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Colombia: Update On "drug War" Events, Statements

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Oct. 2: Gilberto Florez, a Liberal Party congressperson, and two police escorts was targeted by gunfire near Mocoa. The guards shot back at the unidentified assailants, and no one was injured. According to local press reports, Florez had sought entry to the US, but was denied a US visa for unknown reasons. On Monday evening, two bombs exploded in Bogota, badly damaging a video store and a pharmacy. In Barranquilla, two bombs exploded, one damaging a senator's political headquarters and the other a bank. A report by AP said a total of seven bombs exploded during the evening, injuring four people. The four brought the total of bombings since mid-August police blame on drug traffickers to 142.

Oct. 3: The Colombian Supreme Court upheld President Virgilio Barco's decree allowing extradition of persons accused of drug-related crimes to the US, and overturned his order to confiscate drug ring leaders' real estate and other property. The decree permitting property seizure, said the court, did not specifically cite drug traffickers. The court then overturned the decree on a technicality. A police explosives expert told AFP on condition of anonymity that within the last 43 days, police conducted 303 searches for bombs in government offices, schools, colleges, airports, and bus terminals.

Oct. 4: In a statement, President Barco said he issued another decree on extradition a year ago that specifically cited drug traffickers. The court must now rule on that decree. On Wednesday evening during a Senate session, Sen. Juan Slebi claimed the US Drug Enforcement Administration had killed thousands of leftists in the last four years that were blamed on drug traffickers. Slebi was reportedly denied a US visa because of suspected links to the drug trade.

Oct. 5: In a communique, the government announced that Colombian voters will decide whether suspected drug traffickers wanted in the US should be extradited. The referendum may come as early as January. President Barco named Carlos Lemos Simmonds to the interior ministry (called ministry of government). Interior is in charge of the nation's police force. Lemos Simmonds was communications minister and acting minister of justice since the resignation of Monica de Greiff. Colombia's new justice minister is Roberto Salazar Manrique, a former treasury official and deputy director of the national bank. Enrique Danies Rincones, former governor of Guajira, was appointed minister of communications. According to local news reports, until Salazar accepted the justice ministry post, five people turned Barcos down after receiving death threats, including three government officials. Two bombs exploded Thursday evening, injuring two people and damaging and supermarket and a bank. Also on Thursday evening, the army reportedly arrested three alleged hired assassins just before they were to meet with Medellin drug ring leaders. The arrests took place on a farm in Versalles, Antioquia state.

Oct. 6: Police said they captured six men linked to a series of bombings in Bogota. Local residents were credited for making the arrests possible.

Oct. 7: Bogota daily newspaper La Prensa reported that Joaquin Vallejo, a 76-year-old former ambassador to the UN and former interior minister, carried messages from the drug traffickers to Barco's secretary general, German Montoya, from last September until five days after the assassination of Luis Carlos Galan. Two of La Prensa's principal owners, Misael Pastrana and Belesario Betancur, are both former presidents and members of the Conservative Party. Memos and other documents about the alleged contacts were delivered to La Prensa by Alvaro Leyva, a Conservative party senator. Montoya said he had met with Vallejo, but on his own initiative and that he had told Vallejo that negotiations with the drug traffickers were
impossible. Montoya's statement called the La Prensa report "calumnious" and said it showed the paper's "lack of solidarity with the national crusade against drug traffickers that is led by the government and supported by the world." La Prensa said the main document among the messages is a memo in Vallejo's handwriting that summarizes proposals from Group A, identified as the Medellin drug ring. The newspaper published a photograph of the piece of paper. According to the memo, the Medellin drug trade leaders were ready to abandon cocaine processing, turn over its arms, laboratories and airstrips and help the government fight against other drug traffickers. In return, the traffickers asked for amnesty and guarantees not to be extradited. Oct. 8: In interviews published in Bogota's two leading dailies, El Tiempo and El Espectador, Joaquin Vallejo was quoted as saying the talks were carried out only through intermediaries. He was quoted as saying that the government did not discourage the contacts between a Medellin lawyer representing the traffickers and German Montoya, with Vallejo as the messenger. According to Vallejo, Montoya had said that such negotiations would be possible only if the United States and other cocaine consuming countries agreed to participate. Vallejo told El Espectador he met with Pablo Escobar and Jorge Luis Ochoa, Medellin drug ring leaders, in September 1988. A bomb exploded on a bus outside Bogota, killing seven people, and causing serious injury to eight. Police said there was no way of determining whether the incident was related to a wave of bombings by drug traffickers. During his inauguration speech, new Justice Minister Roberto Salazar Manrique said supported extradition of suspected drug traffickers, and opposed negotiations with them. He said he plans to make reorganization of the judicial system a priority and to serve out his term as justice minister until Barco's government term expires August 7, 1990. Oct. 9: Six Colombian reporters have been killed since April, 10 others have been kidnapped, the publishers of two Medellin newspapers have fled the country, and the Bogota daily El Espectador was bombed in September. The Caracol radio network reported that government security agents raided five cocaine laboratories along the Rosario River in southwestern Narino state, arrested eight people and destroyed a ton of coca leaves used to make the drug. Oct. 10: Police reported 13 explosions in Bogota, Barranquilla and Pereira before dawn, causing injury to 19 people. Four of 9 bombs that exploded in Bogota damaged power pylons. Electricity service in the city was not interrupted. Three bombs exploded and two were defused in Pereira (western Colombia), said national police Col. Gabriel Granados. He said a bomb planted in a lottery ticket office wounded 11 people. Police in Barranquilla, a Caribbean port city, said one bomb exploded, but no one was injured. The bombings coincided with a visit by Gen. Maxwell Thurman, head of the US Southern Command in Panama, to confer with President Barco. According to AP, there were no indications whether the bombings were connected with the general's visit. In Medellin, Martha Luz Lopez, manager of El Espectador, was shot to death by an assailant on a motorcycle. The killing occurred as she was leaving the newspaper's office. Her mother, Martha Lopez, was seriously wounded in the attack. Lopez's death marked the fifth attack against employees or facilities of El Espectador, which has adopted an anti-drug position. On Dec. 17, 1986, the newspaper's chief editor and publisher, Guillermo Cano Isaza, was murdered by gunmen. Two days earlier, Amparo Hurtado de Paz the paper's US correspondent her husband and their 9-year-old daughter were found murdered in Miami, Florida. Two Espectador journalists were murdered in March 1989 and last month in Buenaventura. On Sept. 2, a large car bomb exploded next the paper's main office in Bogota, killing one person and wounding 83. Oct. 11: In a letter read by the Caracol radio network, reputed head of the Medellin drug ring, Pablo Escobar, said, "Colombian peace is more important than the considerations and conceptions of the other governments of the world." In the letter, reportedly signed by Escobar, he requested that the director of La Prensa newspaper intercede with the government on behalf of the Medellin
organization, to end its drug war. La Prensa and other papers, he said, should act "for the sake of peace" as intermediaries in negotiations between traffickers and the government. The letter said Escobar wants leaders from the Roman Catholic Church, the judiciary and politicians to help begin the dialogue. "In the same way that war decrees can be issued so can peace decrees be issued," the letter said. The letter also said news reports of previous government negotiations with drug ring leaders were accurate despite government denials. Bogota newspaper El Espectador asked the government for protection following the assassination of two of its employees in Medellin on Tuesday. Drug traffickers claimed responsibility for the killings, and threatened to kill the paper's 11 remaining employees in Medellin if they do not leave town. (Basic data from AP, 10/03-06/89, 10/08-11/89; AFP, 10/02/89, 10/06/89, 10/08-10/89; Notimex, 10/06/89; 10/09/89; Radio Nederland Wereldomroep, Swiss Radio International, 10/09/89)

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