

Drug traffickers in bid for political power in Ibero-America

by Valerie Rush

When Honduran drug kingpin José Ramón Matta Ballesteros escaped from a Colombian prison in March only to return home to Honduras where a double homicide charge was awaiting him, he knew exactly what he was doing.

Matta is wanted by U.S. law enforcement as the head of one of Ibero-America's largest drug-smuggling rings and as the reputed mastermind of the kidnap, brutal torture, and murder of Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique Camarena in Mexico last year. A U.S. request for his extradition is standing. But "Don José Ramón" isn't worried. Honduras' constitution forbids extradition of nationals, and his lawyer is already predicting that Matta will soon be a free man.

Behind the legal machinations, however, are the dollars that the fabulously wealthy Honduran drug-trafficker brought with him when he "turned himself in" to the Honduran police. Finance Minister Reginaldo Panting was explicit in welcoming "investors" like Matta back to Honduras: "We welcome the dollars that Mr. Matta Ballesteros has brought to invest in Honduras, and if he wants to buy gasoline stations, I will sell him mine. . . . I don't know Matta's economic situation, but if we have an investor who brings dollars, then this will help our balance of payments."

The "free enterprise" mentality expressed by Minister Panting—morally repulsive as it is—should come as no surprise to those familiar with the "open-economy recommendations" of the International Monetary Fund to the austerity-wracked nations of Ibero-America. Or to those familiar with the free-enterprise spoutings of U.S. Nobel Prize-winning "economist" Milton Friedman. In fact, it is the mentality expressed by most of Ibero-America's finance ministers, and—fanatically—by the Reagan administration.

Conflict of interest?

The Matta Ballesteros case points up a gross contradiction in the much-touted war on drugs of the "free marketeering" Reagan administration. While the State Department has been announcing to all who will listen that the Nicaraguan Sandinistas are drug runners, nary a word has been uttered about Matta Ballesteros' outrageous refuge behind the Honduran constitution. After all, as one Colombian journalist

pointed out, "The U.S. needs Matta Ballesteros. Honduras needs the United States."

Could the State Department's silence perhaps have something to do with its earlier collaboration with the former defense minister of Honduras, the Moonie Gen. Gustavo Alvarez, who used a virulent "anti-communist" front to cover for his involvement in the international narcotics trade?

It was universally known at the time that Alvarez was not answerable to then President of Honduras Roberto Suazo Cordoba, but rather to his "controller," the U.S. ambassador from 1981-84, John Negroponte. In 1982, under Alvarez's "strong-man" rule, Honduras was upgraded as a drug center through the consecutive visits of the mafia-sponsored defense minister of Israel at the time, Ariel Sharon, and of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's right-hand man, Col. Bo Hi Pak.

With Sharon, according to high-level sources, Alvarez struck a secret drugs-for-arms deal which included turning Honduras into a "safe house" for fugitive international traffickers. With Bo Hi Pak, the drug-smuggling apparatus was enhanced through the Confederation of Associations for the Unification of the American Societies, the same CAUSA which had promoted Bolivia's "cocaine generals." Alvarez was inducted into the Moon sect and created a personal cult army within the Honduran armed forces.

Although ousted from power in a bloodless coup in March 1984, the kooky Alvarez continued his dirty operations from exile in Miami. In October 1984, \$10 million worth of cocaine was seized by FBI officials in Miami, along with eight men who proved to be part of an Alvarez-linked assassination plot against then Honduran President Suazo Cordoba. Named as head of the plot was Alvarez's former chief of staff General Bueso-Rosa, then based at the Honduran embassy in Santiago, Chile and an activist in the Moon cult.

Many of Alvarez's collaborators are today back in Honduras—no doubt in league with Matta Ballesteros.

The Colombian angle

Matta Ballesteros' scandalous "escape" from a Colombian maximum-security jail was made possible through deep-seated corruption in the highest echelons of Colombian political life. As he himself describes his "flight" from prison:

At nine in the morning, I shaved, put on a blue suit and red tie, and left. All the doors opened for me. A powerful hand was opening them. At each door, I identified myself with a visitor's card, until I passed through the door to the street. I hailed a taxi and stayed hidden in a house in Bogota for eight days. Then I left by the Dorado airport on a chartered flight for Guatemala, traveled by land across the border to Honduras, and here I am!

Although Colombian Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González fired the national prison director and a half-dozen other prison officials, he himself has acknowledged that the corruption, "frequently financed from abroad," is difficult to defeat.

Matta Ballesteros, married to a Colombian, owns vast properties inside Colombia—including 27 buildings in the capital of Bogotá alone, a dozen or more sprawling country estates, and so on. His money-laundering "investments" in Colombia—as in Honduras—have apparently been welcome. According to the Bogotá daily *El Espectador* of April 7, Matta has pledged to return to "the land I love" as soon as current President Belisario Betancur steps down from office come Aug. 7.

El Espectador notes that other criminal "notables," such as fugitive banker Jaime Michelsen Uribe and master embezzler Roberto Soto Prieto, have also announced plans to return to Colombia—as soon as Betancur leaves the presidency. The editors of *El Espectador* ask why these criminals have such confidence in the next Colombian administration, and demand that the presidential candidates make public their position on the issue of political protection for criminals. Another question to ask is whether the U.S. government will share that confidence in the next Colombian administration?

Enter 'the Godfather'

El Espectador's editors, representing dissident elements within the official Liberal Party, know that whichever of the presidential candidates win this year, he will be sharing power with "the Godfather," former President Alfonso López Michelsen.

López, first cousin of the fugitive banker Jaime Michelsen, whose vast Grancolombiano financial empire was built on the drug bonanza, is a wealthy and powerful political "fixer" in Colombian politics, and a long-time ally of the mob. During his 1974-78 administration, Colombia was converted into a haven for Dope, Inc., with López sponsoring the financial mechanism, exemplified by the infamous "sinister window" at the Central Bank, which enabled the local oligarchs to launder their cut of the billions in marijuana and cocaine sales.

López's reputation as "the Godfather" of the Colombian drug trade lost him his bid for re-election in 1982, despite the millions he spent in "getting out the vote"; the "confessions" of drug czars Carlos Lehder and Pablo Escobar that they had

given hefty contributions to the López campaign apparently did not help that image.

In 1984, following the mafia assassination of Betancur's Justice Minister, Lara Bonilla, López personally met with the fugitive drug kings in their Panama hideout, and then went public with their offer to repatriate their multi-billion dollar fortunes from the drug trade in exchange for a government pardon. In an infamous interview granted to the Colombian press at the time, López personally urged the government to accept the offer, pledging the murderous mafiosi's good faith. In that same interview, López blasted those who incorporate morality into politics, a theme he has returned to frequently in recent times.

The March 9 congressional elections in Colombia, which placed the bulk of López's dirty political machine solidly in control of the Congress, also eliminated from the presidential running the only political tendency which was reasonably clean of the mafia taint: the *Nuevo Liberalismo* followers of Luis Carlos Galán. Now, as a result of the Matta Ballesteros "escape," the sole representative of *Nuevo Liberalismo* in the Betancur cabinet—Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González—is being targeted by the López forces for the same kind of slander treatment that set up his predecessor and friend Lara Bonilla for a mafia hit.

Immediately following the Matta flight from prison, a lower-echelon prison official publicly accused Parejo of "complicity" in the escape and demanded an investigation. The office of Attorney-General Carlos Jiménez Gómez, the man who held unauthorized meetings with the mafia chiefs at the same time as López, followed by opening up an investigation of the minister. The fiercely anti-drug Parejo responded with a public denunciation of the investigation as "arbitrary and totally illegal," and charged the attorney-general's office with consistent sabotage of the war on drugs.

Minister Parejo has repeatedly clashed with Attorney General Jiménez Gómez since taking office in May of 1984. It began when Parejo pointedly "joked" that drug traffickers should be strung up from the nearest lamppost, provoking a wave of hysteria among the mafia-riddled Caribbean coast politicians and juridical "disapproval" from Jiménez. Parejo's faithful defense of the extradition treaty which Lara Bonilla gave his life to uphold has been denounced by Jiménez, who along with the mafia has repeatedly pronounced the treaty "unconstitutional." Parejo's order last year launching a massive—and highly effective—herbicide eradication program against the country's marijuana and coca cultivation was similarly challenged by Jiménez.

Attorney General Jiménez, furious at having his dirty machinations labeled "illegal" and "arbitrary" by his intended victim, fired off a letter to President Betancur demanding retribution against Parejo. The ball is now in Betancur's court, giving the Colombian President a golden opportunity to turn his last four months in office into a blow against those "citizens above suspicion" who have protected the mob from the top.