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Colombia's Battle Against the Drug Mafia: Implications for the United States



National Intelligence Estimate

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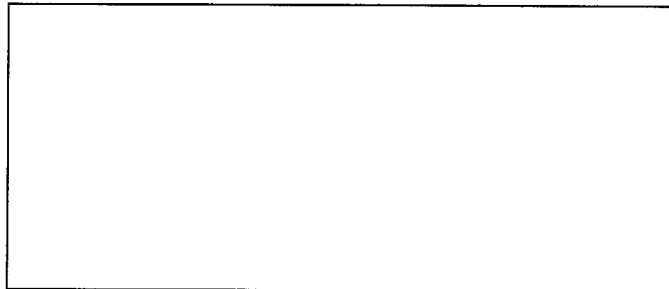
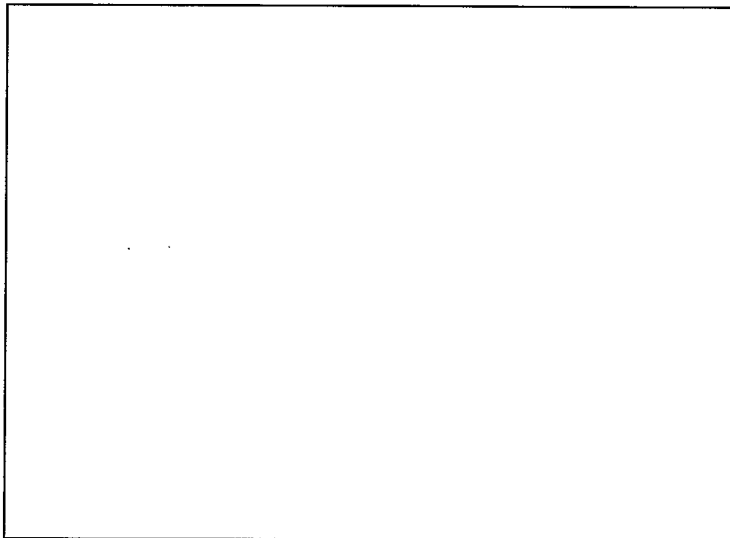
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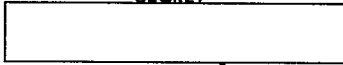
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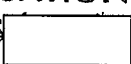
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NIE 88-88

**COLOMBIA'S BATTLE AGAINST
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FOR THE UNITED STATES** 

Information available as of 28 April 1988 was used in the preparation of this Estimate, which was approved by the National Foreign Intelligence Board on that date.

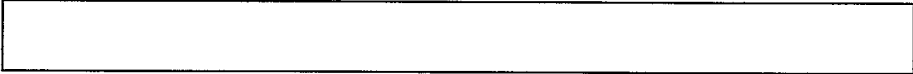
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KEY JUDGMENTS

The release from jail of drug kingpin Jorge Ochoa and spiraling violence by major traffickers have demonstrated the inability of President Virgilio Barco's government to implement an effective and sustained counternarcotics strategy. With the powerful drug mafia holding the upper hand, Barco is likely to continue antidrug coordination with the United States, but the odds of his taking sustained and strong action—particularly extraditions—against the major drug organizations are slim. He is also likely to emphasize the need for narcotics consumer countries, particularly the United States, to strengthen internal demand reduction programs. Moreover, we believe Colombian official and public acceptance of trafficker activity will grow as the narcotics situation continues to deteriorate.

The major drug trafficking organizations, fearful of any new Colombian extradition treaty with the United States, are relentlessly increasing their use of corruption, intimidation, and violence against Colombia's judicial system, particularly the seriously threatened Supreme Court; key opinion makers in the media; the schools, and the business community; and counternarcotics personnel in the military and police organizations.

Since Ochoa's release, Barco has publicly reaffirmed his intent to continue fighting major trafficking organizations and has permitted more active antidrug initiatives by the military. While unlikely in the near term to seriously threaten the power of the major drug organizations, he is likely to emphasize enforcement actions against targets the drug mafia views as replaceable or expendable: chemical stockpiles, marijuana operations, and small-scale cocaine facilities. He will probably continue to be reluctant to systematically target major cocaine laboratories and operations. This is partly to avoid a major confrontation with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Colombia's largest insurgent group, in whose territory coca is grown and cocaine is sometimes produced.

President Barco's inability to adequately address US counternarcotics concerns may complicate a range of diplomatic issues. Prolonged

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frictions over narcotics control could erode Barco's generally pro-American stance and cause increased Colombian resentment of US pressure for extradition. Therefore, Barco is likely to allow further US involvement in his counternarcotics programs only if it is not widely publicized.

Continued US and Colombian efforts to strengthen Bogota's counter-narcotics capabilities could escalate the threat of attacks against US Embassy and law enforcement personnel. Events since Ochoa's release in December 1987 have also increased the likelihood that drug traffickers might carry out a high-visibility attack on official US facilities in Colombia or even in the United States.

Events of the last few months only solidify the conviction that prompted the scheduling of this Estimate: Colombia's illegal narcotics trade will continue to grow. It will be an increasing threat to US interests in Colombia and in the region for the balance of Barco's presidency, due to expire in August 1990, and probably beyond. The United States will continue to be a key target for the traffickers, both as a market and for violent reprisals.

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DISCUSSION

Introduction

1. The rapid growth of the worldwide cocaine trade has created new security and political problems in US relations with Colombia, the major source of refined cocaine consumed in the United States.¹ US policies toward Bogota, long defined by mutual political and economic interests, are now focusing almost exclusively on narcotics control.² The Colombian Government faces a serious and intractable challenge to its authority by the powerful Colombian drug mafia. Although the government is sympathetic to US requests for greater cooperation in coping with this grave threat, concerns about national sovereignty and trafficker reprisals will probably continue to block strong counterdrug actions. (S NF)

2. The recent release of drug kingpin Jorge Ochoa aggravated underlying tension between Bogota and Washington over Colombia's failure to curb the cocaine trade. President Virgilio Barco has attempted to take progressively stronger counternarcotics actions since he took office in August 1986.

A well-intentioned administrator with a reputation for thoroughness and integrity, Barco nonetheless has failed to formulate a comprehensive antidrug strategy and to provide the strong leadership needed to sustain an effective drug control program. The resultant indecision and seeming ambivalence on narcotics issues—a primary factor in Ochoa's release—has prompted increasing domestic criticism of the Barco government over its inability to deal with the powerful drug mafia. (S NF)

3. The expanding leftist insurgency has forced a diversion of Colombia's limited security resources.

Bogota has been relatively successful in efforts to reduce marijuana production and exports of Colombian marijuana to the United States have declined steadily in the past few years. Partly for that reason, this Estimate deals primarily with cocaine.

¹ Narcotics are medically defined as physiological depressants—limited to opium, the opium derivatives morphine and heroin, and synthetic analogs for these substances—having the potential for dependence and tolerance. This paper uses the term in its legally accepted sense, to include other illegal drugs such as cocaine, other coca products, and marijuana. (C)

thereby eroding even further the government's already reduced capacity to deal with the drug mafia.³ The government is reluctant to move against cocaine processing facilities in the southeast because they lie in territory controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest insurgent group, which has a tenuous four-year-old truce with the government. (S NF)

4. Ochoa's release from jail last December underscores the extent of Colombian traffickers' power and the inability of the Barco government to deal with it. Ochoa's release, following weeks of legal maneuvering, bribery, and threats by major traffickers, was a clear victory for the drug mafia—and as clear a defeat for Barco. Since then, Barco has shown consternation and the recognition that he risks damaging relations with Washington, as well as injuring Colombia's reputation worldwide, unless he can develop and implement a more effective antinarcotics strategy. At the same time, however, Barco faces massive trafficker retaliation, charges of US clientism, and challenges to his authority if he moves directly to oust the drug mafia. The political, security, and economic costs of either course are high, and Barco has shown increasing frustration in trying to identify and weigh his options.

5. Ochoa's release also triggered a chain of domestic reactions in Colombia, reflecting alarm at the government's inability to curb the traffickers' growing power, outrage over revelations of bribery, and public anger at perceived US retaliation, which took the form of more stringent US customs inspections of Colombian imports. Public opinion, which had shifted from condemnation of Ochoa's release to anger at perceived US retaliation, veered again in favor of stronger antidrug measures when a group known as "The Extraditables" kidnaped Andres Pastrana, a leading candidate in Bogota's mayoral election, and then killed Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyos. Both victims were outspoken critics of narcotics; the Attorney General was an advocate of extradition.

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Colombia: Key Country in the World Cocaine Trade

Colombian drug traffickers have dominated the international cocaine industry since the early 1970s, when they began to control refining and distribution of cocaine hydrochloride. The next leap forward in the size of their operations occurred in the early 1980s, when major traffickers—responding to rising US cocaine consumption—came together in a loose cartel and built large-scale processing laboratories in Colombia's southeastern jungle area. Today, Colombia's cocaine mafia controls a multinational drug consortium, with holdings in several countries and influence throughout the region. []

Colombian traffickers continue to obtain most of their coca from Peru and Bolivia, but their monopoly over the refining business is beginning to weaken. The bulk of the cocaine produced in Colombian laboratories comes from drug crops in Peru's Upper Huallaga Valley, the largest coca growing region in the world. Peruvian traffickers have generally accepted their position as suppliers to the Colombian trade, although [] Peru may be attempting to develop its own international cocaine business. This evolution has already occurred in Bolivia, where some major cocaine organizations operate independently of the Colombians and now ship directly to the United States and Europe. []

Colombian traffickers have expanded their own drug cultivation in several ways since the late 1970s: They have increased production of coca leaves in eastern and southern Colombia, where many large cocaine refining complexes still operate. This new cultivation reportedly includes some fields of the higher-yield Peruvian variety, which had previously not been grown in Colombia. To augment their supplies still further, Colombian traffickers have also begun to grow coca in northwestern Brazil, along Colombia's borders with Ecuador and Peru, and along the northern border with Venezuela—all in remote regions beyond the effective reach of law enforcement personnel. In Brazil, Colombian traffickers have persuaded local Indians to plant coca and have used Brazilian chemicals to process their crops into cocaine. Processing laboratories appear to be spreading throughout the countries ringing Colombia as the traffickers accelerate operations to meet the rising demand for cocaine. Bolivian traffickers have followed a similar pattern in the past several years, expanding their processing and transshipment operations into Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. []

6. The Attorney General's murder signals a direct assault by the drug traffickers on the Barco government, intended to stop the President's efforts to revive extraditions to the United States, which ceased last year when the Colombian Supreme Court voided Bogota's 1979 treaty with Washington. Extradition is the most hated and feared of all Colombian counternarcotics measures. Since Ochoa's release, Barco has publicly reaffirmed his intent to continue fighting major trafficking organizations and has permitted more active antidrug initiatives by the military. He issued a new warrant for the arrest of the major drug traffickers, specifically for purposes of extradition, and he publicly chided the Supreme Court for undercutting his presidential authority. These measures indicate that Barco has not yet conceded the war on drugs. (S NF)

Continued Government Commitment—Within Bounds

7. Barco's recent adoption of emergency powers is an attempt to restore public order and blunt public criticism [] in combating growing trafficker violence. His antiterrorist state-of-siege decrees will be difficult to implement. Tougher security measures, however—including Army support for the police in urban areas and creation of a central data bank on criminals—may help stem rising urban violence if there is appropriate followup. []

8. The President may respond to public pressure for more forceful government action by agreeing to a closer US advisory role on some counternarcotics initiatives. In a meeting [] in January, he identified a need to improve programs for coca eradication, laboratory destruction, judicial reform, law enforcement, and drug awareness. He also requested US participation in a new secret bilateral coordinating group. [] Barco may even be reconsidering his earlier decision not to attack large-scale cocaine processing centers in insurgent-controlled territory—an action that the United States has repeatedly urged. []

9. The President's failure to take a strong public stand on extradition, however, has facilitated legal challenges that will undercut his efforts to find a legal basis for remanding traffickers to the United States. The Supreme Court substantially weakened Barco's antiterrorist decrees by ruling key emergency arrest provisions unconstitutional. The Council of State—an independent executive body that monitors judicial

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decisions—recently suspended Barco's arrest order for Pablo Escobar, and is likely to void warrants against other major traffickers. Moreover, members of both bodies will remain vulnerable to threats and bribery, and the high courts are likely to block any attempt to use state-of-siege legislation to authorize extradition under an earlier treaty or by presidential fiat. In this climate, the President is unlikely to take a more activist approach to extradition. If another major drug lord is captured, Barco will choose his actions carefully, and he will almost certainly avoid any confrontation with the courts that could provoke impeachment measures. [redacted]

Traffickers: Political Power Growing

10. Since the early 1980s, when they began large-scale production of refined cocaine for the US market, narcotics barons have used enormous financial resources and violence to undermine the authority and integrity of the nation's legal and political institutions and to secure for themselves a position of virtual immunity from prosecution. Subversion of institutions by the drug mafia continued, with only temporary interruptions, through the 1982-86 Betancur administration, and President Barco now faces an extensive and well-organized resistance to drug control—and particularly to extradition. [redacted]

11. [redacted] Intimidation, assassinations, and bribery have blocked prosecution of narcotics traffickers, despite efforts by the Barco government to protect judges and their families. The Supreme Court, the most critical link in the extradition chain, has been a primary target of violence and bribes since 1984, when it was required to rule on the first extradition cases. This four-year onslaught has increasingly stymied efforts to remove traffickers from Colombia and has left the Court at odds with Barco. Deterioration of the Court has accelerated since 1985, when half of Bogota's 24 high justices died in a two-day takeover of the Bogota Palace of Justice by Colombia's M-19 guerrilla group. [redacted]

[redacted] Continued death threats have apparently erased all hope of Court approval for individual extraditions. [redacted]

12. The drug mafia has begun to use the same tactics against the Colombian Cabinet, concentrating particularly on the Justice Ministry. Enrique Parejo, who succeeded to the Justice Ministry in 1984 after traffickers murdered Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, was attacked by their hitmen in Budapest—a

dramatic illustration of the drug mafia's international reach and determination to punish antidrug officials even after they leave office. [redacted]

13. Barco has been reluctant to investigate possible drug links among his senior officials. [redacted]

14. The Ochoa case provided yet another dramatic illustration of the traffickers' growing ability to exploit Colombian Government vulnerabilities. [redacted]

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Mounting Casualties in Colombia's War on Drugs

Colombian traffickers routinely use violence to eliminate opponents or ensure compliance with their objectives, but their reprisals against Colombian officials have been more selective. Since Bogota signed the bilateral extradition treaty in 1979, many of the drug

mafia's attacks on prominent Colombians have focused on the extradition issue, while others have targeted key law enforcement officials and media proponents of drug control. Examples from Colombia's obituary columns follow.

30 April 1984	Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, Minister of Justice	17 November 1986	Col. Jaime Ramirez Gomez, former Commander, National Police antinarcotics force
23 July 1985	Tulio Manuel Castro Gil, Superior Court Judge investigating Lara Bonilla's murder	17 December 1986	Guillermo Cano Isaza, director of leading Bogota newspaper
7 November 1985	Eleven Supreme Court justices killed in Palace of Justice, seized by M-19 guerrillas on 6 November	13 January 1987	Enrique Parejo Gonzalez (survived), Minister of Justice following Lara Bonilla; attacked in Budapest while serving as Ambassador to Hungary; since assigned to Czechoslovakia; remains antidrug activist
31 July 1986	Hernando Baquero Borda, Supreme Court Justice involved in extradition decisions	23 November 1987	Juan Gomez Martinez (survived), manager of Medellin newspaper; new mayor of Medellin
17 August 1986	Capt. Luis Macana Rodriguez, leading National Police investigator	18 January 1988	Andres Pastrana Arango (survived), son of former President Misael Pastrana; new mayor of Bogota; kidnaped in Bogota, freed by police in Medellin
1 September 1986	Carlos Arturo Luna Rojas, chief of security, Avianca Airlines	25 January 1988	Carlos Mauro Hoyos Jimenez, Attorney General; proponent of revived extradition treaty
17 September 1986	Raul Echavarría Barrientos, deputy director of leading Cali newspaper		
22 October 1986	Alberto Villamizar Cardenas (survived), congressional leader who sponsored extradition legislation		
31 October 1986	Guillermo Zuluaga Serna, Superior Tribunal Judge, Medellin		

More Pressure on Key Opinion Makers

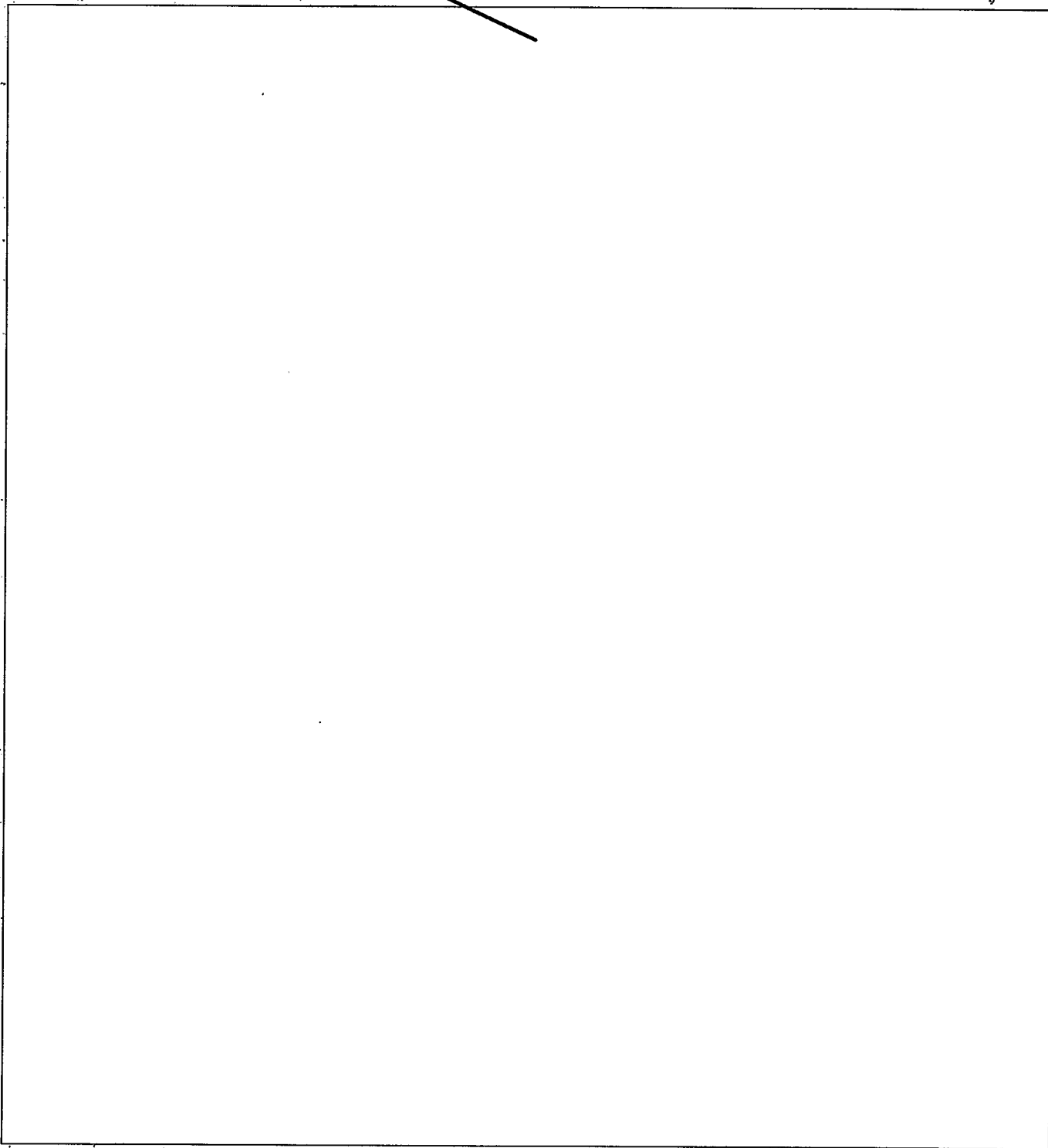
15. Intimidation by the drug mafia has begun to undermine the resolve of journalists, businessmen, teachers, and other Colombian citizens who have spoken out against the traffickers. Journalists, who have led an antidrug crusade since the murder of publisher Guillermo Cano in 1986, abandoned plans for a series of exposes on the drug mafia after receiving death threats. Traffickers have played on strong nationalist sentiments to the point that the media now question the right of the United States to press Barco for a revival of the extradition treaty. Recent editorials have stressed that the nation is caught in an insoluble dilemma: if the government moves aggressively against the mafia, the level of violence will escalate and it will have to pay a high price in blood; if the government fails to act, it will cede national control to the mafia. The overriding theme in the Colombian press, however, is that Colombia is paying a greater price than any other

country in the struggle against narcotics and that the consumer nations must begin shouldering a larger burden in the fight.

Spreading Influence in the Security Forces

16. The traffickers' ability to subvert personnel is beginning to threaten the government's efforts to limit corruption in the security forces. Military units stationed in major trafficking regions have long been vulnerable to trafficker payoffs and threats. Military involvement in counternarcotics initiatives under Barco has also exposed local commanders to trafficker intimidation, a trend that is likely to continue to the extent that the President uses military manhunts for drug law enforcement. Moreover, the recent state-of-siege orders for Army counterterrorist assistance to urban police forces will increase the risk of terrorist attacks against military personnel, particularly in Bogota and in the drug mafia's home city of Medellin.

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17. Lack of strong and effective action against the drug mafia will also foster corruption in Colombia's law enforcement agencies, despite attempts to remove compromised personnel. Traffickers have paid substantial bribes to ensure delivery of drug and chemical shipments.

[Redacted]

18. Ochoa's release will probably encourage more widespread and blatant use of police payoffs for protection, particularly in Medellin.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Traffickers' Economic Base Is Secure

[Redacted]

Weak Institutional Response

19. Barco has been unable to generate significant support on narcotics issues, both because of his ineffective leadership and because Colombian institutions, for various reasons, have held back from an all-out effort.

[Redacted]

22. The financial power of the drug mafia became evident in 1984, when a group of drug dealers, including mafia chieftain Pablo Escobar and members of the Ochoa clan, met with Colombian officials in Panama following Lara Bonilla's murder. At that meeting, the traffickers—who claimed to control 70 to 80 percent of the Colombian cocaine trade—offered to inject \$3 billion a year into Colombia's economy in exchange for immunity from prosecution. Bogota rejected the offer. [Redacted]

23. Since that incident, the traffickers have continued to expand their real estate and business holdings in Colombia, thus gaining both economic and political leverage. Reporting over the past year shows how traffickers are steadily diversifying drug assets in-country. [Redacted] traffickers are buying out cattle ranchers to acquire large tracts of land in east-central Colombia, where guerrilla activity has forced out legitimate tenants. Once in place, the traffickers establish private armies to defend their property. A similar situation appears to

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be developing in the northwestern agricultural region, where traffickers are investing in banana farming as well as ranching. Increasingly chaotic security conditions will likely accelerate this trend as farmers and ranchers—facing violence from traffickers, guerrillas, and common criminals—abandon their holdings in rural areas where the government's presence is weak.

Outlook: Poor Prospects for Control

27. Spiraling violence in recent months has seriously damaged Barco's political prestige, and he is likely to concentrate in the near term on efforts to repair his administration's image and credibility.

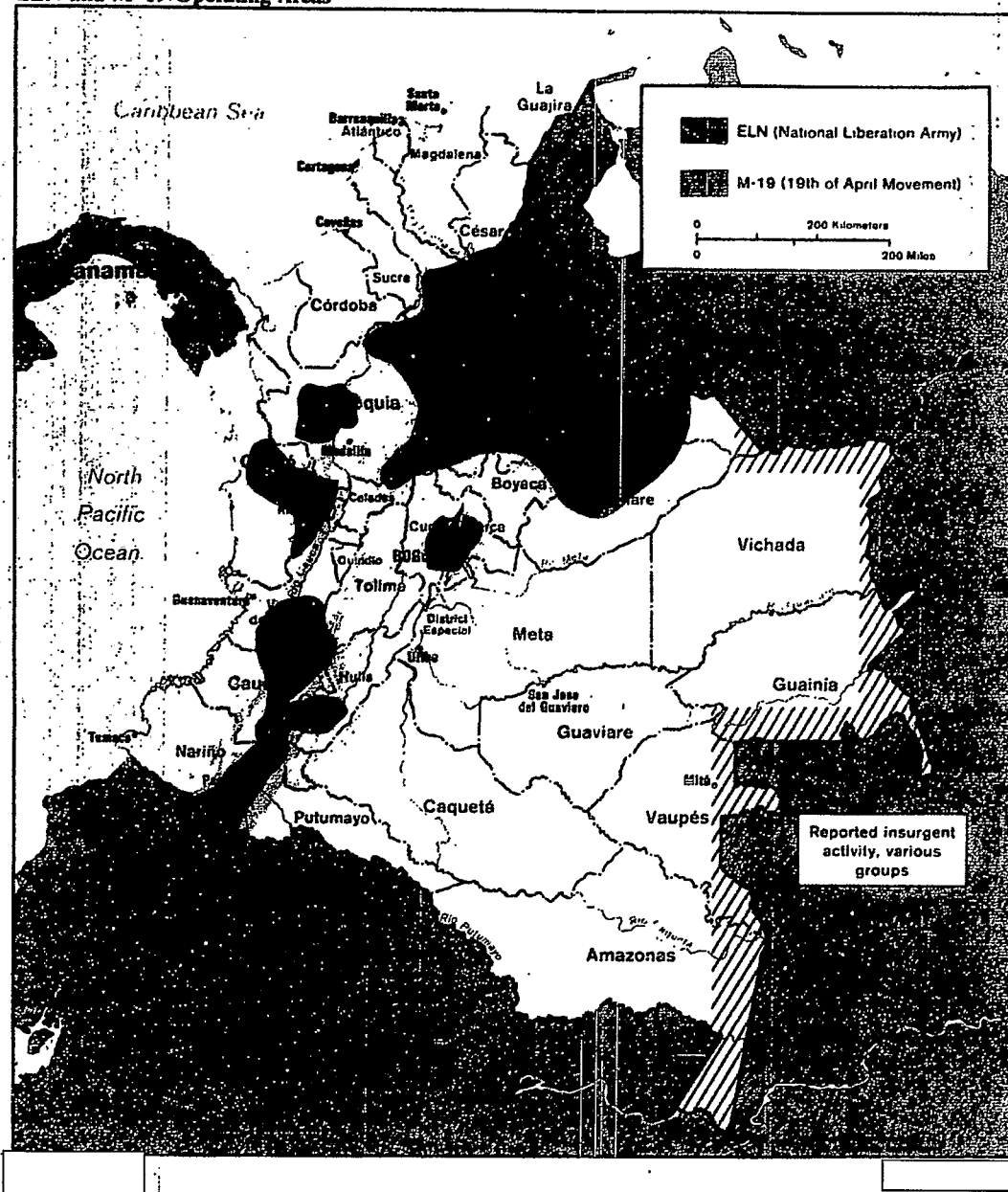
28. Over the next year, the traffickers' blatant power play may serve as a catalyst for more energetic counternarcotics actions. However, President Barco will probably achieve only temporary disruption of major traffickers' operations, despite his pledge to toughen drug control initiatives.

29. Barco also remains wary of antagonizing the FARC, and, despite his readiness to expand counterinsurgency actions, he is unlikely at this juncture to risk a major confrontation by systematically raiding large cocaine processing laboratories where the FARC is present.

30. For both political and security reasons, Barco will probably stop short of any action—particularly extradition—against the drug mafia that would result in his impeachment or in further damage to his administration.

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Figure 2
ELN and M-19 Operating Areas



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31. Resource constraints and legal obstacles will undercut current antidrug initiatives, even if senior military leaders decide to sustain an active counternarcotics role.

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At the same time, current antidrug initiatives apparently run counter to the Council of State ruling forbidding Escobar's arrest for purposes of extradition, creating a legal impasse that would complicate any effort to prosecute Escobar or another major trafficker.

32. Continued trafficker intimidation has generated some movement toward a government accommodation with the traffickers, despite Barco's determination to continue counternarcotics efforts.

Implications for the United States

33. President Barco's inability to respond to US counternarcotics concerns has created new tensions that could complicate cooperation with Washington on a range of other diplomatic, security, and economic issues. It is possible that nationalistic sentiment will cause Barco to become less supportive of US-backed antinarcotics programs in Colombia. Prolonged frictions over narcotics control may erode Barco's pro-American stance and lead him to distance his government from traditional close relations with Washington.

34. The traffickers' latest antiextradition offensive has, with some effect, played on Colombian nationalism. Colombian resentment of perceived US pressure for extradition is likely to grow, perhaps impairing long-established working relationships, especially if the drug mafia carries out threats to kill more pro-extradition officials.

35. Continued US and Colombian efforts to strengthen Bogota's counternarcotics capabilities could escalate the threat of attacks against US Embassy and law enforcement personnel in Colombia. The drug mafia reportedly believes US personnel were responsible for a car-bomb attack in Medellin this year against its ringleader, Pablo Escobar. The traffickers could decide to broaden their campaign of intimidation and carry out longstanding threats to kill or kidnap US diplomatic personnel, including the Ambassador. Events since Ochoa's release have also increased the likelihood that drug traffickers might carry out a high-visibility attack on the Embassy, the Ambassador's residence, or other official US facilities in Colombia or even in the United States. The traffickers' association with M-19 adds to this concern.

36. From an international perspective, events since Ochoa's release have focused world attention on Colombia's inability to combat the drug mafia and on the role of US antinarcotics efforts. Growing trafficker violence and influence may prompt increased international assistance for narcotics control programs in Colombia and other source countries—particularly from Great Britain, Italy, West Germany, Japan, and other countries with diplomatic and economic interests in the region. At the same time, however, other source countries will keep a careful watch on the US role in Colombia's counternarcotics program, and any perceived interventionism could raise concerns about their own cooperation with Washington.

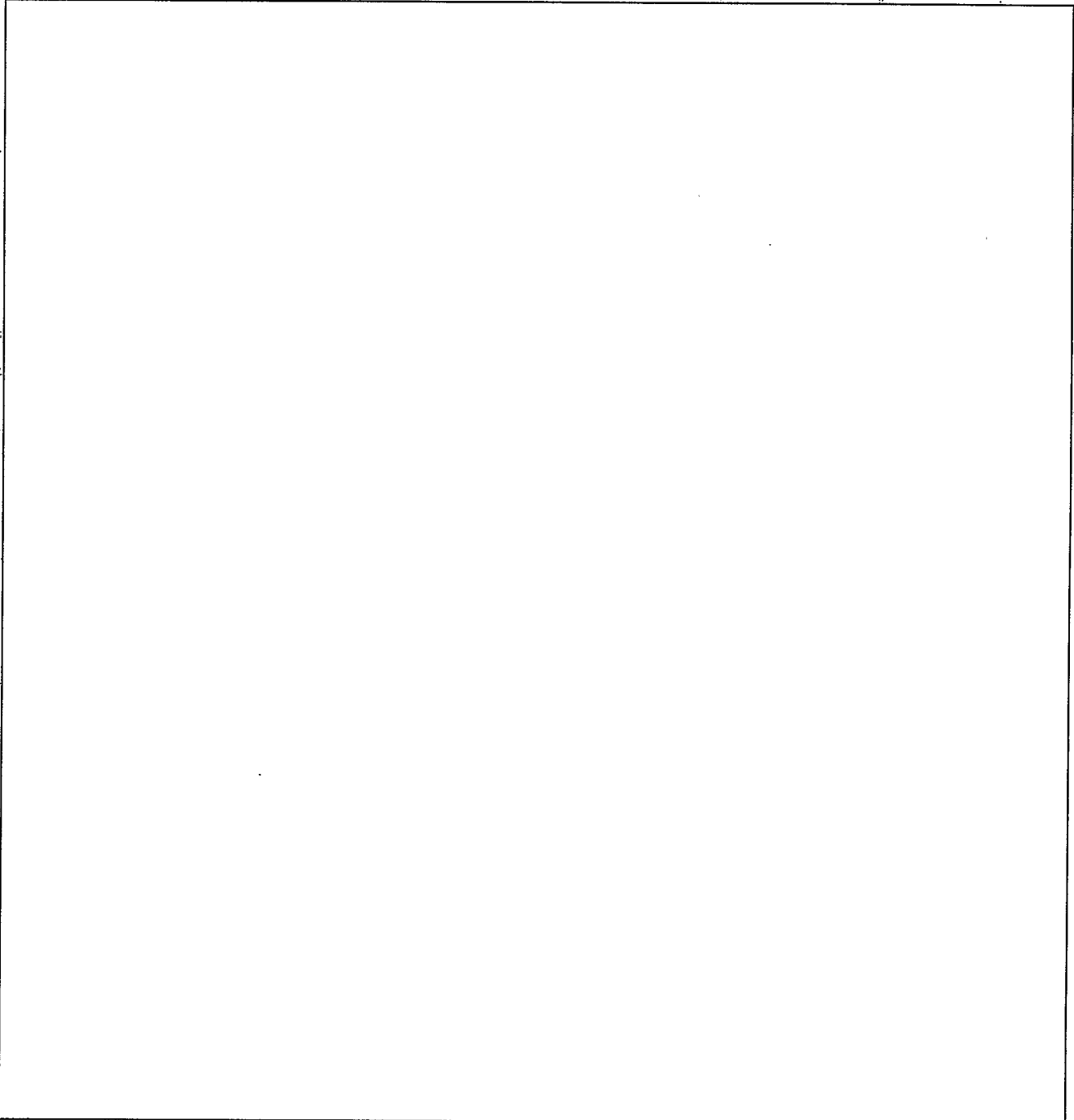
37. Events of the last few months only solidify the conviction that prompted the scheduling of this Estimate: Colombia's illegal narcotics trade will continue

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[redacted]

to flourish. It will pose an increasing threat to US interests in Colombia and in the region for the balance of Barco's presidency, due to expire in August 1990, and probably beyond. The United States will continue to be a key target for the traffickers, both as a market and for violent reprisals. [redacted]

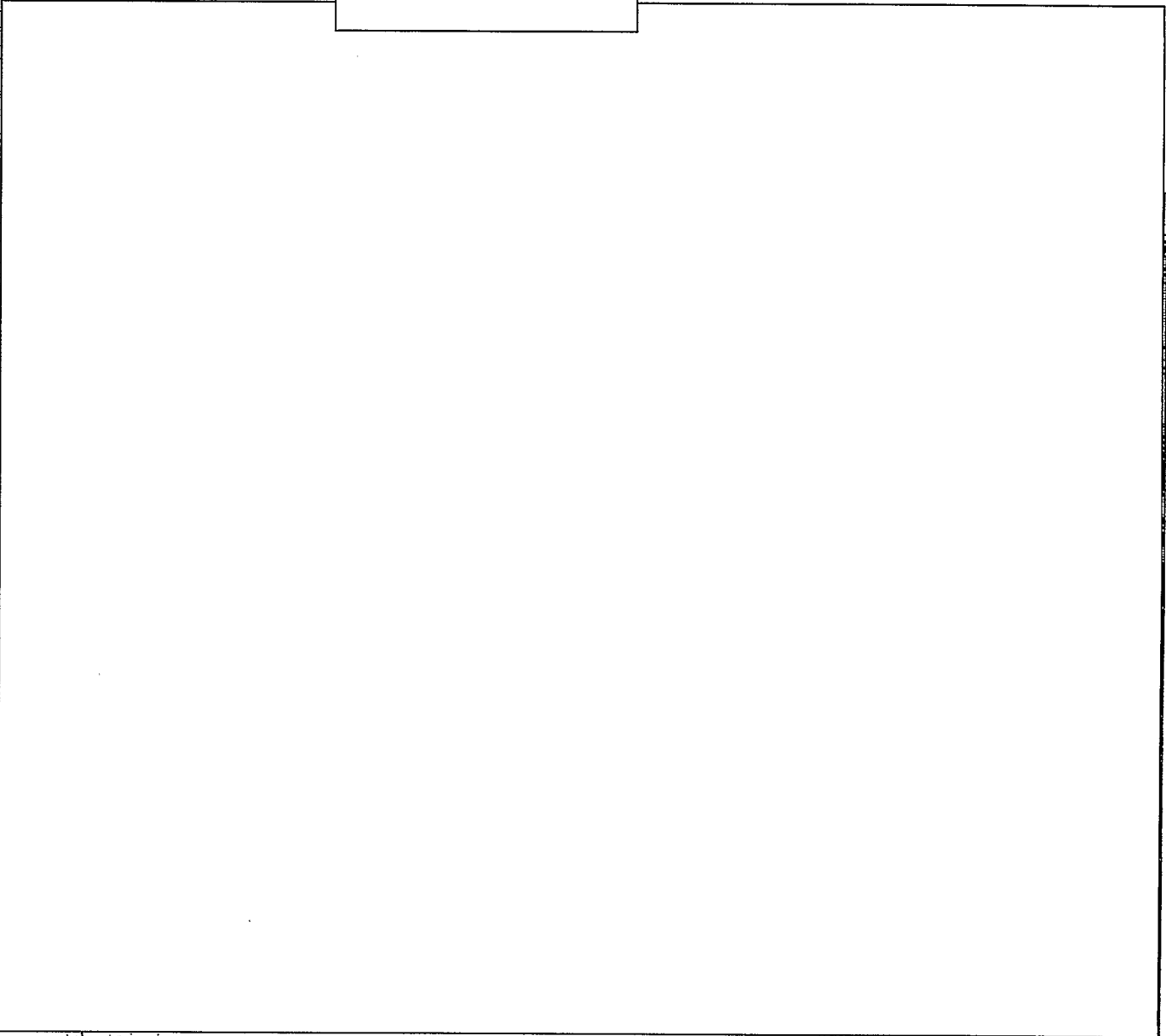
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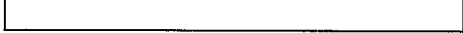
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