

Andean Report by Javier Almario

Colombian cabinet changes

President Barco still holds dialogues with the terrorists, but military shifts hint a harder line could emerge.

On July 16, Colombian President Virgilio Barco presented a new ministerial cabinet: Changes included Mines and Energy, Justice, Government, and Defense. Perhaps most significant was the change of defense minister, which forced alterations up and down the military hierarchy.

Defense Minister Gen. Manuel Jaime Guerrero Paz was retired after barely one year in office, and replaced by Gen. Oscar Botero Restrepo, who had held the post of Commander General of the Armed Forces. The great surprise was that Gen. Pedro Nel Molano, who had served as head of the joint chiefs of staff of the Armed Forces, did not get the position of Army commander as expected, but was retired instead. The new Army commander is Gen. Armando Arias Cabrales.

Arias Cabrales gained fame in November 1985, as commander of the operation to recapture the Justice Palace after it had been seized by the terrorist M-19. General Arias has been the target of numerous legal actions since then, among them charges lodged against him by the Attorney General's office concerning the alleged disappearance of one of the Justice Palace terrorists. Barco's Attorney General Alfonso Gómez Méndez, who is married to a suspected agent for Cuban intelligence, Patricia Lara, has sought to prosecute General Arias as a means of eliminating the tradition of military legal jurisdiction, by trying to bring him before a civilian tribunal for trial.

Arias Cabrales's comment on his nomination was that "it was a decision of the national government . . . backing by the President for my actions."

Whether his naming was just a sop to pressures by the military or a genuine turnaround in presidential policy is now the question.

A miffed General Nel Molano, who had expected to get the post that went to Arias, told reporters that he is a strategic evaluation specialist, and that he has recommended that the Barco government include the Castroite ELN terrorists in its ongoing dialogue with the other terrorists. "One hopes that groups like the ELN understand that war doesn't get you anywhere," said Molano. It is possible that such an evaluation, at a point when the army is engaged in combat with the ELN, may have been Molano's undoing.

Many rumors have circulated about why the defense minister was changed. It is a known fact that the President's policy of having dialogue with terrorists instead of defeating them in battle had been endorsed by the outgoing Defense Minister Guerrero Paz, including his upholding a cease-fire against the M-19 ordered by Barco. The miserable inadequacy of such a policy has long been evident, and it is possible that Guerrero Paz was made the scapegoat for Barco's own policy failure.

Nonetheless, the Colombian political elite, with Barco in the lead, remains convinced of the promise of *perestroika*, at home and abroad. They suffer from the illusion that with Gorbachov in power in the U.S.S.R., Colombia's Moscow-run guerrilla forces will abandon their drive for power. Even Conservative Party leader Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, the victim of a bloody kidnaping by the M-19 just one year ago, told a Caracas, Vene-

zuela conference recently, "The revolutionary option has ceased to exist." Thus, Barco's policy failure remains in force.

In fact, Barco has now ordered the military to cease actions against the FARC, EPL, and Quintín Lamé narco-terrorists, because all of these have paid lip service to Barco's dialogue appeals, and allegedly seek to rejoin the Colombian political circuit. Only the terrorist ELN, responsible for damages to the state oil company Ecopetrol on the order of \$300 million, still remains outside the "dialogue" process. Barco has ordered a military offensive against this terrorist group, but the purpose of the offensive is not to destroy the ELN but rather to force it to join the dialogue.

Armed Forces Commander Gen. Nelson Mejía Henão recently told his troops that the Occidental Petroleum-financed ELN is on the verge of being defeated and that "one hopes more confrontations will not be necessary, and that they will enter into dialogue with the government." He later called on the ELN guerrillas to "accept development, not slow it down. There is good will on the part of the government, the military forces, and the people."

The ELN had demanded the ouster of Mines and Energy Minister Mejía Vallejo, and won it. An *El Espectador* columnist commented July 19 that neither the Conservative Party nor a section of the ruling Liberal Party had succeeded in ousting Mejía. "It took no more than a subversive movement of recognized criminals like the ELN to request his removal for it to be done. . . [We now have] co-government, under blackmail of death and the blowing up of pipelines." Barco may think he is offering the ELN the carrot of dialogue versus the stick, but all evidence suggests it is the terrorists who are doing the offering.