

Colombian President Gaviria frees cocaine cartel godfather

by José Restrepo

“Drug trafficker Pablo Escobar Gaviria’s escape is the logical and necessary conclusion of the negotiating process that President César Gaviria Trujillo initiated with the criminals at the beginning of his administration,” charged Enrique Parejo González, former justice minister and one of the country’s few surviving heroes of the war on drugs, in a television interview July 22. In a press conference the next day, Parejo also called for a tribunal to determine responsibility for the disaster, before which all those implicated—“from the President of the Republic to the last official who has shamed our nation before the international community”—should be brought. Parejo added that this must lead to “the President’s resignation,” because “he lacks the moral authority to rule the country.”

All the evidence more than confirms Parejo’s judgment. Colombia is once again on the verge of war, thanks to Gaviria’s strategy of trying to buy peace by yielding to narco-terrorism.

To top it off, the Bush administration is now seeking to use Escobar’s escape as the pretext for conducting another extraterritorial kidnapping operation, similar to those carried out in Panama and in Mexico.

In his July 23 statement, Parejo charged that Pablo Escobar’s “surrender” 14 months ago was the result of Gaviria’s so-called “strategy of submission to justice,” which was nothing but “a farce and a hoax,” since all it entailed was a series of presidential decrees promising the traffickers reduced sentences and guarantees of no extradition in exchange for their handing themselves in.

The government ended up revamping its strategy numerous times, dictating “as many as seven decrees to accommodate the observations, objections, and requests of the drug traffickers, who had already imposed every condition of their supposed surrender. Every petition of the drug traffickers was accepted,” Parejo charged. Their last request, he noted, was for the constitutional prohibition of extradition, which was granted by the suborned Constituent Assembly in 1991.

The escape that wasn’t an escape

On July 22, President Gaviria announced on radio and television that special Army troops had taken over the “maxi-

imum security jail” in Envigado, dubbed “the Cathedral” by the Medellín Cartel, and had freed several hostages taken by the traffickers. Pablo Escobar and nine of his lieutenants who had been “imprisoned” with him, were nowhere to be found. Even when the whole world had learned of Escobar’s “escape,” President Gaviria was still doubting it. “The government prefers the hypothesis that Pablo Escobar is holed up somewhere in the Envigado jail or its surroundings,” Gaviria insisted during a press conference.

The truth is that one cannot seriously call it an escape at all, since Escobar was in the Cathedral only because he wanted to be there. He bought the lands upon which it was constructed one year before his “surrender,” and he personally oversaw its construction.

The “maximum security jail” was no jail at all, but rather a comfortable and spacious refuge with round-the-clock, free protection afforded by the Colombian Army for 14 months, on President Gaviria’s orders. A water-bed, 60-inch television screen, video and sound equipment, even toys for his children, equipped his private three-room apartment within the bunker he shared with 14 colleagues. At least half of the “prison guards” were appointed by Escobar himself, according to retired Col. Augusto Bahamón, in his book *Mi guerra en Medellín (My War in Medellín)*. A double-bottomed truck, dubbed “the Tunnel,” was used by Escobar to ferry weapons, money, accomplices, and victims, into and out of the Cathedral at his whim.

It was an open secret in Medellín (of which Envigado is a suburb wholly owned and operated by the cartel) that during his so-called incarceration, Escobar frequently attended social events around town, and that he handled all of his drug dealings from his “jail cell.” Only the government repeatedly denied this reality, until a scandal exploded over the disappearance of 22 of Escobar’s underlings and rivals, and the surfacing of several of their mutilated bodies around town—the result of “trials” that Escobar had personally conducted, and executions that he had personally ordered, from the Cathedral.

In his July 22 address, President Gaviria was forced to admit what he had denied for 14 months: “Pablo Escobar continued to be involved, directly and personally, in the

commission of crimes from the Envigado jail." Among those crimes, said Gaviria, was "a mass kidnaping of individuals from Medellín, two of whom have appeared tortured and murdered . . . in what appears to be a settling of accounts within the organization." Further, said Gaviria, "known criminals entered and left the Envigado jail at will."

Press criticism is muzzled

The daily *El Espectador*, which has been the repeated victim of Escobar's narco-terrorism, claimed in an editorial that "the President is forced to acknowledge that his policy of yielding to the drug trade has totally failed. . . . And President Gaviria continues to insist that his policy is in force, as if nothing had happened here."

Gaviria apparently hopes to blame the escape on the military, while silencing any criticism of his appeasement policy toward the traffickers. Thus, his Communications Minister William Jaramillo Gómez has requested that the Colombian media only report what has been officially confirmed. On July 24, the daily *El Tiempo*, a mouthpiece of the government, appealed for total solidarity with Gaviria and for self-censorship, "although without silencing valid criticism of an ill-planned military operation."

Gen. Hernando Mosalve Figueroa, acting commander of the Air Force, resigned his post to protest government claims that his force did not provide air transport to incoming troops rapidly enough. Gen. Gustavo Pardo Ariza, head of the Fourth Army Command based in Medellín, has been "retired" and is to be questioned for his supposed refusal to storm the Cathedral as per orders. Civilian Defense Minister Rafael Pardo Rueda, formerly President Gaviria's "peace adviser" in negotiations with the narco-terrorist M-19, told the press July 27, "This is a truly shameful situation that affects the image of the Armed Forces."

The image the Gaviria administration clearly hopes to present to the world, is that of a bungling and corrupt military. But the truth of the matter is that the entire operation was (mis)planned *not* by the military, but by Gaviria's Security Council, which includes the President, most government ministers, and the acting head of the Armed Forces—all of them reported to be total novices at running a sound military operation.

On July 21, these officials ordered an operation to transfer Escobar to another prison, despite the knowledge that the drug lord would never tolerate such a "violation" of his surrender conditions. The element of surprise is the key to a successful military operation, and yet Escobar's lawyers knew of the transfer order before the military in charge of the operation had received its orders, according to official documents released to the media. At 5 p.m., Gen. Farouk Yanine, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was told to deploy troops to Medellín. But at 7 p.m., before the troops could be readied, deputy Justice Minister Eduardo Mendoza and prison director Col. Hernando Navas Rubio entered the Cathedral *without armed es-*

cort, "to inform" the drug traffickers of the transfer plans. Mendoza and Navas Rubio were taken hostage.

At this point, the military operation was changed, with the objective now of freeing the hostages. Special troops, brought in for the rescue operation, arrived at 5:30 a.m. on July 22, and General Yanine received orders to move against the prison at 7 a.m. The action took ten minutes; the hostages were freed and five of Escobar's fellow "prisoners" were recaptured. Escobar and nine henchmen were, of course, long gone.

Commented one journalist sarcastically, "The operation fulfilled its mission: to give Escobar the pretext for an escape."

A pretext for Bush

Another objective was achieved as well. The incident gives the Bush administration a perfect pretext to try to apply to Colombia its Thornburgh Doctrine, according to which U.S. authorities and troops have the right to kidnap and/or militarily intervene in any country in order to capture presumed criminals, just as was done in Panama with an invasion of 30,000 soldiers which led to the deaths of at least 4,000 Panamanians.

The Bush government may be expressing solidarity with the Gaviria government out of one side of its mouth, but Washington is already preparing public opinion for an intervention in Colombia, just as the aggression against Iraq was prepared first through the media.

Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Hemispheric Affairs, told the *New York Times* July 24 that the possible kidnaping of Escobar for trial in the United States "is an option that has to be considered." Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Crime and Criminal Justice, which oversees the activities of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), said that Escobar's kidnaping by U.S. authorities was an option, but one of "last resort."

Dick Gregorie, former U.S. Attorney in Miami who brought charges against both Escobar and against Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, said: "We have just spent months on a Noriega trial in which most of the evidence involved Escobar. What happens now depends on what we are willing to do about it."

The Gaviria government had scarcely announced the militarization of the Envigado jail, when the U.S. State Department placed at least three urgent calls to the Nariño government palace in Bogotá to ask if a coup d'état had occurred, and whether Gaviria was still President. The Bush government has solid reasons to fear such a coup. It is well known that elements of the military are more than a little upset about the way Gaviria's government has protected Escobar for the past 14 months, and the way it covered his escape. Now, with his efforts to throw the blame on the Armed Forces, Gaviria may find that he has gone too far.