

Andean Report by Javier Almarino

On the heels of the Cali Cartel

President Samper is growing nervous, as drug investigations take on the country's political elites.

After 10 months of vacillation, Colombian Prosecutor-General Alfonso Valdivieso has moved against the Cali drug cartel, and the ruling Liberal Party and President Ernesto Samper Pizano are starting to sweat.

On April 21, Valdivieso announced that he had asked the Colombian Supreme Court to begin a criminal investigation against Comptroller General and former presidential candidate David Turbay Turbay, as well as against nine Liberal congressmen, among them House of Representatives President Alvaro Benedetti. Several of those named were active in Samper's 1994 presidential campaign. They are all facing allegations that they are on the payroll of the Cali Cartel.

In addition to the investigations, former senator Eduardo Mestre Sarmiento, an ex-president of the Liberal Party, has been arrested and sent to a maximum-security jail, along with Cali Cartel "executive" Eduardo Gutiérrez Arcila. Arrest warrants have been sworn out against cartel chieftains Gilberto and Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela and 12 others who allegedly handle the finances, accounting, and business fronts of the cartel. Among these is journalist Alberto Giraldo, the public relations man for Rodríguez Orejuela who surfaced last year in the infamous "narco-cassettes," in which Giraldo and the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers can be heard discussing the millions of dollars being given to the Samper campaign to assure his presidential victory.

Among others called to testify are Germán Bula Hoyos, former Colombian ambassador to the Soviet Union;

Mauricio Guzmán Cuevas, the mayor of the city of Cali; "Gaviota," the country's leading soap opera starlet; and Santiago Medina, Samper's former campaign treasurer. Also among the accused is Sen. Alberto Santofimio Botero, who in 1982 was active in the Liberal Party faction controlled by then-head of the Medellín Cartel Pablo Escobar. Both Santofimio and Escobar were bitter enemies of then-Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, who fell to a cartel assassin's bullets on April 30, 1984. The latest charges against Santofimio could prove to be the death blow against his long and tainted political career.

"We have only just begun," stated Valdivieso in an April 20 press conference. Evidence already in hand could implicate a majority of the country's political elites.

According to information from the Prosecutor General's office, the investigation began with a July 1992 raid conducted jointly with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, against a cartel warehouse in Panama. Five tons of cocaine were discovered, hidden in a 200,000-ton salt shipment contracted by the cartel company Exposal with a state company, Concesión Salinas. The manager of Concesión Salinas at the time, whose signature appears on the contract, was Monica de Greiff, a close associate of Samper who went on to become his 1993 presidential campaign treasurer. She is the daughter of the former prosecutor general Gustavo de Greiff, whose last act in office in 1994 was to absolve Samper in the narco-cassette scandal.

Then, on July 12, 1994, the offices of Exposal in Cali were raided. No traf-

fickers were caught, but vast quantities of documents were seized, including proof of cartel payments to politicians, businessmen, police officials, show business stars, and details on cartel business fronts and their representatives.

One of those business fronts is Litofarallones, which, according to the documents seized, sent various of Samper's political allies thousands of unspecified "units." Samper's 1994 campaign treasurer, Santiago Medina, received 20,000 such "units," which journalists conjecture refers to 20 billion pesos. Medina maintains that it means 20,000 campaign shirts. If so, one has to ask why a Cali Cartel front, which went "bankrupt" immediately after the elections, was used by Samper's campaign for its propaganda. Julián Murcillo, who was manager of Litofarallones at the time, is also the manager of Exposal.

Valdivieso stated in his press conference that "for now" he is only investigating the infiltration of the drug trade into the congressional elections, and President Samper has had no choice but to back such an investigation. But already, former justice minister Enrique Parejo González has called on Samper to reopen the "narco-cassettes" case which "would be an unequivocal demonstration of your willingness to clarify that troublesome episode."

Various analysts speculate that Valdivieso's action was only taken under pressure from the United States. U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette has in fact issued a statement "applauding" the bold initiative. However, there is little doubt that the great majority of Colombians are remoralized by the fact that someone has had the courage to take up the task begun by Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, who gave his life to try to prevent Colombia from becoming a narco-tyranny.