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Colombia: Chronology Of Violence & Government Response, Jan. 25 - Feb. 27

by Barbara Khol

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Jan. 25: Journalist Diana Turbay, abducted last Aug. 30 by the Medellin drug traffickers' organization known as "The Extraditables," was seriously injured during an operation by 100 police officers to rescue her and other hostages. She died as a result of three bullet wounds. The operation targeted a ranch near the village of Sabaneta, northeast of Medellin. Richard Becerra, photographer for TV news Cripton, was rescued. According to unofficial reports, four of the abductors were killed. Turbay, editor of the magazine Hoy por Hoy (Bogota), Becerra, and several other journalists from her magazine and the Cripton TV news program, were abducted by The Extraditables. The rescue operation occurred at a ranch near the village of Sabaneta, northeast of Medellin. Turbay was the daughter of former president Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala. In a communique, The Extraditables announced plans to execute two journalist hostages, and to resume "military operations" against police. The statement said the police have continued practices of torture, disappearance, assassination and massacre. Orders for arrest have been transformed into orders of execution, according to the statement. Jan. 29: A Defense Ministry source reported that suspected hired guns for the drug traffickers killed nine people, including two police in downtown Medellin. In November, President Cesar Gaviria announced that cocaine traffickers would not be extradited to the US if they turned themselves in to authorities. The offer covered crimes committed before Sept. 5, 1990. On Jan. 29, Gaviria promised relatively lenient sentences, and extended the deadline for their surrender until the moment of a trafficker's surrender. The amendment also provided the strongest guarantee yet that traffickers who surrender will not be extradited. As of Jan. 29, five traffickers had surrendered. Jan. 30: Attorney Guido Parra, described as a spokesperson for the drug ring headed by Pablo Escobar, said chief traffickers are now satisfied that the government has definitively eliminated extradition as an option once traffickers have turned themselves in. He added that his statement was personal, and not based on any document or statement authored by Medellin drug ring leader Pablo Escobar. In a statement, The Extraditables said the police were responsible for Turbay's death, and announced another unilateral truce. Next, the communique said that while orders had been given a week ago for the execution of a hostage, the lives of remaining hostages would be respected. The order of execution referred to Marina Montoya, sister of German Montoya, a former presidential chief of staff and current ambassador to Canada. The statement said her death had been ordered because of "abuses" by police against drug ring members. Jan. 31: Medical examiners confirmed the body of a woman found a week ago in Bogota is that of Marina Montoya, 65, abducted Sept. 19. Her body was found Jan. 24 in Bogota, but not identified until Thursday. Feb. 2: Six persons, including a town councilperson and five rural worker leaders, were killed by unidentified persons in the Chaguani area of Cundinamarca department (central Colombia). Gustavo Petro, an assistant to the town's mayor, said the council member was also a regional leader of the April 19 Movement (M-19) party. Unidentified assailants shot and killed 13 people in two separate massacres. Seven people were killed late Friday when armed suspects traveling in two vehicles opened fire on a group of young people standing on a corner and inside a billiard hall in a working class neighborhood of Medellin. Feb. 4: In a communique, The

Extraditables announced plans to release one of three journalist hostages as a "sign of goodwill," and their support for the Constitutional Assembly, scheduled to begin Feb. 5. The drug ring leaders also called for the assembly to name a special negotiating commission to deal directly with traffickers, election of regional prosecutors who are currently appointed by the government, special prisons for drug traffickers, civil court trials for members of the military and police and an unconditional guarantee against the extradition of Colombians. Feb. 6: The Extraditables released journalist Beatriz Villamizar unharmed in downtown Bogota. She had been abducted on Nov. 7. Feb. 12: Six adolescent boys, who police said had criminal records, were executed by unidentified persons with machineguns in the El Salado neighborhood of Medellin. Feb. 13: Fortunato Gaviria, the first cousin of Colombian President Cesar Gaviria Trujillo, was kidnapped Wednesday from one of his coffee plantations. Fortunato Gaviria, former governor of Caldas department, was taken away by armed men near his home outside Pereira, capital of Risaralda department (western Colombia). Maximo Daza Velazque, a former Peruvian police major, was shot to death in Medellin, alongwith Luz Helena Espinosa, who accompanied him. Feb. 16: Police reported that the corpse of Fortunato Gaviria, 39, had been found on his ranch known as La Gaucha. He had been shot to death. Juan David Ochoa Vasquez, a top Medellin drug ring leader, turned himself over to authorities Saturday in the northeastern town of Turbo. A powerful car bomb exploded in a parking lot at a bullfight ring near La Macarena outside of Medellin, resulting in the deaths of 22 people, and injuries to another 143. Police reports said that the 150-kg. dynamite bomb apparently was aimed at a carload of police providing security at the ring. The bomb destroyed 39 cars, 15 food stands, a bridge and scattered dead and wounded people around the grounds where hundreds of people had assembled for the bullfight and festivities. Nine policemen and 13 civilian were killed. Feb. 18: Police reported that Fortunato Gaviria was killed by his own employees. Police sources quoted by RCN radio in Bogota said the seven suspects under arrest had confessed to having kidnapped and killed their employer after he came to the farm and demanded they give him a clear account on how it was being administered. Callers identifying themselves as members of Los Priscos, a band of gunmen who police believed had been dismantled, told several local radio stations the car bomb explosion at the bullfight ring on Feb. 16 was in retaliation for the arrest of several of its members. Police Col. Enrique Ferrero said the Medellin police recently raided kidnapping rings believed to be working for the drug cartel and had managed to free 20 hostages. Feb. 19: The government decided to annul secrecy of the military budget, in force for many years. In 1990, defense spending surpassed 93 billion pesos (\$180 million), equal to 300% of the education budget, and twice the amount dedicated to the public health sector. According to official statistics, Colombia's homicide rate is 30 times greater than the European average, 15 times higher than the overall US rate, five times greater than the Latin American average, and over double the rate of El Salvador. In Bogota, at the annual congress of the Colombian Livestock Growers Federation (FEDEGAN), ranchers requested government authorization for the establishment of private armed vigilante groups to protect their property. According to the federation, 37 ranchers were abducted in the first 45 days of the year, and only 10 have thus far been released. Of the latter, five were rescued, and the others paid "millionaire" ransoms. Despite stepped up police and military action, said participants, rebels and common criminals continue to subject ranchers to extortion, kidnapping and blackmail. Many ranchers have fled their homes and workplaces, according to spokespersons. They added that when ranchers refuse to pay "taxes" to rebels or common criminals, their cattle are shot to death. [Police reported the previous week that since Jan. 1, 1,451 persons had been kidnapped thus far in 1991. Of the total, 725 were abducted by common criminals, 698 by guerrilla organizations, and 28 by drug traffickers.] Feb. 20: Interior Minister Humberto de la Calle recommended that government

officials refuse authorization for the reactivation of "self-defense" groups in the countryside. Feb. 22: Twelve persons were assassinated in Pradera, Valle department (western Colombia), and in Bello, Antioquia department. Next, three bodies were discovered in the Medellin River, near Barbosa, Antioquia. The three had been missing since Feb. 18. Feb. 24: Gunmen killed five vendors at an outdoor market in Medellin. Feb. 25: Unidentified assailants burst into a Medellin high school classroom, and killed two teenage boys in front of a teacher and 40 fellow students. The teacher was injured. Feb. 26: Gunmen killed nine teenagers playing on a soccer field in Medellin. In an interview with the RCN radio network, Medellin city official Rodrigo Palacio said the killings were the work of hired assassins who "have developed a death culture." Feb. 27: According to the Police Department of Criminological Studies (DECYPOL), a total of 1,053 persons were assassinated in Medellin since Jan. 1. Public defender Sergio Estarita reported that in the same period, 19 persons had disappeared. Eight were found alive, and the whereabouts of the others are unknown. In the past 48 hours, he added, 16 persons were assassinated in the Medellin metropolitan area, almost all of them under 25 years of age. Javier Tobon, a delegate for the archdiocese in northeastern Medellin, said that during the past weekend the "Grupo Amable de Medellin" had released statements announcing that it planned a "clean-up operation" for the city. Medellin mayor Omar Florez said that following the war with the drug traffickers, numerous "delinquents" were effectively retired. "Since they know nothing else..., they make their living from crime," he said. According to spokespersons for the Medellin metropolitan police headquarters, a total of 183 persons had been arrested following the deaths of 17 young people in the past 12 hours. (Basic data from UPI, 01/19/91, 01/29/91; Reuters, 01/29/91; Notimex, 01/25/91, 02/06/91; AFP, 01/25/91, 01/30/91, 02/04/91, 02/12/91, 02/13/91, 02/16/91, 02/18/91, 02/19/91, 02/22/91; EFE, 01/30/91, 02/02/91, 02/04/91, 02/19/91, 02/20/91, 02/26/91, 02/27/91; AP, 01/31/91, 02/02/91, 02/04/91, 02/16/91, 02/17/91, 01/25/91, 02/26/91)

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