
Presidential Address

Colombia's Betancur: 'Above all we shall make war on drugs'

The following are excerpts from the presentation given on Colombian radio and television by President Belisario Betancur at 2:30 a.m. on May 1, after learning of the death of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla.

Compatriots: The government of Colombia, and the President of Colombia personally, express, as do all good people, their grief at the death of the justice minister, victimized for having fulfilled his duty and for the battle he waged against organized crime, which sought to capture this nation.

The profound sorrow which grips us, and our national solidarity with Lara Bonilla's mother, his wife, his children, with all his family members and his compatriots, should serve as a lesson to us all, and especially to those of us who exercise authority over that bitter and thorny road to peace and justice, viewing the dangers which threaten a people when their moral reserves are weakened.

Peace, my fellow citizens, is an ideal with many facets and is for that reason an elusive one. We have been determined to achieve it in the political arena, yet with such uneven results that not even the serenity with which the state of siege was decreed for those four departments, affected by intolerable acts of subversion and faced with . . . enormous drug-trafficking operations—not even this sufficed to bring about the overtures [of peace] which the government and the community had hoped for. On the contrary, it has produced an escalation of violence which rightfully has alarmed all good people. . . .

Exactly one month ago I expressed, through this same medium, my anguish over this situation when, in speaking of a first glimmering of hope in the struggle for peace, I said that this step was a firm one, that we could dedicate ourselves to no more meaningful task, and I said so with these words which I now repeat with such profound sorrow:

I said then that to recover the national dignity stolen from us by the drug trade, which presents us to the world with a black image and poisons and perverts our youth, is the great task that we have before us: to denounce [the traffickers]

daily, to put them on notice that they cannot continue to undermine our society, to tell them in one great national chorus: "Enough!"

And I added on that same occasion that we must end all facetious references to what this drug empire is doing, as if it were unimportant. The greatest problem that Colombia has had in its history is drugs. Its evil effect on our people, on their health, their morality, is dramatically summed up in our poverty, our unemployment, the alienation from our physical values, our moral and our basic values; in other words, we are talking about rescuing a society . . . hence the surgical operation which we must make, in a new dauntless, tireless, and intrepid fight for moral peace.

Every councilman, I said, who gains his municipal post through [the influence] of the drug mafias is the equivalent of three, four, five or more guerrilla fronts in the remote mountains. Each family of honest background which enters the service of the drug trade means the same thing: not taking up arms for concrete political ideals, or even vague ones, but swelling the ranks of a new anarchism created by the destructive chimera of easy money which allows opulent or extravagant living.

Fellow citizens, we stand today before an inescapable reality: an exemplary Colombian, a good man, paid with his life for his love of country, of justice, and of that so often forgotten sense of what it means to fully do one's duty, consciously applying that sense of virtue and the values which make human beings and nations worthy of respect, [placing these] above even the most elementary sense of personal security and survival. The state can take no revenge, less so because of the sacrifice of him who so honorably represented and paid homage to justice. . . .

We will exhaust the extraordinary measures we need without vacillation, with prudent firmness. . . . Our state shall never allow the destruction of society. And we proceed guided by respect for human rights; the community and the state which represents it may offer protection without engaging in excesses. But above all we shall wage war against the drug traffickers. . . .

In sum, we shall initiate a great national mobilization. No Colombian man, woman, child, youth, or adult, rich or poor, must be silent through interest or fear. Their personal security, their future, the future of this nation, sometimes so bitter but always beloved, demands participation in this new task of independence. We shall rescue the national dignity stolen by the drug traffickers. There is no lust for vengeance over the fresh grave of the patriot Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. The handful of Colombian soil which we cast in sorrow upon his lifeless body expresses a great national grief, a great personal grief. But above all it expresses pride, and the hope of the nation which he loved and honored as did the greatest heroes, in whose pantheon he already belongs, because he made the supreme sacrifice of his life. Let us all be worthy of the memory of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla.