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Colombia: Update On "drug War"

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Sept. 26: A statement by the M-19 guerrilla organization published in daily newspaper El Tiempo (Bogota) called for immediate negotiations between the government and the drug traffickers. In an nationwide televised address, President Virgilio 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, he said. Sept. 27: AFP cited reports by Bogota police stating that about 50 kg. of dynamite exploded prematurely in a car as it rolled into a Bogota gasoline station Wednesday night, killing a 16-year-old girl and 21-year-old man inside the vehicle, and wounding five station employees. The victims were suspected of "links" to the drug traffickers. Newspaper reports said the two young people were driving to the town square in Suba, about 15 km. northwest of Bogota, which is surrounded by a police station, judicial offices, a church and a school. Other press reports indicated the car bomb was intended for the Suba offices of the Administrative Security Department (investigative and intelligence police force). According to a report by Notimex, other sources indicated that the two victims were employees at a nearby restaurant. The explosion caused damage to at least 50 residences located in a 500 meter radius of the gasoline station. Sept. 28: Union chief Judge Antonio Suarez said the nation's 4,500 judges would not strike because a recent meeting with acting justice minister Carlos Lemus indicated the government appeared to be trying harder to provide additional security for judicial officials. Suarez added that judges still had not received armored cars, communications equipment and bulletproof vests promised by the US and former justice minister Monica de Greiff. On Thursday evening, a car packed with dynamite exploded in the basement garage of the Tequendama Intercontinental hotel in Bogota, which is owned by the army's retired officers organization. Sixty cars were damaged or destroyed, and one person wounded. Earlier in the day, police reported an explosion in a Bogota bank, injuring one man and destroying 15 stores. Another bomb exploded harmlessly at a transformer substation of the government's electric company in Bogota. In Cali, two bombs exploded at a bank and at a warehouse owned by the bank. In Washington, US President George Bush and Colombian counterpart Virgilio Barco discussed plans for a possible pan-American anti-drugs summit. Bush said the topic would come up for discussion at the planned conference of heads of state from about 20 North, Central and South American nations scheduled to take place on Oct. 27-28 in Costa Rica. El Tiempo daily newspaper (Bogota) reported that the government has returned 100 of 375 planes seized since Aug. 19. The National Drug Council decided that 180 of the aircraft had been used in drug trafficking and turned the planes over to the Colombian air force. The disposition of the other 95 aircraft is under investigation by the Council. Sept. 29: Seven bombs exploded Friday night in Colombia, five in Bogota and two in Cali, according to a communiqué by the national police. Four of the bombs in Bogota were at public schools and one at a bank. In Cali one bomb exploded at a department store and another at a small grocery store near a Colombian air force base. The seven bombs injured seven people slightly, including two children at one of the Bogota schools, police said. No one claimed responsibility for the bombs. During a speech before the UN General Assembly, Barco called for a global effort to seize traffickers' assets, and for the US to do more to restrict demand for drugs. He said, "Every tactic and every weapon in
the war against narcotics pales in significance compared with the need to reduce demand. Those who consume cocaine are contributing to the assassination of my people by the criminal drug cartels." Next, Barco called for more rigorous controls on the manufacture and sale of chemicals used in cocaine production, which, he said, "come mainly from North America and Europe." He also called for limits on the sale of arms to drug traffickers, steps to prevent foreign mercenaries from providing assistance to Colombian traffickers, and an end to the laundering of drug profits through the Western banking system. Sept. 30: Daily newspaper El Tiempo reported that the Justice Ministry will extradite Ana Helena Rodriguez to Florida next week to face federal drug trafficking charges. Rodriguez was handed the extradition notice Sept. 29, and has until Oct. 6 to appeal. She was arrested in August. Rodriguez would become the second Colombian extradited to the US since President Barco declared war on drug traffickers Aug. 19. Notimex reported that Colombian judges do not know what to do with drug traffickers' assets seized by security forces. The assets include buildings, ranches, houses, cattle, works of art, horses, among others. The courts have received thousands of petitions for the return of confiscated property to owners. According to statements by military officials, until the disposition of such property is decided, 25% of Colombian troops serving as guards will remain effectively immobilized. Two bombs exploded Saturday night in Bogota, one just four blocks from the presidential palace and the other at a school. Police said there were no injuries. The bomb near the palace destroyed a national police station that was under construction. Oct. 1: Drug ring leader Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha reportedly managed to escape in a helicopter just before a raid on one of his strongholds last week, police said. During the raid in the town of Quipama, 100 km. northwest of Bogota, four people were arrested and a cache of arms was seized. Gacha escaped upon learning that the 500-strong police force was in the vicinity. Security forces confiscated $196,000 worth of pesos stuffed into burlap bags and about 40 guns, El Espectador daily newspaper quoted a police official as saying. An official statement by the Ecuadoran government released late Sunday said suspected drug dealer Evaristo Porras Ardila was sent back to Colombia earlier in the day but gave no details. Porras was arrested in Quito on Sept. 27, according to the government statement. Since 1987, he had lived in Ecuador under an assumed name and was president of Ecuamer, an import-export business. According to a New York Times article dated Oct. 1 (published Oct. 2), many Colombians are weary of the so-called drug war, and would prefer that the government negotiate with the traffickers. Liberal Party Sen. Eduardo Carrillo Nates said, "If this continues we are going to have to have a dialogue with the narcotics traffickers...Many people are saying the government should stop the war. Then the bombs would stop. The export of cocaine would not stop. But the country would be calm again." Unidentified Colombian and US officials say the government's efforts have almost certainly disrupted cocaine processing and shipping, but it is unknown if exports to the US have been reduced. Meanwhile, few raids have been reported in the last three weeks and none of the drug mafia's principal leaders have been captured. "People are having a lot of doubts," said Juan Carlos Pastrana, editor of opposition daily newspaper, La Prensa. "The drug traffickers are succeeding," said Maria Jimena Duzan, a senior editor of daily newspaper El Espectador. Hernan Melendez, who was a public relations consultant to Sen. Luis Carlos Galan, said that in the beginning, "I believed the president had to do something...But the price is becoming too high. If the stability of the country requires dialogue with the narcotics traffickers, then we should do it." Norberto Morales Ballesteros, president of Colombia's lower legislative chamber, said: "People are confused. They don't see government actions as capable of eliminating the terrorism." Morales referred to the government's peace negotiations with guerrilla groups. He asked, "Wouldn't we avoid many of the negative events if we applied a similar solution to the narcotics traffickers?" The drug trafficking leaders have offered to end the cocaine traffic in Colombia, to invest more
of their earnings at home and to answer criminal charges in local courts. In return, they wish to be left alone, i.e., join the country’s legitimate business elite. National police in Bogota said three people were wounded when three bombs exploded Sunday in Cali. Another person was injured when a bomb exploded in the northern city of Sincelejo, capital of Sucre department. A 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew was ordered in Sincelejo, where four other bombs were found and deactivated, the Colombian radio chain RCN said. Oct. 2: In Los Angeles, US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) official John Zienter said the Medellin and Cali cocaine rings may now be joining forces to fight the government crackdown. He said cocaine from both the Medellin and Cali organizations was found by police Sept. 28 in about 20 tons of drugs seized at a warehouse outside of Los Angeles. It was the largest drug bust in history. Zienter did not disclose the procedure used to determine whether the cocaine came from the Medellin and Cali drug cartels or what amount of the drugs each group had sent. Seven people were arrested late last week in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Nevada in connection with the Los Angeles drug bust. The Los Angeles District Attorney’s office described the detainees as "major drug dealers. The DEA said the cocaine discovered in the LA warehouse, along with $10 million in cash, had come by trailer truck from Mexico. (Basic data from AP, 09/26/89, 09/28/89-10/02/89; AFP, 09/28/89, 10/01/89, 10/02/89; DPA, 09/29/89; Notimex, 09/29/89; Xinhua, 10/02/89; New York Times, 09/30/89, 10/02/89)