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ACTION ARA-01

INFO  LOG-00  ACDA-08  ACDE-00  INLB-01  AID-00  ACQ-01  INL-01
DEAB-00  SRPP-00  DS-00  OIGO-01  FBIE-00  IM-01  TEDE-00
INR-00  ADS-00  MMP-00  PM-00  P-00  SCT-00  ASDS-01
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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1766
INFO AMEMBASSY CARACAS
AMEMBASSY QUITO
DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC
SECDEF WASHDC
USIA WASHDC 3984
NSC WASHDC
USCINCSO MIAMI FL
DIROND Cp WASHDC
CIA WASHDC
DIA WASHDC
DIRNSA FT GEORGE G MEADE MD

SECDEF WASHDC//OCDEPS//

CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 01 OF 04 BOGOTA 002349

STATE FOR ARA, DRL, PM
NSC FOR JAMES DOBbins

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Current Class: CONFIDENTIAL
1. (C) SUMMARY: EMBASSY OFFICERS MET FEBRUARY 27 WITH RETIRED ARMY OFFICER ON WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE COLOMBIAN ARMY. THE LIST IS DAUNTING: CORRUPTION, NEPOTISM, POOR USE OF RESOURCES, LOW MORALE, FAILURE TO LEARN FROM PAST MISTAKES, POOR LEADERSHIP, AND A LACK OF STRATEGIC PLANNING. HE DECRIED THE POLITICAL ELITE'S FAILURE TO SEE THE SECURITY SITUATION AS A PROBLEM THAT AFFECTS IT; THE MILITARY OPERATES IN A POLICY VACUUM. HE EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE INCREASING TENDENCY OF THE POLICE TO TAKE ON MILITARY DUTIES WHILE THE ARMY IS TASKED WITH SUCH "CIVILIAN" DUTIES AS GUARDING OIL PIPELINES (A PROCESS HE REFERRED TO AS THE "PRIVATIZATION" OF THE COLOMBIAN ARMY). STRETCHED TOO THIN BY MULTIPLE MISSIONS AND FACED WITH A WELL-FINANCED INSURGENCY, THE ARMY IS WEAKENED AND DIVIDED, WarnED. CALLED COLOMBIAN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE A "MAFIA" WHOSE "GODFATHER" IS MAJOR GENERAL IVAN RAMIREZ, CURRENTLY INSPECTOR GENERAL OF THE ARMY. CONFIRMED WHAT WE HAVE HEARD FROM OTHER SOURCES; IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN IF HIS DIAGNOSIS WILL BE HEeded, HOWEVER. END SUMMARY.

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2. (C) EMBOFFS MET FEBRUARY 27 WITH RETIRED ARMY OFFICER WHO
RETIRED FOUR YEARS AGO

POL/ECON COUNSELOR, REGIONAL SECURITY OFFICER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER, CHIEF OF MILGROUP'S ARMY MISSION, VISITING DIA ANALYST AND POLOFFS ALSO PARTICIPATED.

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COLOMBIAN ARMY: IN BAD SHAPE
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3. (C)


MILITARY EFFICIENCY IS USUALLY MEASURED IN TERMS OF ENEMY CASUALTIES, NOTED. VIEWED THAT WAY, THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY'S EFFICIENCY HAS BEEN IN DECLINE OF LATE, BUFFETED BY A STRING OF GUERRILLA-INFLICTED HUMILIATIONS (PUERRES, LAS DELICIAS, AND MOST RECENTLY PATASCOY). OTHER PROBLEMS INCLUDE MISUSE OF RESOURCES (RATHER THAN INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES); LOW MORALE; RAMPANT NEPOTISM; FAILURE TO LEARN FROM PAST MISTAKES; POOR LEADERSHIP; AND A LACK OF STRATEGIC PLANNING, ACCORDING TO

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DISCONNECT BETWEEN MILITARY AND "CLASE POLITICA"

4. (C) CLAIMED THAT THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY CONTINUES TO USE THE SAME TACTICS AND STRATEGY "THAT HELPED THE U.S. LOSE THE VIETNAM WAR." UNLIKE THE U.S. MILITARY, HOWEVER, COLOMBIA HAS
FAILED TO ENGAGE IN HEALTHY SELF-CRITICISM, CONTINUED.


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SUBJECT: FORMER ARMY OFFICER: COLOMBIAN ARMY CRIPPLED BY CORRUPTION, INEFFICIENCY, AND A LACK OF POLITICAL WILL AND ENLISTED PERSONNEL. THE FORMER GOES TO GREAT LENGTHS TO KEEP ITS SONS FROM PERFORMING MANDATORY MILITARY SERVICE; THOSE WHO DO NOT ESCAPE BY BRIBERY, BOGUS MEDICAL EXEMPTIONS OR STUDYING ABROAD USUALLY FIND EASY BILLETS IN THE PRESIDENTIAL GUARD OR THE COLOMBIAN ARMY PEACEKEEPING UNIT IN THE SINAI, DECLARED. AT THE SAME TIME, A PEASANT'S SON WHO TRIES TO AVOID MILITARY SERVICE IS SENT TO JAIL, OBSERVED.
5. (C) [ ] said the Colombian army is composed of several different factions: "the married ones' army, the single ones' army, the generals' sons' army, the sergeants' sons' army, the politicians' friends' army, the generals' in-laws' army," and so forth. Many officers get promoted without ever serving in combat, and thus lack the credibility to lead troops into battle. Generals who are selected by an "anti-democratic" popularity contest rather than on merit live in luxury while poorly paid troops barely get by. [ ] asserted that many of today's best officers are retiring, disillusioned with an army left to do the dirty work by an uncaring political elite.

6. (C) [ ] also expressed concern about a confusion of military and police functions in Colombia. He expressed admiration for police director Serrano but said the police increasingly perform military duties while the army is being used for civilian tasks like protecting infrastructure. He noted the bitter rivalry between the police and army, saying army generals dislike Serrano because the police has usurped the "supremacy" the army enjoyed fifteen years ago. [ ] acknowledged that the military had been corrupted by narcotraffickers, many of whom lured away skilled (if morally bankrupt) officers. [ ] also mentioned that the example of generals who lost their U.S. visas because of narco-corruption also hurt troop morale (although he acknowledged the USG's right (##) in such cases). He deplored the military's tendency to deal with wrongdoers internally rather than handing them over to the civilian justice system, citing the case of General Jose Villareal Abarca, who was expelled about twenty years ago from the army for abetting narcotraffickers but who was never tried or jailed. "This sets a terrible example and encourages other
PERSONNEL TO THINK THEY CAN COMMIT CRIMES AND GET AWAY WITH IT," LAMENTED.

ARMY STRETCHED TOO THIN BY TOO MANY MISSIONS

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7. (C) SAID THE MILITARY'S MULTIPLE MISSIONS, MANY OF THEM NOT STIPULATED BY THE CONSTITUTION, HAVE LEFT THE ARMY STRETCHED BEYOND ITS EFFECTIVE CAPACITY. ABOUT THIRTY PERCENT OF THE ARMY IS ASSIGNED TO ADMINISTRATIVE WORK AND ANOTHER THIRTY PERCENT HAVE BEEN "PRIVATIZED," GUARDING PRIVATE AND PUBLIC ENTERPRISES LIKE OIL PIPELINES, ACCORDING TO SO-CALLED MOBILE BRIGADES ARE TIED DOWN GUARDING ECONOMIC INTERESTS OF THE ELITE, DECLARED. MANY SOLDIERS ARE STATIONED IN LARGE HEADQUARTERS RATHER THAN OUT IN THE FIELD. AS A RESULT, THE BORDERS ARE INADEQUATELY DEFENDED FROM INCursions FROM VENEZUELA AND ELSEWHERE AND THE GUERRILLAS STRIKE WITH VIRTUAL IMPUNITY. THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES OF COLOMBIA (FARC), FUELED BY ILLICIT INCOME FROM CRIME, HAVE EXPANDED FROM 600 FIGHTERS IN 1983 TO 11,000 TODAY, STATED; THE RATIO OF SOLDIERS TO GUERRILLAS HAS DECLINED FROM 120:1 FIFTEEN YEARS AGO TO 6:1 TODAY. (DAO COMMENT: THERE ARE ABOUT 125,000 COLOMBIAN ARMY TROOPS AND PROBABLY NO MORE THAN 18,000 GUERRILLAS TOTAL, FOR A RATIO OF ABOUT 7:1. END COMMENT.)

CORRUPTION AND NEPOTISM: "CANCER" ON THE ARMY

(#) GARBLED TEXT CORRECTIONS WILL FOLLOW
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ONDCP FOR JANET CRIST
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
JUSTICE FOR CRIM. WARREN, RICHARD AND NDDS/VAN VLIET
USIA FOR AR, I/GAR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/05/03
TAGS: PGOV, MOPS, PHUM, PTER, PINR, PINS, ASEC, SNAR, CO
SUBJECT: FORMER ARMY OFFICER: COLOMBIAN ARMY CRIPPLED BY
CORRUPTION, INEFFICIENCY, AND A LACK OF POLITICAL WILL

8. (C) WAS SKEPTICAL OF THE MILITARY'S TRADITIONAL EXCUSES'
FOR FARING POORLY AGAINST THE GUERRILLAS: LACK OF HELICOPTERS, LACK
OF COMMUNICATION EQUIPMENT, LACK OF INTELLIGENCE, AND CONCERNS THAT
INFlicting CASUALTIES WILL LEAD TO CHARGES OF HUMAN RIGHTS
VIOLATIONS. REGARDING THE LATTER, SAID THAT IN THE PAST
SOME PERSONNEL COMMITTED ABUSES IN ORDER TO EARN DECORATIONS AND
GET PROMOTED, BUT SUCH OFFENSES DID NOT OCCUR AS A MATTER OF
POlICY. THE SOLUTION TO THE ARMY'S PROBLEMS, HE SAID, IS NOT JUST
MORE MONEY, BUT MORE TRAINING, MORE PUBLIC SUPPORT, A CONSENSUS ON
WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE SECURITY SITUATION, AND LESS NEPOTISM AND
CORRUPTION (WHICH HE TERMED A "CANCER" ON THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY).
ACKNOWLEDGED NONE OF THESE WOULD BE EASY TO ACHIEVE, BUT HE
WARNED THAT A FRACttURED AND WEAKENED MILITARY MEANS A FRACttURED AND
WEAKENED COLOMBIAN DEMOCRACY. NOTING THAT DISGUST WITH MILITARY
CORRUPTION HAD LED VENEZUELAN OFFICERS TO ATTEMPT A COUP SOME YEARS
AGO, WARNED THAT SOMETHING SIMILAR COULD HAPPEN IN COLOMBIA.
(COMMENT: WE DOUBT THAT THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY WOULD DO SUCH A
THING ANYTIME SOON. HOWEVER, WE NOTE FOR THE RECORD THAT FOUR
FORMER TWENTIETH (ARMY INTELLIGENCE) BRIGADE MEMBERS ARE FACING
TRIAL ON CHARGES OF PARTICIPATING IN THE NOVEMBER 1995
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ASSASSINATION OF CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADER ALVARO GOMEZ HURTADO. HURTADO ALLEGEDLY HAD BEEN PLOTTING WITH SOME SENIOR MILITARY OFFICERS TO DEPOSE PRESIDENT SAMPER BY FORCE AT THE HEIGHT OF THE SAMPER NARCO-SCANDAL. END COMMENT.)

GUERRILLAS AND PARAMILITARIES BOTH INVOLVED IN DRUGS

9. (C) BLAMED POLITICIANS FOR "PLAYING THE GUERRILLAS' GAME" BUT ADMITTED THAT GUERRILLAS HAVE ALSO INFILTRATED THE ARMY, INCLUDING ATTENDING MILITARY SCHOOLS. SAID EMPHATICALLY THAT "GUERRILLAS ARE NARCOS." PAST GUERRILLA CONFLICTS WITH NARCOTRAFFICKERS WERE PURELY TERRITORIAL, NOT MORAL. SAID PARAMILITARIES ARE ALSO "UNDoubtedly" INVOLVED IN THE DRUG TRADE.

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE: A MAFIA LED BY "GODFATHER" RAMIREZ

10. (C) WHEN ASKED IF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE IS ONE OF THE "ARMIES WITHIN THE ARMY" HAD DESCRIBED EARLIER, HE REPLIED THAT IT WAS INDEED A "MAFIA" THAT SPENDS MOST OF ITS TIME "GATHERING DIRTY SECRETS RATHER THAN PROCESSING INFORMATION FOR COMBAT." THE "DIRT" IS THEN USED BY THE GOVERNMENT TO SPY ON POLITICAL ENEMIES OR SETTLE PERSONAL VENDETTAS. CHARGED. WHEN ASKED ABOUT ALLEGATIONS THAT MILITARY INTELLIGENCE WAS INVOLVED IN THE 1995 MURDER OF CONSERVATIVE POLITICIAN ALVARO GOMEZ HURTADO, SAID HE HAD "HEARD THE GOSSIP" TO THAT EFFECT BUT KNEW NOTHING FURTHER. THE MILITARY INTELLIGENCE BUDGET IS NOT SPENT ON INFORMANTS, BUT IS CONFIDENTIAL.
OVER TWENTY YEARS." ACCORDING TO RAMIREZ HAS ALWAYS SURROUNDED HIMSELF WITH LOYAL SUBORDINATES WHO "COVERED UP FOR HIM." HE ALSO APPEARS TO HAVE LINED HIS POCKETS AT PUBLIC EXPENSE, ADDED; HOW ELSE COULD HE HAVE GIVEN HIS DAUGHTER AN $80,000 APARTMENT AS A WEDDING GIFT? HOWEVER, RAMIREZ IS NOT ALONE IN ENRICHING HIMSELF ILLEGITIMELY, SAID; SUCH CORRUPTION IS RAMPANT, PARTICULARLY IN THE PROCUREMENT PROCESS FOR WEAPONS, VEHICLES, UNIFORMS, AND OTHER MATERIEL. ALTHOUGH THE MILITARY'S OVERALL BUDGET ALLOCATION IS MADE PUBLIC, THE INTELLIGENCE BUDGET AND THE AMOUNT THE MILITARY EARN FOR PROTECTING OIL INSTALLATIONS AND OTHER PRIVATE FACILITIES ARE STILL "RESERVADO," NOTED.

STATUS QUO: ACCEPTABLE TO MANY

11. (C) WHEN ASKED IF THE CURRENT SECURITY SITUATION, ALBEIT RATHER DISMAL, MIGHT ACTUALLY BENEFIT THE MILITARY, ACKNOWLEDGED THAT SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE "THIS WAR IS NOT BEING
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FOUGHT TO 'WIN.' POLITICIANS, HR CLAIMED, "HELP BOTH THE GUERRILLAS

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AND THE MILITARY AT THE SAME TIME," ALTHOUGH HE DID NOT ELABORATE. HE EXPRESSED DISGUST FOR PRESIDENT SAMPER'S DECISION TO PROMOTE SEVERAL GENERALS BEFORE THEY HAD SERVED THE REQUISITE TIME IN GRADE, AND DEPLORED ONE RECIPIENT'S EXPLANATION FOR WHY HE ACCEPTED: IF HE DIDN'T, SOMEONE ELSE WOULD. AGREED WITH RSO'S COMMENT ABOUT PUBLIC APATHY IN COLOMBIA, MANIFESTED IN EARLY 1997 WHEN BOGOTA RESIDENTS PAID VIRTUALLY NO ATTENTION TO THE FIVE-DAY CLASH BETWEEN GUERRILLAS AND THE ARMY IN SAN JUANITO, ONLY THIRTY MILES AWAY. REMARKED THAT AN ARMY OFFICER, WAS AT SAN JUANITO; HIS REPEATED CALLS TO HEADQUARTERS FOR GUIDANCE AND REINFORCEMENTS WERE IGNORED.

GIVING THE BAD NEWS TO GENERAL BONETT

12. (C) POL/ECON COUNSELOR NOTED COLOMBIA SPENDS RELATIVELY LESS ON ITS MILITARY THAN OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE HEMISPHERE, EVEN THOUGH IT IS CONFRONTING A MAJOR INSURGENCY. AGREED BUT SAID THAT, ALTHOUGH THE MILITARY NEEDS RESOURCES, IT NEEDS ADEQUATE INTERNAL CONTROLS TO ENSURE MONEY IS SPENT CORRECTLY. SAID ARMED FORCES COMMANDER BONETT HAS BEEN IN TOUCH WITH HIM AND IF BONETT ASKS TO MEET WITH HIM, PLANS TO SPEAK FRANKLY AND PROVIDE EVEN MORE DETAILS ABOUT CORRUPTION AND INEFFICIENCY THAN HE WAS WILLING TO DO WITH EMBASSY PERSONNEL. "I EXPECT CRITICISM SAID, BUT THE PUBLIC HAS A RIGHT TO KNOW "IF THEIR MONEY IS BEING SPENT ON HELICOPTERS OR MERCEDES."

RAMIREZ AND DEL RIO, "THE TWO MOST CORRUPT"

13. (C) AFTER THE MEETING, PRIVATELY TOLD POL/ECON COUNSELOR THAT MAJOR GENERAL RAMIREZ AND THE FORMER COMMANDER OF THE ARMY'S 17TH BRIGADE, BRIGADIER GENERAL RITO ALEJO DEL RIO, ARE "THE TWO MOST CORRUPT ARMY OFFICERS IN COLOMBIA." HE CLAIMED THAT DEL RIO TOLD 17TH BRIGADE PERSONNEL TO COOPERATE WITH PARAMILITARIES WHENEVER DEL RIO WAS PHYSICALLY ABSENT FROM THE
AREA; HE ALSO ACCUSED DEL RIO OF INVOLVEMENT IN DIVERTING A PLANLOAD OF WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION TO PARAMILITARIES IN THE MAGDALENA MEDIO REGION IN 1985. (NOTE: THE INCIDENT CAME TO LIGHT ONLY BECAUSE THE OVERLOADED PLANE CRASHED. END NOTE.) commented that both are now in key positions (INSPECTOR GENERAL OF THE ARMY AND COMMANDER OF THE BOGOTA-BASED 13TH BRIGADE, RESPECTIVELY) TO PREVENT ANY POSSIBLE COUP ATTEMPTS.

14. (c) COMMENT: confirmed our impressions about problems that are seriously hampering the Colombian Army's performance. He frequently harkened back to the good old days when he was a young officer, and perhaps exaggerated the decline that has taken place since then. For all we know, he may also have been motivated by personal animus, having reached only before retiring, but we have no reason to doubt his credibility. His diagnosis struck us as accurate, but it remains to be seen whether the medicine he prescribes -- rooting out waste, fraud, and abuse -- will be particularly welcome to the patient. Garza