

# Colombia's Samper is on the ropes

by Andrea Olivieri

With the knowledge that the Clinton administration is now in possession of evidence that could be used to pull the plug on his corrupt government at any time, Colombian President Ernesto Samper Pizano has gone into a desperate frontal attack against his critics. He and his chief spokesman, Interior Minister Horacio Serpa Uribe, have accused the Prosecutor General's office (in charge of investigating the corruption of Colombia's political elites) and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) of involvement in an "international conspiracy" to bring him down.

In particular, Samper and Serpa have charged that these agencies are behind a failed Sept. 27 assassination attempt against Antonio José Cancino, the lawyer who has taken up President Samper's defense against charges from Samper's own campaign treasurer Santiago Medina, that his Presidency was won in 1994 through multimillion-dollar infusions of drug money. The attempted assassination—if that's what it was intended to be—prompted a presidential communiqué accusing Deputy Prosecutor General Adolfo Salamanca of having provoked the assault on Cancino because of his office's investigations! In it, Samper ranted that his critics were creating a climate for violence, and warned of an international conspiracy against him.

Interior Minister Serpa then publicly stated that behind the attack on Cancino are "those who at an international level are sullyng Colombia's image abroad." When asked by a journalist if he thought the DEA were part of that conspiracy, Serpa responded: "I'd say that rings a bell." Serpa also denounced "high-level officials of the State Department and of the U.S. embassy in Colombia," who in social gatherings had reportedly conjectured about Samper's fall and had taken bets on the date of Samper's anticipated resignation from office.

Foreign Minister Rodrigo Pardo later "clarified" that Serpa was speaking for himself, and not for the government, in his accusations against the DEA, but Samper's decision to name Serpa acting President while Samper is on a three-day State visit to Germany, can only be interpreted as the President's fullest endorsement of his interior minister.

The anti-imperialist tinge that both Samper and Serpa have given to their attacks on U.S. agencies has been picked up by the political party of the "formerly" narco-terrorist M-

19. One M-19 congressman, Carlos Lucio, publicly presented tape recordings of conversations between DEA agents in Colombia who were allegedly mocking Colombia. No one has yet asked Lucio how he got his hands on tapes which were made by the well-paid technicians of the Cali Cartel.

## 'Deflecting attention'

The President's communiqué and Serpa's public comments provoked strong reactions from the Clinton administration, which until that moment had been exceedingly cautious in its statements regarding Samper. On Sept. 28, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said that the Colombian government sought to "deflect attention away from ongoing investigations into charges of narcotics corruption. This kind of appalling behavior can only have a negative effect on our bilateral relations." The DEA said that it had hoped Serpa "would direct his attention to the drug mafia, who destroy lives and assassinate Colombian and American citizens, rather than espouse bizarre conspiracy theories."

A number of Colombian media analysts commented that Samper and Serpa's flight-forward attacks on Washington could well supply the final nail in the President's political coffin. *El Tiempo* columnist Enrique Santos Calderón wrote on Oct. 1, "It is inconceivable that a government which is being investigated and which has its back to the wall as this one does, can at the same time aggravate both the U.S. and the Prosecutor General; that is to say, both those who are investigating it, and those who can provide key evidence to that investigation."

What has Samper so desperate is the mountain of hard documentary evidence that was delivered to the DEA by Guillermo Pallomari, the long-term treasurer of the Cali cocaine cartel, when he surrendered in September and entered into the U.S. Justice Department's witness protection program. In addition to maintaining records on the Cali Cartel's European and U.S. operations, he was also believed to have been the cartel's paymaster for corrupted police and political networks inside Colombia. Pallomari fled Colombia (reportedly with official U.S. help) after his wife was kidnapped and he learned that the cartel had paid for an assassination contract against him. During a July raid on Pallomari's office in Cali, the first hard evidence was seized indicating that drug money had infiltrated the Samper presidential campaign.

High-level sources report that Pallomari has already given testimony to Colombian prosecutors which confirms Santiago Medina's accusations against Samper. Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdívieso, whose office is independent of the executive, is just back from the United States, where he met with U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, as well as high-level FBI and DEA officials and others. All eyes are now on the Accusations Committee of the Colombian House of Representatives, which will soon make a recommendation on whether the corruption investigation against Samper should be dropped, or pursued.