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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/12/09

TAGS: PTER, ECON, SNAR, PREL, ETRD, PHUM, ASEC, PREF, CO SUBJECT: VISIT TO CUCUTA, ON COLOMBIAN-VENEZUELAN BORDER

A) BOGOTA 8278 B) BOGOTA 7247 C) BOGOTA 5721 REFS:

D) BOGOTA 7837 E) BOGOTA 6585

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR CURTIS W. KAMMAN. REASONS 1.5 (B&D).

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) **DECLASSIFY AFTER: 12 NOV 2014**

DATE/CASE ID: 10 MAR 2006 200402327

UNCLASSIFIED

OIMCDWOOTLIED 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

- (U) HUMAN RIGHTS/LABOFF VISITED 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 VENEZUELANS CROSSED 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 SLOGAN. (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 NEEDED 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, FIRES, ALUMINUM, PAPER, AND AGRICULTURAL GOODS, PARTICULARLY SOY. LICIT COLOMBIAN EXPORTS VALUED BY CUSTOMS AT USD 480 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

ALLOWS COLOMBIAN TRUCKS TO ENTER ITS TERRITORY, SO IMPORTS ARE CONFIDENTIAL

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NOW OFF-LOADED ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER AND REPACKED 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 PUNISHED. 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 TACHTRA RIVER, WHICH FORMS THE BORDER. THE 45 POLICE DRAFTEES ASSIGNED 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
TRUGS WERE REGULARLY SMUGGLED ACROSS THE BORDER BUT DEPONTED
THAT AUTHORITIES VIRTUALLY NEVER CAPTURE ANY. THEY SPECULATED
THAT SUCH SMUGGLING IS CONDUCTED IN RURAL SECTIONS OF NORTH DE
SANTANDER'S LONG, MOSTLY UNGUARDED BORDER DURING A NOVEMBER 5
EETING WITH POLOFF,
· -

B1

DEPARTMENT. END NOTE.) THE EPL, FARC, AND PARAMILITARIES WERE

LOCAL ELN'S INVOLVEMENT IN DRUGS IS MUCH LESS; RATHER, THE ELN

ALL MAKING DRUGS PROFITS, HE SAID. ACCORDING TO

B1

MAKES ITS MONEY FROM KIDNAPING AND EXTORTING COAL MINES (USD 2/TON) TO THE SOUTH. SAID THE DAS HAD CAPTURED PROCESSED COCAINE EN ROUTE FROM LA GABARRA LABS TO CUCUTA ON SEVERAL CONFIDENTIAL	B1
PAGE 07 BOGOTA 10429 160211Z OCCASIONS.	
(C) ARMY WILL NOT FIGHT PARAMILITARIES, FOR NOW	
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."	Bl
(C) ARMY FEELS ISOLATED	
TOLD POLOFF HE IS DISGUSTED WITH THE LACK OF COCAL AND NATIONAL POPULAR BACKING FOR THE ARMY'S EFFORTS. PEOPLE VIEW THE GUERRILLAS AS THE ARMY'S PROBLEM, NOT SOCIETY'S	B1
ROBLEM," HE SAID. WHEN HE DEPLOYED TROOPS TO BORDER AREAS TO NTERCEPT SMUGGLERS, SAID HE ENCOUNTERED "INTENSE RESSURE, FROM THE GOVERNOR ON DOWN, TO STOP IT EVERYBODY'S AKING SOMETHING FROM CONTRABAND."	Bi
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(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.	B1, B6
OF FEDEGAN, THE NATIONAL RANCHERS' ASSOCIATION,	,
EXPRESSED PROSTRATION THAT HE COULD NOT SAFRLY SPEND THE NICHT AM	
MID REMORE DOST TO MINUTES FROM TOWN. AND THE OWNERD	B1, B6
RANCHERS DENOUNCED THE ELN'S MAY 3 CAR-BOMBING OF FEDEGAN'S USD 5	טם, וט
MIDDION REPRIGERATED WAREHOUSE AT CUCUTA PREDOPTEDLY IN	
RETALIATION FOR FEDEGAN'S ALLEGED SUPPORT FOR PARAMILITARIES.	
ESTIMATED THAT 70	DI De
PERCENT OF THE POPULATION OF ATALAXA, ONE OF CUCUTA'S POOR	B1, B6
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	
INTERVIEW WITH A LOCAL NEWSPAPER, A CUCUTA URBAN PARAMILITARY SAID "DECENT PEOPLE NEED HAVE NO FEAR WE'RE HERE TO KILL	
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COMETDENTIAL	
PAGE 09 BOGOTA 10429 1602112	
GUERRILLAS AND THEIR SUPPORTERS ONLY, AND WE TARGET THEM	
CAREFULLY." TOLD POLOFF THAT CICITA PROTECTION	D1 D4
MAD STOPPED WALKING THE STREETS AT NIGHT AND EXDERGING DOLLETON	B1, B6
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

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 THROWN UP CONFIDENTIAL

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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	В1
EVENTS. THEY BELIEVE THAT AN EXPLOSIVE SITUATION EXISTS AND	
THAT THE STATUS QUO CANNOT BE MAINTAINED. RUMORS THAT ABOVE	
OFFICERS, POLICE OFFICERS, AND RANCHERS TOGETHER ARE ATTEMPTING	
TO CHANGE THE REGIONAL SECURITY BALANCE BY SUPPORTING PARAMILITARIES ARE, AT THIS POINT, ONLY RUMORS.	Di
SURPRISINGLY FRANK WITH POLOFF ABOUT HIS INTENTION NOT TO FIGHT	Bl
PARAMILITARIES. HE IS CONVINCED THAT DOING SO BEFORE THE	
GUERRILLAS ARE DEFEATED WOULD NOT MAKE MILITARY SENSE EMBASSY	
DOES NOT KNOW WHETHER	B 1, B 6
ALLEGATIONS ARE TRUE. THE EXCHANGE OF ACCUSATIONS	
HOWEVER, INDICATES A HIGHLY CHARGED ATMOSPHERE IN WHICH	B1
DISTNEODMATION CAMPATONS THE PROPERTY OF THE P	

DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS LIKELY PLAY A ROLE.

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