

Escobar escapes, war returns to Colombia

by Andrea Olivieri

The well-planned escape of Medellín Cartel kingpin Pablo Escobar from his customized Colombian prison has signaled the demise of President César Gaviria's carefully constructed "narco-democracy," and the return of full-scale war to Colombia. As former Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González, one of the country's few surviving heroes of the country's war during the 1980s against narco-terrorism, commented on the new crisis facing the country, "The President has demonstrated that he lacks the moral authority to continue ruling the country. . . . He should be asked to resign."

The bloody escapade in Medellín on July 21, during which at least six people were killed when a botched attempt to transfer Escobar to a military base triggered a hostage-taking and shootout with military commandos, is the lawful consequence of an unholy pact that was struck between the César Gaviria government and the billionaire drug trafficker and his cohorts over a year ago.

After blackmailing the government and bribing the illegally convoked National Constituent Assembly into approving a constitutional ban on extradition (see p. 41), Escobar agreed to end his reign of narco-terror and to "surrender" to Colombian authorities in exchange for a U.S.-modeled "plea-bargain." The deal worked out with the government in effect constituted the legalization of Escobar's dirty billions, following a short rest and relaxation stint in his personal five-star prison.

Gaviria was able to boast of being "the President of peace," and the Bush administration, which had backed Gaviria's appeasement policy toward narco-terrorism every step of the way, now had a new world order "democracy" to promote globally.

Warned in advance

But things went awry. Escobar's continued day-to-day management of his vast cocaine empire—including regular business meetings with his henchmen and trials of potential rivals *inside* his five-star jail—could no longer be ignored when at least a dozen mutilated bodies of those rivals began appearing on the outskirts of Medellín. The public clamor for

action finally forced President Gaviria to order a "temporary" transfer of Escobar to a military base while security at the drug lord's jail was "tightened up." The three *unarmed* government officials sent to inform Escobar of the transfer served effectively as a warning to the drug traffickers, who broke out their arsenal, employed their hostages as a time-buying device, and used pre-designed escape hatches to elude a military dragnet.

As Gen. Farouk Yanine, who was in charge of the belated military assault on the prison, was to bitterly point out, "They only told us to surround the prison and increase security; later we were told to try to free the hostages."

Escobar's dramatic escape is but the latest blow to the already severely diminished credibility of President Gaviria's administration. Attempts to negotiate the amnesty and return to civilian life of thousands of heavily armed narco-terrorists under the umbrella Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinating Group were finally abandoned in July, after more than a year of on-again, off-again "peace talks" with terrorist chieftains who responded to each concession by the government with a fresh escalation of terrorist assaults and assassinations against both military and civil targets.

President Gaviria's sole "success story," the amnesty and incorporation into the government of the M-19 narco-terrorists best known for their bloody November 1985 siege of the Colombian Justice Palace which left 100 dead, was nearly overturned in June when a courageous judge ordered the arrest of more than a dozen M-19 leaders for the commission of "atrocious crimes" during that siege. Only a last-minute intervention by Gaviria's presidential office contravening the judiciary prevented the warrants from being enforced.

'The war is on'

The Medellín Cartel's one-year suspension of indiscriminate and large-scale acts of terrorism—a hiatus more than filled by the bloody actions of the FARC and ELN narco-guerrillas—is ended. According to phone calls to the Colombian media from self-proclaimed spokesmen for Escobar in the 24-hour period immediately after the prison break, "The war is back on." One hostage at the prison claimed to have heard Escobar promise to "make it rain car-bombs."

President Gaviria's only chance for political survival at this point is to give the Colombian Armed Forces both the mandate, and the means, to wage total and absolute war against the narco-terrorist enemy. In 1990, the Colombian leader devoted \$350 million to the military budget, one-third of what it is was spending in payments on the public debt. The demilitarization strategists who played a major role in drafting the country's new and "ignominious" Constitution, and who have been working hand-in-glove with the narco-terrorists to pave the way for the easy ascent to power for these guerrillas, should be well advised as to the punishment for treason under conditions of war.