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Colombia: Update On "drug War" Developments; Government Amnesty Agreement With M-19 Rebels Postponed

by John Neagle

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Dec. 12: In Envigado, six miles from Medellin, suspected drug mafia assassins killed Jaime Velez, 38, a prosecutor who handled cases against suspected drug traffickers. In Venecia, 37 miles southeast of Medellin, Edgar Henao, 55, an engineer with the Inter-American Development Bank, was killed by suspected drug traffickers. Next, in the Pacific port of Buenaventura, Judge Sofia de Roldaan was killed by suspected drug ring assassins. Colombian officials implemented a plan in airports to prevent airline sabotage such as the Nov. 27 bombing of an Avianca airliner that killed 111 people. Civil aeronautics authorities said the program would begin in two Bogota airports with strict suitcase inspection and nine dogs trained to sniff out explosive devices made of gunpowder and dynamite. The new measure mandates inspection of all suitcases, and procedures for ensuring that every piece of luggage has an owner aboard and that tag numbers match tickets. Police trained in explosives will also patrol bathrooms, kitchens, restaurants and other places where explosive devices can be hidden. Dec. 14: Late Thursday, the Colombian Senate failed to reach a quorum to vote on legislation that would have permitted the Colombian electorate to vote on whether the government should continue extraditing drug traffickers to the US. In the words of Interior Minister Carlos Lemos, "The issue has been eliminated." The Senate vote was necessary to give the House time to approve the measure before the congressional session was scheduled to end on Dec. 16. Senators' failure to act is also likely to prevent constitutional reforms sought by President Barco's government. In a maneuver intended to sabotage the executive's agreements with the April 19 Movement (M-19) rebel group, on Dec. 5 the House attached the referendum proposal to the reform legislation. Among the proposed reforms is a plan that would allow candidates supported by former M-19 rebels to run for congress and win seats with fewer votes than normally required. In exchange, the guerrillas would disarm. In response to the legislative developments, M-19 issued a communique stating that the group had decided to cancel its political campaign to be organized through a new political party. The statement said that the government should postpone congressional elections scheduled for March 11 and presidential elections set for May 27. The communique said, "Normal elections in a country that has become unhinged would carry us toward greater levels of violence." Interior Minister Lemos told reporters that while constitutional reform may be lost this session, the sacrifice was worth it because the Senate maneuver prevented "the interference of drug traffickers in congressional decisions." According to AP, since Aug. 18, there have been 203 attacks that have killed 188 people and wounded 1,238. Dec. 15: During a shootout near the Caribbean port Covenas, located 70 miles south of Cartagena, police killed Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha, his 17-year-old son Freddy, and five bodyguards. National police chief Miguel Gomez Padilla said the incident took place at a ranch owned by another leader of the Medellin drug ring, Pablo Escobar. No mention was made of police casualties. In a televised interview, federal investigations police chief (DAS) Gen. Miguel Maza Marquez said police had been pursuing Rodriguez Gacha for 70 hours in the Covenas coastal area before catching up with him. According to Notimex, police received an anonymous tip on Rodriguez Gacha's whereabouts. Police said

the operation by more than 1,000 security force members, supported by seven helicopters, was the result of weeks of intelligence work. [Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha had a grade school education and went from pig farming to bartending. In the 1970s he became a hired killer for a Colombian gangster trying to gain control of emerald mines. In the process, he became wealthy, and about 10 years ago he began using profits from the "emerald war" to buy cocaine base from Bolivia to be processed into pure cocaine. He and other major drug traffickers banded together to form the Medellin drug ring, named after the northwestern city of Medellin where smugglers traditionally had their headquarters. Rodriguez Gacha had many ranches, but perhaps his favorite was at Pacho, 50 miles north of Bogota. After the government commenced the crackdown against traffickers in August, the army occupied the Pacho ranch. Many peasants in the area told an AP reporter at the time of the takeover that Rodriguez Gacha was generous with his money. They said he gave away thousands of dollars, providing money for medical treatment and for seed and farm equipment when they could not get government agricultural loans. When the southern city of Popayan was devastated by a 1984 earthquake, Rodriguez Gacha was seen walking through the ruined city giving money to survivors. Police have admitted that Rodriguez Gacha's popularity with peasants had made it difficult to trap him. Government officials have said he was behind the Aug. 18 murder of Sen. Luis Carlos Galan, and the 1988 killing of Patriotic Union (UP) leader Jaime Pardo Leal. More than 700 UP members have been assassinated in the past four years. Rodriguez Gacha was also believed responsible for paying rightist death squads to kill peasants described as supporters of leftist causes. Next, the drug mafioso was believed to be a major organizer in over 260 bombings and other terrorist attacks to pressure the government into terminating extradition of suspected drug traffickers to the US. Rodriguez Gacha was nicknamed "El Mexicano" because of his fondness for wide-brimmed hats and other Mexican artifacts. At the time of his death, the drug trafficker was believed to have about \$1 billion stashed away.] Dec. 17: After local officials used public funds to bury the bodies of the seven men killed Friday, relatives requested exhumation of the bodies of Gonzalo and Freddy. The bodies were buried in a common grave in Sincelejo, 320 miles north of Bogota. Sucre state governor Arturo Martinez told the Caracol radio network that Freddy's mother had claimed her son's body after the burial. He identified the woman as Luz Dari Celades. Two of Rodriguez Gacha's brothers claimed Gonzalo's corpse, said Martinez. (Basic data from AP, 12/12/89, 12/14-17/89; Notimex, DPA, 12/15/89; AFP, 12/12/89, 12/15/89)

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