

López Michelsen lobbies for return of the drug pushers

The justice minister of Colombia, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, was machine-gunned to death on the streets of Bogotá on April 30, 1984. The killers had been dispatched by the heads of Colombia's drug mafias, who preside over a multi-billion dollar empire. Indictments for the murder have now been handed down against members of the Movimiento de Renovación Liberal, a faction of the Liberal Party controlled by cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar of the city of Medellín.

On the weekend of May 6, exactly one week after the assassination, former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen arrived in Panama to meet secretly with the men who ordered Lara Bonilla's death. Present were such czars of Colombia's drug underworld as Pablo Escobar and Jorge Ochoa. López Michelsen and the mafia chiefs discussed what terms could be offered by the mafia to buy the country out from under the control of President Belisario Betancur, who had vowed, in a eulogy to Lara Bonilla, to continue the former justice minister's war on drugs.

López and his go-between, Santiago Londoño White (treasurer of López Michelsen's unsuccessful 1982 presidential bid), arranged for a second secret meeting in Panama on May 26, involving Attorney General Carlos Jiménez Gómez. At this meeting, the men who had plotted Lara Bonilla's assassination presented the attorney general—who was acting on his own authority—with a proposal to buy the country for \$3 billion. They proposed amnesty for themselves in return for repatriation of their ill-gotten gains and a solemn promise that they would close down their laboratories and airstrips and retire into respectability.

At the beginning of his administration, President Betancur had offered an amnesty to the country's several armed guerrilla groups, in an attempt to bring peace to a nation that has been wracked by violence for over 30 years. The mafia now argues that the same "amnesty" should be extended to them. Were this to be done, the result could not be domestic peace, but the utter destruction of the nation. President Betancur turned down the offer.

During the second week of July, the government issued

arrest warrants for top political lieutenants of drug chief Pablo Escobar in the city of Medellín, for involvement in the Lara Bonilla murder. A week later, a Miami grand jury handed down separate indictments for drug-running against Escobar and another participant in the meeting with López Michelsen, Jorge Ochoa.

On July 19, after news of the López Michelsen/Jiménez Gómez trips had been exposed in the press, Betancur announced: "The government has been explicit that under no circumstances would there ever be dialogue concerning situations that are clearly defined by law. . . . As a consequence, there have not been, nor are there, nor will there be negotiations, nor any form of understanding between the government and the authors of the proposal." Betancur reported that he and his family had received death threats from the mafia.

It was in this context of national outrage over López Michelsen's role and demands for an explanation of his activity that the former President gave the interview which we excerpt here, to German Santamaria, editor of El Tiempo. The interview appeared in the paper's July 29 edition.

López Michelsen is at pains to portray the leaders of the drug mafia as falsely accused victims of a propaganda campaign, innocents who had nothing to gain from the death of the justice minister. While attempting to present himself as a neutral mediator, in fact he argues that the only way to deal with the drug traffic is to make a deal with the mafia. Any other solutions, such as an all-out war on drugs, and application of herbicides and high technology as proposed by Betancur, are not acceptable to López Michelsen and his cronies.

El Tiempo: How did your contact with the drug traffickers come about?

López Michelsen: I was in Panama, invited by the government as an observer of the elections. While I was there my friend Santiago Londoño White asked me if I could receive some alleged drug traffickers. He told me that in his opinion

it was a most important matter, and I said yes, that they could find me at the Marriott Hotel, where I was lodged with the Colombian delegation.

El Tiempo: This is precisely a question that some Colombians are asking: Why does Santiago Londoño, your old campaign treasurer in Antioquia, appear on the scene?

López Michelsen: For many years I've been a friend of Dr. Londoño, who belongs to a very distinguished family, and I've known his father for a long time. It was he who took responsibility, towards the end of my government, to acquire the land for the Rionegro airport. After the campaign we still had some outstanding debts, which were backed by his and some other Liberals' signatures, as well as some IOUs from the Banco Comercial Antioqueno of Medellín. That's why we've been in constant contact. Many people know this in Antioquia, and surely that's why they went to him so that he would tell me whether I could receive them.

El Tiempo: And this is the second great question many Colombians ask: Why does an ex-President of the Republic agree to talk with people involved in the recent murder of Minister Lara Bonilla?

López Michelsen: It's true, the interview took place only a few days after Dr. Lara Bonilla's murder. And that's why people of ill will ask, while Rodrigo Lara's corpse is still so fresh, how could I talk to people who could be his murderers? Obviously they sought me because they were tangled up in that situation. They were frightened of being accused of being Lara's murderers. Under normal circumstances, I don't think they would have sought me out; only at that time, when they had to leave the country because of the wave of indignation that was created and the finger of accusation pointed at them.

As soon as Lara Bonilla was murdered, everyone who had had any problems with him was indicted, by name, for that crime. They [the drug traffickers] say that their sons were expelled from their schools, that their parents and relatives jailed. Ochoa himself told me that his father had been arrested, accused of carrying an unregistered weapon. Later, during the trial, it turned out that he was licensed to carry several submachine guns. In my opinion, what they wanted initially was to make the government see that they didn't have anything to do with Rodrigo Lara Bonilla's assassination, and that they wanted to cooperate with the investigation to find the authors of the murder. And I, as ex-President, . . . in order to help solve problems in the community, agreed to receive them.

El Tiempo: In Panama, how did the interview come about?

López Michelsen: Three days later they phoned me, and we set a meeting. Just one. I never spoke more than once with them and the meeting lasted 45 minutes.

El Tiempo: Who came?

López Michelsen: Pablo Escobar, Jorge Ochoa and also Santiago Londoño. The meeting was in a tiny room, since the hotel was full because of the elections. The four of us were sitting there, just like we are chatting here.

El Tiempo: As a politician and as a writer, what was your first impression of them at that moment?

López Michelsen: I was surprised that they really had a coherent plan. Since it was such a *sui generis* proposal in the midst of the atmosphere that existed as a result of the Lara assassination, you would have thought there would have been a lot of ad lib and émotionalism. But there wasn't. They had their presentation well prepared. For 45 minutes they systematically developed three themes: their position on the assassination of Rodrigo Lara, their position on the army, and their position on the government. They began by asserting that the organization they represented was equally important and of the same size as the [Colombian] National Coffee Growers' Federation.

El Tiempo: Did Escobar and Ochoa at that time admit to being narcotics traffickers?

López Michelsen: They said that they represented some one hundred persons who were the leadership of the cocaine organization, an organization which they said had taken 10 years to form and which worked in coordination with people from Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and with accomplices in the United States. . . . Some of them asserted that one of the people they represented had a \$90 million profit during the latest quarter.

El Tiempo: Exactly what were they trying to propose to you during that meeting?

López Michelsen: At that time, they were people who felt trapped, frightened, and their main objective was to try to demonstrate that they had nothing to do with the assassination of Rodrigo Lara. That's the root of their intention to collaborate to dismantle all airports, laboratories, and plantations of an organization which was so big that, according to them, it would take another 10 years to organize something similar over again. That is, they offered to collaborate with the government in the job of dismantling all that infrastructure. . . .

El Tiempo: What did they say as to their responsibility for the death of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla?

López Michelsen: That they had no interest to be served by his death. They knew that the minister was about to leave the country in a few days, and they also stressed that Lara Bonilla had signed, together with the President, negative responses to extradition requests for persons wanted by the United States for narcotics traffic. They stressed that things were calm between the government and the mafia and that something like the death of Lara Bonilla was even harmful to them. . . .

El Tiempo: But if they didn't assassinate the minister, how can their flight from the country be explained?

López Michelsen: Because they believed that in the case of the assassination of Lara, the courts were prejudiced against them. And they gave the example that the judges had gone on strike for 24 hours, taking as proven fact that they were the assassins of the minister. That is, that the courts on the day after the assassination had ruled out any other hypothesis. They also claimed that the President's speech during the [Lara Bonilla] funeral at Neiva had prompted the belief that up until then the drug pushers hadn't been pursued, but from then on that would change. That is obviously twisting the truth, because Minister Lara Bonilla did everything possible to pursue the mafia. He was implacable against its members and his untiring labor went from opening investigations to admonishing judges. But any lawyer knows how difficult it is to pull together all the proof needed to get a conviction in one of these cases, because, among other reasons, the higher up a person is in this kind of business, the harder it is to prove the crime. It is easier to convict the "mule" [low-level carrier of drugs—ed.] caught with drugs inside her heel than those who run the business from the shadows. But public opinion was convinced that proof appeared with the death of Lara.

However, the only thing new that happened was that the security agencies opted for trying to shape public opinion at any cost, even though from a strictly legal standpoint, they didn't really have a case. This is very important, because one of people's most generalized reactions to the debate on the Panama conversations is to think that there was already enough to arrest them [the traffickers] and that this legal process was then going to be obstructed by the mafia's offer of an amnesty to the government. . . .

El Tiempo: You pointed out that the second topic dealt with during the discussion was their position vis-à-vis the government. What is it?

López Michelsen: It's the same thing it says in the memorandum already known to public opinion. That they were willing to dismantle everything, to end the organization, turn in the crops, laboratories, and airstrips.

El Tiempo: But did they really talk about bringing back all their money?

López Michelsen: I myself asked them if they were going to bring their dollars back, and they said yes. But if this were their intention, then they would have done it then; they would have brought everything back during the amnesty decreed by the government. Anyway, that possibility was discussed, but never, as a newsman put it, as collateral. They simply made that offer, which I interpreted more as a symbolic gesture. . . .

El Tiempo: Did they guarantee that that would put an end to drug trafficking?

López Michelsen: They themselves admit that small-scale

drug running will never end, but the consortium or wholesale organization, according to the representatives who spoke with me, would disappear. Funny though it may sound, they offered to combat *bazuco* inside the country. It was clear then that there is a division between the big figures in the business and the small ones, who sell retail in the form of *bazuco*, low grade cocaine residues. . . .

El Tiempo: And on the third point, regarding the armed forces, what was the most important thing they said?

López Michelsen: They held that those they represented maintained fairly good relations with the army, that they could fix the army without any problems. I came to the conclusion that they meant, as a Mexican President once said, that they could shoot at them with 5, 10 or 15 million peso shells. . . .

El Tiempo: At the end of the meeting at the Marriott Hotel did you reach some conclusion?

López Michelsen: I only offered to convey what we had spoken to President Betancur. . . .

El Tiempo: How did the President react when you told him everything?

López Michelsen: I referred to him the points and the attitude that came out of the Panama meeting. It didn't occur to me to suggest any type of action on the matter, and he didn't make any comment. . . .

El Tiempo: On what other occasion did you speak to the President about the matter?

López Michelsen: It's funny, but I never spoke with the President about that again, because it's a subject that wasn't going anywhere. What's more, something very special happened. Some ladies from the coast came to me to complain about abuses they had been subject to since their [drug trafficker] husbands had fled. I told the President that they said that the authorities broke into their homes by force, drank their liquor and took things away, and the President answered that the fight against drug trafficking remained implacable, but according to the laws and the Constitution. We never spoke again about the Panama thing. . . .

El Tiempo: But many people believe you began in Panama a series of conversations with the narcotics traffickers. . . .

López Michelsen: It was just one conversation that had no reason to go any further and without any type of collateral. I transmitted the information to the President and a political line was set, a process to follow. And in my opinion this question could have been used advantageously, given the state of mind the traffickers were in, to let them be heard and to learn where they had their airports, plantations and laboratories, which would have been a big advance.

El Tiempo: That is, accept their surrender.

López Michelsen: The difference between the surrender of the narcotics traffickers and the surrender of the guerrillas is something important to consider. While the former wanted to say where their plantations, landing strips, and laboratories were, the guerrillas argued, "We will keep our rifles."

El Tiempo: You are talking about an absolute surrender?

López Michelsen: It was an absolute promise of surrender.

El Tiempo: Then, from an historical perspective, do you consider the Panama meeting to be positive?

López Michelsen: I believe, as the attorney general said once on television and as any lawyer with some knowledge of Colombian public law has to know, that you can't be thinking of suspending judgment or giving amnesties or anything like that. But, retrospectively, I certainly believe that we could have let them tell us where their plantations, landing strips and laboratories were.

El Tiempo: Then, you consider that the whole debate has been useful for Colombia?

López Michelsen: I think it has been useful, since the country has to grasp the magnitude of the drug traffic problem and to fight it and to wipe it out and not have it like a demon to distract public attention when it is periodically brought to light. It has to be wiped out by all means, and therefore if these gentlemen wanted to surrender their laboratories, landing strips and plantations and sell their planes, then I think the road to reducing the narcotics traffic is probably easier through some form of arrangement than by the more difficult path to reach the same goal.

El Tiempo: Did the U.S. government or the DEA have anything to do with this?

López Michelsen: The Americans said that capitulation to the drug traffickers was unacceptable and they have a solid scientific and juridical argument. But it's not a question of capitulation, but a unilateral proposal from the narcotics traffickers. . . .

El Tiempo: Then the government of the United States had nothing to do with this conversation?

López Michelsen: I don't even know DEA people. And as for the U.S. embassy and its statements on narcotics questions, I don't believe them at all. It would be better to say I don't believe they know more than the Colombians, since they gather loads of rumors and present them as truth. There they may capture some people because they trap them as members of the mafias, but as for the personnel they have here, they know less than the Colombians.

El Tiempo: It seems strange that the Americans don't have

a good investigatory capability on narcotics traffic. . . .

López Michelsen: As I told you, I don't hold that opinion. During my government, Mrs. Carter came and gave me a notebook accusing everyone and their brother without any kind of proof, only rumors and similar names.¹ She gave it to me in the strictest confidence, and shortly thereafter it came out in *Le Monde* and on U.S. television. Also, with the system in the United States of negotiating sentence reduction for informers, the Latins have discovered that if they implicate Cuba or Nicaragua, they get their sentences reduced. . . .

El Tiempo: What is your opinion on the moral debate which has come up around these matters?

López Michelsen: Oh, please! Take cases like *El Espectador*, which published announcements paid by Lehder from the founding of the MAS until the Movimiento Latino was created, and now they're saying that you can't talk to drug traffickers, after having received their checks.

El Tiempo: But what many debate is that an ex-President would meet with drug traffickers.

López Michelsen: I understand, as regards those who met with me, that at that time there were no orders of arrest issued against them, no warrants. Well now, there are people who, in justifying the conversations, attempt to establish a parallel between the talks with the guerrillas and this conversation with the drug traffickers. This is true in law, but not morally. It's not even true by the law, because these people were neither indicted nor sentenced, whereas among the guerrillas there are people who have not only been indicted but also sentenced by the courts. It is also said that talking to the drug traffickers is a crime of cover-up. But cover-up is an autonomous offense, so it's the same thing to cover up for a drug trafficker, when one knows where he is, as covering up for a political kidnapper or covering up for a woman when one knows where she's hiding. It cannot be said that the cover-up of one is more serious than the cover-up for another, when one does not inform the authorities of the whereabouts of the offender. It must be noted that in this case they were not sought by the law; in other words, they were simply wanted within the wave that grew out of Lara Bonilla's murder, but there was no order from a judge or any kind of juridical disposition to hunt them down.

Note:

¹Rosalynn Carter, wife of U.S. President Jimmy Carter, visited then-President López Michelsen in June 1977 and presented him with a secret memorandum implicating several prominent Colombian political figures in drug trafficking; among the names listed were those of presidential aspirant Julio César Turbay Ayala and then Defense Minister Gen. Varón Valencia. Carter administration official Peter Bourne, later dumped from the government for illegally prescribing drugs to members of the White House staff, made the allegations presented to López, creating a scandal that almost led to a rupture in relations between the United States and Colombia.