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John Neagle

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Colombia: Update On "drug War," Violent Incidents

by John Neagle

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Nov. 18: Manuel Julian Palma Molina and Roberto James Sokolowski Salah were extradited to the US, for a total of eight since the crackdown began in August. In Medellin, soccer referee Alvaro Ortega was shot to death, apparently because he upset drug traffickers who bet heavily on the games. Nov. 21: Joseph Arsili Cohen was arrested by police. He was convicted of drug trafficking in a US court in Boston, Mass., before escaping in 1988. His arrest brought the number of "extraditable" persons to 16. Nov. 22: The Colombian soccer championship, suspended last week following the murder of a referee by the drug traffickers, has been cancelled for the year. Colombian soccer league president Alex Gorayeb said the clubs had decided to follow the recommendation of President Virgilio Barco. The championship was due to finish on Dec. 6. Nov. 23: Special police units came close to capturing Medellin drug ring leaders Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Jorge Luis Ochoa Vasquez in the Magdalena Medio region. Both fled on foot and in their underwear from a ranch hideout when helicopters approached carrying a 300-person police and military force. Police reported the arrest of 50 men and five women working for Escobar, as well as two guards found asleep at their posts. Nov. 26: Two police were killed by gunfire when they tried to prevent a group of men from robbing a bus near Riohacha. A 23-year-old woman also died in the shooting, said police. While conducting a search north of Bogota, a policeman was killed by unknown assailants. Four farm workers were killed by 10 armed men in the northern Meta province, and another four peasants in northeastern Santander province were dragged out of their houses and murdered as their family and friends watched. Police alleged that the attack on the farm workers was carried out by National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas. Special police units expanded their search for drug traffickers in the northeastern Magdalena Medio Antioqueno region. Police said that identification papers and other documents left behind by Escobar at the ranch raided on Nov. 23 led the special police units to search for him in other areas of the country. Nov. 27: An Avianca airlines Boeing 727 went down just after takeoff from Bogota on a flight to Cali in southwestern Colombia. Witnesses said the plane exploded. All 101 passengers and six crew members on the Avianca flight were killed in the crash. Wreckage was spread over six miles, but most was within an area about two miles long in grassy hills south of Bogota. A spokesperson for the Colombian Pilots Association told AP on Monday night: "Given the circumstances of the crash, I would say that it was a terrorist attack." An Avianca pilot said the crew probably would have spotted trouble in advance if mechanical failure had caused the accident. Both pilots requested anonymity. The Civil Aviation Authority said no problems had been reported by the plane's crew. The Caracol radio network's station in Bogota received a call three hours after the crash from a man who said the Extraditables were responsible. The traffickers, said the caller, had planted a bomb on the plane to kill six police informants aboard who had told police the location of the jungle hideout of trafficker Pablo Escobar. Police at the crash site said 120 people had been arrested for looting the bodies, suitcases, packages, and mail. Nov. 28: Unidentified Caracol station executives were cited by AP as saying that the call received on Monday may have been a hoax since the caller was babbling and emotional. Col. Edgar Lesmes, assistant director of the Civil Aviation Authority, said the agency did not have the flight log and was trying to determine whether it had been found. "The only thing we have been able to establish is that there was an in-flight explosion for unknown reasons," he said in an interview with the Caracol radio network. He

said investigators have found no trace of explosives or explosive devices in the wreckage. Col. Jorge Gonzalez, the agency's chief of operations, told a news conference oxygen masks had dropped from the overhead consoles. That is automatic in a case of pressure loss, and would occur if an explosion ripped a hole in the cabin. He said, "We definitely believe this was an explosion that pilots did not have time to report." In Washington, Justice Department spokesperson Daniel Eramian said that investigators from the US Drug Enforcement Administration have found no evidence that drug traffickers were responsible. Officials said examinations of wreckage from the plane failed to turn up evidence of explosives on board the jetliner. Investigators hoped that analysis of the plane's two "black boxes," or flight recorders, would indicate the cause of the crash, the officials said. Both recorders were found Tuesday. Experts investigating the crash said the discovery of blood-soaked oxygen masks near several passengers, and the lack of forensic evidence, could point to failure by the jet's cabin pressure system and to a resulting explosion. (Basic data from Notimex, 11/18/89; AFP, 11/18/89, 11/22/89, 11/26/89; Xinhua, 11/21/89; DPA, 11/28/89; AP, 11/27-29/89)

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