

Washington, D.C. 20505

## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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11 May 1984

Colombia: Death of a Minister--Implications for US  
Narcotics Control Policy [redacted]

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Summary

The assassination of Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla--widely attributed to drug traffickers--has prompted President Betancur to launch an unprecedented crackdown against Colombia's powerful narcotics traffickers and to declare a nationwide state of siege. Public outrage over the murder as well as embarrassment over the harm done to the country's international image have influenced the actions of the President, who is highly sensitive to domestic opinion trends. Nevertheless, we judge the effort will only temporarily disrupt the illicit industry's operations. Popular support for the new programs probably will wane over the next few months, and meanwhile the major traffickers will reduce their activities to cut their risks; in the unlikely event the traffickers opt to fight the authorities, we judge the threat to US mission personnel will greatly increase. Finally Betancur's interest in pursuing a truce with insurgent groups probably will lead him to lift the state of siege later in the year. The enforcement effort would then be returned to weak civil and judicial authorities, enabling the traffickers to resume fairly normal operations. Nevertheless, we believe the President will find it difficult to back away from his recent public promise to extradite those Colombian traffickers wanted by US authorities. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] International Security Issues Division, Office of Global Issues and [redacted] South America Division, Office of African and Latin American Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. This analysis is based on information available as of 11 May 1984. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Strategic Narcotics Branch, OGI on [redacted]

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### Traffickers Strike

[ ] On 30 April, Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla--the government's most prominent antinarcotics spokesman--was murdered in Bogota. One assailant was killed by Lara's bodyguards; another was captured and is currently being interrogated by the authorities. Although no one has claimed responsibility, we and most observers assume the act was carried out by drug traffickers. We believe the murder was intended to deter the administration's current drug control activities and to intimidate any successor to Minister Lara. [ ]

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We suspect this action was carried out by low level traffickers bent on enhancing their reputations rather than by one of the major drug organizations whose activities had been largely unaffected by Lara's antinarcotics efforts. There are several reasons for this view:

- ° Through media smear campaigns and private threats against Lara and his family, the drug mafia had already rendered the Minister politically impotent. According to the US Embassy, Lara was planning to resign this month and accept a diplomatic assignment overseas to escape the threat to his life.
- ° President Betancur's hesitancy to introduce new drug control programs and his nationalistic opposition to the extradition of Colombian citizens to the United States meant that the government represented little threat to the major traffickers' interests.
- ° The major traffickers typically prefer to use bribery, media manipulation, and intimidation to achieve their ends rather than drawing attention to themselves through such public spectacles as assassinations of prominent officials. [ ]

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### Government Reaction

[ ] The assassination of Lara has spurred Betancur to take strong and unprecedented action against the Colombian drug mafia. A highly moral man, the President probably was personally outraged by the killing. His response, however, also was prompted by the high-pitched public reaction, embarrassment over

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the harm done to Colombia's international image, and a desire to demonstrate strong leadership and rebut opponents' criticism that weak executive support for Lara's drug programs contributed to his death. Betancur's actions include:

- Publicly declaring war on drug traffickers. 25X1
- Reversing his opposition to the extradition of Colombian nationals.
- Declaring a countrywide state of siege--the eleventh since 1948--that sanctions armed forces involvement in drug control activities, places narcotics cases under military court jurisdiction, and severely limits freedom of travel and assembly.
- Ordering widespread arrests of narcotics traffickers and raids on their property.
- Strengthening existing antinarcotics statutes in order to give authorities sweeping powers to seize both traffickers and their assets. 25X1

#### Traffickers' Response/Impact on the Trade

According to the US Embassy most traffickers apparently have decided to scale back operations, go completely underground, or temporarily flee the country. This may help explain why no major figure has yet been arrested by the authorities. We anticipate that the major traffickers will continue to maintain a low profile until public anger and pressure on Betancur dissipate. 25X1

Any disruption in drug trafficking as a result of the crackdown is likely to be limited and transitory. There will be some immediate disruption of drug operations--especially among low level operators--as the traffickers scramble to protect their interests. Because the major trafficking organizations are strong enough to preserve their networks and maintain their operations at a profitable level, at least for the remainder of the year, the government crackdown probably will inflict the greatest damage on smaller trafficking organizations that do not have the resources to "ride out the storm." The crackdown also will hurt the many independent coca and marijuana growers, who will find fewer buyers for their product. 25X1

We believe this disruption of traffickers' activity could include a temporary relocation of operations to neighboring countries--Venezuela, Ecuador, Brazil--until the pressure dies down in Colombia. Traffickers also may reduce their Colombian stockpiles either by storage in adjacent countries or increased shipments to the United States and Europe. Alternately, but less likely, traffickers could attempt to fight back against the 25X1

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authorities to maintain operations and protect their extensive infrastructure and investment. This would entail more heavily armed protection for processing laboratories and shipments, and a decision to shoot it out with security forces. [ ]

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### Prospects

We expect popular support for Betancur's crackdown to wane over the next few months, both because of the country's historical apathy toward antinarcotics efforts as well as an increasing preoccupation with the nation's worsening economic problems. The antinarcotics effort also is likely to conflict with Betancur's fervent drive to end the longstanding insurgency problem by negotiating truces with the guerrilla groups. For example, [ ] the armed forces hope to use the present state of siege to hit hard at guerrilla groups as well as drug dealers. This could jeopardize a peace initiative that we believe Betancur cherishes much more than the antinarcotics campaign. Moreover, Betancur would, in our view, regard the prolonged use of extraordinary security measures as an embarrassing admission that he could not govern through normal procedures. Thus, we expect him to lift the state of siege later this year. The enforcement effort would then be returned to the weak civil and judicial authorities, enabling the traffickers to resume fairly normal operations. [ ]

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### Implications for the United States

We believe the President will find it difficult to back away from his recent public promise to extradite those Colombian traffickers wanted by US authorities; consequently if major traffickers, such as Carlos Lehder or Pablo Escobar are apprehended soon, Betancur probably would approve their extradition to the United States. Nevertheless, we judge that over the long haul Betancur is more likely to promote programs aimed at appeasing popular sentiment and projecting a favorable image than enacting and seriously enforcing a rigorous drug control program. Although the power of enforcement agencies in Colombia has been strengthened under the state of siege, we doubt that this situation will last long enough to have a permanent effect on the overall supply of drugs to the United States. [ ]

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Although the prospects for a Colombian spray campaign are better than ever, we still believe that Betancur is likely to resist US requests for a widespread herbicidal spray campaign. Any expansion of the current test program of herbicidal spraying of coca and marijuana plants will remain a difficult issue and we suspect he will continue to delay making such a controversial decision for as long as possible. Popular support for a crackdown on drug dealers does not translate directly into backing for herbicidal eradication, because the latter stirs political, ecological and other public concerns. [ ]

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In the unlikely event that traffickers choose to stand and fight rather than wait out the current maelstrom, the threat to US mission personnel would greatly increase. Because of the publicly acknowledged role of the United States in promoting a strong antinarcotics campaign in Colombia, we would expect the US to become the traffickers' next major target. [REDACTED]

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