

COLOMBIA

Murders Yet to Come

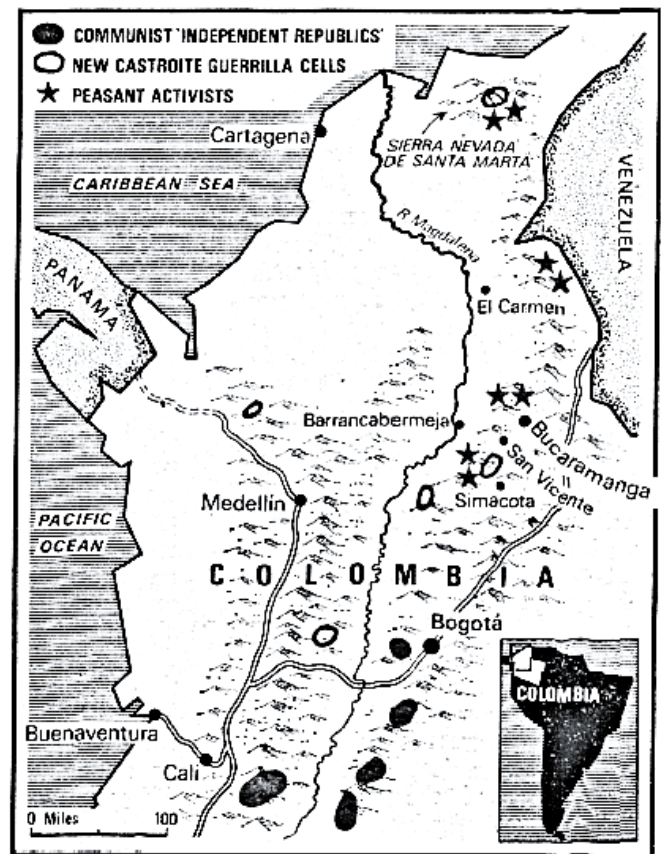
FROM A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT: NORMAN GALL

San Vicente de Chucuri

COMMUNIST and castroite guerrillas are now operating in several parts of this bloodstained country; they are adding to the depredations done by the rural bandits who still plague a country badly scarred by ten postwar years of tribal warfare between its Liberals and its Conservatives. The first attack of the new bandits came at dawn on January 7th this year, when 27 men and one woman—dressed in olive green fatigue uniforms and berets—attacked and took possession of San Vicente's neighbouring town of Simacota for about two hours.

They robbed a government lending agency of about \$4,000 and a beer distributor and a private home of another \$1,000. The raiders—carrying automatic weapons and wearing armbands bearing the letters ELN (meaning National Liberation Army)—cut the town's external communication lines and, before departing in the direction of San Vicente, made speeches proclaiming a war against imperialism and oligarchy and announced that they had come "to attack the government and not the people." When they left, three policemen and one child were dead. An army patrol sent to pursue them was ambushed, and two soldiers died. The Simacota attack was Colombia's first major experience of castroite guerrillas. There may be more experiences soon: on August 15th four soldiers were killed and four wounded in an ambush here.

San Vicente and its environs in the department of Santander in eastern Colombia is where, according to defectors from the guerrilla band, the Simacota group trained for eight months before the January raid and where its members are still operating. It is one of several such cells quietly in gestation in Colombia, the viability of which will depend greatly on the capacity of Colombia's divided extreme left, or some faction of it, to mount a nationally coordinated guerrilla effort. A cell of communist guerrillas, modelled after Venezuela's FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional), seldom numbers more than 20 or 30 men, but lightning actions such as the Simacota attack send shock waves throughout the region and the nation far out of proportion to their military significance. Combined with raid's in other parts of the country, such operations are aimed at compounding the tensions created by Colombia's colossal problems of political instability, population growth (2.9 per cent annually), unemployment (roughly 20 per cent), and the migratory inundation of the cities by peasants who during the



1950s sought safety from the *violencia*—the furious tribal warfare between Liberals and Conservatives that raged for 10 years (1948-58) and took an estimated 200,000 lives.

As a result of the *violencia*, Colombia has been governed since 1958 by a National Front government that has blocked orderly political evolution because, according to 1958 constitutional amendments, the two major parties are to alternate in the presidency until 1974. Participation in the congress and the administrative bureaucracy is to be shared with "millimetric" equality; moreover, the congress can enact laws only with a two-thirds majority. Smaller parties that have arisen since 1958 must run in elections as Liberals or Conservatives or abstain from electoral politics; 70 per cent of the electorate abstained from voting in the 1964 congressional contest.

The dollar value of the peso has halved over the past year, international lending agencies have boycotted the country until it acts to resolve its fiscal and foreign payments problems, and many factories are laying off workers for lack of raw materials. In July President Guillermo Leon Valencia, a Conservative, declared a "state of siege." He has threatened to rule by decree if congress does not give him the special economic powers he has requested.

In this atmosphere of economic confusion and political discontent—the dangers of which, seemingly, are appreciated by everyone but the members of Colombia's ruling oligarchy—the psychological effect of successful castroite guerrilla operations could be very

powerful. Moreover, the reciprocal impact of viable guerrilla operations is not limited by national boundaries, since the convulsions of neighbouring Venezuela and Peru—where rural insurrections are already established—traditionally effect Colombia (and vice versa).

The test of insurgency could come in San-Vicente and the sluggish, processes of its daily life. It is a sparsely settled municipality (700 square miles; 30,000 population) that has no paved roads, only three physicians, few schools beyond the second grade and about a fifth of its school-age children attending classes. This heavily Liberal community is anti-clerical and will cooperate only reluctantly with the army and police. It was ravaged between 1948 and 1953 by the *violencia* between the neo-Falangist regime of Conservative President Laureano Gomez and a Liberal guerrilla band led by Rafael Rangel Gomez, a local caudillo who was mayor of three towns of the region. Homes were burned, crops were stolen, and entire families were slaughtered by bands of both parties throughout the nation. Conservative bands dressed as police brought Liberal peasants before the local priest, who made them kiss a crucifix and swear allegiance to the Conservative party; these "professions of faith" were announced in the provincial press.

San Vicente is, moreover, adjacent to the strategic oilfields and refineries of Barrancabermeja, along the Magdalena River, where communists have for years maintained strong control of the unions at the Shell and government-owned Ecopetrol installations, the most important in the nation. In recent years communist labour organisers from Barrancabermeja have visited the rural neighbour-hoods of San Vicente to form "peasant leagues" that have promoted peasant invasions of uncultivated portions of haciendas. The communists have also obtained free medical services for about 2,000 peasant families in the Ecopetrol company clinic. While these contacts have in many cases been superficial, they have apparently served to form friendly relations to be exploited for purposes of refuge, information and the hiding of arms and other war material.

With all this, however, San Vicente has been quiet. On July 3rd, a peasant who had defected from the guerrillas and had been serving as an army guide for two months, was ambushed and wounded outside the army barracks in San Vicente. He was taken to a hospital in Bucaramanga, where he was stabbed to death a few days later while undergoing treatment. In late June the guerrillas tried to launch a surprise attack on the Conservative village of El Carmen, but retreated when the village priest received warning of the attack and summoned troops. Mean-while, the peasant leagues have been spreading north of San Vicente near a provincial

railway line whose union is also communist-controlled. The invasions, which seem to be a precursor to guerrilla activity, have also been reported near petroleum installations along the Venezuelan frontier and near the 5,000-foot-high Sierra Nevada de Magdalena near the Caribbean coast, where, according to military sources, a part of the Simacota group is forming another cell for insurrection.

It is doubtful whether a communist guerrilla movement can prosper at this time in a nation so sated with rural violence as Colombia. But a few well-aimed blows in this deepening political and economic malaise could produce a popular convulsion to be felt throughout the hemisphere. It must be remembered that savage partisan fighting echoes and recurs throughout this unhappy nation's entire republican history; that the Conservative repressions of 1948 had their roots in the Liberal repressions of 1930; that the *violencia* of the past decades began with the terrible Bogotazo of April 9, 1948, when the popular Liberal politician Jorge Eliecer Gaitan was murdered on a Bogota street, a deed that launched the city's population on a spree of pillage and murder resulting in an estimated 4,000 deaths. As the ten-year orgy of political violence turned to common banditry and as Liberal and Conservative chiefs stopped providing arms and money to these roaming bands, the communists stepped in with arms and money of their own. Inside Colombia now there are four "independent republics" beyond the reach of the national government; these provincial separatist areas are controlled by communist-oriented armed bands.

Bogota, dark and cold, is filled with sickening tension and despair as the rich speculate in cheap official dollars (less than half the free price) and the shabby middle class and the shabbier proletariat are hard pressed to meet their elementary needs. In tropical Cali, an industrial mecca and refuge from the *violencia* for hundreds of thousands of peasants of the western departments, import restrictions are shutting factories and the dwellers in shacks of paper and bamboo clash (occasionally) with police and soldiers attempting to stop them from invading peripheral urban land to build new slums. The official press, which is the only press that matters, reports little more than appointments and resignations (the average ministerial tenure is from six months to a year), while National Front politicians seem inexhaustibly fascinated with their "millimetric" system of dividing the pot. Many Colombians are seized with painful if shapeless forebodings.