

LEGENDARY DRUG FIGHTING
GENERAL

HON. BENJAMIN A. GILMAN

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, May 4, 2000

Mr. GILMAN. Mr. Speaker, the Los Angeles Times in a front page story of Wednesday May 3, 2000 profiled the legendary drug fighting General, and our good friend General Rosso Jose Serrano of the Colombian National Police (CNP), America's long, courageous ally in our war on drugs.

The LA Times informative article outlines General Serrano's fight against the drug cartels in Colombia and how he brought down both the powerful and violent Cali and Medellin drug cartels in his nation and fought successfully to rid the CNP of corruption, and develop a record of respect for human right at the same time. General Serrano is a worldwide legend in the fight against illicit drugs in Colombia, a leading drug producing nation in the world today.

Most recently through two successful Operation Millenniums with our own DEA, General Serrano has continued the struggle of bringing the drug kingpins to justice and helping stem the flow of illicit drugs into our nation. On the eradication front with 6 new high performance Black Hawk utility helicopters to help eradicate opium poppy in the high Andes of Colombia the CNP under General Serrano's courageous leadership is making great strides in eliminating the source of the heroin flooding our nation. Since the first of the year the CNP with this new capacity have eradicated more than 3000 hectares of opium, source for more than 2½ tons of heroin that could have entered our nation.

Mr. Speaker, I ask that the Los Angeles Times article be printed here in its entirety so that my colleagues and our fellow Americans could learn more about the accomplishments of a cop's cop and America's good friend and ally.

[From the Los Angeles Times, May 3, 2000]

TO COLOMBIANS, HE IS THE WAR ON DRUGS

(By Juanita Darling)

GUAYMARAL AIR BASE, Colombia—Dressed in a pale blue sport coat instead of his usual olive green uniform, Gen. Rosso Jose Serrano, Colombia's top police officer, stepped out of his helicopter a few yards from the hangar where three U.S.—donated Black Hawks were undergoing the manufacturer's final inspection.

They were the last of six helicopters promised in 1998, when the Colombian National Police became the first law enforcement agency in the world to fly the military helicopters. Serrano was here to thank the U.S. congressional aides who had delivered them.

He was especially grateful because, as the helicopters were flying here, two more Black Hawks were pledged to police as part of a \$1.3-billion aid package before Congress to help fight drugs in Colombia.

For the general's congressional supporters, as for many people in the United States and Colombia, Serrano and the police are this nation's fight against drugs.

Here, polls consistently rank the gray-haired general as the nation's most popular public figure. Serrano kept U.S. anti-drug money flowing in ever greater quantities even after Colombia's previous president had his U.S. visa revoked because of suspected

ties to narcotics traffickers, and even while a horrendous human rights record prevented the army from receiving aid.

At a time when U.S. officials trusted no one else in Colombia, Serrano collaborated with the Drug Enforcement Administration to break up the Cali cartel, then the world's most powerful cocaine syndicate.

But now, thanks in part to the effectiveness of the police, the nature of the drug war in Colombia is changing. The fight has spread from the cities to the countryside. The big cartels have atomized into smaller, more flexible networks that are believed to be run largely from Mexico and Miami.

The success of eradication programs in Bolivia and Peru has forced traffickers to move production of coca—the plant used to make cocaine—into the Colombian jungles. That brings the traffickers into partnerships with the brutal, heavily armed leftist rebels and right-wing counterinsurgents who have been fighting the Colombian government and each other for 36 years.

Police, even with Black Hawks, do not have the equipment or training to fight a drug war that is blurring into a guerrilla war. The proposed U.S. aid package, which emphasizes military hardware for the armed forces, reflects those changes, as well as U.S. confidence in Colombia's current president, Andres Pastrana.

Serrano and the police are no longer the only representatives of their country's fight against drugs. At age 57, the general must guide the police into a new role of cooperation with the armed forces and explain that role to his supporters on Capitol Hill, who fear that he is being discarded.

"Now we have to operate more on an international level, to share more information and teach others from our experience," Serrano said during an interview on his way to the airport and an anti-narcotics seminar in Argentina. In the same week, he had already met with the congressional aides, visited a remote village where guerrillas had killed 21 police officers, attended their funerals and cut the chains of a young kidnapping victim after police rescued her.

Serrano's ability to anticipate change and respond has allowed him to survive four defense ministers and two presidents during his more than five years as police director. That's impressive for a kid from the little town of Velez who admits that he joined the police at age 17 because he liked the uniform.

"Serrano is more than a great policeman," said Myles Frechette, former U.S. ambassador to Colombia. "He also has a natural political instinct and he is patriotic."

Serrano has demonstrated those qualities by walking a tightrope held on one end by his friends in the U.S. government and on the other by sometimes jealous Colombian politicians. The only safety net is his tremendous popularity.

In his 1999 autobiography, "Checkmate," Serrano writes that he has no idea why former President Ernesto Samper chose him for director in 1994, skipping over half a dozen more senior officers. He was not Samper's first choice, or even his second, according to sources close to the decision-making.

However, those sources said, U.S. officials made it clear that anti-narcotics aid hinged on Serrano's heading the police. Convinced that Samper's 1994 presidential campaign had accepted \$6 million from drug traffickers, the Americans dealt directly with Serrano, ignoring the president and even revoking his U.S. visa.

Their anger with Samper overshadowed what Serrano said is the police chief's greatest triumph: a two-year effort, ended in 1996, to capture leaders of the Cali cartel. Even

then, the United States refused to certify Colombia as a fully cooperative partner in the war against drugs.

Nevertheless, anti-narcotics aid to Colombia—mainly for the police—kept growing, from \$85.6 million in 1997 to \$289 million last year. And Serrano's popularity grew with it.

When he visited an army base in Tolemaida last year with the military high command, soldiers politely stepped past the defense minister and armed forces commander to shake hands with the top cop. After lunch, the kitchen staff shyly emerged to ask Serrano to pose for a picture with them.

"It is difficult to provide him with security because people rush toward him to touch him, to take a picture of him," said Capt. Herman Bustamante, his chief of security and the son of his close friend Herman Bustamante.

Serrano's approval ratings come in close to 94% in most recent surveys—which paradoxically, also show that Colombians' biggest worry is safety in a country that averages eight kidnappings a day.

"Everybody loves Gen. Serrano, but nobody loves the police," said Maria Victoria Llorente, a crime researcher at the prestigious Los Andes University. "It's something I cannot understand."

Her only explanation is that Colombians do not blame Serrano for the lack of public safety because common crime cannot be separated from the violence of this country's long-standing guerrilla war and drug trafficking.

Serrano said he worries about public safety: "I wish that there were no narcotics and that we could concentrate on crime."

Colombians appear to accept that reasoning and to respect Serrano's reputation in a nation crippled by corruption. "The police are riding on the coattails of his prestige," Llorente said. "It is a cult of personality."

And Serrano undeniably has a magnetic personality.

"Everyone sees him as their father," said Jorge Serrano, 23, the youngest of his three children. "He looks like a teddy bear."

He is open about his humble origins as the son of a seamstress and a meat salesman. Frechette recalled that Serrano asked him to arrange for a used firetruck to be delivered to Velez, about 100 miles north of the capital, Bogota, through a U.S. program that allows the U.S. military to transport the trucks when there is space on ships or planes.

Serrano is an avid tennis player, known for his ability to put a spin on a ball so that it drops just past the net. A well-publicized tennis game was used to hush rumors of a rift between Serrano and Pastrana last year. "The president chooses him as his doubles partner," said the younger Bustamante. "It's better to have him on your side."

The general is never more human than at the all-too-frequent funerals for officers who have died in the line of duty. Serrano visits the murder scene, often a remote village that taken with the officers to raise their spirits. He always serves as a pallbearer.

"He takes the loss of his boys seriously," said a European diplomat. Because the government provides pensions only for the widows and orphans of officers who have more than 15 years of service, Serrano's wife, Hilde, runs a private charity to benefit other families.

"He never abandons a subordinate in trouble, neither those who have been attacked in battle or those who have faced accusations," said Gen. Luis Enrique Montengro, his second in command. "People are confident that if they are loyal to him, he will be loyal to them."

The most public example of that loyalty has been Serrano's staunch defense of Maj.

Oscar Pimienta, a hero of the Cali cartel capture who was accused last May of skimming U.S. aid. American officials are still trying to work out how to conduct an audit that will not compromise police security.

When Judge Diego Coley ruled that there was enough evidence to hold Pimienta for trial, he said, he was called to Serrano's office. He surreptitiously recorded the upbraiding that Serrano gave him, accusing the judge of trying to destroy a brilliant police career and besmirch Serrano's reputation.

Coley filed a complaint with the attorney general over Serrano's conduct. When newspapers published the story, radio talk show hosts immediately sprang to Serrano's defense. Callers to the shows disparaged Coley.

"Instead of hurting Serrano, this incident has increased his popularity," Coley said. "People think, 'Yes, the general should put that judge in his place.'"

Coley, who was transferred a few days after the ruling, has become disillusioned. "I met him when he was a colonel and he was friendly. Now he is arrogant—all he cares about is his image."

Serrano does not discuss the incident, but his supporters say he has good reason to suspect attempts to undermine his reputation. In the midst of their operations against the Cali cartel, Montenegro recalled, intelligence agents discovered that drug traffickers had set up bank accounts in the Cayman Islands in the names of Serrano and Montenegro in an attempt to make it appear that the police officials had taken bribes.

Further, corruption is a sensitive issue for Serrano, who has dismissed more than 6,500 officers suspected of ineffectiveness or dishonesty. The campaign began five years ago, when half the Cali force was on the drug traffickers' payroll.

"Dishonesty makes him angry," Herman Bustamante said. "He takes drastic measures when corruption is involved."

Serrano's anti-corruption campaign has made him enemies among the dismissed officers, who Bustamante said are as much a threat to the general and his family as the criminals he has captured. As a result, the Serranos must travel with escorts at all times.

All have apartments in the same building—the general's is the penthouse—with police security in the lobby and a roadblock at the end of the street. They have lived this way for a more than a decade.

"Our life changed," Jorge Serrano said. "I had few friends—only those who dared to be my friends. I had to go everywhere in an armored car. With five bodyguards around all the time, a person feels inhibited."

Even so, they do not feel safe. Jorge Serrano and his family recently joined his brother and sister in exile.

"We understood that we had to make sacrifices," said the younger Serrano during an interview on his last day in Colombia. "All that he had done for the country is reflected in us. He is a dedicated person who believes that the more he sacrifices, the harder he works, the better things will turn out."

THE DANGERS IN THE CAUCASUS

HON. BILL McCOLLUM

OF FLORIDA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, May 4, 2000

Mr. McCOLLUM. Mr. Speaker, rarely has the situation in a strategically crucial area been so tenuous and fraught with dangers as the situation in the Caucasus presently is. These dynamics are of immense importance

for the United States because the Caucasus is the gateway to "the Persian Gulf of the 21st Century"—the energy resources of the Caspian Sea Basin and Central Asia. As well, the Caucasus constitutes the natural barrier between Asia Minor and Russia—an area increasingly contested by a close ally, Turkey, and a global power, Russia. Both Turkey and Russia are reclaiming traditional spheres of influence and, in the process, reviving their historic conflict.

At the core of the brewing crisis in the Caucasus are two increasingly conflicting dynamics that are on a collision course. On the one hand, there is an intensified effort, spearheaded by the Clinton Administration, to find a negotiated political solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in order to clear the way to an oil pipeline across the Caucasus. While no negotiated solution is in sight, the U.S. involvement has already created expectations for panaceas and economic boom among all local powers. Now that these expectations are not materializing, there is a rebounding spread of radicalism and militancy—from Armenia (where political violence is on the increase) to Azerbaijan and Georgia, where military activities reinforce the hardening of political positions. On the other hand, there looms an escalation in and beyond Chechnya. Spearheaded by Islamist forces, including terrorists from several Middle Eastern countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the new cycle of fighting is expected to spread into the entire region for geo-strategic reasons. The surge of Islamist terrorism is likely to serve as a catalyst for the eruption of the tension and acrimony building throughout the entire Caucasus.

Having just returned from a trip to Russia, including Chechnya, German BND Chief August Hanning reported to the Bundestag that the situation in the Caucasus has "escalated dangerously". Once the weather improves in the early Summer, the fighting in Chechnya will not only escalate, but also spread to the fringes of the Russian Federation and to the rest of the Caucasus. Hanning is most alarmed by these prospects because the Islamist forces in Chechnya are supported and guided by "the Afghan Taliban and globally operating terrorist bin Laden as well as by groups of Islamist mercenaries." Through these channels, Hanning found out, the Chechen forces have been provided with large quantities of modern weapons including "Stinger-type" anti-aircraft missiles. Hanning warned the Bundestag of the dire strategic and economic ramifications for the West if the Chechnya war spread to Georgia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and the rest of the Caucasus.

Russian experts also warn that the Mujahedin and other Islamist forces in Chechnya are preparing for a major escalation and expansion in the fighting. Oleg Odnokolenko of the Moscow newspaper Segodnya is right in calling the forthcoming escalation "the start of a fundamentally new war—a fullscale third Chechen war." As was the case with the previous Chechen wars, the Islamist leadership and the local senior commanders—particularly Shamil Basayev and Khattab—consider terrorist strikes at the heart of Russia and, should the need arise, also the West their winning weapon. Their most recent preparations suggest an intent to this time go way beyond another round of Moscow bombing.

However, the declared major objective of the Chechen Islamists is the incitement of a

regional flare-up. Ali Ulukhaye, Chechnya's ambassador to Baku, recently stressed the regional context of the unfolding was against Russia. Ulukhaye stated that "Chechens will not be satisfied with the liberation of their own territory." Only a regional solution is a viable solution for the Chechen Islamist leadership. Ulukhaye explained that "the freedom of Chechens is impossible until all the Caucasian people are liberated. We will drive the occupation army up to the Don. We should liberate the territory from the Don to the Volga, from sea to sea [from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea] and up to Iran and Turkey from Russia and set up a confederative Caucasian state. If we are liberated from the empire, the Abkhazian, Ossetian and Nagornyy-Nagornyy-Karabakh conflicts will be resolved by themselves peacefully." Ulukhaye highlighted the urgent imperative to resolve the latter conflict because "Nagornyy-Karabakh always was an inalienable part of Azerbaijan." According to Ulukhaye, the Chechen Islamist leadership and its allies have already earned the right to determine the fate of all other nations and peoples in the Caucasus. "Today, Chechens carry the burden of the Caucasus Russian war on their shoulders," he noted. However, the war must be expanded to other fronts as well in order to be able to defeat Russia. "If the Caucasian peoples divide this burden equally, then it will be easy to deal with Moscow. The matter is that if, God forbid, Chechens are defeated, Georgia and Azerbaijan will be the Kremlin's next target," Ulukhaye explained. "The Caucasian peoples have no possibility of resolving their problems independently," and therefore must unite behind the Chechen Islamist leaders in order to take on Russia.

Among these crisis points, Nagorno-Karabakh is uniquely volatile because of internal pressures in Baku. The growing militancy in Azerbaijan not only closely fit Ulukhaye's message and logic, but is also driven by indigenous strategic and economic interests. To be economically viable, the anticipated oil and gas pipelines will have to cross areas currently held by the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. Since late March, there have been strong indications that Baku is contemplating the resumption of hostilities against both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. For example, the military elite of Azerbaijan (both on active service and recently retired) led by General Zaur Rzayev, and former Defense Minister Tacaddin Mehdiyev just met and briefed President Haidar Aliyev about the urgent imperative to resolve Nagorno-Karabakh issue by force. The delegation argued that everyday that passes increases the world's acceptance of the "Nagorno-Karabakh entity", thus reducing the likelihood that Azerbaijan will be able to recover this important region. The delegation stated that "the military are confident that it is possible to resolve the conflict and liberate the land only in a military way." Indeed, since late March, there has been a worrisome escalation in the military clashes along the Azeri-Karabakh cease-fire line. These clashes should be considered probing of the Armenian defense lines and readiness by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces.

This threat is most dangerous because interested third parties can flare-up the southern Caucasus on their own. Given the growing