

By Ken Dermota

BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

Can Colombia bargain with cocaine kingpins?

THE HOTTEST AND MOST DIVISIVE ISSUE IN war-weary Colombia is whether to negotiate peace with the cocaine lords. This desire to do something before it's too late has champions on the left and right and could involve people as diverse as Nobel prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez and Henry Kissinger.

Colombians and U.S. officials are becoming polarized on the issue as the *narcos* continue to bomb the country in an attempt to force the government to the bargaining table. Those opposed to dialogue have become increasingly repulsed by the idea of negotiating with the killers of the country's most prominent politicians, judges and journalists. But others believe accommodation is necessary to avoid further bloodshed.

Here in the nation's capital, which the citizens have renamed "Bombgotá," some U.S. Embassy officials refuse to take a stand on negotiations with the *narcos*. One official, however, voiced his vehement opposition, saying, "If Colombia negotiates, it will isolate itself from the rest of the world. I'll pack my bags."

Colombia and its drug dealers are looking for a way out of the "total war" they have been locked into since the August slaying of the country's favored presidential candidate, Luis Carlos Galán. The Colombian police have in the last three months pushed the *narcos* against a wall, giving chase last week to two surprised *capos*, or chieftains, of the Medellín cartel who escaped through the woods in their underwear.

They also have been unsuccessful at capturing the cartel's top two leaders, who are now battling the whole of Colombian society with their ultra-right, Salvadoran-style death squads. The goal of Medellín *capos* Pablo Escobar and José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha is to force Colombia to allow their peaceful retirement among the world's richest men.

Unofficial negotiations have progressed much further than anyone will admit. The negotiators meet in secret, or hide behind a semantic curtain by saying they are merely "listening" to the *narcos* or are "mailboxes" delivering messages to the government. Although President Virgilio Barco's assistant Germán Montoya is among the negotiators, the president denies any knowledge of the talks.

Dangerous liaisons: But Colombians know that the *narcos* met with an old friend of Montoya's, former Colombian official Joaquín Vallejo, who also happens to be Escobar's godfather from back when Escobar's father tended the Vallejo family farm. Vallejo, who hadn't seen Escobar in 30 years, says he was impressed with Escobar's "intelligence and sincerity." Vallejo wrote out in longhand the basis of an agreement he calls a "pre-accord," granting the *narcos* and their death squads amnesty if they hand over their weapons and explosives and leave the drug trade. Vallejo also threw in a provision to demobilize leftist guerrilla groups operating near the *narcos'* plantations.

Vallejo and Montoya are so convinced of the viability of this plan that they suggested including the U.S. in tripartite negotiations, with Kissinger as a possible U.S. representative. They even asked the *narcos* to pay for a U.S. public-relations firm to lobby the U.S. Congress to support negotiations, fearing that the U.S. would act to isolate Colombia

in the world community if it were to act on its own.

Medellín Mayor Juan Gómez Martínez, one of the few politicians to unequivocally support negotiations, keeps a telephone in his desk open to the *narcos* at all times. Gómez is avuncular, outspoken and quick to mention that the *narcos* want him on the negotiating team.

Medellín, once the epicenter of the current war, has become the most peaceful city in Colombia—the result, rumor has it, of negotiations by the mayor. "That's what some say," Gómez says. He also told a Colombian newspaper that peace came to Medellín because "the people disciplined themselves."

There is much speculation about Gómez' motives for supporting negotiations, which he insists be called "dialogue." Some suggest

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he's been bought out, others say he merely wants to be first on the negotiations bandwagon, still others say he is trying to protect himself after surviving a *narco* death-squad attack in 1987. Gómez says he just wants to see the violence end. If any—or all—of these possibilities are true, he remains emblematic of a whole society that is afraid and tired but also benefits from the narcodollars. These are powerful, practical incentives toward some kind of accommodation.

The mayor justifies his support for negotiations by pointing to a pact negotiated in mid-November granting the M-19 guerrillas amnesty and access to electoral politics. Rightists such as Gómez sympathize with the *narcos* as daring entrepreneurs with anti-communist ties and cynically place negotiations with *narcos* on the same level as negotiations with politically motivated guerrillas.

Curiously, negotiations have support from the left as well, perhaps because leftists don't want to defeat the pro-negotiation spirit that has benefitted them, but certainly for reasons of national destiny.

The M-19 guerrillas say that the issue of extraditing drug traffickers is an example of U.S. intervention in Colombian affairs. They agree with the drug traffickers' biggest demand in negotiations: that no Colombians

be extradited to the U.S., since they cannot receive a fair trial in an unfamiliar court system in an unfamiliar language.

Certainly it is because of extradition that the *narcos* are waging war against Colombia's institutions and population. The bombings around the country, for instance, have been in the name of "the extraditables." "We're not ready to fight a war on our land to stop drug trafficking," says Angelica Pérez of M-19.

The guerrillas say the answer to the violence—but not the drug trafficking—is to negotiate with Escobar and Gacha. Negotiating their retirement would stop them from funding and training the paramilitary death squads that are terrorizing the cities and killing peasants on the banana plantations.

Strange bedfellows: This is not the first time Colombia has negotiated with the drug lords. In 1984 the *narcos* met with ex-Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen at the Marriott Hotel in Panama City. Michelsen was there to observe the Panamanian elections, and the *narcos* were in hiding after killing Colombia's justice minister. The *narcos* offered a deal that included destruction of the cocaine fields, eradication of drug use in Colombia, decommissioning the processing labs and airplanes, and the payment of Colombia's national debt—all of which have been dropped from the current proposal, indicating that five years later, the drug dealers now believe they are in a stronger position.

Enrique Santos Calderón edits the Sunday version of *El Tiempo*, Colombia's largest newspaper as well as the country's largest private business. Santos has the aristocratic bearing appropriate to an heir to this fortune and he vehemently opposes negotiating with the *narcos*, as does the greater part of the urban, industrial class who do not want to share power with drug dealers—the *nuevos ricos*, as they are disparagingly called.

Santos questioned the accuracy of a recent telephone poll that said 63 percent of Colombians favor negotiations. He says people are afraid to tell strangers over the phone that they oppose something the drug traffickers favor. He also says public opinion can be swayed by bombs—which are aimed at

making people tire of the war. The longer the bombing drags on, the further the *narcos* can push the public toward talks. "Time is on their side," Santos says.

In a 6,000-word defense of negotiations published in late November, Colombian author García Márquez claimed the drug war will be "long, ruinous and without a future" because the \$65 million in U.S. aid "can't even compare with what the Nicaraguan contras received in eight years: \$2 billion dollars." The U.S. crushed the 1984 negotiations, García Márquez claims, so it could use the drug war as a cover for attacking communists.

Speaking from the offices of *El Espectador*, the newspaper that was bombed by the extraditables in September, newspaper columnist María Jimena Duzán says that after negotiating the retirement of *capos* Escobar and Gacha, their lieutenants, seeking a piece of the pie, would have "an immediate fight among themselves. However, it is better that the *narcos* fight among themselves than to kill ministers, which destabilizes the country."

Colombia—and the U.S.—have already suffered one such "war of the cartels," where the Cali and Medellín cartels locked horns over access to the New York market. Property belonging to each cartel was bombed by the other, and dozens of Colombians were gunned down in New York, Cali, Medellín, Miami and Bogotá.

"It is a fiction that negotiating with Escobar would bring peace," Duzán says. "One of the absurd things about negotiating is: with whom are you going to negotiate? It is a myth that Escobar is in charge—[he is in charge] only in his territory. [Capo] Fidel Castano is among the most violent in the country, and he's not going to negotiate with anybody."

Double trouble: Colombia is in the midst of two crises—the long-term crisis of drug trafficking and the short-term crisis of war. Negotiations can help only with the short-term problem of violence because if the *capos* negotiate their retirement, a dozen of their underlings will jump to take over the business.

It is widely believed that Gacha and Escobar built the paramilitary death squads. If this is true, negotiations might just put an end to the violence and the Medellín cartel will seek to do business in peace, like the Cali cartel. If, on the other hand, some of the lieutenants maintain the rightist connections, negotiations will help neither the violence nor the drug trafficking.

The U.S. remains unconcerned about Colombia's short-term problems, preferring to pursue the interdiction of cocaine destined for the U.S. The U.S. has not, for instance, added a penny to the 100 million peso (\$419,000) reward offered for Gacha and Escobar, since their capture would have little effect on the supply of cocaine to the U.S. Nor has the U.S. made any commitment to place additional pressure on the Medellín cartel, which is responsible for the wave of violence.

Instead, the U.S. places equal emphasis on all the cartels, even though the others have not been implicated in the killing of any judges, politicians or journalists. Said one U.S. Embassy official who refused to be named, "We don't discriminate." □

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Colombia is in the midst of two crises—the long-term crisis of drug trafficking and the short-term crisis of war. Negotiations for peace with the drug lords can help only with the short-term problem of violence because if the current chieftains negotiate their retirement, a dozen of their underlings will jump to take over the business.

By Chris Norton

SAN SALVADOR

JUST AS THE 10-DAY REBEL OFFENSIVE HERE appeared to be winding down and guerrilla combatants had slipped out of their strongholds in the working-class districts on the northern edge of the city, the rebels struck again.

Not all the guerrillas had abandoned the capital. Many had circled up onto the San Salvador volcano, which overlooks the cap-

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ital, and then swung down on the exclusive Escalon neighborhood in an apparent attempt to show they could bring the war to the manicured lawns of the elite as well as the city's poor neighborhoods.

Although the November 21 operation had focused on the whole neighborhood, U.S. media attention focused almost exclusively on the seizure of the the Sheraton Hotel because of the 12 hapless U.S. Green Berets whom the guerrillas stumbled upon in the hotel's auxiliary tower. Armed to the teeth, they barricaded themselves into their rooms while the rebels slipped away.

The U.S. soldiers declined to leave, however, convinced that the guerrillas had left snipers behind and boobytrapped the hallways and stairwells. On an adrenalin jag, they spent a tense night fearing a rebel attack only to discover in the morning that the guerrillas had long since gone and that they had been alone in the building all night.

It was an apt metaphor for U.S. policy in Central America—macho Green Berets, terrified of a threat that was mostly of their own creation. Hostage to their own fears, they reflected the image of the world's most powerful country acting as if threatened by tiny Nicaragua or a homegrown Third World revolutionary movement like the Salvadoran Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN).

Double delusion: While terrified of a rebel victory in El Salvador, U.S. policymakers had tried to deceive themselves with the belief that their policies were working, that democracy was being built and that the rebels were almost beaten.

But the unprecedented FMLN offensive, in which the rebels seized and held sizable portions of the capital and other major cities for a week, shattered some of the illusions that direct U.S. policy in El Salvador, in much the same way the Tet offensive shook U.S. policy in Vietnam.

As in Vietnam, propagandists in the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador churned out press releases and reports claiming that the leftist guerrillas were on the verge of military defeat and could no longer launch major attacks. According to the Embassy, the rebels were defeated in the countryside and were only able to launch desperate "terrorist" attacks in the city.

Although both the army and the U.S. Embassy were aware the FMLN was planning a major attack in the capital, they were totally unprepared for the scope and audacity of what was to come. They had fallen into the trap of believing their own propaganda.

Fish in the sea: Saturday night, November 11, in one of the working-class districts that surround the capital, a group of friends were having a party. At 8 p.m. two pickup trucks drove up loaded with weapons, and people quickly grabbed the arms and spread out to take up combat positions.

Hundreds of seasoned FMLN combatants had already infiltrated the capital. They were



A wounded victim of the government bombing of San Salvador awaits Green Cross assistance.

U.S. self-delusion exacts brutal price on Salvador

joined by hundreds of city-based "urban commandos," many of whom may have burned a bus or blown up a power line but had never before participated in actual combat. Guerrilla columns also entered the capital from different points.

They simultaneously attacked a score of targets, including the army's First Brigade as well as the home and the official residence of President Alfredo Cristiani, the millionaire coffee grower who has tried to give a more moderate face to the death squad-linked rightist ARENA Party. But these were diversionary attacks. The main rebel objective was to seize, and for the first time hold, major portions of the working-class districts that ring the capital on its northern, eastern and southeastern edges.

By Sunday the guerrillas were building barricades and digging trenches, often with the support of the local population. The army, stretched thin by the nationwide attacks, reacted with air power, indiscriminately bombarding civilians.

Hot metal rained out of the sky. Although it was aimed at guerrillas, it killed and wounded hundreds of civilians. "The airplanes are shooting at us and killing people," screamed one woman in the northern neighborhood of Zacamil. "Please ask them not to bomb us."

Worried about the bad press, U.S. Ambassador William Walker called daily briefings at the U.S. Embassy that were reminiscent of the "four o'clock follies" in Saigon. He tried to minimize the figures of civilian casualties and said the army was acting with "great caution." He admitted, however, "We cannot categorically state that houses have not been hit by [army] helicopters." Meanwhile, a U.S. military source said it would be impossible to dislodge the guerrillas without major civilian casualties.

Terrorized by the bombardment and fearful of more to come, thousands of Salvadorans poured out of the embattled neighborhoods on the city's periphery. Waving makeshift white flags and carrying children in their arms, they fled their homes. They crowded into Catholic churches and the houses of friends or merely camped in parks or downtown streets that were less affected by the fighting.

The bombing and strafing appear to have been part of the army's strategy to force people to leave areas where the guerrillas had dug in. The rebels, on the other hand, had hoped to "liberate" certain areas of the city and provoke a more generalized insurrection.

The fighting was quite different in various parts of the capital. In Zacamil, the rebels dug into a large block of five-story low-rent residential apartments. Although they tried to convince the civilians to stay, most residents fled when the fighting intensified. When they were finally surrounded by the army's elite battalions, the rebels managed to slip out of the area, reportedly crawling through sewers.

In other areas, especially the northern working-class suburb of Mejicanos, a much more sophisticated battle of movement and maneuver was played out. Led by the legendary guerrilla commander Facundo Guardado, the rebels built barricades but moved out of the way of strong army thrusts, reoccupying areas the army moved past.

Slowly the army brought its greater firepower to bear against the guerrilla positions, and on Saturday night, a week after the offen-

The army reacted to the rebel attacks by bombing civilians indiscriminately.

sive began, the bulk of the rebel forces slipped out of Mejicanos in the early morning hours and moved north through the gullies.

As the army gradually regained control of the situation, the security forces began pursuing groups it considered sympathetic to the guerrillas. The Lutheran, Baptist and Episcopal churches were raided, and more than 20 foreigners working with them were arrested and deported.

Civilian killings: Norma Guirola de Herrera, the head of a Salvadoran women's group, was picked up by soldiers while doing emergency medical work in San Marcos. She and two others were discovered dead shortly after.

But most shocking of all were the brutal November 16 murders of six Jesuit priests, including the rector and vice rector of Cen-

tral American University (UCA). At least two witnesses say they saw approximately 30 uniformed men enter the compound where the priests lived at 3 a.m. The men dragged the priests from their rooms and took them in front of the residence, where they shot them to death. They then killed the cook and her 15-year-old daughter to eliminate witnesses.

Although the entire area was heavily militarized and the attack occurred during a dusk-to-dawn curfew, the group took the time to go downstairs and burn videotapes and shoot up computers and vehicles.

The government and the Salvadoran military, of course, denied any participation in the killings, but Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas said that the killers were either "the military or paramilitaries intimately connected with the military." A Jesuit spokesman noted it would have been impossible for a large group of armed men to operate during the curfew without at least the cooperation of the military. Suspicion centers on the treasury police, who have one of the worst human-rights records and who had searched the Jesuit residence two nights before the murders.

U.S. Ambassador Walker called the killers "animals," and President Cristiani promised to conduct an "exhaustive investigation," calling for technical aid from the U.S. and Britain. The rooms were apparently covered with fingerprints, which shouldn't be hard to match, especially with FBI help. But there is much skepticism that the government has the political will or the power to conduct a real investigation, especially since the evidence points to the military.

Many observers fear the slaying of the Jesuits is only the beginning of retaliation against opposition groups. A First Brigade sound truck reportedly boasted, "Ignacio Elacuria and Martin Baro [rector and vice rector] have fallen. We will continue killing communists," on the same day the Jesuits' bodies were found.

"What worries me is to what degree Cristiani is in charge of events," said a Western European diplomat. "The FMLN [offensive] has given the green light to hard-liners in the army to go ahead and do what they have wanted to do for a long time."

Many foreigners have left the country. Spain has cut all aid until the slayings of the Jesuits are satisfactorily investigated. Church leaders have been arrested, gone into hiding or gone abroad. A dusk-to-dawn curfew remains in effect. News is censored, and the country's most prominent evening TV newscast has gone off the air rather than submit to censorship. If the rebels continue the offensive, as many think is likely, army hard-liners will likely become more desperate and less discriminating in their repression.

The U.S. Embassy and the Cristiani government claim that the guerrillas' offensive was defeated—that the people's failure to rise up in an insurrection shows that the rebels have no support. But once again they may be deluding themselves. People are unlikely to join an insurrection unless they think it has a good chance of success. Before this offensive, most people in the capital had never even seen a guerrilla and could hardly be expected to risk their lives for an unknown quantity. Now, however, the rebels have demonstrated their strength. If they make a strong push again, more people may join in. □

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