

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Betancur in showdown with oligarchy

Colombia's drug-pushing oligarchy is manipulating Communists and terrorists in a coup drive against the President.

The drug-pushing Colombian oligarchy, led by the followers of former President Alfonso López Michelsen, is making use of the Communist Party and their terrorist fellow-travelers in a bid to overthrow the government of President Belisario Betancur.

Although firm action by the Betancur government against an illegal strike on June 20 has temporarily averted the threat, and also won the full support of Defense Minister Vega Uribe, Betancur's acceptance of International Monetary Fund austerity means that his control of the situation may be tenuous, at best.

The June 14 summit conference between Betancur and President Luisinchi of neighboring Venezuela, at which an effective anti-drug axis was to be forged between the two nations, was nearly sabotaged by pro-drug groups in both countries. The next step was the buildup to a coup d'état inside Colombia.

At the summit Betancur invoked mutual self-defense in his statements to Luisinchi: "In the face of common enemies—backwardness, poverty, ignorance, the brutalizing drug trade—our national and strategic interests are the same. We will work together, President Luisinchi! . . . We will not allow those who want to see us disunited, easy prey to modern neo-colonialisms, to divide us. We will not allow the arms traffickers to poison the exemplary relations between our two countries."

A wave of terrorist bombings, kidnappings, assassinations, and armed

confrontations with the military over the preceding weeks set the stage for anti-government violence and pro-coup sentiment on June 20, the day the Communist Party-linked CSTC labor federation called a "civic strike" against the Betancur regime. Leaflets were circulated throughout the country by a purported "Strike Coordinating Committee," which gave instructions on how to set fire to police stations and make molotov cocktails.

The strike action, endorsed by nearly every terrorist organization in the country, was denounced by the three democratic labor federations, declared illegal by the government, and the army put on "maximum alert" in anticipation of trouble.

The strike was nonetheless given implicit backing by the López Michelson wing of the opposition Liberal Party, whose likely presidential candidate, Virgilio Barco, called on President Betancur to step down and permit the installation of an "emergency cabinet," due to the people's alleged "loss of faith" in their President. Liberal Party director Ernesto Samper Pizano labeled the "motivations" behind the Communist strike "justified."

The country's top oligarchical forces, represented by the National Industrialists Association, the National Merchants Federation, and the private urban bus owners, privately threw their support to the strike as well, according to the strike organizers. The bus owners, in particular, threatened Betancur that unless they were granted increased fares, they would keep their

buses off the streets on June 20.

President Betancur went on national television June 18 to warn against "terrorist infiltration" of the strike action and to appeal to the leadership of the Communist Party and allied labor federation not to lend themselves to "the enemies of peace." His appeal fell on deaf ears. The Communists responded by calling the President a terrorist!

The coup scenario began on May 23, when a busload of soldiers was bombed and machine-gunned by unnamed terrorists, triggering a series of army-guerrilla battles that reportedly left as many as 100 dead.

Several top leaders of the amnestied M-19 guerrilla organization were then the targets of assassination attempts, leading the M-19 command to break off its "national dialogue" with the Betancur government and blame the President personally for the hits. The M-19 has been operating actual paramilitary encampments in the poorest *barrrios* of the cities of Bogota and Cali, using the amnesty from the government to build up its forces under the cover of "political organizing." Several sophisticated arms factories were uncovered on June 4 in the Cali region, believed to belong to the M-19. Clandestine arsenals of explosives and weapons were discovered in several other major cities across the country.

On the eve of the "civic strike," 21 bombings and dynamitings across the country had already taken their toll in lives and infrastructure, with railroad lines, bridges, and oil pipelines particular targets. The authorities counter-attacked effectively, by rescinding the legal status of trade unions and officials taking part in the strike, and with preventive detentions of M-19ers and other "amnestied" guerrilla supporters of the strike.