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SUBJECT: Martinelli Confirms Approval of Cross-Border Attack Plan

REF: PANAMA 877; PANAMA 883; PANAMA 799; PANAMA 699; PANAMA 639  
BOGOTA 3559

CLASSIFIED BY: Stepheson, Barbara J, Ambassador, State, EXEC; REASON:  
1.4(B), (D)

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GOP Approves Plan

1. (S//NF) President Martinelli told Ambassador on December 13 that he had given approval for Colombian forces to attack FARC forces that will be gathered for the holidays in Panama's Darien province (ref A). He confirmed that the plan had been discussed during a meeting on December 9 with visiting Colombian National Police director General Oscar Naranjo.

2. (S//NF) During a lengthy dinner conversation with Ambassador, the president voiced contradictory views about the seriousness of the FARC threat. At times he expressed indignation about the FARC "holding a Christmas party" on Panamanian territory and said he was determined to take immediate aggressive action against them. When the Ambassador raised the risk (and political cost) of women and children being killed, Martinelli at first deemed this an acceptable price. He then reconsidered after the Ambassador framed the issue in counterinsurgency terms, underscoring the importance of maintaining the support of the population. At another point in the conversation he opined that the FARC was not really a threat to the GOP, and that he was being forced to act only because the Padron kidnapping case had demonstrated the FARC's potential danger to urban Panamanians. The range of seemingly conflicting views

that Martinelli holds in his own mind about this problem are illustrative of his mercurial and unpredictable management style, in which he gives conflicting directives to subordinates and approves contradictory courses of action.

3. (S//NF) Beyond the pros and cons of any potential Colombian action against the FARC, the Ambassador noted the danger posed by having two uncoordinated plans in the same space and time. The president first said it was a matter of who -- the U.S. or the Colombians -- could take out FARC leader alias "Silver" first, but then he said he now realized that this could get someone killed. The Ambassador made clear that closer Panama-Colombian cooperation was something we had long favored and noted that we would be happy to be part of a coordinated Panama-Colombian plan.

#### Embassy Panama Standing Down in Darien

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4. (S//NF) Embassy Panama's Pillar Three Darien working group (Pillar Three of our Darien 1207 strategy is aimed at demobilizing the lower ranked of the 200 FARC 57th Front members operating in the Darien along with the arrest of specific FARC leaders on U.S. indictments) met December 15 to review the impact of recent events on our operations in the Darien. The working group considered the state of play described above as well as their meeting the day before with Frank Abrego, head of the National Frontier Service, the GOP public force with lead responsibility in the Darien. Abrego had kept the embassy team waiting in his headquarters office for an hour while he scrambled to get guidance from Minister of Government and Justice Jose Raul Mulino on whether he was to provide an intelligence briefing or not. As a precaution, and to avoid running the risks associated with two uncoordinated plans operating in the same area and at the same time, the working group decided to cancel of the deployment of two JTF-Bravo Blackhawk helicopters that had planned training missions with the CNT-17 SEAL detachment and to recall the SEAL detachment, the U.S. Army Joint Planning and Assistance Team (JPAT) and Military Information Support Team (MIST) to Panama City for the next several weeks. In addition, the Ambassador has accepted DEA's recommendation that the FAST team focus its efforts on valuable CN targets elsewhere in Panama, away from the uncertainty of operating in the Darien, where

SENAFRONT's level of commitment to the CN operations was most decidedly not reassuring to U.S. law enforcement agencies. When the Ambassador briefed Minister of the Presidency Jimmy Papadimitriou the evening of December 15 about our plan to take this "Christmas break," he welcomed the decision and thanked the Ambassador for being understanding in the face of confusion.

5. (S//NF) Comment: We have just received Bogota 3559, which is helpful in piecing together the events over the past couple of weeks and to pointing to a way forward. We are grateful for General Naranjo's commitment to working in concert with the USG and his openness about GOC efforts to develop operational targets as a precursor to developing plans for taking effective action against those targets. While we would welcome marrying Embassy Panama's effort--we were in the midst of the same process of developing a target package against FARC leader aka Silver and others as a first step to developing a concept of operations to share in mid-January with the GOP for review and approval--with a Colombian effort, we are mindful (as Bogota 3559 notes) that Consejo Chief Olmedo Alvaro seeks to marginalize the USG, which has traditionally been Panama's principal security partner. After intense speculation that the

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anti-American Alfaro would be ousted, his position, which includes daily access to President Martinelli, seems to have strengthened considerably over the past couple of weeks, making our approach of working around him to achieve our goals steadily more difficult. We look forward in the new year to working in close collaboration with Embassy Bogota and with guidance from Washington to chart a way forward built around a single, coherent plan for denying the FARC and other DTOs safehaven and operating space in the Darien.  
End comment.  
STEPHENSON