

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Leadership vacuum in Colombia

Nearly all have agreed that President Virgilio Barco must go, but who—or what—will replace him?

Rumors of a letter circulating nationwide, demanding the resignation of Colombian President Virgilio Barco, have triggered increasingly overt calls for an alternative to the defective leadership being exercised by the former World Bank official. Elements from both the opposition Conservative and ruling Liberal parties have begun to suggest various formulas for filling the leadership vacuum at a moment of virtual national dissolution, under the combined effects of narcoterrorism and economic crisis.

Most striking was a column in the June 20 edition of the daily *El Tiempo*, by Juan Diego Jaramillo, the political heir to Social Conservative Party leader and kidnap victim Alvaro Gómez Hurtado. Entitled "Doctrine of a Coup," Jaramillo wrote, "If things continue as they are, a coup would not be the product of a perverse secret conspiracy, but the result of involuntary circumstances demanding the rupture of the hierarchies to achieve national salvation."

Columnist Enrique Caballero, a mouthpiece for certain Liberal factions, wrote June 19 in the anti-government daily *El Espectador*, that Barco's disastrous choices for new ministerial collaborators, far from meeting the popular clamor for action on the government's part, have given proof positive of the need for a changing of the guard: "It is painful to say it, but President Barco, who has shown such eloquent signs of insensitivity and irresponsibility, has given the final demonstration that he was never intended to govern. The blame is not

his. It is that of the great Liberal Party which brought him to the [presidential] palace."

Caballero revived discussion of Barco's possible replacement—for reasons of ill health—by a carefully chosen vice-president, known in Colombia as the *designado*: "The moment for solving this crisis in a form that will not derail the institutions is not far away, fortunately. The opportunity is the upcoming [August 1988] election of the *designado*."

The fight to fill the presidential vacuum—one way or the other—has broken out into the open. A business-sponsored dinner to pay homage to Gen. Ruiz Barrera, the courageous anti-terrorist commander of the IV Army Brigade based in the violence-ridden city of Medellín, was immediately denounced by the editors of the daily *El Mundo* as the conspiracy behind the Barco resignation push.

The owner of *El Mundo* is Bernardo Guerra Serna, a powerful Liberal Party chieftain closely linked to former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen, and, reputedly, to the cocaine trafficking clans that dominate Medellín.

The many prominent figures who attended the dinner of honor, including members of the National Industrialists Association, etc., charged that *El Mundo's* accusations were themselves "a diabolical conspiracy."

While Colombia's ruling forces fight it out, the narco-terrorists have upped the ante. A clear pattern of attacks has emerged against the country's two most vital economic sectors:

oil, of which Colombia has only recently become a net exporter; and coffee, the country's number-one foreign exchange source. Towns in the department of Caldas, Colombia's major coffee center, have been repeatedly assaulted by guerrilla commandos targeting police stations, government offices, and the coffers of the local agricultural bank. In addition, at least three national leaders of the coffee industry have been kidnaped in recent weeks.

Official reports just released reveal that Colombia has been unable to export more than 11 million barrels of oil in 1988 because of over 40 guerrilla attacks against the country's main pipeline, the 800-kilometer Coveñas-Caño Limón connection. At least \$70 million have been lost to Colombia from a combination of oil spills, pipeline repairs, and more than 55 days of suspended pumping of crude.

The constant sabotage attacks on the country's oil installations have been carried out by the ELN in the name of "fighting imperialism." And yet, it has been widely acknowledged that the greatest economic losses are not suffered by such multinationals as Occidental Petroleum Co., which has given millions in protection money to the Castroite ELN. Rather, it has been the state oil company Ecopetrol which has borne the brunt of the damage and is now teetering on the edge of bankruptcy—precisely the objective of the terrorists.

Desperate appeals to the ELN terrorists to stop their assaults and negotiate a settlement by the newly named energy minister, Oscar Mejía Vallejo, and by Attorney General Horacio Serpa Uribe, were answered the next day with three new dynamite attacks. Mejía acknowledged that the attacks "apparently are the ELN's negative response to our request for a dialogue."