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Intelligence Assessment

INR foreign affairs brief

United States Department of State
Bureau of Intelligence and Research

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Profile of Fidel Castano, Super Drug-Thug

Fidel Castano is one of Colombia's most ruthless criminals. He is responsible for several mass murders in rural Colombia, including the 1988 kidnap/murder of a Colombian politician. He is also a top suspect in the 1990 murder of two leftist presidential candidates. A significant drug trafficker, he led the vigilante group known as "Los Pepes," which helped hunt down Medellin drug lord Pablo Escobar and reportedly served as an intermediary between the Cali drug cartel and police and military officers during the search for Escobar. Castano hoped to gain judicial concessions in return for his help, but no information is available that he has been granted any type of pardon.

Background

Castano was born in 1951 in Antioquia Department in northeastern Colombia to a family of modest means. He acquired a fortune, probably through various illegal activities, and invested much of it in the purchase of huge tracts of ranchland in the Department of Cordoba and in the nearby Magdalena Medio and Uraba regions in northern Colombia. He has lived in Israel where he may own real estate; he may also own real estate in California. Castano developed a hatred toward leftists in the early 1980s after his father was kidnapped for ransom by guerrillas and either was killed or died in captivity.

Castano formed and directed an "army" of about 120 men which rounded up leftists or suspected leftist sympathizers, then tortured and killed them. Castano soon became widely known in Colombia because of his cruelty toward anyone he suspected of direct or indirect ties with Colombia's leftist insurgent groups. Castano initially enjoyed widespread support from

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fellow landowners and from the security forces who saw him as an ally in their war against armed leftist subversion. Some ranchers later turned against Castano because of his brutality and his attempt to levy his own "taxes" on them, but he apparently continued to enjoy the support of some active duty or retired security forces personnel.

In 1990 Castano tried to rehabilitate himself. He announced he was ready to surrender, offered to disband his armed group, handed over some of his weapons, and gave away land to peasants. While it is unlikely that Castano was sincere in his announced intention to renounce violence, he did adopt a lower profile. Meanwhile, in June 1991 a Colombian court convicted Castano in absentia of "conspiracy" in a 1988 massacre which left 21 dead. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison, but acquitted of murder charges although he reportedly ordered the massacre. In 1993 the Prosecutor General's office issued an arrest warrant for Castano for the 1988 kidnap/murder of a prominent Colombian, Senator Alfonso Ospina, former Secretary General of the presidency.

Links to traffickers

Castano has long been involved in trafficking but there are few details on his drug network. Sometime after the mid-1980s Castano began working with Medellin kingpin Jose Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha who hated "leftists" even more than Castano. Together, they formed a paramilitary force of approximately 200-300 well-armed men operating in the Magdalena Medio region. It is unclear which massacres Castano ordered on his own and which may have been conducted jointly with Rodriguez.

After Rodriguez was killed by Colombian police in December 1989, Castano began working closely with Pablo Escobar and eventually became his military adviser. Castano probably was a member of Escobar's "Extraditables" terrorist group, which in 1990 claimed responsibility for the assassination of two leftist presidential candidates. Colombian authorities suspect Castano was directly involved in planning these murders, but he has never been charged.

Leader of "Los Pepes"

Castano remained loyal to Escobar until a few months after Pablo Escobar's July 1992 escape from prison. By then it had become apparent that Escobar was growing increasingly weaker, largely owing to the defection from his camp of former Medellin colleagues who wanted revenge

for Escobar's murder of their family members while he was in prison. Ever the opportunist, Castano switched his allegiance to the increasingly powerful Cali cartel. He became a principal leader of Los Pepes, which provided officials with information on the whereabouts of Escobar and attacked supporters and properties of Escobar. Los Pepes was financially backed by the Cali cartel [redacted] and reportedly had the tacit support of some senior Colombian police officials. Castano reportedly acted as an intermediary between the Cali cartel and the Escobar search force.

The next Escobar?

Castano reportedly hopes that his work with Los Pepes will earn him judicial leniency, such as a reduction of his jail term imposed in absentia. While there is no reporting to indicate the government has granted Castano any concessions, it is unlikely that police or military officials would be willing to vigorously search for him if he did, in fact, act as an intermediary to deliver Cali bribes to senior police and military officers. His alliance with the Cali drug lords probably gives Castano a measure of protection in that officials might be unwilling to incur the wrath of Cali bosses by going after Castano.

While he may enjoy the protection of some Colombian officials, others want to capture him. [redacted]

[redacted] Castano could become a new Escobar. [redacted]
[redacted] Castano is more ferocious than Escobar, has more military capability, and can count on fellow antiguerrillas in the Colombian Army and the Colombian National Police. Castano is a heroic figure to some Colombians for his long antiguerrilla war and for his championing of agricultural reform in some regions. Castano was the cover subject of a March edition of a leading Colombian weekly magazine, *Semana*.

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Outlook

Without strong outside pressure, Colombian officials may be unwilling to press too hard to find Castano, given his reported connection to senior police officials. Cali cartel financial contributions to Ernesto Samper's campaign raise questions about how assiduously Samper might pursue Castano if he wins the presidency. An Andres Pastrana presidency might be more willing to push for Castano's capture. Even if Castano is imprisoned, he has a good chance of manipulating the judicial system to get a reduction in his sentence.