
In Memoriam

Enrique Low's war with drug 'slavery'

by José Restrepo

Enrique Low Murtra, who served as Colombia's justice minister for nine months in the administration of Virgilio Barco, was assassinated on April 30 at 8:15 p.m., as he left the LaSalle University where he worked as a professor and head of the Economics Department. He was shot as he was about to take a taxi to his home, since the government of President César Gaviria had refused to provide him with the protection and transportation he requested.

Low Murtra's assassination occurred exactly seven years after the murder of another justice minister, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, the first political leader to launch a real resistance against the drug cartels.

Eduardo Laverde, Low's partner in a consulting firm, angrily charged the next day that "the blame for this abominable crime should be placed on the President of the Republic, who removed [Low Murtra] from his ambassadorial post in Switzerland where he was a little more protected." For security reasons, the Barco government had named Low Murtra as ambassador to Switzerland, but Gaviria removed him. "My son didn't voluntarily resign from the ambassadorship in Switzerland," said Rodrigo Low, the former minister's father. Expressing rage at the Gaviria government, the elder Low said that his son had "requested that the government name him to another embassy, because he had received death threats. He was told that this was unnecessary, since things had calmed down. Nor did the government provide him the protection he had requested in Colombia. I want the Colombian people to know the truth."

Enrique Low Murtra had survived the terrorist M-19's bloody takeover of the Justice Palace on Nov. 6-7, 1985, in which half the members of the Supreme Court and another 100 people lost their lives. At that time, Low served on the Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, and was in charge of lawsuits involving economic matters. Following the takeover, Low charged that the M-19 had carried out mafia orders to assassinate the justices and characterized the action as "narco-terrorist."

A delayed battle

Low accepted the Justice Ministry post in the Barco administration on Sept. 30, 1987 at the point when the terrified Supreme Court, in the aftermath of the slaughter at the Justice

Palace, had already ruled that the extradition treaty with the United States, a crucial weapon in the war against drugs, was unconstitutional.

A devout Catholic, Low said that the country had to fight against reigning impunity, especially as it related to drug-trafficking, because "the slavery which drugs produce, in the mind and spirit of people who make up our society, not only violates their human rights, it destroys them. . . . We can't fool ourselves," he stated, "with the sophism that the problem should be taken on exclusively by the consuming nations. It's true that they should act more decisively to reduce demand. But we can't ignore the pernicious consequences which this vice—today exploited economically by a few cold-blooded individuals—has on the producer nations' values; we need only mention the wave of corruption spreading through our institutions. When anyone resists, [the mafia] opts for assassination of those who courageously oppose its designs."

Low's efforts to combat corruption were unsuccessful due to lack of support from the Barco government. In December 1987, a corrupt judge ordered the release of Fabio Ochoa Vásquez, one of the Medellín Cartel's kingpins, while another judge in Cali ordered the release of drug trafficker Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela.

In November 1987, Low charged that the assassination of Jaime Pardo Leal, former presidential candidate of the Patriotic Union, the party created on the initiative of the narco-terrorist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), was ordered by kingpin Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. He said that it was the result of "disputes over the economic benefits [of trafficking] poorly distributed between the guerrillas and the drug-traffickers."

In January 1988, Low issued orders to capture, for subsequent extradition, Pablo Escobar, Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, and the Ochoa brothers, Fabio, David, and Jorge Luis. Since the Supreme Court had already ruled that extradition was unconstitutional, Low decided to make use of the Montevideo Convention, which permitted extradition among several countries of the hemisphere.

Through their armies and their lawyers, the drug traffickers appealed the arrest warrants before the Council of State, arguing that, since an extradition treaty with the United States existed, the Montevideo Convention couldn't be used. The Council of State's magistrates, which included some of Low Murtra's former colleagues, ruled in favor of the drug traffickers. In April 1988, Low appealed to the Council of State to reconsider its position, but the appeal was denied.

When Barco refused to wage a serious war on drugs, Low Murtra resigned his post on June 9, 1988. From then, until Aug. 7, 1990, he served as Colombia's ambassador to Switzerland. There, authorities captured several terrorists from Spain's ETA who were ordered to murder him. It was only after the drug mafias murdered presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán in August 1988, that President Barco launched the type of anti-drug war that Enrique Low Murtra had been demanding.