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18 November 1985

Talking Points

Colombia: M-19 Guerrilla Attack on Colombian
Palace of Justice 6 Nov 1985

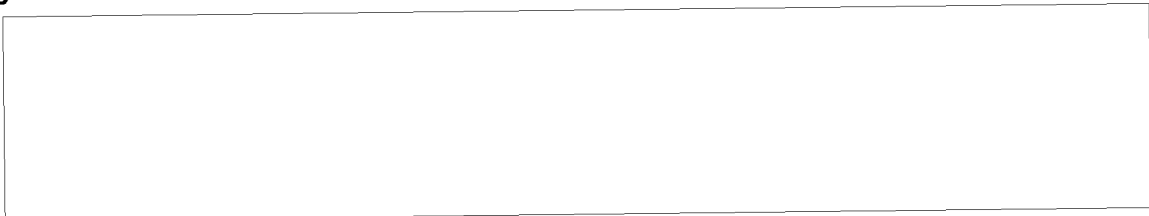
1. Attention in Colombia has shifted for the moment from the 6 November Palace of Justice episode to the volcanic disaster of last week.

-- There has been some criticism of the government for ignoring warning signs of the eruption, but on balance we expect public opinion to rally behind Betancur and the relief effort in the short term.

-- Over the next few months, however, the inevitable inadequacy of government relief and reconstruction programs probably will damage the lame-duck President's public standing.

2. Also, we expect attention to return to the Palace of Justice episode, at which time several aspects of the incident should be clearer.

-- M-19 motives: the group probably was hoping for a recreation of its spectacularly successful 2-month occupation of the Dominican Republic's embassy in 1981. We believe the government's rapid decision this time to assault the Palace of Justice caught the M-19 off guard.



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-- Foreign backing: The M-19 has been using weapons recently supplied by Libya, [redacted] evidently Libya has replaced Cuba as the main source of external aid--arms, training, and money--for the M-19. [redacted]

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*35 of 19 of April
mon. - Nov 6
Occup. P. of J.
President itself as
active & more.
Army - mission
counterattacks
- all Secur.
- 15 of 24 Sup Ct Just
- 55 of 70
90% of held gutted
in 27 fire during
Siege.*

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3. We believe Betancur reacted forcefully because of his concern that his past vacillation toward the guerrillas may have encouraged the operation and because of his fear that failure to act forcefully would anger military leaders, who, believe they are being blamed for the increasing violence.

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4. The short term cost for Betancur has been limited to predictable criticism from the Liberal opposition and members of the judiciary, who believe that Betancur should have attempted to negotiate with the guerrillas.

5. Where does this leave the government and the guerrillas?

-- The government probably will pursue a two-track policy: increased counterinsurgency operations against the M-19 and continued negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest guerrilla group and the only one willing to continue peace talks. This is Betancur's last shred of hope for the highly vaunted peace process he has built his administration around.

-- This approach recognizes that the military lacks resources to combat all groups simultaneously, and thus aims to eliminate the M-19 and then deal with FARC once its current political ambitions are dashed in the 1986 elections.

6. The fallout from the attack is unlikely to become regime threatening despite scheduled official investigations, but M-19 attacks probably will increase--

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-- We expect more kidnaping and extortion as the guerrillas seek to finance their operations; US diplomatic and business interests are likely targets.

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Back Up

Relations between the M-19 and the government have deteriorated since June, when the guerrilla group unilaterally abrogated cease-fire accords. Since then, the M-19 has increased its guerrilla operations in southwestern Colombia, and clashes with the military have occurred almost daily.

Thirty-five guerrillas of the 19th of April (M-19) guerrilla movement occupied the Palace of Justice building in Bogota on 6 November in an effort to reassert itself as an active guerrilla organization. The M-19, which suffered recent military setbacks, reportedly intended only to stage a publicity-generating operation that would enable it to criticize the government and promote its cause. The Army, however, launched a massive counterattack, which left all of the guerrillas, 15 of 24 Supreme Court justices, and about 55 others dead. Approximately 90 percent of the building was gutted by a fire that burned for most of the 27-hour siege.

- Three American missionaries were released by FARC recently after having been held hostage for several weeks. The M-19, however, still holds hostage an American oil executive and is demanding a large ransom for his release.

Note: None of the guerrillas killed held any important leadership or policy post.

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