
COLOMBIA

Political amnesty key to economic success

by Valerie Rush

When Colombian President Belisario Betancur signed into law Nov. 19 the long-awaited "political amnesty," he was not granting official forgiveness to the country's various armed guerrilla forces. He was moving against a shadow government of drug mafiosi and financiers—and the military factions who have run protection for them—which has controlled and looted Colombia for at least a decade.

"We need peace," said Betancur at the signing ceremony at the presidential palace. "We need complete peace, security, tranquility every day to encourage health, cultivate the spirit, promote savings, increase capitalization, invest and generate employment. . . . Terrorism will not be a barrier against our proposals for national development. I invite my compatriots to join in this task, the highest endeavor entrusted us by our predecessors and by our descendents."

To succeed in his ambitious development plan, President Betancur must first demilitarize the country and regain control of a vast countryside which has existed as an occupied war zone for decades.

In a speech to the Air Force in November, Betancur declared his intention to redeploy the armed forces out of the rural areas where they have struck an alliance with the local drug czars, and into a new role of opening up and developing the extensive unexplored regions of the Colombian Amazon. "We need our armed forces . . . to be a counterpoint of the activity the government wants to develop in its vast territorial zones," said Betancur, defining a new concept of national sovereignty for the military.

While promising the gradual demilitarization of the countryside, Betancur has also decreed an ambitious aid package designed to bring electrification, housing, industry and health and training services to the neglected peasant areas which have long been focal points of guerrilla unrest. An initial \$840 million has been slated in land, jobs and business credits for amnestied guerrillas.

Speaking in Urabá, a potentially rich agricultural region in northwestern Colombia which has been converted into a devastated battleground among the drug mafias, a defiant peasantry, and the Communist Party-allied Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), Betancur pledged to make the region an exemplary development project. "This is a fundamental question," declared the President, "for if we do not accomplish this, we will simply end up going from bad

to worse."

Challenging the drug banks

Perhaps most importantly, Betancur has begun to challenge the powerful banking sector which, totally integrated with Dope, Inc., has stolen billions from the national economy. In two executive decrees announced the same week as the amnesty was passed, Betancur undertook to shut down the legal loopholes through which the narcotics operatives have captured the banking system. A limit on the loan amount any financial entity can make to a person or corporation was set at 7 percent of total available lending capital, while lending to relatives less than five bloodlines removed was strictly prohibited. A limit on how much of a bank or financial entity can be owned by any one person, family or allied "group" was set at 20 percent. Colombia's leading banks are presently controlled by individuals or families holding anywhere from 51 to 95 percent of total stock.

An 'historic compromise'

The success of the amnesty rests with the "historic compromise" Betancur hopes to construct among nationalist factions in the country's three major political parties: the ruling Conservatives, the Liberals, and the Communist Party. The amnesty proposal Betancur chose to endorse was formulated by Gerardo Molina, a prominent politician and also the 1982 presidential candidate of the Colombian Communist Party.

The support of the Catholic Church is also vital to the success of the amnesty initiative. Betancur unveiled his amnesty aid package to the public with the declaration that "peace is the new name for development," a phrase that echoes Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*.

The biggest threat to the amnesty is the resistance of hard-line sections of the military determined to perpetuate social unrest, and thus the influence of the military—and the drug Mafias—over government policymaking.

The control the military exercises over both left and right terror squads in the country was evident in the weeks that preceded congressional approval of the amnesty. On the day the amnesty was voted up, a 60-man guerrilla squad battled troops in the southern rural city of Villavicencio, leaving more than 15 dead. On the day the amnesty was signed into law, a mortar attack on the Defense Ministry by "unknown guerrilla forces" reportedly claimed 20 lives. In the past months, the rightist MAS death squad murdered at least 10 prominent labor leaders.

Defense Minister Fernando Landazábal, an outspoken opponent of the amnesty, revealed his strategy in an editorial in the armed forces journal released earlier this month: "The government and the democratic institutions want peace. . . . But if part of the armed groups don't accept it, the government and the armed forces will be forced to exercise authority. . . ."

Landazábal denounced amnesties as nothing but "periods of oxygenation for subversion."