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Colombian Judge, Police Chief, Presidential Candidate Murdered: Summary Of Events, Responses

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Aug. 16: Late Wednesday evening, gunmen apparently hired by drug traffickers attacked Bogota Superior Court Judge Carlos Valencia Garcia as he left his office in central Bogota. The judge, who was hit six times in the machine gun fusillade, died a short time later at a nearby hospital. Valencia Garcia, 43, had rejected court motions to exonerate drug trade leaders, Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha, for their role in the 1987 killing of a journalist. Following an urgent meeting of the National Security Council, secret police chief Gen. Miguel Maza Marquez said police would adopt new security measures to protect judges. The general said Valencia Garcia was accompanied by two armed security guards and was wearing a bulletproof vest when he was shot and killed. In July, Maza Marquez was the target of an assassination attempt he attributed to the cocaine traffickers. Antonio Salom Beltran, president of Colombia's Supreme Court, said the war against judges had reached an "intolerable point." In the last 10 years, 23 judges have been assassinated, and officials blame nearly all the deaths on drug traffickers. According to AP, every judge who has investigated Escobar Gaviria and Rodriguez Gacha are dead, have resigned or have fled Colombia after receiving death threats.

Aug. 17: Colombian judges and judiciary employees went on strike to demand increased protection, and 48 magistrates of Bogota's Superior Court resigned. Judiciary union vice president Helmut Romero said, "In view of the government's inability to protect its judges, we decided to begin a nationwide indefinite strike and intend to offer our collective resignation." Romero called on the government to step up protection of federal judges involved in drug trials "because it is not acceptable that a judge is slain in Colombia every 15 days." Aug. 18: In Medellin, five gunmen killed Antioquia department police chief Col. Waldemar Franklin Quintero. According to official sources cited by AFP, a police officer driving the van the colonel was traveling in also died when the attackers opened fire with automatic weapons, and another policeman was critically wounded. An unidentified witness told national radio network Caracol, "They fired without mercy for several minutes at the colonel, who was hit more than 100 times..." The attack on Franklin Quintero occurred moments after he left home. Franklin Quintero directed the local campaign against cocaine trafficking and led several major raids that resulted in the seizure of tons of the drug and the arrest of several dealers. Defense Minister Gen. Oscar Botero said that soldiers and police will increase protection for judges and intensify their crackdown on the drug trade. Botero announced results of "Operation Apocalipse," launched a few days earlier. He said police arrested 61 people in 100 raids on suspected drug processing and smuggling locations nationwide. According to the minister, police confiscated weapons and, at a house in suburban Bogota, $7.7 million in cash, gold, checks and jewelry. Seizures of valuables nationwide totaled $10 million, he said. In Bogota, magistrates carried signs accusing President Virgilio Barco of being an "accomplice" in the demise of justice in the country. Asked about the judiciary strike and Franklin Quintero's assassination, Justice Minister Monica de Grieff said: "It's terrifying what is happening in Colombia...The only way to confront this challenge is by fighting together, the government, judges, the armed forces and the citizenry to stop the wave of violence." The minister appealed to the country's more than 4,000 judges and magistrates to end
their strike. Late Friday night, at least seven gunmen opened fire at a political rally attended by an estimated 7,000 people in Soacha, 20 km. southwest of Bogota. Liberal Party Sen. Luis Carlos Galan, considered a favorite to win the May 1990 presidential elections, was fatally wounded. Local councilperson Julio Cesar Penalosa was also killed and at least nine others wounded, including three of Galan's bodyguards. The gunmen escaped. Galan, 46, died early Saturday in a nearby hospital. He had sustained six bullet wounds, despite wearing a bullet-proof vest. The senator, aware that his life was at risk, wore the protective vest at public meetings and traveled in the company of several armed bodyguards. Galan escaped an assassination attempt on Aug. 5 in Medellin. Galan, a journalist turned politician, favored extradition of drug traffickers as an effective means to begin ridding Colombia of both the drug trade and corruption. He was a former minister of education and ambassador to Italy. [In 1979, Galan split Liberal Party ranks by establishing what he called the "New Liberalism" movement, dedicated to combatting "corrupt, antiquated and bureaucratized" politicians who had long controlled the party. In 1982, Galan ran for the presidency as candidate of the Liberal party faction he founded. Largely because the Liberal Party vote was split, Conservative Party candidate Belisario Betancur won the presidency. In 1986, Galan once again entered the presidential race as an independent candidate. He later withdrew his candidacy after his movement lost several seats in congressional elections. When Liberal Party President Virgilio Barco came to power, Galan dedicated himself to collaboration with the government, and by mid-1988 had formally dissolved the "New Liberalism" movement. Supporters of Galan's movement, outspoken opponents to drug traffickers and corruption, became targets for drug ring hitmen. A well-known example was the April 30, 1984 assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. Lara Bonilla was a spokesperson for the "New Liberalism," and had denounced and convicted several drug traffickers. Shortly after the attack in Soacha, President Virgilio Barco delivered a speech broadcast nationwide on TV and radio declaring that he would use his powers under the nation's state of siege to reactivitate a treaty with the US to extradite suspected drug traffickers. The extradition treaty with the US, first established in the 19th century, was suspended in 1987. Colombia's Supreme Court ruled the treaty unconstitutional. Barco announced that drug traffickers' assets, including real estate, would be seized without the prior issue of court orders; accomplices would face up to 10 years in prison; and, security forces can detain persons suspected of links of any kind to the drug trade or traffickers incommunicado for up to seven days. The president also pledged that the government would provide stepped-up security for judges and judiciary employees working on drug trafficking cases. An emergency fund had been created, he said, to purchase armored cars and residences equipped with modern security systems. In his speech, Barco warned Colombians they should be prepared "to experience more pain and sufferings" in what he called the "war against the nation" unleashed by drug rings. Aug. 19: Secret police chief Gen. Maza said the drug traffickers would "keep on shooting," despite Barco's decision to intensify the war on drugs. In reference to the killers, Maza said, "Everyone knows who they are and we're not going to back down." Justice Minister Monica de Grieff suggested that only single judges and attorneys be assigned to prosecution of drug cases to reduce the number of potential victims subjected to harassment, threats and attacks by the drug mafia. One of the criticisms of President Barco's announced crackdown against the drug rings appearing in the local media and cited by Notimex was that the government should have established military courts to hand down summary judgments in the prosecution of drug traffickers. In Caracas, leading Venezuelan politicians expressed sorrow over the assassination of Galan, who had visited Venezuela during the previous week. "A close friend of Venezuela has died, a man who understood Latin American integration and defended democratic values," said Sen. Ramon Velasquez, of the ruling Democratic Action party. Also in Caracas, former presidents and political
leaders of Andean nations ended a three-day meeting by issuing a joint declaration condemning Galan's murder. As news of Galan's murder spread through the country, crowds estimated at hundreds of thousands came out on the streets shouting "justice, justice," and demanding action against the drug traffickers. The government decreed a three-day mourning period for Galan. When President Barco visited Congress to pay his last respects to Galan, whose body was laid out in state there, he was surrounded by thousands who accused him of failing to halt widespread violence. They shouted insults at him, waved white handkerchiefs and yelled: "Justice! Justice!" In a brief communique broadcast by the RCN radio network and printed by the Bogota daily La Prensa, the Medellin drug mafia pledged to continue killings of government officials. The statement signed by the "Extraditables," said, "We do want peace. We have screamed for it, but we will not beg for it." Unidentified police cited by AP said that the Medellin drug ring leaders had offered a $500,000 reward for Galan's death. Police said they had detained three suspects. Interior Minister Orlando Vasquez described the killings as the most serious crisis in Colombia's history and appealed to Colombians for cooperation on measures to be taken under the state of emergency. One was an immediate ban on all sales of liquor in Bogota.

Aug. 20: In statements on NBC's Meet the Press, US Attorney General Richard Thornburgh said that in talks this year in Bogota, he and President Barco had discussed "hitting (drug lords) in the pocket book where it really hurts" by seizing of assets, as well as extraditing them to the US. Asked if a US anti-drug plan to be unveiled by President George Bush Sept. 5 could involve sending US troops to Colombia, Thornburgh said, "That's an option that certainly has be considered...If in Colombia they feel, hypothetically, that they may have reached the point where they can no longer operate under the rule of law and have to use the rule of force, then they're going to require all the help they need." Colombian officials announced that 3,883 people had been detained during the weekend in connection with Galan's killing, and a crackdown on drug trafficking. The raids netted 260 guns and 522 vehicles, apparently the property of drug traffickers or hired gunmen. Armed forces commander in chief Nelson Mejia announced security forces would confiscate real estate and businesses owned by drug traffickers. Defense Minister Oscar Botero added that other measures would be aimed at destroying the coca crop and disrupting the trafficking networks. Gen. Mejia said a list of drug traffickers' real estate holdings was being updated and that a "gigantic plan" code-named Arco Iris was being prepared to attack the traffickers. The operation will also target the Cali drug ring, whose leaders have allegedly invested millions of dollars in businesses through frontmen. According to unidentified press reports cited by AP, Pablo Escobar Gaviria, head of the Medellin drug ring, traveled to Panama earlier in the week after ordering a series of killings, including Galan's. Galan was buried on Sunday. According to AFP, close to a million people watched the funeral procession, a three-mile route from the cathedral to the central cemetery in Bogota. Mourners yelled "Galan, Colombia is with you!" and "Justice! Justice!". They threw red and white carnations in the path of the cortege, and sang the national anthem. The cathedral service was attended by all leading politicians, and by ambassadors. Aug. 21: On Monday morning, Colombia's Defense Ministry reported 10,450 people had been detained in 321 raids nationwide. Ministry communiques said 622 weapons were seized as well as 1,023 vehicles and four tons of cocaine paste. Among the sites raided were buildings and ranches in and around the city of Medellin that are owned by Pablo Escobar. According to the ministry, at one ranch owned by Escobar, soldiers detained 52 people and seized 2,000 head of cattle, 100 pigs, 3,000 gallons of gasoline and several cars and trucks. Properties owned by the family of Jorge Ochoa and by Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha were also raided. Later in the day, Defense Ministry communiques reported that since Saturday, police and soldiers had arrested more than 11,000 persons. In an interview broadcast by the national radio chain Caracol from Cali, Gen. Manuel Bonnet Locarno said, "We haven't
yet been able to capture the drug cartel chiefs, but we have struck hard against their immense fortunes." Military spokespersons in Sincelejo, capital of northern Sucre department, said they had captured Eduardo Martinez Romero, believed to be a finance chief of the Medellin drug ring. A spokesperson for the judiciary union said judges and judiciary employees had decided to return to work. In Kennebunkport, Maine, White House Chief of Staff John Sununu said that the Colombian government had not requested military assistance. "There is no question that any request (for military assistance) would have to be taken on a long-term basis. It is not the kind of situation where they would ask anything to happen immediately. There has been no indication of their desire to do that and we're in no way prepared for that kind of request." In a letter addressed to President Barco, UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar expressed his concern over the violence unleashed in Colombia due to international drug trafficking, and offered condolences regarding the death of Sen. Galan. Perez de Cuellar said he was hopeful that the international community would apply concerted action against the illegal drug trade, as the spiralling violence linked to the trade equally impacts on developed and developing nations. In response to Bogota's request for a special meeting, the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States met and declared its "solidarity with Colombia in the face of a criminal aggression" by drug traffickers. Unidentified Latin American diplomats told AP that they interpreted Colombia's request as an attempt to pressure the US for more action to crack down on drug use, and as an move to neutralize any potential criticism for the declared state of emergency under which the Colombian government has detained thousands of people suspected of links to the drug trade. Bogota has long argued that if the US market were to be significantly reduced, the drug mafia's production and influence would also decline. The resolution approved by the OAS Council reversed the usual word order and condemned "the use, traffic and production" of drugs. In his speech before the OAS, Colombian ambassador Leopoldo Villar Borda said of Colombia that "no country has paid so high a price for the traffic created by an insatiable demand for drugs." When reporters asked if Colombia was prepared to ask for US troops in Bogota's war against the drug rings, Villar Borda reacted with incredulity, brushing aside the question with an emphatic "no." US Drug Enforcement Administration spokesperson Frank Shults said that the government has a list of between 50 and 100 indicted Colombian nationals who would be brought to the US for trial if the US were to request extradition. Shults said the exact number of Colombians the US would request extradited is not known since many of the names have been on the list for years. He added that the DEA and the Justice Department are reviewing those lists and making an assessment about the currency of the evidence...the availability of information." Only one top Colombian drug trafficker, Carlos Lehder, was captured and handed over to the US in 1987. He was convicted by a Florida court in 1988, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Sources who requested anonymity told AFP that a team of US police experts was ready to go to Colombia to give special training on security measures to judges and journalists, under a $5 million program Congress approved in 1988. ABC reported that the US State and Justice Departments planned to send a team of experts to Bogota on Aug. 22 to provide instruction to Colombian judges in methods for self-protection against attack. Washington is also preparing a training program in anti-drug operations for Colombian police. In a telephone call to President Barco, President Bush was assured that US troops were not needed in Colombia. (Basic data from several reports by AP, 08/17-19/89, 08/21/89; AFP, 08/18/89, 08/19/89, 08/21/89; Notimex, 08/18-21/89; and, Reuters, 08/19/89)