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TITLE: SUBJECT: WHO IS FIDEL CASTANO?

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TEXT:

TAGS: SNAR, PHUM, PINR, PTER, PINS, CO, (CASTANO, FIDEL)

SUBJECT: WHO IS FIDEL CASTANO?

REF: A) BOGOTA 5872 B) BOGOTA 5453

1. CONFIDENTIAL--ENTIRE TEXT.

2. IN JUST A FEW SHORT MONTHS RIGHT-WING VIGILANTE CHIEFTAIN FIDEL ANTONIO CASTANO GIL HAS BECOME ALMOST AS NOTORIOUS IN COLOMBIA AS FEARED NARCO-KINGPIN PABLO ESCOBAR. CASTANO APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MID-JANUARY MURDER OF SOME 42 PEASANTS IN THE URABA TOWN OF PUEBLO BELLO (SEE REF B) AND UNCONFIRMED MEDIA REPORTS HAVE SUGGESTED THAT CASTANO MAY BE LINKED TO THE KILLINGS OF LEFTIST PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES BERNARDO JARAMILLO AND CARLOS PIZARRO. USING RECENT LOCAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS, WHICH ARE LARGELY BASED UPON LEAKED VERSIONS OF THE INTERROGATION OF A RECENT DESERTER FROM CASTANO'S ORGANIZATION, AND LIMITED NON-PUBLIC INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO THE EMBASSY, THIS MESSAGE PROVIDES BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ON CASTANO. UNDOUBTEDLY, SOME OF THE REPORTED DETAILS OF CASTANO'S LIFE ARE INACCURATE OR EMBELLISHED; NEVERTHELESS, WE BELIEVE THAT THE AVAILABLE INFORMATION IS OF INTEREST.

3. DESPITE HIS NOTORIETY, CASTANO DOES NOT PLAY IN THE SAME LEAGUE AS PABLO ESCOBAR. ALTHOUGH INVOLVED IN ILLEGAL NARCOTICS, CASTANO IS APPARENTLY NOT A MAJOR TRAFFICKER. MOREOVER, HIS INFLUENCE IS LARGELY REGIONAL, RATHER THAN COUNTRYWIDE. IN RECENT MONTHS, HOWEVER, CASTANO HAS BECOME WIDELY KNOWN THROUGHOUT COLOMBIA BECAUSE OF HIS BARBARIC CRUELTY TOWARDS ANYONE HE SUSPECTS OF DIRECT OR INDIRECT TIES WITH COLOMBIA'S LEFTIST INSURGENT GROUPS. CASTANO, WHO WAS A KEY FIGURE

**REVIEW AUTHORITY: James Cooper, Senior
Reviewer**

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IN NOW DEAD NARCO-KINGPIN RODRIGUEZ GACHA'S PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATION, COMMANDS A PERSONAL "ARMY" OF PERHAPS SOME 120 MEN, MOST OF WHOM HE PAYS ABOUT 200 DOLLARS A MONTH. HIS GROUP NOW OPERATES INDEPENDENTLY AND THE NATURE OF CASTANO'S CURRENT RELATIONSHIP WITH WITH THE REMAINING MEDELLIN CARTEL CHIEFTAIN, PABLO ESCOBAR, IS UNCLEAR.

4. ACCORDING TO PRESS ACCOUNTS, CASTANO WAS BORN IN 1951 IN AMALFI, ANTIOQUIA DEPARTMENT, TO A FAMILY OF MODEST MEANS. LITTLE IS KNOWN OF THE NEXT THREE DECADES OF CASTANO'S LIFE, ALTHOUGH HE APPARENTLY SPENT SEVERAL YEARS IN VENEZUELA. CASTANO SOMEHOW ACQUIRED A FORTUNE, PERHAPS THROUGH NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING, AND INVESTED MUCH OF IT IN THE PURCHASE OF HUGE TRACTS OF RANCH-LAND IN THE DEPARTMENT OF CORDOBA AND IN THE NEARBY MAGDELENA MEDIO AND URABA REGIONS. IN THE EARLY 1980S THE ERSTWHILE RANCHER WAS FREQUENTLY SEEN IN THE COMPANY OF SEVERAL ARMED BODYGUARDS AND RUMORS BEGAN TO CIRCULATE OF HIS PARTICIPATION IN THE ILLEGAL DRUG BUSINESS.

5. IN ORDER TO RESIST GROWING PRESSURE FROM THE GUERRILLAS, WHO KIDNAPPED, TERRORIZED, AND IMPOSED "TAXES" ON RURAL LANDOWNERS IN THE REGION, CASTANO TOOK A LEADING ROLE IN THE FORMATION OF ARMED ANTI-GUERRILLA SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS. INITIALLY, CASTANO ENJOYED WIDESPREAD SUPPORT FROM FELLOW LANDOWNERS AND EVEN FROM THE SECURITY FORCES, WHO SAW HIM AS AN INVALUABLE ALLY IN THEIR WAR AGAINST ARMED LEFTIST SUBVERSION. LOCAL POLICE AND MILITARY UNITS WENT SO FAR AS TO GIVE CASTANO INFORMATION ON THE LOCATION OF SUSPECTED LEFTISTS. IRONICALLY, IN ORDER TO FINANCE HIS ORGANIZATION AND HIS LAND PURCHASES, CASTANO BEGAN TO LEVY HIS OWN "TAXES" ON LOCAL RANCHERS.

6. GRADUALLY, CASTANO'S ORGANIZATION MOVED FROM THE DEFENSIVE TO THE OFFENSIVE. SINCE THE GUERRILLAS THEMSELVES WERE HARD TO FIND, CASTANO ORDERED HIS MEN TO CAPTURE LOCAL INHABITANTS SUSPECTED OF DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY SUPPORTING THE INSURGENTS OR OF BELONGING TO

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TAGS: SNAR, PHUM, PINR, PTER, PINS, CO, (CASTANO, FIDEL)
SUBJECT: WHO IS FIDEL CASTANO?

THE LEFTIST PATRIOTIC UNION (UP) POLITICAL PARTY, WHICH THE PARA-MILITARY GROUP LEADER APPEARS TO SEE AS LITTLE MORE THAN A GUERRILLA FRONT GROUP. CASTANO'S PRISONERS ARE ALMOST INVARIABLY ASSASSINATED, USUALLY AFTER BEING SUBJECTED TO EXTREMELY BRUTAL TORTURE. ROGELIO DE JESUS ESCOBAR MEJIA, THE DESERTER FROM THE CASTANO ORGANIZATION, SAID THAT HE WAS AWARE OF 95 MURDERS COMMITTED BY CASTANO'S ARMED FOLLOWERS DURING THE 16 MONTHS THAT HE WAS A MEMBER OF THE GROUP. FEW OF THESE 95 INDIVIDUALS DIED ALONE--ALMOST ALL OF THE KILLINGS CAME DURING MASS EXECUTIONS. THE AUTHORITIES NOW BELIEVE THAT CASTANO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR MANY OF THE MOST NOTORIOUS OF THE MASSACRES OF RURAL INHABITANTS WHICH HAVE PLAGUED COLOMBIA OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS.

7. CLEARLY, CASTANO HAS A VISCERAL HATRED TOWARDS LEFTISTS. DESERTER ESCOBAR TOLD AUTHORITIES THAT THE PARA-MILITARY CHIEFTAIN WOULD SHOW OBVIOUS PLEASURE UPON SEEING TELEVISION NEWS REPORTS OF THE DEATHS OF UP MEMBERS, EVEN WHEN HE HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE KILLINGS. CASTANO APPARENTLY BEGAN HIS FANATIC CRUSADE AGAINST THE LEFT IN THE EARLY 1980S AFTER HIS FATHER DIED, OR WAS KILLED, WHILE IN THE CUSTODY OF THE FARC GUERRILLA GROUP WHICH HAD KIDNAPPED HIM FOR RANSOM. CASTANO'S VIOLENCE IS NOT DIRECTED SOLELY AGAINST LEFTISTS, HOWEVER. CASTANO WAS APPARENTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE 1988 KIDNAPPING AND SUBSEQUENT ASSASSINATION OF SENATOR ALFONSO OSPINA, FORMER SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE PRESIDENCY AND A LEADING MEMBER OF A RESPECTED

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ESTABLISHMENT FAMILY WHICH OWNED CONSIDERABLE RANCH-LAND IN CASTANO'S AREA OF INFLUENCE. IN ADDITION TO THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ENORMOUS RANSOM PAYMENT, CASTANO MAY HAVE BEEN MOTIVATED BY THE REFUSAL OF SOME OF OSPINA'S RELATIVES TO SELL HIM STRATEGICALLY LOCATED RANCHES.

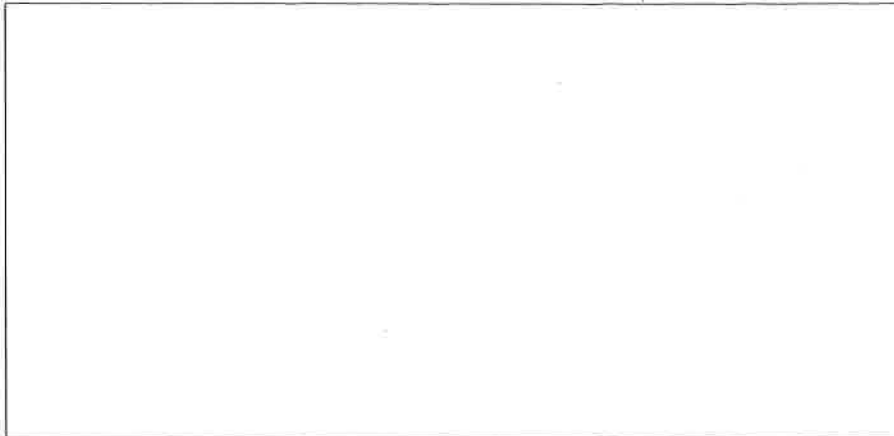
8. DESPITE HIS MODEST ORIGINS, CASTANO REPORTEDLY COMES ACROSS AS A RELATIVELY CULTURED INDIVIDUAL. HE IS UNMARRIED, BUT HAS LIVED WITH MANY DIFFERENT WOMEN OVER THE YEARS. CASTANO IS A JOGGING, WEAPONS, AND MARTIAL ARTS ENTHUSIAST WHO APPARENTLY EARNED HIS NICKNAME, RAMBO, FROM HIS WELL-KNOWN ADMIRATION FOR THE FICTIONAL MOVIE CHARACTER.

9. THE SECURITY FORCES, SOME ELEMENTS OF WHICH ONCE AIDED CASTANO, HAVE OCCUPIED AT LEAST TWO OF HIS RANCHES AND ARE NOW SEARCHING FOR THE FUGITIVE PARAMILITARY CHIEF. IT IS BY NO MEANS CLEAR, HOWEVER, THAT CASTANO'S ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN SERIOUSLY WEAKENED. CASTANO'S ROLE IN THE JARAMILLO AND PIZARRO ASSASSINATIONS REMAINS UNCERTAIN, BUT THERE SEEMS LITTLE DOUBT THAT HE HAS ORDERED A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF RURAL MASSACRES OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, INCLUDING THE MASS KILLING OF THE 42 INHABITANTS OF PUEBLO BELLO.

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