10-26-1989

Colombia: Update On "drug War"

John Neagle
Colombia: Update On "drug War"

by John Neagle

Category/Department: General
Published: Thursday, October 26, 1989

Oct. 20: A car bomb exploded in front of a hotel in the Caribbean port city, Barranquilla, seriously injuring four people. According to AFP, at least 10 people suffered minor injuries, and the explosion caused extensive damage to shops and buildings. Federal police announced that Robert James Sokolowski had been arrested, and was being held for extradition to the US. The Justice Department in Washington said the suspect's name was actually Robert Sokol Jr., 29, who is wanted on a 1984 federal conspiracy charge to distribute cocaine in Greensboro, NC. Judges ended a three-day strike to demand protection from drug traffickers. The judiciary employees union said its demands were not met, and that the judges have not yet received any of the $19 million in security assistance promised by the US. The judges threatened to strike again if the government does not provide bulletproof vests, bulletproof cars and bodyguards. In a telephone interview with AP, an attorney representing the union, Gregorio Oviedo, said the government had promised to deliver 25 motorcycles for guards, 72 bulletproof vests and 14 metal detectors in the following week, and that by Nov. 30, there will be 50 bulletproof cars turned over to judges who are considered the most threatened by drug traffickers. He added that all of the promised equipment is Colombian, and will provide protection for only 2% of the judges who have received death threats from drug traffickers. Oviedo said the only protection thus far received by Colombia's 5,000 judges consisted of 40 bulletproof vests delivered as part of a $65 million US military aid package for fighting the traffickers. He said the 45-lb. vests were returned because they were so heavy that many of the lighter-framed judges could hardly walk about while wearing them. The M-19 guerrilla movement and the leftist political coalition, Patriotic Union (UP), confirmed that they were contacted recently by persons representing the Medellin drug ring who are anxious to organize a non-aggression pact with the government. M-19 leader Hipolito Blanco said that a month ago, spokespersons for the Medellin traffickers discussed their desire for a "dialogue" with members of M-19. Last month, in paid advertisements in Colombian newspapers, M-19 said it supported talks between the government and the drug rings toward ending the violence. UP presidential candidate Bernardo Jaramillo said he was contacted by a Medellin lawyer on behalf of the drug traffickers to discuss the possibility of "dialogue." Jaramillo stated that while he is supportive of the concept of dialogue, the traffickers must first demonstrate their commitment to ending violence. He added that "we cannot dialogue over the ruins [of bombed buildings], and the cadavers of judges, teachers and politicians murdered by the drug ring's hired assassins." The UP was established after the 1984 cease-fire agreement between the government of President Belisario Betancur and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC). Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha, a leader of the Medellin drug mafia, has been accused by the UP of masterminding assassinations of UP activists. At least 800 party members have been murdered in recent years. Rodriguez Gacha's campaign against the FARC was carried over to the UP. In statements to reporters in Cartagena, former Colombian president Alfonso Lopez Michelsen said that while he does not support the idea of dialogue with the drug traffickers, every day more Colombians are opting for talks between the government and traffickers. Oct. 23: In a communique addressed to Senate president Luis Guillermo Giraldo, "The Extraditables" most pertaining to the Medellin drug ring proposed the establishment of a "great national commission" to discuss terms for ending the confrontation between the government and
the drug mafia. The communique said the drug ring leaders had decided to contact the national congress because "numerous legislators have manifested support for a frank and sincere dialogue as the only effective way to achieve peace." The establishment of such a commission, said the drug traffickers, would follow the collapse of a "prolonged negotiations process" with President Virgilio Barco's government. The breakdown in the talks occurred in August when the government issued "a declaration of war in response to our peace proposal." Members of the national commission suggested in the communique were as follows: (1) Archbishop of Bogota, Cardinal Mario Rebello Bravo. On at least one occasion, Rebello has admitted publicly that the Church had received contributions from the drug traffickers for use in social welfare programs dedicated to low-income households. (2) Archbishop of Medellin, Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo. (3) Deputy Guido Parra, a lawyer who has acted as an intermediary in previous negotiations between the government and the Medellin drug ring. (4) Former government minister Joaquin Vallejo Arbeleaz, 76. For about a year, Vallejo spoke on behalf of Medellin drug ring leader Pablo Escobar Gaviria in talks with German Montoya, Barco's personal representative. (5) Medellin mayor, Juan Gomez Martinez. The mayor has publicly declared his support for dialogue with the traffickers. (6) Former attorney general Carlos Jimenez Gomez under President Belisario Betancur. In 1984, Jimenez met with Escobar Gaviria and Rodriguez Gacha to deliver their proposal for talks with the government. That proposal was similar to the current one. The communique said leftist popular organizations and rightist paramilitary groups could also be invited to participate in the dialogue. Next, the traffickers said they would support an eventual referendum on the terms contained in any subsequent agreement. The issue of extradition, said the communique, should not be included in a referendum. Oct. 24: El Tiempo published a message from drug traffickers saying they had interpreted a recent Supreme Court ruling as declaring that a Colombia-US extradition treaty exists but was not signed correctly. The State Council asserted that Colombia will continue to extradite drug traffickers under indictment in the US, and will not negotiate with drug ring leaders. Council members include the president, chief of police intelligence, attorney general, and ministers of defense, interior and justice. Referring to the drug traffickers' message in El Tiempo the council said, "Organized crime is continuing its misinformation campaign." In western Medellin, Pedro Luis Osorio, bodyguard of a manager of El Espectador and member of the city's police force, was shot to death. After killing the bodyguard, police said the assassins chased down and murdered his friend, Maria Ortega, five blocks away. A police spokesperson said, "It seems the murders were a result of a personal dispute...Drug traffickers had nothing to do with them." In an anonymous telephone call a man claiming to represent drug traffickers said that the remaining 11 El Espectador workers in Medellin would be killed if the paper did not close the bureau in that city. (Basic data from AP, 10/20/89, 10/24/89; AFP, 10/20/89; Notimex, 10/20/89, 10/23/89, 10/24/89)

-- End --