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Colombia: Update On Government's War With Drug Mafia

by John Neagle

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Oct. 26: Police reported that a 60-lb. dynamite bomb exploded on a street in Medellin as a bus carrying 44 policemen passed by, killing five of them and wounding 16. Two policemen assigned as guards to the Ecuadoran consulate in Medellin were shot and killed as they tried to help another policeman make an arrest. Oct. 27: Police reported that three bombs exploded Thursday night and early Friday in Bogota, wounding one person. One bomb was deactivated Thursday night at a bank. According to AP, since Aug. 18, 169 bombings attributed to the traffickers have killed 21 people and injured 219. Oct. 28: Secret police chief Miguel Maza Marquez told reporters that drug mafia leader Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha apparently hired the gunmen who killed Liberal Party presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan on Aug. 18. He said some 20 gunmen participated in the assassination. Oct. 29: In Bogota, two journalists employed by the World Vision news program were shot and seriously injured by two men on a motorcycle who opened fire on their car. News director Jorge Enrique Pulido was shot three times, and Ximena Godoy, once. The attack occurred when the two left the national television station in Bogota after completing their afternoon show. Jose Rafael Abello Silva, reputedly the number-four man in the Medellin drug ring, was extradited to the US. Arrested Oct. 10 in Bogota, he was charged in Oklahoma with drug trafficking and money laundering. Abello Silva was the fifth Colombian extradited to the US since September. Oct. 30: Victor Linares, described as Medellin drug mafia leader Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha's security chief, was killed in Bogota in the company of bodyguards. Known as "El Mexicano," Linares was shot down upon leaving the Modelo prison where he had visited the drug ring leader's son, Fredy Gonzalez Rodriguez. Linares organized rightist paramilitary groups for Rodriguez Gacha, as well as "sicarios" (hired gunmen). According to Notimex, the suspected killers were gunmen hired by the Medellin drug mafia's rival group, based in Cali. Early this year, a former army officer who served as the Cali group's security chief was killed, presumably by the Medellin mafia. Oct. 31: President Virgilio Barco reiterated that his government will not enter into "dialogue" with drug ring leaders. He said that "these criminals do not want peace, but rather impunity for their crimes and illegal trade." Barco and Gen. Miguel Maza Marquez, chief of the Colombian intelligence force Department of Administrative Security, spoke at a ceremony commemorating the Department's 36th anniversary. In the past two months, leaders of the Medellin drug ring have requested "dialogue" with the government on five occasions. They offered to disarm, terminate a bombing campaign and abandon the drug trade if the government grants them amnesty and ends extradition to the US. At a hearing of the US House of Representatives task force on international narcotics control, Phil Orsini of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, said: "We know firearms are being purchased in the United States [by Colombian drug traffickers]. What we cannot determine is what percentage of the firearms used by the cartels are from US sources." Orsini, who heads the Bureau's firearms enforcement branch, noted there were 270,000 licensed gun dealers in the US, and some of them were inadvertently arming the drug traffickers. Small quantities of firearms are legally purchased in the US, he said, and then smuggled to Colombia. Orsini said that 87% of a sample of 292 firearms confiscated by Colombian authorities from drug traffickers in the past 18 months were later found to be of US origin. Nov. 1: Federal judge Mariela Espinoza was shot to death by assassins firing automatic weapons from two speeding cars as she arrived at her home in
Medellin accompanied by two guards on motorcycles. One of the bodyguards and a bystander were wounded. Espinoza sat on the Medellin Superior Court. In northern Bogota, Luis Francisco Madero, a Conservative Party member of the Chamber of Deputies, was killed with a pistol shot to the head by a man waiting for him in the shadows outside the congressperson's apartment. Madero, a deputy for 27 years, had supported extradition. Government officials estimate that the drug traffickers have killed 42 people since the crackdown began. Included among the dead are three federal judges, a congressperson, a governor, a state leader of the leftist Patriotic Union (UP) and nine news media employees. Colombian media sources reported that police had arrested Luis Alfonso Carvajal on charges of drug trafficking. Carvajal owns two airlines serving the country's eastern region. Carvajal is reportedly wanted in the US, and will be extradited. In Medellin, police reported that 11 women ranging in age from 15 to 24, described as prostitutes at the service of drug traffickers, had been murdered in the past five days. The bodies were found in several locations throughout the city. Police said most of the women had been shot several times. According to Notimex, some Medellin residents believed that the killings were performed by gunmen hired by drug traffickers to prevent the women from providing information to the authorities. The government has offered citizens large rewards for information that would lead to the capture of major drug mafia leaders. Another perspective on the rash of killings was that a self-appointed vigilante group had struck at the drug mafia by eliminating certain dons' favorite female companions, while also ridding the city of a an alleged "source" of immorality. Nov. 2: The National Association of Court Workers declared a nationwide strike of two hours Thursday, four hours Friday, and the entire workday on Nov. 7 and Nov. 8. No strike was declared for Nov. 6 because it was a holiday. The Association includes 5,000 judges and 12,000 other court workers. On Thursday night in Bogota, a car bomb exploded under a bridge, killing four people, and injuring two. According to Notimex, the explosion took place in an industrial district 500 meters from a gasoline tank, and destroyed or damaged 25 small business establishments. Bombs also exploded at a supermarket, a bank, and a municipal printing plant during the night, but there were no casualties. One of the explosions took place a few blocks from the El Espectador newspaper office, causing serious damage to several factories, retail businesses, and a subsidiary of a bank owned by the government and coffee growers. Another bomb was set off at a branch of the private Banco de Bogota. The Banco de Bogota has been affected by bombings at least a dozen times since mid-August. Nov. 3: Judiciary workers' union leader Helmut Romero told the Caracol radio network that the strike would go on indefinitely until the government responds to the union's request for protection. The judges demand bullet-proof cars and vests, guns, bodyguards, weapons training, and metal detectors at office entrances. Several dozen judiciary union members blocked 19th Street in downtown Bogota. Although some protesters engaged in a brief scuffle with about 50 riot squad policemen, no one was arrested and the street was not cleared. At a rally, Jesus Abella, member of the union's executive board, said that only two of the dozens of magistrates in Bogota had received special protection. He said, "The rest do not have bullet proof cars or escorts." Fabio Moron Diaz, president of the 24-member Supreme Court, said in a statement: "We consider that it is exceptionally difficult to administer quick and complete justice under the current working conditions." The Supreme Court never goes on strike. [AP pointed out that while salary levels are not an issue in the current strike, low pay is a frequently heard complaint. Federal appellate judges earn the equivalent of about $500 a month, municipal judges $400, and court employees $150 to $200.] According to radio network RCN, Medellin judges resigned. Colombia's major daily, El Tiempo, reported that two court employees, both union members, were kidnapped in Cali on Oct. 28, tortured and then shot to death. The bodies were found in a river. According to AP, since the government's crackdown on drug traffickers began, more than 180 bombings
have occurred resulting in the deaths of 29 people, and another 226 injured. Four people were killed and at least six others injured when a car bomb exploded in a busy street in Bogota. A police spokesperson blamed the attack on the drug mafia. Nov. 4: Police spokespersons told reporters that a plot to kill leading presidential candidate Cesar Gaviria, successor to assassinated senator Luis Carlos Galan, was foiled Friday. They said they had uncovered a plan to attack a campaign caravan Gaviria had hoped to take to the towns of Aracataca, Plato and Fundacion in the Caribbean district of Magdalena. Gaviria, on the advice of police, canceled his trip. Nov. 6: In Santa Marta, a bomb tossed from a passing car exploded outside the circulation office of Colombia's largest daily, El Tiempo, causing minor damage but no injuries. In Cartagena, a bomb exploded outside a bank. Police said the blast caused no injuries. According to AP, at least 39 people have been killed and 226 injured in bombings since Aug. 19. In a speech to the UN General Assembly's committee on drug trafficking, Colombian Justice Minister Roberto Salazar asserted that an "action plan with specific recommendations and concrete commitments in the short-term" is necessary. Salazar called for global cooperation in curbing the demand for drugs, the illegal weapons trade and sales of chemicals used in drug processing. Next, he reiterated the Colombian government's appeal for international collaboration to control drug money laundering, including a convention on seizure of assets obtained with drug trade profits. (Basic data from DPA, 10/29/89, 11/03/89; Notimex, 10/31/89-11/03/89, 11/06/89; AFP, 10/28/89-11/01/89, 11/04/89; Xinhua, 10/27/89, 10/31/89-11/02/89, 11/04/89; AP, 10/31/89-11/04/89, 11/06/89; New York Times, 11/04/89)

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