

Colombian anti-drug hero gunned down

by the Editors

The former chief of Colombia's anti-narcotics police, Colonel Jaime Ramírez Gómez, was machine-gunned to death while riding with his family Nov. 17. The mafia killed him not only in revenge against the man who personally conducted the biggest cocaine seizure in world history, the 1984 raid on the Tranquilandia cocaine lab which netted 14 tons of pure cocaine and 45 narcotics traffickers.

It also sought to eliminate Colombia's best policeman from the line of command. Ramírez was a quiet doer who never ran public relations campaigns to "improve his image," something common among so many figures today. His service record speaks for itself.

Ramirez was a key liaison with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, and was to testify the day after his murder at an investigatory tribunal on evidence he had personally put together of cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar's role in the assassination of Colombia's Justice Minister, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, in 1984. Escobar was indicted in Miami two days after Ramirez' death along with the "Medellin cartel" of the drug mob, on charges of trafficking 58 tons of cocaine into the U.S.

An extraordinary team

Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, as justice minister, and Jaime Ramírez, as the F-2's anti-narcotics chief, made an extraordinary team which accomplished the most valiant and efficient campaign to rescue public morality from under the heel of the narcotics traffickers.

Without vacillating, the two drafted and executed a master plan to extirpate the drug scourge. Their approach was not to reduce the activities of the drug traffickers, but to totally eradicate them. And, to do that, they took on the task of destroying the mafia's logistical infrastructure. This meant using the power of the state to finish off marijuana and coca plantations by the best means: the use of herbicides. It was necessary simultaneously to dismantle the laboratories and places where narcotics were processed and prepared for shipment. It was also vital to end the thugs' transport and communications network by destroying clandestine airports and seizing all those planes suspected of being used in narcotics transport.

While they ran this war to the death against drug traffic,

Lara Bonilla and Jaime Ramírez worked hard on a justice reform proposal designed to arm the state with the legal tools required to overthrow the drug traffickers. Sentences had to be increased, penal codes stripped of all kinds of "legal" loopholes through which the criminals could escape the reach of justice, and international accords such as the extradition treaty with the United States, had to be enforced.

Mobsters camouflaged as ecologists invented spurious arguments against the use of herbicides to kill marijuana. The "respectable" owners of some 200 airplanes, detained for being linked to the drug traffic, moved their great influence to get their suspended flying licenses reinstated.

By murdering Lara in April of 1984 and then offering to pay the foreign debt with narco-dollars, the drug runners and their pet politicians supposed that Colombia would give in to the law of the jungle. The ploy backfired; the population rose up in support of President Belisario Betancur's decision not to accept the drug runners' blackmail.

Since then, the drug financiers have decided to eliminate one by one every opponent of their designs. They hoped Colombians would be overwhelmed with fear. In November 1985, they had the M-19 terrorists seize the Justice Palace and murder judges who had enforced extradition of drug traffickers.

Since shortly before the inauguration of President Virgilio Barco this past August, the drug mafia stepped up both their calls for legalization, and their political assassinations. Surely Colonel Ramírez worried during the days before his assassination whether the new Colombian government would continue the war on drugs. Government agencies advised Barco to ban herbicide use and ordered the planes seized on suspicion of carrying drugs to be returned to their owners.

The way Ramírez's career as a police officer developed says things about the government's posture toward the drug traffic. He expected he would be promoted to brigadier general in early December, after completing the requisite study program. However, according to Colombian press reports, he was to be the only one in his graduating class not promoted this year.

His yearning to serve his country in some position with operational responsibilities, for which he was highly qualified, surely must have made him intensely concerned during the weeks before his death.

There are many questions to be cleared up in the investigation of his assassination. However, in order for his sacrifice not to have been in vain, the battle plan for eradicating drug traffic drawn up by Ramírez and Rodrigo Lara Bonilla must not be abandoned on any front. On the contrary, this war on drugs program must be improved and expanded. The governments of the United States and other countries which have cooperated with Colombia against drugs, must be unequivocal and concrete in their support of this war. That is the best tribute we could render to the memory of Jaime Ramírez Gómez.

May he rest in peace.