



## Colombian Terrorists

**Robert Charles, Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs**

Op-Ed

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As assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, as well as a long-time subscriber to National Geographic magazine, I was disturbed by Carlos Villalon's article "Cocaine Country" in July's issue. It glorified an unrepentant and brutal drug cartel with an established record of delivering death and destruction to families and communities in Colombia and via the drug trade to our schoolyards and front yards in North America.

Contrary to what Mr. Villalon represented in "Cocaine Country," the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) is anything but selfless, moral and compassionate.

The FARC has been designated by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. FARC leaders are on the list of persons designated by the Treasury Department under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Act that Americans are barred from doing business with FARC members. Some members of the FARC leadership are also under criminal indictment by the U.S. Department of Justice for drug-related activity.

From the moment National Geographic's editors saw FARC commander Fabian Ramirez's name and response to Mr. Villalon's request to document the "cocaine culture" in southern Colombia, they should have recognized the inherent bias and propaganda underpinning the story. Further, they should have known they could be seen as lending credibility to those who supply drugs that kill more than 21,000 Americans each year and fund terrorism in our hemisphere.

Moreover, the U.S. government believes "Fabian Ramirez" is actually Jose Benito Cabrera Cuevas. Mr. Cabrera is under indictment in Colombia and, in May 2003, was designated by the president of the United States as a significant foreign narcotics trafficker.

If these were not red flags for the editors, Mr. Villalon's portrayal of the FARC as some sort of benevolent overseer of a company town should have been. Since when is a long history of incalculable evil (bombings, murder, narcotics trafficking, kidnapping, extortion) offset by small, cynical and occasional acts of benevolence? Villains throughout history have engaged in similar "patronage." No less, the FARC.

Overwhelming evidence of FARC terror exists on many levels.

For example, the FARC celebrated the 40th anniversary of its insurgency by setting off a series of bombs across Colombia that killed 13 people and wounded more than a 100. Recently, the FARC massacred more than 30 farmers in a peasant community in a battle over lucrative coca turf near the border of Venezuela. In May 2002, a mortar round fired by FARC guerrillas landed on a church in northwest Colombia, killing 119 people. The FARC is also suspected of being behind the 2003 El Nogal nightclub bombing in Bogota that claimed 36 lives and wounded 160, as well as grenade attacks on two Bogota bars that wounded 72, including four Americans.

The FARC increasingly engages in kidnapping for ransom, the proceeds of which, together with those from other sources, help fund its terrorist activities. The FARC also has attempted to use hostages as bargaining tools to negotiate freedom for jailed traffickers and terrorists. Among its current high-profile "prisoners" are former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three American citizens: Marc Gonsalves, Keith Stansell and Thomas Howes.

Inexplicably, there was little mention of this in "Cocaine Country." Equally disturbing are the number of other material facts excluded by Mr. Villalon.

For example, the Caqueta region, where Mr. Villalon researched "Cocaine Country," was under FARC control from 1999 through 2002, until the Demilitarized Zone was dismantled - and ostensibly after that - until this past spring. And while rural development has been a challenge for the Colombian government, the FARC made it as difficult as possible through extortion and coercion of local officials and citizens alike. Moreover, I submit that because the FARC forces people in the regions it controls to grow and process coca, it is the FARC that has created a world where, as Mr. Villalon wrote, "people break the law to survive."

The real story in the Caqueta region was the story of people terrorized and controlled through the threat of terror. It is a compelling tale of creeping and cruel evil that rivals some of the worst the world has seen. It is also a story that was impossible to miss - unless you simply closed your eyes to it.

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