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Colombia's "drug War": Summary Of Recent Events & Statements
by John Neagle
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Sept. 18: US Embassy spokesperson Peter Samson told AP by telephone that shortly before 9 p.m. "a homemade rocket propelled by a homemade launcher" struck a corner of the embassy building, causing no injuries. On the same evening, three bombs exploded in northern Bogota, heavily damaging three banks and 30 other businesses and shattering windows over a large area. One security guard was injured, police said. Two other bombs were deactivated by police. A spokesperson for the Army 13th Brigade headquarters in Bogota told reporters that troops seized a 22,000-acre cattle ranch, 5,000 head of cattle and 300 show horses in Cundinamarca department belonging to drug ring leader Jose Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha. In August, the army seized 18 ranches owned by Rodriguez Gacha. At a news conference, Medellin Mayor Juan Gomez Martinez called on President Virgilio Barco to "tell the whole truth" and reveal the names of important Colombians involved in drug trafficking. Colombian news program 24 Hours said the US embassy has a list of Colombian political figures, including a presidential primary candidate and members of the national legislature, who have been denied visas to enter the US. According to a report by Notimex, several months ago the US cancelled visas for at least 22 politicians suspected of links to drug trafficking, including Liberal Party senator Alberto Santofimio Botero. Santofimio is a party leader, and has previously served as president of the lower legislative chamber and as Justice Minister. A native of Tolima department, Santofimio Botero spent several months in jail in the 1970s after being charged with cashing checks for non-existent government employees. Santofimio opposes extradition of Colombians to other countries to face criminal charges, and has been seen in the company of suspected drug traffickers in Tolima. There are no charges pending against Santofimio in Colombia or anywhere else, nor are his close friends facing charges. He was an enemy of Luis Carlos Galan, the Liberal presidential candidate assassinated in August. Galan's death served to trigger the government's "war" on drug traffickers. Other Liberal Party politicians on the Embassy list are Bernardo Guerra Serna, Jairo Ortega, Arcesio Sanchez Ojeda, Jaime Vargas Suarez, Juan Slebi, David Name Teran, Victor Eduardo Tango, Enrique Ramos Caballero, Gilberto Flores Sanchez, and Samuel Alce Escruceria. Sept. 19: On Tuesday evening, the Colombian Senate heard six hours of testimony from Defense Minister Gen. Oscar Botero Restrepo who denied opposition charges he is linked to foreign mercenaries training assassination squads for drug rings. The special Senate session came after arrest warrants were issued Sept. 17 for two Israelis, former army Col. Yair Klein and civilian Arik Acek, accused of training assassination squads for drug traffickers. Interior Minister Orlando Vasquez Velasquez told senators he knows "there is a massive infiltration of narco-traffickers in the government, the armed forces, police and congress." This year 85 members of the army and national police have reportedly been dismissed and charged with wrongdoing, most for alleged links to cocaine merchants. Sept. 21: Justice Minister Monica de Greiff resigned after three months in office. She received numerous death threats since she signed an extradition order bringing Eduardo Martinez Romero to Atlanta, Ga. on Sept. 6 to face US charges. Radio Caracol cited unidentified sources who said de Greiff handed a letter of resignation to President Virgilio Barco, who offered her the ambassadorial post in Portugal. She reportedly
declined. Early in the day, 10 bombs exploded at the offices of Colombia's main political parties after senators urged the government to publish names of officials suspected of taking bribes from drug traffickers. Newspapers identified 25 politicians denied US visas, following days of rumors the US has a blacklist of Colombian officials on the payroll of drug traffickers. Nine bombs in Bogota went off shortly after 3 a.m. in offices of six presidential candidates' campaign headquarters, and the public offices of the Liberal Party and the opposition Conservative Party. Another explosion damaged a savings and loan bank. Two people were injured in the blasts. Damages resulting from the explosions at the political offices were estimated at $250,000. A car-bomb containing 100 kilos of plastic explosive was found parked near a government building in downtown Bogota.

Sept. 22: At a news conference, Gen. Ramon Niebles said two men have confessed to killing Sen. Luis Carlos Galan, and the army knows who hired the alleged assassins. He did not identify the alleged assassins by name, but said they were members of a band called The Blackies. Next, the general said these two and another two men were arrested Sept. 21 in a house in Bogota where the army found weapons, ammunition and 220 pounds of dynamite packed under a car seat. Two of the men are suspected of setting off a 500-pound bomb Sept. 2 that seriously damaged the offices of Bogota daily El Espectador. Police have said twice before that they captured Galan's killers, and both times the suspects were released after a few days. At a news conference in Medellin, president of Colombia's lower legislative chamber, Liberal Party congressperson Norberto Morales, said he was telephoned by Medellin drug ring leaders Pablo Escobar and Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha. Morales said Escobar and Rodriguez Gacha offered to invest millions of dollars in Colombian industry if a truce is reached. Morales Ballesteros recently announced he favored dialogue with the traffickers. He said both Escobar and Rodriguez Gacha agreed with a dialogue proposal offered last month by Medellin Mayor Juan Gomez Martinez, a member of the opposition Social Conservative party. In statements to the Radio Caracol network, Justice Minister de Greiff confirmed she had resigned, and indicated that President Virgilio Barco had asked her to do so. She also confirmed that she had turned down the ambassadorship to Portugal. De Greiff said she would travel to the US in the next two weeks to join her husband and three-year-old son, who are under tight security, then return to Colombia.

Sept. 23: Two bombs exploded in Bogota on Saturday evening, injuring two people. One explosion occurred in a downtown movie theater, and the other damaged a government-owned bus terminal in the northeast portion of the city. Since Aug. 23, when drug traffickers declared a "total war" after the government initiated a crackdown, officials have blamed them for 102 bombings and arson attacks that killed six people and injured 129. Sept. 24: Three bombs exploded Sunday night at banks in the capital, but caused no injuries. Sept. 25: A bomb exploded in the Cartagena Hilton hotel at the coastal resort of Cartagena, killing two people and seriously wounding a third. Police said the bomb exploded on the hotel's sixth floor. The majority owner of the Cartagena Hilton is the Colombian government's National Tourism Council. The Hilton's 1,500 guests were evacuated to other Cartagena hotels. Also in Cartagena, a bomb exploded at a bank branch, injuring a guard and passerby. In Bogota, a bomb exploded in a suburban office of the city's electric power company. No injuries were reported. In a live interview with the Radio Caracol network, congressperson Norberto Morales said he favors a peaceful settlement with the traffickers: "We have to open a way toward this initiative because we are bleeding to death (and) our economy as in ruins." A contender for the Liberal Party presidential nomination, Ernesto Samper, said in an interview published in the Bogota daily La Republica that if the government's war against the traffickers fails, "the road left is legalization of drugs." Colombian judges threatened to strike unless they receive more rigorous protection by the government. Former Justice Minister de Greiff said she was promised $19 million in extra US aid earlier this month to protect judges. The National Association of Judicial Employees
said it has heard nothing since about the aid. According to the Association, 1,600 of the country's 5,000 judges have been threatened with death in the last 12 months. Sept. 26: Police reported that a bomb exploded outside a crowded supermarket in downtown Bogota. Several people were injured by flying glass. A statement published by daily newspapers El Tiempo and El Espectador by the M-19 guerrilla organization called for immediate negotiations between the government and the drug traffickers, and an end to extradition of Colombian nationals. The communique was signed by M-19 leaders Carlos Pizarro Leon-Gomez, Antonio Navarro Wolf, Otty Patino and German Rojas Nino. In an address on Tuesday evening, President Barco said that since he declared war on the traffickers, security forces have seized 1,056 properties from the mafia leaders along with 525 vehicles, 74 boats and 375 airplanes. More than 10,800 people have been arrested, and 535 of them have been charged with crimes that link them to drug traffickers, Barco said. (Basic data from AP, 09/18/89, 09/20/89, 09/21/89, 09/25/89, 09/26/89; AFP, 09/21/89, 09/22/89, 09/25/89, 09/26/89; Notimex, 09/21/89)

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