

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Betancur faces down coup threat

Colombia's president withstood a challenge to his rule from tainted military ranks, and came out strengthened.

In his second major victory since the new year began, Colombian President Belisario Betancur has rebuffed a coup threat led by his own defense minister, and emerged not only unscathed but significantly boosted in the public eye.

Less than three weeks ago, Betancur dethroned the country's number-one dirty-money banker, Jaime Michelsen Uribe of the Gran Colombiano financial group, forcing him to flee the country as a fugitive. The second week in January, President Betancur laid down the law to his rebel military subordinates, prompting a crisis in the armed forces command which led to Defense Minister Landazábal's resignation from the service, and a military reorganization.

The confrontation with the military began weeks earlier, when Landazábal and Armed Forces chief Gustavo Matamoros d'Acostagave televised interviews challenging Betancur's domestic and foreign policies. The defense minister denounced the President's efforts to negotiate a truce with the nation's several guerrilla organizations, and pledged that the military would "annihilate" the guerrillas. He added, "The Colombian people must get used to hearing their generals, because they know what they're saying, and why."

Matamoros, asked to comment on rumors of rapprochement between Colombia and Cuba, replied: "In the president's palace is a man who is a true patriot. . . . Logically, he is very aware that we cannot have relations with a government led by a Commu-

nist dictator. . . . [Relations with Cuba] I believe to be a moral impossibility."

The highly placed protectors of the Colombian drug mafia have frequently used charges of Betancur's "communist leanings" to try to destabilize his government and thwart his anti-drug efforts.

Betancur, on the eve of his trip to Quito for the Latin America Economic Conference, decided not to respond immediately to the military challenge. The anticipated result materialized: A debate arose in the national media on the unconstitutionality of armed forces' intervention into civilian politics.

Once home, President Betancur demonstrated the same masterful control and timing he had shown in chopping off the head from the Grancolombiano hydra. Addressing the National Security Council Jan. 18, attended by the full cabinet and all three armed forces commanders, Betancur issued a forceful but diplomatic warning to the military that they "neither are nor can be deliberative," a responsibility and right reserved for civil leadership.

Betancur was particularly astute in choosing extensive quotes from a speech by former President Alberto Lleras Camargo, given in 1958 to commemorate the end of the only Colombian military regime in this century, that of Gen. Gustavo Rojas Pinilla: "There is a difference between leading a university and a regiment. All your lives have been dedicated to learning to obey, and thus, to knowing

how to lead people who neither deliberate on their orders nor discuss them; in practice, radically different from leadership in civilian life."

"Politics is the art of controversy . . . the military, the art of discipline. . . . Remaining outside of public deliberation is not a whim of the Constitution, but a necessity of [military] functioning."

Defense Minister Landazábal got the message and went into an immediate all-day huddle with the entire military command. Naval commander García Motta and national police chief Delgado Mallariño broke ranks early on, walking out of the summit to demonstrate their support for the President. Landazábal's letter of resignation was submitted to the President shortly thereafter.

An outpouring of popular support for the President's action was registered in the media, in the Congress, and in the streets. Apparently confident that the lesson had been well learned by his military subordinates, and with the full support of both the Liberals and his own Conservative Party, the President has adopted a conciliatory approach. His letter accepting Landazábal's resignation was laudatory of the would-be coup maker.

Going even further, Betancur named as his new defense minister Landazábal's collaborator General Matamoros. Although Matamoros immediately pledged full allegiance to Betancur, he is generally considered a hard-line opponent of Betancur's amnesty offer to the guerrillas.

At least three three-star generals have been replaced in the shakeup following Landazábal's resignation, including the commanders of the Army and Air Force, and the head of the joint chiefs of staff Gen. Bernardo Lema Henao. More changes are expected.