
Colombia

U.S. demands serious narco-corruption probe

by Andrea Olivieri

The Dec. 14 vote by a subcommittee of the Colombian Congress, shelving a corruption investigation of President Ernesto Samper Pizano “for lack of evidence,” forestalled the threat of immediate impeachment against his narco-government, but has done nothing to end the political crisis afflicting the nation. Indeed, that crisis has been heightened, as anti-drug forces both inside Colombia and in official Washington have dismissed the whitewash of Samper as “not serious,” and demanded that the investigation into narco-corruption continue.

President Samper immediately interpreted the vote by the so-called “Accusations Committee” (a committee heavily dominated by Samper’s followers in the ruling Liberal Party), as a mandate for consolidating his own dictatorial rule. In a nationally televised address the next day, Samper declared war on his political opponents: “I want to notify those who, following this ruling, persist in compromising my honor and in discrediting the government, that I will not hesitate to use all the legal means at my disposal to stop them from doing any more harm.”

Samper’s threats are by no means confined to “legal” reprisals against his enemies. Colombians remember only too well the Nov. 2 assassination of Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, a former Presidential candidate who had taken the lead in opposing Samper’s corrupt reign. The newspaper of the murdered Gómez, *El Nuevo Siglo*, was quick to editorialize on Dec. 18 that “no pressure, not even from the highest levels of the regime, will silence us or prevent us from continuing our journalistic mission to defend the principles of morality in government.”

In particular, Samper and a close circle of advisers have targeted Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdivieso, who has been pursuing his own corruption investigation into the country’s political elites, and who is already responsible for jailing three of the most important campaign aides from Samper’s 1994 Presidential campaign, for accepting millions in illegal contributions from the Cali cocaine cartel.

A late-November attempt by Samper’s forces to oust Valdivieso from his post was rebuffed by the Council of State, the country’s highest magisterial body, and Valdivieso’s tenure is now confirmed for three more years—if he manages to survive. The magistrates who voted in Valdivieso’s favor have reported receiving death threats similar to those which

various journalists have received, including *EIR*’s Bogotá correspondent.

Heat from Washington

The outrageous vote by the Accusations Committee has actually intensified the pressure on Samper coming from the Clinton administration. In an interview with CNN shortly after the vote, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics Matters Robert Gelbard commented: “It’s evident that the investigation was not serious. . . . This committee’s effort unfortunately shows that there are still certain people linked to drug traffickers in power.”

Gelbard’s statements triggered a furious response. Samper demanded an immediate retraction; his lawyer charged the Clinton government with using “legalistic colonialism”; his foreign and defense ministers labeled Gelbard’s statement “intolerable interference in Colombia’s internal affairs”; and Colombian Ambassador to Washington Lleras de la Fuente suggested that Gelbard was speaking only for himself.

That illusion was dispelled the next day by State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns, who declared, “When Gelbard speaks on the record, he speaks for the U.S. government.” U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette also stood behind Gelbard, making it clear that the United States had no intention of easing up. In fact, Frechette noted U.S. plans to revive the issue of extradition of Colombia’s drug traffickers. Extradition was banned in Colombia in 1991, when the drug cartels managed to bribe the majority of delegates at a Constituent Assembly.

The permanent interment of Colombia’s extradition treaty with the United States was a key element in the pact Samper struck with the Cali Cartel, in exchange for the estimated \$6.2 million that helped buy him the Presidency. The other element of the deal involved full implementation of the surrender arrangement fashioned by Samper’s predecessor, César Gaviria Trujillo, now the secretary general of the Organization of American States. The surrender package included a reasonably short prison term to “appease” the United States and the international community, no confiscation of the druglords’ fortunes, and legalization of the cartel’s business holdings.

That deal is, however, under attack by the Clinton administration, which is demanding lengthy prison terms or extradition of the imprisoned cartel bosses, and passage of legislation to allow for confiscation of their tremendous wealth. Their “legitimate” business holdings are already under fire from Clinton’s Oct. 22 Executive Order, which ordered a severing of U.S. commercial ties with scores of Colombian companies and individuals believed to be drug cartel fronts.

Another powerful pressure point in the hands of the Clinton administration is the annual procedure certifying countries deemed cooperative in the war on drugs. In 1995, Colombia squeaked by with a “national interest waiver,” designed to give Samper the benefit of the doubt. His government comes up for consideration again in March.