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SUBJECT: VISIT TO CUCUTA, ON COLOMBIAN-VENEZUELAN BORDER

REFS: A) BOGOTA 8278  B) BOGOTA 7247  C) BOGOTA 5721
D) BOGOTA 7837  E) BOGOTA 6585

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR CURTIS W. KAMMAN. REASONS 1.5 (B6).

SUMMARY

1. (C) POLOFF VISITED CUCUTA, ON THE COLOMBIAN-VENEZUELAN

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: NORMAN M BOUTON
CLASSIFICATION: CONFIDENTIAL REASON: 1.4(D)
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BORDER, NOVEMBER 4-5. INSECURITY IN THE ADJACENT CATATUMBO REGION, WHERE GUERRILLAS AND PARAMILITARIES VIE FOR CONTROL OF THE LUCRATIVE COCA TRADE, HAS SPILLED OVER INTO THIS PREVIOUSLY PEACEFUL TRADING CENTER. GUERRILLA AND PARAMILITARY URBAN MILITIAS ARE NOW PRESENT IN LARGE NUMBERS IN CUCUTA, AS ARE AN UNDETERMINED NUMBER OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDP'S). SMUGGLING OF GASOLINE, COUNTERFEIT BRAND NAME CLOTHING, DRUGS, AND GUNS IS RAMPANT ON THIS POROUS BORDER. OVERWHELMED COLOMBIAN AUTHORITIES HAVE THROWN UP THEIR HANDS IN RESPONSE. COOPERATION WITH VENEZUELAN BORDER AUTHORITIES, IN SO FAR AS IT EXISTS, APPEARS INEFFECTUAL. RECESSIONS IN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA HAVE SLOWED ONCE-THRIVING LICIT BORDER TRADE. CITING TOO FEW RESOURCES FOR TOO MANY MISSIONS, THE LOCAL ARMY UNIT REFUSES TO COMBAT AREA PARAMILITARIES. ACCUSATIONS OF LOCAL LEADERS' ALLEGED INVOLVEMENT WITH GUERRILLAS OR PARAMILITARIES MAY BE THE PRODUCT OF DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS. END SUMMARY.

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(U) VISIT TO CUCUTA - DAYS OF "GIVE ME TWO!" ARE OVER

2. (U) HUMAN RIGHTS/LABOFF VISITTED COLOMBIA'S SIXTH LARGEST CITY, CUCUTA (CAPITAL OF NORTE DE SANTANDER DEPARTMENT, POP. 750,000), ON THE VENEZUELAN BORDER NOVEMBER 4-5. THE PACE OF TRADE IN THIS BUSTLING BORDER CITY HAS SLOWED, DUE TO RECESSIONS IN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA. ACTING MAYOR CESAR EDUARDO CAMARGO TOLD POLOFF THAT, IN THE 1970'S AND EARLY 1980'S, OIL-RICH VENEZUELAN CROSS THE BORDER BY THE THOUSANDS, TAKING ADVANTAGE OF CONSUMER GOODS PRICES SO LOW (RELATIVE TO VENEZUELAN PRICES) THAT "GIVE ME TWO!" ("DAME DOS!") BECAME THE CITY'S INFORMAL SLUGAN. (NOTE: ELECTED MAYOR JOSE ANTONIO JELVIS IS CURRENTLY UNDER HOUSE ARREST FOR ALLEGED CORRUPTION. END NOTE.) MANY CUCUTA RESIDENTS CONTINUE TO COMMUTE DAILY TO VENEZUELAN TEXTILES AND BICYCLE FACTORIES, A HABIT DEVELOPED WHEN VENEZUELAN WAGES WERE MARKEDLY HIGHER. CAMARGO LAMENTED THAT THE "GIVE ME TWO!" DAYS ARE OVER, AND CUCUTA, HE CLAIMED, IS UNREADY TO MAKE NEEEDED TRANSITIONS. THE CITY HAS TRADITIONALLY LIVED ON BORDER TRADE, AND PRODUCES VIRTUALLY NOTHING. MERCHANTS WHO GREW FAT ON EASY SALES HAVE YET TO START MARKETING THEIR WARES AGGRESSIVELY.

3. (U) CUCUTA CUSTOMS (DIAN) DIRECTOR EDGAR ALVARADO TOLD POLOFF THAT, FROM JANUARY TO OCTOBER OF 1999, USD 279 MILLION IN LICIT IMPORTS HAD CROSSED ONE OF CUCUTA'S THREE BRIDGES IN APPROXIMATELY 16,000 VEHICLES. PRINCIPAL IMPORTS ARE PLASTICS, TIRES, ALUMINUM, PAPER, AND AGRICULTURAL GOODS, PARTICULARLY SOY. LICIT COLOMBIAN EXPORTS VALUED BY CUSTOMS AT USD 460 MILLION DEPARTED CUCUTA IN, APPROXIMATELY 24,000 VEHICLES DURING THE SAME PERIOD, AND INCLUDED LEATHER GOODS, CLOTHING, SUGAR CANE, POTATOES, AND OTHER AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS. THE GOV NO LONGER

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ALLOWS COLOMBIAN TRUCKS TO ENTER ITS TERRITORY, SO IMPORTS ARE
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NOW OFF-LOADED ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER AND REPAVED FOR
SHIPMENT INTO EACH COUNTRY'S INTERIOR. CUSTOMS HAS SO FAR DURING
THE YEAR SEIZED USD 1.5 MILLION IN CONTRABAND, ALVARADO SAID.
Topping the list are toothpaste, gasoline, cleaning products,
stolen cars and car parts, and counterfeit name brand clothing.

(C) SMUGGLING OUT OF CONTROL

4. (U) ALTHOUGH LICIT TRADE HAS SLOWED, ALVARADO SAID, SMUGGLING
IS BOOMING. AT TWO OF THE THREE BRIDGES, POLOFF OBSERVED
SMUGGLERS ON BICYCLES MOVING IN BOTH DIRECTIONS, BEARING
VENEZUELAN GASOLINE (WHICH IS ALMOST TWO THIRDS CHEAPER THAN
COLOMBIAN GASOLINE), TOYS, TRAYS, PAPER CUPS, AND CLOTHING.
BEFORE PASSING THROUGH CUSTOMS ON EITHER SIDE OF THE BRIDGES, THE
CYCLING SMUGGLERS VEERED OFF INTO ADJACENT NEIGHBORHOODS WHICH
THEY CONTROL.

5. (SBU) ASKED WHY CYCLING SMUGGLERS WERE NOT STOPPED, ALVARADO
RESPONDED THAT THE VALUE OF THE MERCHANDISE THEY CARRIED WAS
BELOW THE LEGAL THRESHOLD AT WHICH THE SMUGGLER COULD BE
PUNISHER. FURTHERMORE, HE SAID, IF THE STATE BEGAN ENFORCING
CUSTOMS REGULATIONS, SMUGGLERS WOULD MERELY LEAVE CUCUTA'S THREE
BRIDGES IN FAVOR OF 60 PATHS WHICH CROSS THE SHALLOW TACHIRA
RIVER, WHICH FORMS THE BORDER. THE 45 POLICE DRAFTED TO
ASSIST CUCUTA CUSTOMS WERE INCAPABLE OF COVERING THE BRIDGES
AND THE PATHS. POLOFF OBSERVED THE COMMANDING LIEUTENANT OF THIS
POLICE UNIT AS HE STOPPED A TRUCK CARRYING CONTRABAND. WHEN HE
OPENED A BOX CONTAINING COUNTERFEIT LEVI'S JEANS, THE DRIVER
SHOVED HIM. SUDDENLY, 25-30 YOUNG MEN, ARMED WITH BOTTLES AND
ROCKS, APPEARED FROM THE ADJACENT SMUGGLERS' NEIGHBORHOOD.
PROHIBITED BY POLICE REGULATIONS FROM FIRING UNLESS FIRED UPON,
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THE LIEUTENANT AND HIS THREE MEN HAD LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO
WITHDRAW. THE TRUCK WAS ORDERED TO RETURN TO COLOMBIA, LIKELY TO
CROSS THE BRIDGE A FEW HOURS LATER WITH ITS ILLICIT CARGO.

(C) GUNS AND DRUGS ALMOST NEVER SEIZED

5. (C) THE LIEUTENANT AND ALVARADO ASSURED POLOFF THAT GUNS AND
DRUGS WERE REGULARLY SMUGGLED ACROSS THE BORDER, BUT REPORTED
THAT AUTHORITIES VIRTUALLY NEVER CAPTURE ANY. THEY SPECULATED
THAT SUCH SMUGGLING IS CONDUCTED IN RURAL SECTIONS OF NORTE DE
SANTANDER'S LONG, MOSTLY UNGUARDED BORDER. DURING A NOVEMBER 5
MEETING WITH POLOFF,"
asserted that the Venezuelan National Guard was complicit in smuggling weapons to guerrillas in the Catatumbo region (see below).

7. (SBU) Cucuta is two hours south by land from Tibu, gateway to the conflictive Catatumbo and Sierra de Tibu regions of Norte de Santander, which border Venezuela. The ELN has historically been the dominant illegal armed actor in the area and in Norte de Santander generally. The ELN maintains eight fronts in Norte de Santander, versus two or three FARC fronts and two EPL fronts. Paramilitaries of the northern block of Carlos Castano's AUC (United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia), under the command of "Camilo," announced their challenge to guerrillas' dominance of this lucrative coca growing area May 29 with a massacre in La Gabarra town, at the northern end of Catatumbo region (refs A, B, and C). Since, there have been a total of 16 massacres (14 confidential).

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Reportedly committed by paramilitaries, and two by guerrillas), accompanied by more than 50 selective, individual killings.

8. (C) According to the paramilitaries carefully targetted area guerrillas and guerrilla supporters, often with the help of guerrilla defectors. The final body count may be much higher than the 150-plus originally reported by press, as area residents continue to find unmarked graves, and may not have noticed the disappearance of transitory coca pickers, prostitutes, and guerrillas. Said the massacres stopped at the end of August. Asked if the return of (relative) peace was due to the introduction of the army's 10th counter-guerrilla battalion into the region (Ref A), said he thought not. Rather, he attributed it to the paramilitaries' and guerrillas' realization that it is in the interest of neither side to provoke the flight of area coca pickers. Paramilitaries and guerrillas are now vying for their services.

9. (C) Told Poloff that the ELN had been in command of the Catatumbo and Sierra de Tibu regions until the May entry of "Camilo's" paramilitaries, tolerating the lesser FARC and EPL presence. Estimated that "60,000 hectares of coca" are grown in the area. (Note: The current GOC estimate is 3,700 hectares of coca cultivation in all of Norte de Santander department. End note.) The EPL, FARC, and paramilitaries were all making drugs profits, he said. According to the local ELN's involvement in drugs is much less; rather, the ELN...

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MAKES ITS MONEY FROM KIDNAPPING AND EXTORTING COAL MINES (USD 2/TON) TO THE SOUTH. SAID THE DAS HAD CAPTURED PROCESSED COCAINE EN ROUTE FROM LA CARARRA LABS TO CUCUTA ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS.

(C) ARMY WILL NOT FIGHT PARAMILITARIES, FOR NOW

10. (C) ASKED IF HIS TROOPS WERE COMBATING PARAMILITARIES, SAID NO. "LOOK, I HAVE 100 KILOMETERS OF OIL PIPELINE TO PROTECT, AS WELL AS SEVERAL BRIDGES AND THE NATIONAL POLICE... PLUS, THERE ARE GUERRILLAS TO FIGHT... IF YOU HAVE SO MANY TASKS TO DO WITH SO FEW RESOURCES, AND YOU'RE FACED WITH TWO ILLEGAL ARMED GROUPS, ONE OF WHICH (GUERRILLAS) IS SHOOTING AT YOU AND THE OTHER (PARAMILITARIES) IS SHOOTING AT THEM, YOU OBVIOUSLY FIGHT THE GUERRILLAS FIRST, THEN WORRY ABOUT PARAMILITARIES."

(C) ARMY FEELS ISOLATED

11. (C) TOLD POLOFF HE IS DISGUSTED WITH THE LACK OF LOCAL AND NATIONAL POPULAR BACKING FOR THE ARMY'S EFFORTS. "PEOPLE VIEW THE GUERRILLAS AS THE ARMY'S PROBLEM, NOT SOCIETY'S PROBLEM," HE SAID. WHEN HE DEPLOYED TROOPS TO BORDER AREAS TO INTERCEPT SMUGGLERS, SAID HE ENCOUNTERED "INTENSE PRESSURE, FROM THE GOVERNOR ON DOWN, TO STOP IT... EVERYBODY'S MAKING SOMETHING FROM CONTRABAND."
(U) G’S AND P’S IN CUCUTA

13. (C) ALL CUCUTA INTERLOCUTORS CONFIRMED THAT THE PARAMILITARY-GUERRILLA CONFLICT TO THE NORTH HAS SPILLED OVER INTO THEIR CITY. THE ELN BLEW UP THE LOCAL AIRPORT'S RADAR OCTOBER 31, TEMPORARILY BRINGING AIR SERVICE AFTER DARK TO A HALT.

OF FEDEGAN, THE NATIONAL RANCHERS' ASSOCIATION, EXPRESSED FRUSTRATION THAT HE COULD NOT SAFELY SPEND THE NIGHT AT HIS RANCH, JUST 10 MINUTES FROM TOWN. AND TWO OTHER RANCHERS DENOUNCED THE ELN'S MAY 3 CAR-BOMBSING OF FEDEGAN'S USD 5 MILLION REFRIGERATED WAREHOUSE AT CUCUTA, REPORTEDLY IN RETALIATION FOR FEDEGAN'S ALLEGED SUPPORT FOR PARAMILITARIES.

PERCENT OF THE POPULATION OF ATALAYA, ONE OF CUCUTA'S POOR NEIGHBORHOODS, WERE SUPPORTERS OR MEMBERS OF THE ELN'S URBAN MILITIAS. ATTRACTED BY THE GUERRILLA PRESENCE, AUC PARAMILITARIES ARE NOW ACTIVE IN CUCUTA. IN A NOVEMBER 4 INTERVIEW WITH A LOCAL NEWSPAPER, A CUCUTA URBAN PARAMILITARY SAID "DECENT PEOPLE NEED HAVE NO FEAR -- WE'RE HERE TO KILL CONFIDENTIAL"

PAGE 09 BOGOTA 10429 160211Z GUERRILLAS AND THEIR SUPPORTERS ONLY, AND WE TARGET THEM CAREFULLY." TOLD POLOFF THAT CUCUTA RESIDENTS HAD STOPPED WALKING THE STREETS AT NIGHT AND EXPRESSING POLITICAL OPINIONS FOR FEAR OF PARAMILITARY OR GUERRILLA ATTACK.

(U) VISIT TO IDP'S ENCAMPMENT

14. (SBU) POLOFF, ACCOMPANIED BY ISMAEL CAYCEDO OF THE CUCUTA OFFICE OF THE GOC'S "RED DE SOLIDARIDAD" (A SOCIAL WELFARE ORGANIZATION), VISITED THE CUCUTA STADIUM NOVEMBER 5, WHICH CURRENTLY HOUSES 92 INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDP’S). THE 92, CAYCEDO SAID, HAD BEEN AMONG 2,700 REFUGEES WHO HAD BEEN RETURNED TO COLOMBIA AFTER FIRST FLEEING TO VENEZUELA IN JUNE. ALL 92 WERE FROM LA PISTA ISLAND, IN THE RIO DE ORO, AND HAD FLED FOLLOWING PARAMILITARY MASSACRES (REFS D AND E). CAYCEDO SAID 526 OTHER FORMER INHABITANTS OF THE STADIUM HAD RETURNED TO THEIR HOMES OR HAD MOVED ON TO OTHER PARTS OF COLOMBIA. THOSE REMAINING, HE SAID, WERE DOING SO IN HOPES OF RECEIVING NGO OR FOREIGN GOVERNMENT HANDOUTS. THE IDP’S TOLD POLOFF, HOWEVER, THAT THEY WERE AFRAID TO RETURN HOME. THE RED DE SOLIDARIDAD CONTINUES TO PROVIDE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO THE IDP’S AT THE STADIUM, AND THEIR BASIC NEEDS ARE APPARENTLY BEING MET. LIVING CONDITIONS APPEARED TO BE HYGIENIC AND GENERALLY TOLERABLE.

COMMENTS

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15. (C) SEVERAL HARMFUL TRENDS ARE AT WORK IN CUCUTA. BOTH COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA ARE EXPERIENCING RECESSIONS. CUCUTA IS SENSITIVE TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS ON EITHER SIDE OF THE BORDER, AND IS THEREFORE SUFFERING THE EFFECTS OF BOTH RECESSIONS. SMUGGLING IS OUT OF CONTROL, AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES HAVE THROWUP

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THEIR HANDS IN RESPONSE. VIOLENCE FROM THE LAWLESS CATATUMBO AND SIERRA DE TIBU REGIONS HAS SPILLED OVER INTO CUCUTA. MANY CUCUTA RESIDENTS NO LONGER VENTURE INTO THE CITY'S STREETS AFTER DARK, FOR FEAR OF PARAMILITARIES, GUERRILLAS, AND COMMON CRIMINALS. THE IMPUNITY WITH WHICH LOCAL SMUGGLERS, GUERRILLAS, AND PARAMILITARIES OPERATE HAS PLACED THE RULE OF LAW ON THE DEFENSIVE. SOME RESIDENTS NOW APPEAR TO VIEW STATE SECURITY FORCES AS JUST ANOTHER PARTICIPANT IN REGIONAL VIOLENCE, RATHER THAN AUTHORITIES WHO ARE TO BE RESPECTED.

16. (C) RANCHERS AND EXPRESSED SEETHING FRUSTRATION ABOUT THE COURSE OF REGIONAL POLITICAL AND SECURITY EVENTS. THEY BELIEVE THAT AN EXPLOSIVE SITUATION EXISTS, AND THAT THE STATUS QUO CANNOT BE MAINTAINED. RUMORS THAT ARMY OFFICERS, POLICE OFFICERS, AND RANCHERS TOGETHER ARE ATTEMPTING TO CHANGE THE REGIONAL SECURITY BALANCE BY SUPPORTING PARAMILITARIES ARE, AT THIS POINT, ONLY RUMORS. WAS SURPRISINGLY FRANK WITH POLOFF ABOUT HIS INTENTION NOT TO FIGHT PARAMILITARIES. HE IS CONVINCED THAT DOING SO BEFORE THE GUERRILLAS ARE DEFEATED WOULD NOT MAKE MILITARY SENSE. EMBASSY DOES NOT KNOW WHETHER

ALLEGATIONS ARE TRUE. THE EXCHANGE OF ACCUSATIONS HOWEVER, INDICATES A HIGHLY CHARGED ATMOSPHERE IN WHICH DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS LIKELY PLAY A ROLE.

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