

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Another 'democracy' in decline

Capitulating to terrorism and drugs, Colombia's President may not be able to show his face in public much longer.

Colombian President César Gaviria has recently been forced to cancel all public press conferences, a consequence of the growing hostility to his administration among every layer of the population. On April 2, while attending a bicentennial commemoration in Cucuta province of Francisco de Paula Santander, father of the Colombian Republic, Gaviria was hissed and booed by students bearing posters attacking the President's free market policies. Gaviria met the same response while attending a bullfight in Bogotá. According to a recent government poll, Gaviria's popularity has plummeted from 85% in early 1991 to less than 26% today.

Gaviria lost his mandate to rule shortly after taking power, when he betrayed his campaign pledge of a "total war on drugs" by striking a rotten bargain with the Medellín cocaine cartel under the pretext of "seeking peace." With cartel chieftain Pablo Escobar contentedly running his multibillion-dollar drug-trafficking business from his government-protected bunker, peace of a sort briefly reigned. Under the rubric of free market economics, the Gaviria government has devoted itself to restructuring Colombia's already-corrupted monetary system, to facilitate absorption of the subsequent flood of narcodollars back into the country. The drug trade has been effectively legalized.

Gaviria then offered the olive branch to the narco-guerrillas of the FARC and ELN, launching "peace negotiations" designed to establish a

power-sharing arrangement with narco-terrorists who have been ravaging the country for decades. But the FARC and ELN, now united under the Simón Bolívar National Guerrilla Coordinator (CNGSB), have learned from Escobar's example. When the Medellín Cartel wanted to accelerate its negotiations with the government, it bombed an airliner or shopping center, assassinated a candidate, or massacred a village. The CNGSB is following suit.

After the Gaviria government was forced to suspend negotiations with the CNGSB in late March, when the country learned of the death of one of its hostages, a 78-year-old former cabinet minister, FARC negotiator Alfonso Cano threatened "total war" unless the government returned to the negotiating table. Cano also insisted that the CNGSB would accept no changes in the negotiating agenda, a response to Gaviria's plea that the terrorists release their kidnap victims and consider a cease-fire.

While Gaviria contemplates how to get his peace talks back on track without losing what little popularity he has left, the CNGSB has gone on a bloody rampage. Although U.S. banks and companies have been the chief targets, the domestic "bourgeoisie" is also in their sights. A gas station in the city of Cali was dynamited, killing three and seriously wounding more than a score of people. Government offices, telecommunications towers, and military convoys have also been hit.

This time around, the blame is be-

ing placed squarely where it belongs—on Gaviria's shoulders. Former Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González charged that the government had effectively turned itself "into an accomplice of these terrorists," and journalist Enrique Ramírez Yañez protested that the government, in its "disdain" for history, has facilitated the terrorists' drive for power through dialogue "which has only served to bloody the Colombian countryside."

The Catholic Church and the military have begun to publicly intervene as well. Bishop of Pereira Darío Castrillón Hoyos charged that the CNGSB leaders had "gone mad," and insisted that "there is no way to persist in dialogue when one of the sides has lost all reason." Armed Forces commander Gen. Luis Roca Maichel issued an open letter to the attorney general's office charging a government coverup of the crimes of the terrorists.

Yet, the authorities continue to defend their "peace" strategy. Chief government negotiator Horacio Serpa Uribe complained to the press in late March that the country was being misled into thinking that seeking peace was being "soft," and that "the worthy and proud are those who demand war." He persisted that "what requires courage, what is truly difficult, is to be tolerant without being permissive."

Taking that "tolerance" to its logical conclusion is former President Misael Pastrana, who declared April 2 that the path to peace was to hand over 14 senatorial seats to the CNGSB, thereby bypassing the cycle of negotiations and violence. Apparently impressed by Pastrana's proposal, former congressman and self-styled spokesman for the narco-guerrillas Alvaro Leyva Durán proposed that Pastrana and former President Alfonso López Michelsen (known as "The Godfather" for his links to the drug mob) personally intervene to revive the negotiations with the CNGSB.