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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: JOHN L MILLS
DATE/CASE ID: 06 MAR 2006 200400885

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2. (U) INDEPENDENT PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE ALVARO URIBE VELEZ HIRED YANELOVICH POLLING TO CONDUCT A POLL OF 1000 POTENTIAL VOTERS, FROM ALL SOCIAL STRATA. OF THOSE POLLED, 30.9 PERCENT INTENDED TO VOTE FOR LIBERAL PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE HORACIO SERPA, 27.4 PERCENT FOR URIBE VELEZ, AND 19.5 PERCENT FOR INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE NOEMI SANIN. OF THE REMAINING 22 PERCENT, 5.9 PERCENT WERE UNDECIDED, 5.6 PERCENT EXPRESSED SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT ROSSO JOSE SERRANO, 4 PERCENT SAID THEY WOULD VOTE BLANK, AND 3.9 PERCENT BACKED LEFTIST CANDIDATE LUIS EDUARDO GARZON. THE POLL'S MARGIN OF ERROR WAS 3.1 PERCENT.

3. (C) COMMENT: THESE RESULTS RUN COUNTER TO THE LAST MAJOR POLL, TAKEN NOVEMBER 22-26, WHICH SHOWED URIBE TRAILING SERPA BY 15 POINTS, AND LOSING TO BOTH SERPA AND SANIN IN ANY RUN-OFF ELECTION. MANY IN COLOMBIA WERE SUSPICIOUS OF THE NOVEMBER POLL RESULTS -- SPECIFICALLY SANIN'S INEXPLICABLE RISE IN POPULARITY. WHILE WE RECOGNIZE THE PITFALLS OF RELYING ON A POLL GENERATED BY ONE OF THE CANDIDATES, WE SUSPECT THAT THE DECEMBER RESULTS ARE A MORE ACCURATE REFLECTION OF PUBLIC SENTIMENT. END COMMENT.

4. (U) ON JANUARY 2, THE CNP DISCOVERED AND FOILED AN ATTEMPT BY THE FARC TO ASSASSINATE PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDATE ÁLVARO URIBE VELEZ. AFTER CONDUCTING SURVEILLANCE FOR SEVERAL MONTHS, ANTIOQUIA POLICE RAIDED A HOUSE IN SAN LUIS, CAPTURING TWO MEMBERS OF A FARÇ URBAN CELL. ONE OF THOSE CAPTURED CONFFESSED TO BEING A SHARPSHOOTER, CHARGED TO KILL URIBE DURING AN UPCOMING APPEARANCE BY THE CANDIDATE IN MEDELLIN. THE OTHER PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES CONDEMNED THE THREAT, AND DEMANDED INCREASED SECURITY MEASURES. THE GOC RESPONDED THAT IT HAD ALREADY BEEFED UP SECURITY, PROVIDING ARMORED VEHICLES AND ARMED BODYGUARDS FOR EACH OF THE CANDIDATES.


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EVANGELICAL PASTORS, CHURCH MEMBERS UNDER FARÇ THREAT

6. (U) A SPOKESMAN FOR EVANGELICAL CHURCH ASSOCIATION CHRISTIAN UNION MOVEMENT (MUC) DENOUNCED THE DECEMBER 29 MURDER OF AN EVANGELICAL PASTOR AND THE DECEMBER 30 KIDNAPPING OF ANOTHER IN CAQUETA DEPARTMENT. ACCORDING TO MUC, 61 PASTORS HAVE BEEN KILLED IN THE LAST EIGHT YEARS, AND THE FARÇ HAS FORCED THE CLOSURE OF OVER 100 CHURCHES IN THE "DESPEJE." MUC SPOKESMAN VICTOR VELASQUEZ COMPLAINED THAT PEACE COMMISSIONER CAMILO GOMEZ HAS REFUSED TO DISCUSS THE PROBLEM WITH THE MUC. THE FARÇ REPORTEDLY HAS FORBIDDEN TITHING BY EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN TOLIMA DEPARTMENT.

7. (C) MUC FOUNDER HECTOR PARDO SAID THAT THE FARÇ TENDS TO TARGET EVANGELICAL CHURCHES AND THEIR MEMBERS, NOT ON RELIGIOUS GROUNDS, BUT BECAUSE CHURCH MEMBERS
ARE POLITICALLY CONSERVATIVE AND TEND TO REFUSE TO PAY FARC "WAR TAXES," ENGAGE IN COMBAT, OR TO GIVE UP THEIR CHILDREN FOR RECRUITMENT. FURTHERMORE, THE FARC SEES EVANGELICAL CHURCHES -- SOME OF WHICH RECEIVE SUPPORT FROM U.S. OR OTHER FOREIGN CONGREGATIONS -- AS POTENTIALLY RICH TARGETS.

ANOTHER PASTOR FROM CUNDINAMARCA DEPARTMENT REPORTED TO POLOFF IN JULY THAT THE FARC HAD, THROUGH DEATH THREATS, FORCED HIM TO CLOSE HIS CHURCH AND A FOSTER HOME FOR DISPLACED CHILDREN, IN ORDER TO EXPROPRIATE THE PROPERTY.

8. (U) ON DECEMBER 23, UNITED SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS OF COLOMBIA (AUC) LEADER CARLOS CASTANO DIRECTED HIS CHRISTMAS MESSAGE TO THE THREE LEADING PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES, CALLING FOR THE VICTOR TO INITIATE A DIALOGUE WITH THE AUC AND RECOGNIZE IT AS A POLITICAL MOVEMENT. CASTANO CLAIMED THAT THE AUC HAS 15,000 FIGHTERS "COMMITTED TO INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW AND REMOVED FROM DRUG TRAFFICKING." HE TOLD THE CANDIDATES THAT THE AUC MUST BE A PART OF ANY LASTING NEGOTIATED PEACE. UNDERLINING THE IMPORTANCE OF COCA TO THE GUERRILLA ECONOMIES, CASTANO OFFERED TO TURN OVER COCA UNDER AUC CONTROL (IN ANTIOQUIA, CORDOBA, AND NORTE DE SANTANDER DEPARTMENTS) FOR ERADICATION, IN EXCHANGE FOR RECOGNITION.

9. (C) COMMENT: WHILE IT IS NO SURPRISE THAT THE AUC WANTS POLITICAL RECOGNITION, WHICH WOULD BRING IT AMNESTY AND A DEGREE OF LEGITIMACY, THIS IS THE GROUP'S STRONGEST CALL FOR A "PLACE AT THE TABLE" TO DATE. BY OFFERING TO ASSIST WITH COCA ERADICATION, CASTANO ALSO APPEARS TO BE CURRYING FAVOR WITH THE UNITED STATES. THE NATIONAL MEDIA DID NOT CARRY CASTANO'S REMARKS, WHICH APPEARED ON HIS WEB SITE, AND NONE OF THE CANDIDATES COMMENTED ON HIS PROPOSAL. END COMMENT.
10. (U) ON DECEMBER 26, AN APPEALS JUDGE IN BOGOTA ORDERED THAT INDEPENDENT PARAMILITARY LEADER VICTOR MANUEL CARRANZA -- KNOWN AS THE "EMERALD CZAR" -- BE RELEASED FROM JAIL BECAUSE THE JUDGE HEARING HIS CASE HAD NOT ISSUED A RULING WITHIN THE LEGALLY MANDATED TIME LIMIT. THE COURT ORDERED CARRANZA TO PAY 286 MILLION PESOS (ABOUT USD 128,000) IN BAIL PRIOR TO HIS RELEASE. THE JUDGE HANDLING CARRANZA'S CASE SAID HE WOULD CHALLENGE THE RULING, AND VOWED TO PURSUE THE CASE AGAINST HIM. CARRANZA WAS ARRESTED ON FEBRUARY 23, 1998 AND WAS CHARGED WITH PARAMILITARY CRIMES AND KIDNAPPING. CARRANZA IS NOW OUT ON BAIL, BUT THE CHARGES AGAINST HIM ARE STILL OPEN. HOWEVER, CARRANZA'S RELEASE -- AFTER ALMOST FOUR YEARS IN JAIL WITHOUT BRINGING THE CASE TO TRIAL -- PROBABLY INDICATES THAT THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S CASE AGAINST HIM HAS FALLEN APART.

BAD HOLIDAYS IN CATATUMBO

11. (U) UNHCHR STAFF IS WORKING WITH THE OFFICE OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OMBUDSMAN, THE ARMY, AND THE VICE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE TO SORT OUT CONFUSED REPORTS OF VIOLENCE IN THE TROUBLED CATATUMBO REGION IN NORTE DE SANTANDER DEPARTMENT NEAR THE VENEZUELAN BORDER. THE PRESS REPORTED THAT GUERRILLA-PARAMILITARY FIGHTING ON DECEMBER 24 LEFT 14 DEAD IN A RURAL AREA BETWEEN EL TARRA AND TIBU. SO FAR, AUTHORITIES HAVE CONFIRMED THAT 3 PERSONS ARE DEAD IN THE VILLAGE OF LA ARGELIA, NEAR FILO GRINGO, BUT IT IS NOT CLEAR WHETHER THE VICTIMS WERE COMBATANTS OR CIVILIAN BYSTANDERS. BETWEEN 150 AND 200 PERSONS REPORTEDLY HAVE FLED TO THE TOWN OF EL TARRA FROM FILO GRINGO AND NEARBY VILLAGES, AND A DELEGATION OF THE ICRC AND THE COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT'S SOCIAL SOLIDARITY NETWORK IS ON THE SCENE TO ASSESS THE SITUATION. ALSO, UNHCHR STAFF IS
ATTEMPTING TO CONFIRM A REPORT THAT PARAMILITARIES HAVE KIDNAPPED 30 PERSONS NEAR FILO GRINGO. ACCESS TO THIS REMOTE AND NEGLECTED REGION CONTINUES TO BE DIFFICULT; THE CATATUMBO REGION REMAINS HOTLY CONTESTED BETWEEN THE PARAMILITARIES AND GUERRILLAS, BOTH FOR COCA CULTIVATION AND FOR ACCESS TO THE VENEZUELAN BORDER.

DESERTIONS FROM ILLEGAL ARMED GROUPS ON THE RISE


FIGURE ALSO INCLUDES 20 CHILDREN WHO TURNED THEMSELVES IN AFTER DESERTING FROM THE FARC, ELN, AND AUC.


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NEW POLL PUTS ALVARO URIBE IN CLOSE SECOND PLACE

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POLICE FOIL ANOTHER ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT AGAINST URIBE

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AUC'S CASTANO PITCHES PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

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JUDGE RELEASES "EMERALD CZAR" VICTOR CARRANZA

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DESERTIONS FROM ILLEGAL ARMED GROUPS ON THE RISE

13. (C) COMMENT: THE INCREASE IN THE DESERTION RATE OF MEMBERS OF ILLEGAL ARMED ACTORS IS DUE IN LARGE PART TO IMPROVED PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS EXECUTED BY THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY. PSYOPS PAID DIVIDENDS IN OPERATION "SEVENTH OF AUGUST," WHEN THE COLMIL INFLICTED MODERATE LOSSES ON A FARC COLUMN IN THE DEPARTMENTS OF GUAVIARE AND META IN AUGUST 2001, AND OPERATION "BERLIN," WHEN

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THE ARMY'S FIFTH BRIGADE DECIMATED THE FARC'S ARTURO RUÍZ MOBILE COLUMN IN LATE 2000. IN OPERATION "BERLIN" ALONE, 29 FARC COMBATANTS, 10 OF THEM MINORS, TURNED THEMSELVES INTO THE SECURITY FORCES. MANY COMBATANTS ALSO DESERTED AS A RESULT OF OPERATION "SEVENTH OF AUGUST." THE DIFFERENT BRANCHES OF THE SECURITY FORCES HAVE ALSO BEGUN WORKING TOGETHER MORE EFFICIENTLY, ENABLING THEM TO ROUND UP DESERTERS WITH GREATER EASE. END COMMENT.

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