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R 041847Z MAR 98
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1766
INFO AMEMBASSY CARACAS
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ONDCP FOR JANET CRIST
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USIA FOR AR, I/GAR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/05/03
TAGS: PGOV, MOPS, PHUM, PTER, PINR, PINS, ASEC, SNAR, CO
SUBJECT: FORMER ARMY OFFICER: COLOMBIAN ARMY CRIPPLED BY
CORRUPTION, INEFFICIENCY, AND A LACK OF POLITICAL WILL

CLASSIFIED BY POL/ECONOFF PEG WILLINGHAM. REASON 1.5(D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: EMBASSY OFFICERS MET FEBRUARY 27 WITH RETIRED
ARMY OFFICER [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] ON WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE COLOMBIAN ARMY. THE LIST
IS DAUNTING: CORRUPTION, NEPOTISM, POOR USE OF RESOURCES, LOW
MORALE, FAILURE TO LEARN FROM PAST MISTAKES, POOR LEADERSHIP, AND
A LACK OF STRATEGIC PLANNING. HE DECRIED THE POLITICAL ELITE'S
FAILURE TO SEE THE SECURITY SITUATION AS A PROBLEM THAT AFFECTS IT;
THE MILITARY OPERATES IN A POLICY VACUUM. HE EXPRESSED CONCERN
ABOUT THE INCREASING TENDENCY OF THE POLICE TO TAKE ON MILITARY
DUTIES WHILE THE ARMY IS TASKED WITH SUCH "CIVILIAN" DUTIES AS
GUARDING OIL PIPELINES (A PROCESS HE REFERRED TO AS THE
"PRIVATIZATION" OF THE COLOMBIAN ARMY). STRETCHED TOO THIN BY
MULTIPLE MISSIONS AND FACED WITH A WELL-FINANCED INSURGENCY, THE
ARMY IS WEAKENED AND DIVIDED, [REDACTED] WARNED. [REDACTED] CALLED
COLOMBIAN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE A "MAFIA" WHOSE "GODFATHER" IS
MAJOR GENERAL IVAN RAMIREZ, CURRENTLY INSPECTOR GENERAL OF THE
ARMY. [REDACTED] CONFIRMED WHAT WE HAVE HEARD FROM OTHER SOURCES; IT
REMAINS TO BE SEEN IF HIS DIAGNOSIS WILL BE HEDED, HOWEVER. END
SUMMARY.

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2. (C) EMBOFFS MET FEBRUARY 27 WITH RETIRED ARMY OFFICER [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] WHO

RETIRED FOUR YEARS AGO

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[REDACTED] POL/ECON COUNSELOR, REGIONAL SECURITY OFFICER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER, CHIEF OF MILGROUPE'S ARMY MISSION, VISITING DIA ANALYST AND POLOFFS ALSO PARTICIPATED.

COLOMBIAN ARMY: IN BAD SHAPE

3. (C)

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[REDACTED] HE CHOSE TO FOCUS ON THE PERIOD 1986-1996 BECAUSE THE ARMY "CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY" IN THE WAKE OF THE NOVEMBER 1985 PALACE OF JUSTICE DISASTER.

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[REDACTED] MILITARY EFFICIENCY IS USUALLY MEASURED IN TERMS OF ENEMY CASUALTIES, [REDACTED] NOTED. VIEWED THAT WAY, THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY'S EFFICIENCY HAS BEEN IN DECLINE OF LATE, BUFFETED BY A STRING OF GUERRILLA-INFLICTED HUMILIATIONS (PUERRES, LAS DELICIAS, AND MOST RECENTLY PATASCOY). OTHER PROBLEMS INCLUDE MISUSE OF

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RESOURCES (RATHER THAN INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES); LOW MORALE; RAMPANT NEPOTISM; FAILURE TO LEARN FROM PAST MISTAKES; POOR LEADERSHIP; AND A LACK OF STRATEGIC PLANNING, ACCORDING TO [REDACTED]

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DISCONNECT BETWEEN MILITARY AND "CLASE POLITICA"

4. (C) [REDACTED] CLAIMED THAT THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY CONTINUES TO USE THE SAME TACTICS AND STRATEGY "THAT HELPED THE U.S. LOSE THE VIETNAM WAR." UNLIKE THE U.S. MILITARY, HOWEVER, COLOMBIA HAS

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FAILED TO ENGAGE IN HEALTHY SELF-CRITICISM, [] CONTINUED.
 (NOTE: [] MENTIONED SPENDING TIME IN THE U.S. DURING HIS
 MILITARY CAREER, AND REPEATEDLY GAVE EXAMPLES OF U.S. MILITARY
 PRACTICES THAT HE FELT THE COLOMBIAN ARMY SHOULD EMULATE. END
 NOTE.) THE GOC'S TARGETS -- GUERRILLAS, PARAMILITARIES,
 NARCOTRAFFICKERS AND COMMON CRIMINALS -- HAVE THE ADVANTAGE OF
 SURPRISE AND MOBILITY. COLOMBIAN SOLDIERS TODAY, ACCORDING TO
 [] "DON'T WANT TO FIGHT; THEY FEEL IT'S NOT THEIR WAR, BUT
 RATHER THE POLITICIANS' WAR AND THE GENERALS' WAR." [] DECRIED
 THE LACK OF COORDINATION AMONG THE GOVERNMENT, THE MILITARY, AND
 CIVIL SOCIETY. HE BLAMED LOW TROOP MORALE ON THE DIVISION BETWEEN
 THE RULING POLITICAL CLASS AND THE MILITARY AND BETWEEN OFFICERS

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AND ENLISTED PERSONNEL. THE FORMER GOES TO GREAT LENGTHS TO KEEP
 ITS SONS FROM PERFORMING MANDATORY MILITARY SERVICE; THOSE WHO DO
 NOT ESCAPE BY BRIBERY, BOGUS MEDICAL EXEMPTIONS OR STUDYING ABROAD
 USUALLY FIND EASY BILLETS IN THE PRESIDENTIAL GUARD OR THE
 COLOMBIAN ARMY PEACEKEEPING UNIT IN THE SINAI, [REDACTED] DECLARED. . AT
 THE SAME TIME, A PEASANT'S SON WHO TRIES TO AVOID MILITARY SERVICE
 IS SENT TO JAIL, [REDACTED] OBSERVED.

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 THE ARMIES WITHIN THE ARMY

5. (C) [] SAID THE COLOMBIAN ARMY IS COMPOSED OF SEVERAL DIFFERENT FACTIONS: "THE MARRIED ONES' ARMY, THE SINGLE ONES' ARMY, THE GENERALS' SONS' ARMY, THE SERGEANTS' SONS' ARMY, THE POLITICIANS' FRIENDS' ARMY, THE GENERALS' IN-LAWS' ARMY," AND SO FORTH. MANY OFFICERS GET PROMOTED WITHOUT EVER SERVING IN COMBAT, AND THUS LACK THE CREDIBILITY TO LEAD TROOPS INTO BATTLE. GENERALS WHO ARE SELECTED BY AN "ANTI-DEMOCRATIC" POPULARITY CONTEST RATHER THAN ON MERIT LIVE IN LUXURY WHILE POORLY PAID TROOPS BARELY GET BY, [] ASSERTED THAT MANY OF TODAY'S BEST

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 OFFICERS ARE RETIRING, DISILLUSIONED WITH AN ARMY LEFT TO DO THE DIRTY WORK BY AN UNCARING POLITICAL ELITE.

 POLICE BECOMING TOO MILITARIZED, ARMY TOO CIVILIANIZED

6. (C) [] ALSO EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT A CONFUSION OF MILITARY AND POLICE FUNCTIONS IN COLOMBIA. HE EXPRESSED ADMIRATION FOR POLICE DIRECTOR SERRANO BUT SAID THE POLICE INCREASINGLY PERFORM MILITARY DUTIES WHILE THE ARMY IS BEING USED FOR CIVILIAN TASKS LIKE PROTECTING INFRASTRUCTURE. HE NOTED THE BITTER RIVALRY BETWEEN THE POLICE AND ARMY, SAYING ARMY GENERALS DISLIKE SERRANO BECAUSE THE POLICE HAS USURPED THE "SUPREMACY" THE ARMY ENJOYED FIFTEEN YEARS AGO. [] ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE MILITARY HAD BEEN CORRUPTED BY NARCOTRAFFICKERS, MANY OF WHOM LURED AWAY SKILLED (IF MORALLY BANKRUPT) OFFICERS. [] ALSO MENTIONED THAT THE EXAMPLE OF GENERALS WHO LOST THEIR U.S. VISAS BECAUSE OF NARCO-CORRUPTION ALSO HURT TROOP MORALE (ALTHOUGH HE ACKNOWLEDGED THE USG'S RIGHT (##) IN SUCH CASES). HE DEPLORED THE MILITARY'S TENDENCY TO DEAL WITH WRONGDOERS INTERNALLY RATHER THAN HANDING THEM OVER TO THE CIVILIAN JUSTICE SYSTEM, CITING THE CASE OF GENERAL JOSE VILLAREAL ABARCA, WHO WAS EXPELLED ABOUT TWENTY YEARS AGO FROM THE ARMY FOR ABETTING NARCOTRAFFICKERS BUT WHO WAS NEVER TRIED OR JAILED. "THIS SETS A TERRIBLE EXAMPLE AND ENCOURAGES OTHER

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PERSONNEL TO THINK THEY CAN COMMIT CRIMES AND GET AWAY WITH IT,"
[REDACTED] LAMENTED.

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ARMY STRETCHED TOO THIN BY TOO MANY MISSIONS

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7. (C) [REDACTED] SAID THE MILITARY'S MULTIPLE MISSIONS, MANY OF THEM NOT STIPULATED BY THE CONSTITUTION, HAVE LEFT THE ARMY STRETCHED BEYOND ITS EFFECTIVE CAPACITY. ABOUT THIRTY PERCENT OF THE ARMY IS ASSIGNED TO ADMINISTRATIVE WORK AND ANOTHER THIRTY PERCENT HAVE BEEN "PRIVATIZED," GUARDING PRIVATE AND PUBLIC ENTERPRISES LIKE OIL PIPELINES, ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] SO-CALLED MOBILE BRIGADES ARE TIED DOWN GUARDING ECONOMIC INTERESTS OF THE ELITE, [REDACTED] DECLARED. MANY SOLDIERS ARE STATIONED IN LARGE HEADQUARTERS RATHER THAN OUT IN THE FIELD. AS A RESULT, THE BORDERS ARE INADEQUATELY DEFENDED FROM INCURSIONS FROM VENEZUELA AND ELSEWHERE AND THE GUERRILLAS STRIKE WITH VIRTUAL IMPUNITY. THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES OF COLOMBIA (FARC), FUELED BY ILLICIT INCOME FROM CRIME, HAVE EXPANDED FROM 600 FIGHTERS IN 1983 TO 11,000 TODAY, [REDACTED] STATED; THE RATIO OF SOLDIERS TO GUERRILLAS HAS DECLINED FROM 120:1 FIFTEEN YEARS AGO TO 6:1 TODAY. (DAO COMMENT: THERE ARE ABOUT 125,000 COLOMBIAN ARMY TROOPS AND PROBABLY NO MORE THAN 18,000 GUERRILLAS TOTAL, FOR A RATIO OF ABOUT 7:1. END COMMENT.)

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CORRUPTION AND NEPOTISM: "CANCER" ON THE ARMY

(##) GARBLED TEXT CORRECTIONS WILL FOLLOW

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8. (C) [] WAS SKEPTICAL OF THE MILITARY'S TRADITIONAL EXCUSES
 FOR FARING POORLY AGAINST THE GUERRILLAS: LACK OF HELICOPTERS, LACK

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OF COMMUNICATION EQUIPMENT, LACK OF INTELLIGENCE, AND CONCERNS THAT
 INFLECTING CASUALTIES WILL LEAD TO CHARGES OF HUMAN RIGHTS
 VIOLATIONS. REGARDING THE LATTER, [] SAID THAT IN THE PAST
 SOME PERSONNEL COMMITTED ABUSES IN ORDER TO EARN DECORATIONS AND
 GET PROMOTED, BUT SUCH OFFENSES DID NOT OCCUR AS A MATTER OF
 POLICY. THE SOLUTION TO THE ARMY'S PROBLEMS, HE SAID, IS NOT JUST
 MORE MONEY, BUT MORE TRAINING, MORE PUBLIC SUPPORT, A CONSENSUS ON
 WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE SECURITY SITUATION, AND LESS NEPOTISM AND
 CORRUPTION (WHICH HE TERMED A "CANCER" ON THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY).

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[] ACKNOWLEDGED NONE OF THESE WOULD BE EASY TO ACHIEVE, BUT HE
 WARNED THAT A FRACTURED AND WEAKENED MILITARY MEANS A FRACTURED AND
 WEAKENED COLOMBIAN DEMOCRACY. NOTING THAT DISGUST WITH MILITARY
 CORRUPTION HAD LED VENEZUELAN OFFICERS TO ATTEMPT A COUP SOME YEARS
 AGO, [] WARNED THAT SOMETHING SIMILAR COULD HAPPEN IN COLOMBIA.
 (COMMENT: WE DOUBT THAT THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY WOULD DO SUCH A
 THING ANYTIME SOON. HOWEVER, WE NOTE FOR THE RECORD THAT FOUR
 FORMER TWENTIETH (ARMY INTELLIGENCE) BRIGADE MEMBERS ARE FACING
 TRIAL ON CHARGES OF PARTICIPATING IN THE NOVEMBER 1995

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ASSASSINATION OF CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADER ALVARO GOMEZ HURTADO.
HURTADO ALLEGEDLY HAD BEEN PLOTTING WITH SOME SENIOR MILITARY
OFFICERS TO DEPOSE PRESIDENT SAMPER BY FORCE AT THE HEIGHT OF THE
SAMPER NARCO-SCANDAL. END COMMENT.)

GUERRILLAS AND PARAMILITARIES BOTH INVOLVED IN DRUGS

9. (C) [] BLAMED POLITICIANS FOR "PLAYING THE GUERRILLAS'
GAME" BUT ADMITTED THAT GUERRILLAS HAVE ALSO INFILTRATED THE ARMY,
INCLUDING ATTENDING MILITARY SCHOOLS. [] SAID EMPHATICALLY
THAT "GUERRILLAS ARE NARCOS." PAST GUERRILLA CONFLICTS WITH
NARCOTRAFFICKERS WERE PURELY TERRITORIAL, NOT MORAL. [] SAID
PARAMILITARIES ARE ALSO "UNDOUBTEDLY" INVOLVED IN THE DRUG TRADE.

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MILITARY INTELLIGENCE: A MAFIA LED BY "GODFATHER" RAMIREZ

10. (C) WHEN ASKED IF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE IS ONE OF THE "ARMIES
WITHIN THE ARMY" [] HAD DESCRIBED EARLIER, HE REPLIED THAT IT
WAS INDEED A "MAFIA" THAT SPENDS MOST OF ITS TIME "GATHERING DIRTY
SECRETS RATHER THAN PROCESSING INFORMATION FOR COMBAT." THE "DIRT"
IS THEN USED BY THE GOVERNMENT TO SPY ON POLITICAL ENEMIES OR
SETTLE PERSONAL VENDETTAS, [] CHARGED. WHEN ASKED ABOUT
ALLEGATIONS THAT MILITARY INTELLIGENCE WAS INVOLVED IN THE 1995
MURDER OF CONSERVATIVE POLITICIAN ALVARO GOMEZ HURTADO, [] SAID
HE HAD "HEARD THE GOSSIP" TO THAT EFFECT BUT KNEW NOTHING FURTHER.
THE MILITARY INTELLIGENCE BUDGET IS NOT SPENT ON INFORMANTS, BUT IS
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"KEPT' IN A DRAWER TO BUY NECKLACES FOR GENERALS' WIVES, WHISKEY FOR
PARTIES, AND OTHER UNAUTHORIZED EXPENSES," [] CONTINUED. WHEN
ASKED WHO THE "GODFATHER" OF THIS INTELLIGENCE "MAFIA" IS, []
PAUSED AND THEN REPLIED, "MAJOR GENERAL IVAN RAMIREZ HAS BEEN FOR

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OVER TWENTY YEARS." ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] RAMIREZ HAS ALWAYS SURROUNDED HIMSELF WITH LOYAL SUBORDINATES WHO "COVERED UP FOR HIM." HE ALSO APPEARS TO HAVE LINED HIS POCKETS AT PUBLIC EXPENSE, [REDACTED] ADDED; HOW ELSE COULD HE HAVE GIVEN HIS DAUGHTER AN \$80,000 APARTMENT AS A WEDDING GIFT? HOWEVER, RAMIREZ IS NOT ALONE IN ENRICHING HIMSELF ILLICITLY, [REDACTED] SAID; SUCH CORRUPTION IS RAMPANT, PARTICULARLY IN THE PROCUREMENT PROCESS FOR WEAPONS, VEHICLES, UNIFORMS, AND OTHER MATERIEL. ALTHOUGH THE MILITARY'S OVERALL BUDGET ALLOCATION IS MADE PUBLIC, THE INTELLIGENCE BUDGET AND THE AMOUNT THE MILITARY EARNS FOR PROTECTING OIL INSTALLATIONS AND OTHER PRIVATE FACILITIES ARE STILL "RESERVADO," [REDACTED] NOTED.

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 STATUS QUO: ACCEPTABLE TO MANY

11. (C) WHEN ASKED IF THE CURRENT SECURITY SITUATION, ALBEIT RATHER DISMAL, MIGHT ACTUALLY BENEFIT THE MILITARY, [REDACTED] ACKNOWLEDGED THAT SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE "THIS WAR IS NOT BEING

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FOUGHT TO WIN." POLITICIANS, HE CLAIMED, "HELP BOTH THE GUERRILLAS

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AND THE MILITARY AT THE SAME TIME," ALTHOUGH HE DID NOT ELABORATE. HE EXPRESSED DISGUST FOR PRESIDENT SAMPER'S DECISION TO PROMOTE SEVERAL GENERALS BEFORE THEY HAD SERVED THE REQUISITE TIME IN GRADE, AND DEPLORED ONE RECIPIENT'S EXPLANATION FOR WHY HE ACCEPTED: IF HE DIDN'T, SOMEONE ELSE WOULD. [] AGREED WITH RSO'S COMMENT ABOUT PUBLIC APATHY IN COLOMBIA, MANIFESTED IN EARLY 1997 WHEN BOGOTA RESIDENTS PAID VIRTUALLY NO ATTENTION TO THE FIVE-DAY CLASH BETWEEN GUERRILLAS AND THE ARMY IN SAN JUANITO, ONLY THIRTY MILES AWAY. [] REMARKED THAT [] AN ARMY OFFICER, WAS AT SAN JUANITO; HIS REPEATED CALLS TO HEADQUARTERS FOR GUIDANCE AND REINFORCEMENTS WERE IGNORED.

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 GIVING THE BAD NEWS TO GENERAL BONETT

12. (C) POL/ECON COUNSELOR NOTED COLOMBIA SPENDS RELATIVELY LESS ON ITS MILITARY THAN OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE HEMISPHERE, EVEN THOUGH IT IS CONFRONTING A MAJOR INSURGENCY. [] AGREED BUT SAID THAT, ALTHOUGH THE MILITARY NEEDS RESOURCES, IT NEEDS ADEQUATE INTERNAL
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 CONTROLS TO ENSURE MONEY IS SPENT CORRECTLY. [] SAID ARMED FORCES COMMANDER BONETT HAS BEEN IN TOUCH WITH HIM [] AND IF BONETT ASKS TO MEET WITH HIM, [] PLANS TO SPEAK FRANKLY AND PROVIDE EVEN MORE DETAILS ABOUT CORRUPTION AND INEFFICIENCY THAN HE WAS WILLING TO DO WITH EMBASSY PERSONNEL. "I EXPECT CRITICISM [] SAID, BUT THE PUBLIC HAS A RIGHT TO KNOW "IF THEIR MONEY IS BEING SPENT ON HELICOPTERS OR MERCEDESSES."

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 RAMIREZ AND DEL RIO, "THE TWO MOST CORRUPT"

13. (C) AFTER THE MEETING, [] PRIVATELY TOLD POL/ECON COUNSELOR THAT MAJOR GENERAL RAMIREZ AND THE FORMER COMMANDER OF THE ARMY'S 17TH BRIGADE, BRIGADIER GENERAL RITO ALEJO DEL RIO, ARE "THE TWO MOST CORRUPT ARMY OFFICERS IN COLOMBIA." HE CLAIMED THAT DEL RIO TOLD 17TH BRIGADE PERSONNEL TO COOPERATE WITH PARAMILITARIES WHENEVER DEL RIO WAS PHYSICALLY ABSENT FROM THE

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AREA; HE ALSO ACCUSED DEL RIO OF INVOLVEMENT IN DIVERTING A PLANELOAD OF WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION TO PARAMILITARIES IN THE MAGDALENA MEDIO REGION IN 1985. (NOTE: THE INCIDENT CAME TO LIGHT ONLY BECAUSE THE OVERLOADED PLANE CRASHED. END NOTE.) [REDACTED] COMMENTED THAT BOTH ARE NOW IN KEY POSITIONS (INSPECTOR GENERAL OF THE ARMY AND COMMANDER OF THE BOGOTA-BASED 13TH BRIGADE, RESPECTIVELY) TO PREVENT ANY POSSIBLE COUP ATTEMPTS.

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14. (C) COMMENT: [REDACTED] CONFIRMED OUR IMPRESSIONS ABOUT PROBLEMS THAT ARE SERIOUSLY HAMPERING THE COLOMBIAN ARMY'S PERFORMANCE. HE FREQUENTLY HARKENED BACK TO THE GOOD OLD DAYS WHEN HE WAS A YOUNG OFFICER, AND PERHAPS EXAGGERATED THE DECLINE THAT HAS TAKEN PLACE SINCE THEN. FOR ALL WE KNOW, HE MAY ALSO HAVE BEEN MOTIVATED BY
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PERSONAL ANIMUS, HAVING REACHED ONLY [REDACTED] BEFORE RETIRING, BUT WE HAVE NO REASON TO DOUBT HIS CREDIBILITY. HIS DIAGNOSIS STRUCK US AS ACCURATE, BUT IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHETHER THE MEDICINE HE PRESCRIBES -- ROOTING OUT WASTE, FRAUD, AND ABUSE - - WILL BE PARTICULARLY WELCOME TO THE PATIENT. GARZA

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