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Colombia's War Against Drug Traffickers: Summary Of Events & Statements, Aug. 29-sept. 4

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Aug. 29: Early Tuesday, bombs exploded at six state liquor stores in Medellin, and a travel agency in Bogota. No injuries were reported, said police, but damage totaled $100,000. Police blamed drug traffickers for the bombs. There were no claims of responsibility. Fabio Ochoa Restrepo, father of the reputed Medellin drug ring leaders Jorge Luis, Juan David and Jorge Ochoa Vaasquez, asked President Virgilio Barco to "end the blood-letting in our dear Colombia" by negotiating with drug traffickers to end the violence. "No more drug trafficking, no more war, no more assassinations, no more bombs," Ochoa Restrepo said in his message, which was dated Saturday and printed in local newspapers Tuesday. Ochoa Restrepo said drug traffickers are willing to negotiate for peace, but similar initiatives must be made by the government, leftist guerrillas and paramilitary groups. President Virgilio Barco has refused all calls for negotiations with traffickers. Clara Lopez Obregon, a Bogota city councilperson, said the government can win the war on drugs but must first get rid of police and government officials linked to the drug traffickers. Lopez Obregon's name has appeared on a death list by the drug mafia. Justice Minister Monica de Greiff held high-level talks with US officials in Washington to discuss protection of judges and the use of guns, aircraft and advisers the US is supplying Colombia under a $67.5 million emergency aid package. At the Colombian Embassy, De Greiff said she had not considered resigning despite death threats against her and her family by the drug mafia. "I intend next week to return to Colombia and continue my job as justice minister," she said. De Greiff said the discussions in Washington were "very useful," and that she was hopeful the US would come up with the extra $19 million she had requested, including money for bulletproof cars for judges and metal detector gates in courthouses. "The security and effectiveness of the judicial process in Colombia...are under the most extreme threat. The law is under siege in Colombia and we must protect it every way we can." In Kennebunkport, Maine, President Bush refused to comment on a report in Newsweek magazine that he had approved covert US action in Colombia against the drug ring leaders. Bogota police chief Gen. Miguel Maza Marquez announced that police had arrested Albert Jubis Hazvun, a 55-year-old suspect in the Aug. 18 killing of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan. The suspect, believed to be of Lebanese origin, was captured with four Colombians in a private office in Bogota two days after the murder. Peruvian Interior Minister Agustin Mantilla Campos announced close cooperation between Peruvian police and counterparts in Colombia and Ecuador in the search for drug traffickers. He told reporters that his office had ordered the closing of the Peruvian-Colombian border and reinforcement of police surveillance near the border. Next, Mantilla Campos described US assistance against drug trafficking as wholly inadequate. He demanded $600 million in aid for crop substitution in jungle areas. Aug. 30: Interior Minister Orlando Vasquez imposed a curfew in Medellin and nine other cities, affecting about 3 million people. He said the mayors of the municipalities under the curfew have broader powers to conduct searches, inspect vehicles and arrest suspects. The other eight communities affected by the curfew are Itagui, Bello, La Estrella, Envigado, Sabaneta, Rionegro, Copabacana, Guarne and Caldas. Medellin Mayor Juan Gomez Martinez said the curfew would be in effect from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. for all vehicles and pedestrians, and will remain in effect indefinitely.
"until the nights in Medellin quiet down." In a Medellin news conference broadcast by the national radio network Caracol, Gomez Martinez said there would be no exceptions to the curfew. "We will not give safe conduct passes," he said. Next, Gomez Martinez complained of a lack of security assistance from the national government. He has asked for 3,000 additional national police officers to bolster the city's force of 4,000. He said the government agreed to provide an extra 100. The mayor noted that Medellin had only 4,000 law enforcement agents compared with 9,000 in Bogota. The mayor said he supported talks with the traffickers, but that since the suggestion was rejected by the national government, he was carrying out all anti-drug measures ordered by Bogota. Unidentified judicial sources cited by AFP reported that three judges in Medellin had resigned over the weekend, and two left the country. As of Aug. 30, 100 judges had resigned since the drug ring leaders pledged total war in response to the government's crackdown on the narcotics traffic. The three judges were heading investigations into the murder of Antioquia governor Antonio Roldan, Antioquia provincial police chief Valdemar Franklin Quintero and judge Maria Helena Diaz. The judges reportedly quit after they and their families received announcements of their own funerals and funeral wreaths. Judge Octavio Barrera, who was investigating the governor's murder, was the first of the three justices to resign. The others, who were not identified, left Colombia for unknown destinations. The US government ordered families of its embassy staff to leave Colombia, a spokesperson said. AFP reported that Pablo Escobar Gaviria, one of four top leaders of the Medellin drug mafia, was once perceived as a self-styled Robin Hood. According to national security police, Escobar is now in a Panamanian hospital recovering from injuries sustained in a helicopter accident. Escobar was featured in a 1983 interview in the prestigious Semana magazine. In the story, he expounded on his philanthropic activities, and described himself as an astute entrepreneur who earned his fortune in the bicycle business. The US Drug Enforcement Agency estimated that in 1984-85 the drug cartel earned $2 billion. In a recent issue, The Financial Times reported that drug profits did not only go to Escobar and members of the drug mafia but also to a third of the Liberal Party parliamentarians who have had, or still have, links to drug trafficking. Escobar's popularity was reinforced by the support of the Colombian church and some of the Medellin priests often accompanied him on his tours through low-income barrios. In the early 1980s, he was allied with powerful Sen. Alberto Santofimio, Liberal Party candidate for the March 1990 presidential elections. Aug. 31: AP reported that in Medellin, a bomb strapped to an ice cream vendor's bicycle exploded at a paint factory, resulting in injuries to eight people. In a statement to AP on condition of anonymity, a police spokesperson said about 20 cars were damaged. Meanwhile, AFP and DPA reported that a rocket-type device was fired, resulting in serious injuries to four persons. Police were cited as saying that casualties could have been much higher if the attackers had not missed their target the factory's seven fuel depots of the factory. Instead, the device hit a billboard. Radio networks RCN and Caracol reported receiving calls from an anonymous man claiming responsibility on behalf of "The Extraditables." The caller said, "At nighttime, when bombs are placed there are few victims, but there will be more victims now because we will place the bombs at daytime when there are more people in the city." Police said no deaths or medical emergencies were reported overnight in Medellin for the first time in several months. Normally, they said, one murder occurred on average every two hours. Medellin police also announced the discovery of two explosive devices in the early hours of Thursday morning, and a series of bombings causing minor damage on Wednesday night. About 530 people were arrested through dawn Thursday for violating the curfew. Later, AFP reported that police announced arrests of 800 people. Colombia's Security Council decided to keep the names of judges handling drug cases secret. In Colombia, judges handle both the work of a judge and of a prosecuting attorney in questioning witnesses and suspects, reviewing evidence and deciding whether a person should
be charged. Under the Security Council's decree, judges will not be visible when questioning witnesses or suspects. Police spokespersons announced the arrest of a suspect in the Aug. 18 murder of Luis Carlos Galan, in the city of Cartagena. The arrest occurred near the city's airport when the suspect was found in possession of a counterfeit passport. Unconfirmed reports said the person arrested was Alvaro Delgado Posso, native of Del Valle department. The US State Department has reportedly urged all US citizens in Colombia to "seriously consider" leaving the country. Israel also urged its citizens to leave Colombia. Government sources in Jerusalem said attacks were feared on Israelis after reports that Israeli mercenaries had been providing combat training to drug mafia personnel. Colombian authorities said they had arrested two more alleged drug traffickers sought by the US: Alberto Orlandez Gamboa and Bernardo Londono Quintero. Sept. 1: At a press conference, Defense Minister Oscar Mejia Botero said that since the crackdown began 15 days ago, the army had carried out more than 2,000 raids, resulting in the confiscation of 550 ranches and other real estate properties and 349 planes. Regarding the "Israeli connection," the minister said that prior to airing the videotape with a voice cut of a commando speaking Hebrew, neither the government nor the military had any knowledge of Israeli involvement with the drug traffickers, nor was the presence of Israeli mercenaries authorized in Colombia. Police said they deactivated a 40-lb. dynamite bomb in Medellin at the Colombian Industrial Bank at 8 p.m. Thursday evening. Police and fire department spokespersons reported that the Thursday explosion at the paint factory in Medellin had caused $300,000 in damages, and injured at least 13 people. AP cited local news reports which said that 33 pounds of dynamite placed in a box strapped to an ice cream vendor's bicycle exploded at the factory. Police in Medellin said 527 people had been arrested for violating curfew. A US narcotics expert in Bogota who demanded anonymity told foreign reporters that drug ring leaders sought by the US are being protected by corrupt military officers who help the traffickers avoid arrest. The expert said the wealthy drug traffickers can easily afford to pay military officers up to $15,000 a month for information about anti-drug raids before they occur. He added that such soldiers generally earn only about $800 a month in salary. At a news conference in Bogota, Defense Minister Gen. Oscar Botero, said foreign troops were not needed in Colombia. Meanwhile, US military advisors were being prepared for assisting Colombian military and police in the battle with drug traffickers. Botero said the Colombian army was capable of handling the $65 million worth of equipment being sent by the US without the assistance of 200 advisers, but he did not rule out requesting technical help in "specific fields." He added that the most effective assistance the US and other wealthy nations could provide would be reducing drug use at home. The minister said 2,004 properties had been searched, 550 estates seized, 1,061 weapons found and 1,356 cars, 33 yachts, 142 motorcycles and 349 aircraft confiscated. Sept. 2: A 150-kg. bomb exploded in Bogota, partially destroying the offices of daily newspaper El Espectador, and causing the death of one person and 83 wounded. At 6:30 a.m., three men parked a truck at a gasoline station located close to the newspaper facility, and escaped in a nearby car. Ten minutes later the "truck bomb" exploded. Col. Alfonso Rosas of the Bogota police said the blast, heard 18 miles away, wrecked the gas station, melting gasoline pumps and sending shreds of metal flying 100 yards. The explosion blasted out all windows in the newspaper building, and destroyed desks and computers. The fire department estimated over $1 million in damages. Police said the newspaper's advertising and editorial offices were destroyed, but relatively minor damage to printing equipment was reported. Most of the injured had been riding by in two city buses when the explosion occurred. According to Notimex, the explosion did not totally destroy the newspaper facilities because the bomb failed to ignite 11,000 gallons of gasoline in the filling station's tanks. Serious material damage was also reported at a nearby metalworking plant, Corpacero, and at a bank. For the past five years, El Espectador has denounced
the drug trafficking mafia. In 1986, newspaper editor Guillermo Cano was shot to death in front of the paper offices. In June this year, El Espectador's principal attorney was shot to death in northern Bogota. Several days ago, Cano's sons, Fernando and Juan Guillermo, co-editors of El Espectador, left Colombia after receiving death threats. The paper is now headed by veteran reporter Jose Salgar. [In September 1986, assassins killed veteran anti-drug newsman Raul Echavarria of the newspaper Occidente in Cali. Juan Gomez, now mayor of Medellin, fought off a kidnapping attempt in 1987 when he was the editor of Medellin's El Colombiano. The "Extraditables" claimed responsibility. Journalist Andres Pastrana left the directorship of an independently produced Colombian network TV news program to run for mayor of Bogota, the capital. The "Extraditables" kidnapped him in January 1988, but police rescued him a week later and he won the election.]

Terrorists bombed a beach house off Colombia's Caribbean coast that belongs to the family of Luis Gabriel Cano, the president of El Espectador's publishing company. He said no one was injured. An unidentified Colombian Defense Ministry source told AP that the first US military advisers had arrived in the country. The Pentagon has said it will send, among other things, two C-130 transport planes, five UH-1H combat helicopters, eight A-37 reconnaissance jets, trucks, boats, radios, grenade launchers, machine guns, rifles and pistols. Sept. 3: Officials reported that more than 500 estates and hundreds of cars, planes and 33 yachts believed to belong to drug traffickers have been confiscated in the past two weeks. President Virgilio Barco fired Col. Antonio Sanchez, chief of the 4,000-member anti-drug unit in Medellin. A source at the national police headquarters in Bogota who requested anonymity told AP that he was dismissed for dealing with drug traffickers. Sanchez was the third colonel fired from the national police in a crackdown on corruption initiated in January. Two US C-130 transport planes flew into Bogota, marking the beginning of the delivery of $65 million in US military aid promised by Washington. US Ambassador Thomas McNamara, at the Bogota military air base where the C-130s landed, said the planes "are in excellent condition and should serve the Colombian armed forces for many years." Meanwhile, sporadic gunfire could be heard for about four minutes from an estimated 2-1/2 miles away. Each plane had a three-person crew. McNamara said the transport planes brought spare parts for eight A-37 observation and attack aircraft expected to arrive Sept. 4 at the Caribbean port of Barranquilla. The ambassador said five UH-1H transport helicopters are to arrive Tuesday. Sept. 4: Government officials said a man armed with an automatic rifle arrived at the terminal entrance to the international airport located at Rionegro outside Medellin at about 7:15 a.m. and began firing on airport passengers. Airport security guards shot back. Two people were killed the assailant and a passenger. Among the wounded were three security guards and nine passengers. Col. Luis Camejo, commander of national police for Antioquia department, said the gunman "began to fire indiscriminately with a G-3 rifle," an automatic weapon manufactured by Israel. National radio network Caracol identified the dead passenger as a 27-year-old administrator for Pintuco, the country's largest paint company, based in Medellin. The Pintuco factory was bombed Thursday in an attack blamed on drug dealers. According to a report by DPA, officials said the attack was apparently aimed at a politician and security officials who were in the departure hall at the time waiting for a flight to Bogota. Civil aviation officials in Monteria, a northwestern city, said a C-123 transport plane pertaining to the State Department's international narcotics division was firebombed early Sunday. US embassy spokespersons told reporters Monday that it could not confirm the bombing but acknowledged the plane had been badly damaged by some kind of fire. Mayor Juan Gomez Martinez reduced an eight-hour curfew to six hours, or from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. The neighboring city of Itagui also was to shorten its curfew to the same hours. Medellin police detained 484 people for violating the curfew Sunday night. Police explosives experts said they discovered a bomb mounted on the exterior of
a Colombian passenger jet at the Jose Maria Cordoba international airport in Rionegro, outside of Medellin. The Avianca jet carrying 180 passengers made a stopover in Rionegro, destined ultimately for Panama City. Police said they discovered the bomb after the strong smell of gunpowder was detected inside the plane, owned by Servicios Aereos de Medellin (SAM), a subsidiary of the Colombian airline Avianca. Explosives experts removed the device and detonated it at an isolated area away from the airport, police said. Later Monday, Avianca categorically denied reports that a bomb was found on one of its planes, according to local news reports. Avianca declared the bomb report "totally false" and complained that the news media were spreading misinformation, said Radio Caracol. The radio station in turn asserted that authorities in Bogota had helped spread the report by confirming that a bomb was discovered on the hull of a plane belonging to SAM. Authorities later said police removed a suspicious package from the SAM aircraft and blew it up, but the box contained no explosives. Late Monday, two assailants bombed a police post in El Poblado, a wealthy suburb of Medellin. The bomb also blew out the windows of a passing automobile, but the driver escaped unharmed, police said. At least 20 bombs have exploded in the Medellin area since President Barco announced in an Aug. 10 speech new emergency measures to combat the drug mafia. Targets have included two political party offices, a dozen banks, two country clubs, a paint factory, a hotel, a car dealership and an insurance firm. (Basic data from several reports by AFP, Notimex, DPA, AP, Xinhua, 08/29/89-09/04/89)

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