According to Medina's lawyer, he has admitted endorsing the check and sending it on to campaign headquarters. However, while he first said that the campaign received numerous checks every day, and he assumed someone else within the campaign would check the origin of the funds, he later made serious allegations involving others in the campaign, including Defense Minister Fernando Botero Zea, formerly Samper's campaign financial manager, and Communications Minister Armando Benedetti. On July 26, the opposition daily La Prensa reported that Botero asked the Cali cartel for campaign contributions and then created a false accounting system with Medina to hide the source of the funds. The newspaper cited statements made by unidentified witnesses it said are cooperating with the investigation.

Valdivieso asked the Supreme Court to determine whether enough evidence exists linking Botero with the drug cartels to bring charges. In Colombia, ministers can only be investigated by the Supreme Court. Before leaving for Peru where he attended the inauguration of President Alberto Fujimori, Samper said he had asked the Accusations Commission of the House of Representatives to investigate the allegations and said he was prepared to accept whatever consequences resulted from the inquiry. However, he blamed the scandal on the drug cartels. "We are not going to fall into their intimidating traps," Samper said. "Now that we are starting to win the final battle against drug trafficking we will not be blackmailed or intimidated by anything or anyone. We were overly optimistic in believing that we could dismantle the most powerful criminal organization in the world without paying a price."

The congressional committee announced that it would begin an investigation to decide if there is enough evidence to bring the matter to the Senate, which could lead to Samper's impeachment. The committee has 10 days to determine whether the charges have merit. On Aug. 1, Valdivieso accused the government of interfering in his investigation. He said "different branches of government are trying to neutralize the maximum authority of the attorney general." He also said his office had been broken into and copies of secret testimony linking senior government officials to the cartel had been stolen. It turned out that Medina's testimony somehow ended up in the hands of Botero, who had called a press conference on July 31 to denounce it.

At the news conference, Botero and Interior Minister Horacio Serpa provided details of Medina's testimony that should have been confidential, including Medina's implications of Benedetti and Monica de Greiff, an administration adviser. Other parts of Medina's by now quite public testimony, published in the daily El Espectador, not only charge that Botero accepted donations to Samper's campaign from the cartel, but that he actively solicited them. "The money that Dr. Botero authorized be turned over to me was brought directly to my house, once by Alberto Giraldo and twice by Eduardo Mestre, in six gift-wrapped cardboard boxes, each with about 500 million pesos (US \$625,000)," the paper quoted Medina's statement as saying.

Both Giraldo and Mestre are now in jail. As if that were not enough, La Prensa had alleged earlier on July 25 that Botero and Interior Minister Horacio Serpa met Medina in his house on July 14 to "organize" his defense and use him as a scapegoat. By Aug. 1, Samper was trying to put a lid on all the public statements by members of his administration. "I am asking them to abstain from making public judgments or aggravating controversial situations surrounding events, documents, or evidence involved in the judicial process," a statement read by a presidential spokesperson

said. "The government hopes in this way to contribute to the discretion that ought to surround this process."

Finally on Aug. 2, Botero, a personal friend of Samper's and one of his closest collaborators, announced his resignation. While he said he resigned to respond to charges against him, observers said it was more likely that he left before being forced out when Medina began testifying. Following Botero's resignation, opposition Partido Conservador members called for the resignations of Interior Minister Serpa for his role in publicizing the confidential testimony of Medina and Communications Minister Benedetti, who was implicated by Medina. Medina's arrest and the scandal surrounding the latest resurfacing of allegations against Samper have been a serious blow to the image of the administration. In the midst of the scandal, Justice Minister Nestor Martinez gave a report on the administration's effort in fighting drug trafficking. According to Martinez, the Colombian government spends US\$984 million annually on the drug war, which, he said, is six times what the UN spends worldwide in anti-drug efforts. The report listed administration successes in coca- and poppy-field eradication, destruction of laboratories and landing strips, capture of airplanes used to transport drugs, and the arrest of top-level traffickers. (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 07/23-27/95, 08/01/95, 08/02/95; Reuter, 07/25/95, 07/27/95, 07/30/95, 08/01/95, 08/02/95; Associated press, 07/27/95, 08/01-03/95)

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