TAGS: PTER, PGOV, PINS, PINR, CO, PM
SUBJECT: COLOMBIAN ARMY REPORTEDLY CAPTURES 23 PARAMILITARIES
(U) CLASSIFIED BY POL/ECONOFF PEG WILLINGHAM. REASON 1.5(D).

1. (C) ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS, OVER 100 MEMBERS OF THE ARMY’S 17TH BRIGADE (HEADQUARTERED IN CAREPA, ANTIOQUIA DEPARTMENT, IN THE URABA AREA) CAPTURED 23 SUSPECTED PARAMILITARIES (INCLUDING TWO PANAMANIAN CITIZENS) FEBRUARY 7 IN CHOCO DEPARTMENT NEAR THE PANAMANIAN BORDER. HOWEVER, AS IT APPEARS THAT THE MEN VOLUNTARILY TURNED THEMSELVES IN TO THE MILITARY, PERHAPS BECAUSE THEY WERE SHORT ON AMMUNITION AND FAR FROM THEIR HOME BASE.

THE ARMY ALSO SEIZED 20 AK-47 RIFLES, ONE GALIL RIFLE, ONE R-15 RIFLE, A GRENADE LAUNCHER AND AMMUNITION. THE ENCOUNTER TOOK PLACE WHILE THE ARMY WAS CLASHING WITH A REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES OF COLOMBIA (FARC) FRONT, WHICH THE PARAMILITARY GROUP WAS ALSO BATTLING. THE COMMANDER OF THE 17TH BRIGADE, BRIGADIER GENERAL ORLANDO CARRENO, CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03

BOGOTA 01249 0922342
TOLD THE PRESS THAT HE COULD NOT CONFIRM IF THE MEN WERE UNDER THE COMMAND OF PARAMILITARY LEADER CARLOS CASTANO, BUT THEY WERE DEFINITELY "AUTODEFENSAS." CARRENO ALSO SAID THAT WHILE IT WAS STILL UNCLEAR IF THERE IS A JOINT PANAMANIAN-COLOMBIAN PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATION, THE CAPTURED GROUP HAD BEEN OPERATING ALONG THE BORDER. THE 23 MEN (WHOSE NAMES WERE PUBLISHED IN BOGOTA DAILY "EL ESPECTADOR" FEBRUARY 9) WERE TURNED OVER TO PROSECUTORS FEBRUARY 8.

2. (C) COMMENT: WE ARE ENCOURAGED BY THIS DEVELOPMENT BUT WE ARE NOT YET SURE HOW TO INTERPRET IT. UNTIL RECENTLY, THE MILITARY HAS HAD LITTLE SUCCESS IN CAPTURING PARAMILITARIES. THIS INCIDENT MAY REFLECT NEW PRIORITIES IN THE WAKE OF THE GOC’S DECEMBER ANNOUNCEMENT OF A MAJOR CRACKDOWN ON PARAMILITARIES, AS WELL AS MILITARY FORCES COMMANDER GENERAL BONETT’S MESSAGE TO HIS TROOPS THAT "THE ENEMY OF YOUR ENEMY IS NOT YOUR FRIEND." THE 17TH BRIGADE HAS A NEW COMMANDER, WHICH MAY ALSO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO AN INCREASED SURGE IN ANTI-PARAMILITARY ACTIVITY. THE PREVIOUS COMMANDER, BRIGADIER GENERAL RITO ALEJO DEL RIO, NOW THE HEAD OF THE 13TH BRIGADE IN BOGOTA, WAS RUMORED TO HAVE BEEN QUITE TOLERANT OF PARAMILITARY ACTIVITY IN URABA. THE WELL-PUBLICIZED CAPTURE OF THESE PARAMILITARIES COMES ON THE EVE OF THE VISIT TO WASHINGTON BY GENERAL BONETT, AND GIVES HIM SOMETHING POSITIVE TO REPORT TO USG INTERLOCUTORS CONCERNED ABOUT PARAMILITARISM.

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