

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 BOGOTA 01387 132223Z
ACTION ARA-14

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O R 132135Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6320
INFO DEA HQS WASHDC
WHITE HOUSE WASHDC

S E C R E T BOGOTA 1387

STATE FOR S/NM AND ARA
DEA FOR BENSINGER
WHITE HOUSE FOR BOURNE

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SNAR, CO

REF: BOGOTA 6252

1. VICE ADMIRAL MELENDEZ, THE PROCURATOR GENERAL OF THE ARMED FORCES, CALLED ON DCM FRIDAY FEB 10 AND EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT RECENT ARTICLES IN THE FOREIGN AND COLOMBIAN PRESS ALLEGING THAT DEFENSE MINISTER GENERAL VARON WAS CONNECTED WITH NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING. MELENDEZ SAID THAT VARON HAD THOUGHT OF RAISING THIS MATTER DIRECTLY WITH AMBASSADOR ASENCIO BUT HAD DECIDED INSTEAD TO HAVE MELENDEZ CONTACT THE DCM ON AN INFORMAL BASIS FIRST, SINCE THE TWO WERE OLD FRIENDS AND SINCE DCM HAD BEEN IN CHARGE OF THE EMBASSY "WHEN MRS. CARTER DELIVERED HER LIST OF OFFICIALS INVOLVED IN NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING TO PRESIDENT LOPEZ". MELENDEZ STRESSED THAT GENERAL VARON WAS OBVIOUSLY INNOCENT. THIS WAS DEMONSTRATED BY HIS RECORD OF CO-OPERATION AS DEFENSE MINISTER IN MEASURES AGAINST NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING. NONETHELESS, HE WANTED TO GET AT THE BOTTOM OF THESE ALLEGATIONS AND CLEAR HIS NAME OFFICIALLY.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 BOGOTA 01387 132223Z

OTHERWISE, COLOMBIA'S IMAGE ABROAD WOULD REMAIN TARNISHED.

2. MELENDEZ SAID THAT AFTER THE FIRST "LE MONDE" ARTICLE HAD APPEARED, GENERAL VARON QUERIED THE PRESIDENT ABOUT IT AND LOPEZ INDICATED THAT THE ARTICLE HAD ITS ORIGIN IN THE CODEL WOLFF REPORT. LATER LOPEZ MADE A COPY OF THAT REPORT AVAILABLE TO VARON, POINTING OUT THAT IT CONTAINED NO CHARGES

AGAINST SPECIFICALLY NAMED OFFICIALS. ACCORDING TO MELENDEZ, VARON WAS STILL UNEASY AND WANTED THE PRESIDENT TO EXONERATE HIM PUBLICALLY BUT EVENTUALLY HE BECAME RESIGNED TO WAITING FOR THE MATTER TO BLOW OVER AND DROP FROM THE PRESS. THEN CAME THE JAN 23 "LE MONDE" ARTICLE, WITH ITS INDICATION THAT THERE WAS A SECOND USG REPORT, PLUS OTHER ITEMS IN THE COLOMBIAN AND US PRESS TO THE EFFECT THAT MRS. CARTER HAD GIVEN PRESIDENT LOPEZ A LIST OF COLOMBIAN OFFICIALS BELIEVED IMPLICATED IN TRAFFICKING. VARON WENT TO SEE THE PRESIDENT AGAIN. LOPEZ ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE USG HAD GIVEN HIM FURTHER INFORMATION (IN ADDITION TO THE WOLFF REPORT). MELENDEZ SUSPECTS LOPEZ SHOWED VARON THE SECOND REPORT. HOWEVER, VARON TOLD MELENDEZ ONLY THAT LOPEZ SAID IT INCLUDED A STATEMENT THAT VARON HAD PROVIDED A CHARACTER REFERENCE FOR A COLOMBIAN CHARGED WITH NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING IN POPAYAN. LOPEZ TOLD VARON THAT HE DID NOT TAKE THIS SERIOUSLY AND THAT VARON SHOULD NOT WORRY ABOUT IT.

3. MELENDEZ ADDED THAT VARON NONETHELESS REMAINED CONCERNED ABOUT HIS REPUTATION AND SUBSEQUENTLY SENT MELENDEZ TO POPAYAN TO LOOK INTO THE TRIAL RECORDS OF THE COLOMBIAN TRAFFICKER. HE FOUND NO REFERENCE TO VARON IN THE TRIAL TESTIMONY AND ONLY CAME UPON A LETTER FROM A COLONEL IN THE DEFENSE MINISTRY WHO HAD PROVIDED A CHARACTER REFERENCE FOR THE TRAFFICKER. MELENDEZ SAID THAT THIS LETTER SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SENT
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 BOGOTA 01387 132223Z

BUT THAT EVEN SO IT WAS NOT GROUNDS FOR ACCUSING THE MINISTER HIMSELF. MOREOVER, MELENDEZ SAID HE HIMSELF WAS WONDERING HOW THE USG HAD LEARNED OF THE LETTER. DCM EXPLAINED THAT HE WAS NOT FAMILIAR WITH THE DETAILS OF THE POPAYAN CASE AND COULD NOT RECALL WHETHER THE USG KNEW OF THAT LETTER OR NOT.

4. MELENDEZ SAID THAT GOC ATTORNEY GENERAL SERRANO WAS ALSO LOOKING INTO THIS CASE AND HAD PHONED THE PRESIDENT WHEN THE FIRST "LE MONDE" ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED HERE. THE ATTORNEY GENERAL APPARENTLY PRESSED LOPEZ FOR INFORMATION THAT HE COULD USE IN AN INVESTIGATION BUT MELENDEZ WAS NOT SURE WHAT, IF ANYTHING, LOPEZ HAD PROVIDED. IN ANY CASE, THE ATTORNEY GENERAL HAD NOW HAD TO LEAVE FOR THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NARCOTICS IN GENEVA. HE APPARENTLY INDICATED TO MELENDEZ BEFORE LEAVING THAT THE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST VARON WERE GOING TO BE AN EMBARRASSMENT FOR THE GOC DELEGATION AT THE CONFERENCE.

5. MELENDEZ WENT ON TO SAY THAT SINCE THE DCM HAD BEEN IN CHARGE OF THE EMBASSY DURING THE TIME OF THE CARTER VISIT HE MUST BE WELL AWARE OF WHAT SORT OF INFORMATION

WE HAD PROVIDED ABOUT VARON. MELENDEZ SUGGESTED THAT THE USG COULD PERHAPS AUTHORIZE LOPEZ TO MAKE IT PUBLIC, SO THAT THE FLIMSINESS OF THE CHARGES AGAINST VARON WOULD BE REVEALED. MELENDEZ ADDED THAT VARON SUSPECTED THAT ONE OR MORE USG OFFICIALS IN WASHINGTON HAD LEAKED THE INFORMATION TO "LE MONDE", THOUGH VARON DID NOT FEEL THAT THE EMBASSY ITSELF HAD HAD ANY HAND IN THIS. DCM TOLD MELENDEZ THAT OVER THE PAST YEAR WE HAD HAD MANY EXCHANGES AND CONSULTATIONS WITH GOC AUTHORITIES ON NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING, COOPERATIVELY POOLING INTELLIGENCE THAT WE HAD DEVELOPED. THE QUALITY AND RELIABILITY OF THE DATA NATURALLY VARIED AND IT HAD TO BE HELD CLOSELY TO PROTECT INNOCENT PEOPLE, TO SAFEGUARD SENSITIVE SOURCES AND ALSO TO AVOID COMPROMISING ONGOING OR FUTURE INVESTIGATIONS AND
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 04 BOGOTA 01387 132223Z

PROSECUTIONS. THESE BILATERAL EXCHANGES AND CONSULTATIONS HAD TAKEN PLACE AT VARIOUS LEVELS, FROM THE PRESIDENTIAL ON DOWN. OBVIOUSLY, IT WAS UP TO PRESIDENT LOPEZ HIMSELF TO DECIDE HOW TO HANDLE ANY INFORMATION AND REPORTS THAT WE HAD PROVIDED HIM PERSONALLY. THIS PARTICULARLY APPLIED TO THEIR DISSEMINATION TO OTHER COLOMBIAN OFFICIALS. DCM ADDED THAT WE, TOO, HAD BEEN CONCERNED ABOUT THE NEWSPAPER REPORTS AND THAT AFTER CHECKING WITH WASHINGTON THE AMBASSADOR HAD ASSURED PRESIDENT LOPEZ THAT THE USG WAS NOT BEHIND THESE ARTICLES OR OTHERWISE LEAKING CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION. MELENDEZ SAID HE WAS VERY GLAD TO HEAR THIS AND WOULD UNDERLINE IT IN HIS NEXT CONVERSATION WITH VARON ON THE SUBJECT. THE MEETING THEN ENDED WITH BOTH MELENDEZ AND DCM AGREEING TO KEEP IN TOUCH ON THIS PROBLEM.

6. COMMENT: WE DOUBT THAT THE DEFENSE MINISTER WILL BE CONTENT TO LEAVE MATTERS AS THEY NOW STAND. MOREOVER THERE MAY WELL BE FURTHER ARTICLES ON THE SUBJECT IN THE FOREIGN AND COLOMBIAN PRESS. MEANWHILE AMBASSADOR NEEDS TO CONSULT VARON ON SEVERAL ISSUES, INCLUDING THE TROUBLESOME SHORTFALL IN FMS CREDITS AND COLOMBIAN MILITARY COOPERATION IN BILATERAL NARCOTICS CONTROL EFFORTS. VARON HIMSELF MAY DECIDE TO BE ESPECIALLY HELPFUL AND COOPERATIVE IN THESE MATTERS IN ORDER TO HELP DISPROVE THE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST HIM. HOWEVER, WE DO NOT BELIEVE THIS WILL DETER HIM FROM PRESSING FOR STEPS THAT WILL HELP HIM CLEAR HIS NAME. THE AMBASSADOR WILL SHORTLY DISCUSS THIS PROBLEM WITH PRESIDENT LOPEZ AND TO SOME EXTENT WE WILL HAVE TO BE GUIDED BY LOPEZ' OWN CHOSEN COURSE OF ACTION. MEANWHILE, HOWEVER, WE WOULD APPRECIATE WASHINGTON'S VIEWS AND GUIDANCE ON THE TACTICS WE SHOULD PURSUE.

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SECRET

PAGE 05 BOGOTA 01387 132223Z

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