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TITLE: SUBJECT: CONDITIONS AT ITAGUI: BETTER THAN ENVIGADO,

- BUT CONTROLS APPEAR WEAK

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TEXT:

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COMBINE: COMPLETE

SUBJECT: CONDITIONS AT ITAGUI: BETTER THAN ENVIGADO,

- BUT CONTROLS APPEAR WEAK

1. (C) SUMMARY: REPORTS BY JOURNALISTS ALLOWED TO VISIT ITAGUI PRISON MARCH 26 REVEAL A RELATIVELY COMFORTABLE LIFE FOR THE 18 ASSOCIATES OF PABLO ESCOBAR NOW INCARCERATED THERE. ONE FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT WHO VISITED THE PRISON TOLD POLOFF THE JOVIALITY AND RELAXED DEMEANOR OF THE INMATES GAVE HIM THE IMPRESSION THEY WERE AT LEAST NOMINALLY IN CHARGE. ITAGUI WILL NOT BECOME ANOTHER ENVIGADO. BUT, AS AT ENVIGADO, THE INMATES'S ABILITY TO BRIBE AND INTIMIDATE, PLUS THE POSSIBILITY OF HIGH-LEVEL GOC NEGLECT, MAY CAUSE PROBLEMS, ESPECIALLY IF PABLO ESCOBAR BECOMES AN INMATE. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC JOURNALISTS WERE GIVEN A TOUR MARCH 26 OF ITAGUI PRISON, LOCATED JUST SOUTH OF MEDELLIN, WHERE 18 FORMER ASSOCIATES OF FUGITIVE NARCO PABLO ESCOBAR ARE HELD, AND WHERE PABLO ESCOBAR WOULD LIKELY BE HELD IF HE SURRENDERS OR IS CAPTURED. INCLUDED IN THE 18 ARE THE FIVE ENVIGADO PRISONERS WHO DID NOT ESCAPE FROM ENVIGADO WITH ESCOBAR LAST JULY, PLUS THOSE WHO HAVE SURRENDERED OVER THE ENSUING MONTHS. NOT INCLUDED ARE THE OCHOA BROTHERS, WHO ARE HELD IN THE SAME PRISON BUT IN TOTALLY SEPARATE FACILITIES.

THE MEDIA VERSION

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REVIEW AUTHORITY: Adolph Eisner, Senior Reviewer

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3. (U) JUDGING FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHS PUBLISHED IN THE PRESS THE CELLS ARE SPARTAN BUT COMFORTABLE. THE INMATES ARE ALLOWED TELEVISIONS AND VIDEOPLAYERS, NOT OUT OF THE ORDINARY SINCE IN COLOMBIA, AS IN MUCH OF LATIN AMERICA, INMATES ARE ALLOWED WHATEVER LUXURY ITEMS/PRIVILEGES THEY CAN PAY FOR, UP TO A PRESUMABLY REASONABLE BUT UNWRITTEN LIMIT. IN INTERVIEWS WITH THE REPORTERS THE PRISONERS SAID THEY WERE TREATED WELL, BUT VOICED COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE STRICTNESS WITH WHICH VISITS WERE CONTROLLED. THEY ALSO PROTESTED THEIR CONTINUED APPEARANCE ON WANTED POSTERS AND TELEVISION ADS, SAYING THESE "TRAUMATIZED" THEIR CHILDREN.

MEDIA APOLOGISTS

4. (C) ONE PUZZLING ASPECT OF THE VISIT WAS EL TIEMPO'S COVERAGE OF THE VISIT, WHICH APPEARED WRITTEN TO ORDER FOR THE INMATES--THE HEADLINE READS: "ITAGUI: NOTHING LIKE LA CATEDRAL," AND THE SUBHEADLINES READ: "PABLO ESCOBAR'S LIEUTENANTS PROMISED THE ESCAPE EPISODE IS BEHIND THEM AND IT WOULD NOT HAPPEN AGAIN. THE PRESS PROVED THAT THE INSTALLATIONS AT ITAGUI ARE MODEST AND SECURE." EL TIEMPO'S STORY EMPHASIZED THE CLEAN-CUT LOOK OF THE INMATES, THEIR APPARENTLY REASONABLE REQUESTS FOR ACCESS TO A KITCHEN AND THE PAVING OF THE INNER COURTYARD, AND ADDED LITTLE TOUCHES SUCH AS THE FACT OTTONIEL GONZALEZ ("OTTO") HAD A COLLAGE OF FAMILY PICTURES DISPLAYED IN HIS CELL.

5. (C) EL ESPECTADOR'S COVERAGE WAS LESS APOLOGETIC, FOCUSING MORE ON THE STATEMENTS OF THE INMATES AND THE FACT THAT THEY WERE OBVIOUSLY LIVING MORE COMFORTABLY THAN OTHER COLOMBIAN PRISONERS. (COMMENT: IT IS POSSIBLE EL TIEMPO, GENERALLY A STAUNCH DEFENDER OF PRESIDENT GAVIRIA, WENT OVERBOARD IN ITS EFFORT TO PUT THE BEST LIGHT POSSIBLE ON A DELICATE MATTER TO SHIELD

THE GAVIRIA ADMINISTRATION FROM MORE CRITICISM. END

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COMMENT).

JOVIALITY OF THE INMATES

6. (C) A RESPECTED FOREIGN JOURNALIST WHO WAS AMONG THOSE WHO VISITED ITAGUI TOLD POLOFF AT A MARCH 30 BREAKFAST HIS IMPRESSION WAS THAT THE INMATES APPEARED TO HAVE AT LEAST NOMINAL CONTROL INSIDE THE PRISON. HE WAS STRUCK BY THEIR JOVIALITY, WHICH CONTRASTED WITH THE RETICENCE OF THE PRISON STAFF, WHO MADE NO EFFORT TO CONTROL THE INMATES'S ACCESS TO THE PRESS. THE JOURNALIST ASKED JOHN JAIRO VELASQUEZ ("POPEYE," ONE OF THE MORE NOTORIOUS OF ESCOBAR'S HENCHMEN) IF THE STORIES THAT THEY HAD HELD A CHRISTMAS PARTY WERE TRUE. THE JOURNALIST SAID POPEYE SHEEPISHLY REPLIED YES, IT WAS TRUE, AND CONFIRMED REPORTS THAT THEY HAD SENT UP SMALL HOT AIR BALLOONS (A COLOMBIAN CHRISTMAS TRADITION) WITH 10,000 PESO BILLS (ABOUT USD 13) AND NOTES READING "LONG LIVE THE MEDELLIN CARTEL."

7. (C) THE JOURNALIST SAID THE PHYSICAL SECURITY WAS IMPRESSIVE, BUT NOTED THAT THE PRISON STAFF MADE NO MENTION OF IT TO THE VISITING JOURNALISTS, AND INDEED APPEARED TO HAVE NO REAL CONTROL OF THE VISIT, WHICH THE JOURNALIST DESCRIBED AS "CHAOTIC." WHEN THE JOURNALISTS ARRIVED AT THE CLASSROOM WHERE THE INMATES WERE ATTENDING LAW CLASSES, THE INMATES BROKE UP THE CLASS AND BEGAN CHATTING WITH THE JOURNALISTS, WHILE THE INSTRUCTOR AND THE STAFF STOOD ASIDE.

TELEPHONES FOUND

8. (C) THE JOURNALIST DID NOT SEE TELEPHONES IN THE CELLS, BUT IT WAS HIS IMPRESSION THEY ENJOYED REGULAR COMMUNICATION WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD AND THE PHONES WERE VERY LIKELY HIDDEN. NOTE: IN A SUBSEQUENT CONVERSATION WITH POLCOUNS, VICE JUSTICE MINISTER ROBERTO HINESTROSA SAID AN EARLIER RAID HAD DISCOVERED ONE CELLULAR

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TELEPHONE AND ONE CORDLESS TELEPHONE IN THE CELLS. ONE OF THEM WAS FOUND IN "EL MUGRE'S" CELL, BUT HINESTROSA COULD NOT REMEMBER IN WHOSE CELL THE OTHER WAS FOUND.

PABLO'S BROTHER IN CHARGE

9. (C) THE JOURNALIST ALSO CONFIRMED AN ITEM IN RESPECTED WEEKLY SEMANA'S "CONFIDENTIALS" SECTION WHICH NOTED THAT ROBERTO ESCOBAR, PABLO'S BROTHER, APPEARED TO BE IN CHARGE OF THE INMATES. ACCORDING TO THE ARTICLE, THE INMATES DEFERRED TO ROBERTO OR SOUGHT HIS GESTURED APPROVAL WHENEVER THEY WERE POSED WITH A QUESTION. THE JOURNALIST SAID ALL THE INMATES APPEARED CONFIDENT THEY WOULD NOT SPEND MUCH TIME IN PRISON. ROBERTO ESCOBAR TOLD THE JOURNALIST HE WAS ONLY IN PRISON "BECAUSE OF MY LAST NAME," AND "THEY HAVE NOTHING ON ME--I'LL BE OUT SOON."

COMMENT

10. (C) WE KNOW THE GOC IS TRYING TO IMPOSE STRICTER

CONTROLS AT ITAGUI, BUT ARE SOMETIMES STYMIED BY THE COURTS. IN AN EARLIER CONVERSATION WITH POLCOUNS AND DCM, PRISON DIRECTOR GEN. GUSTAVO SOCHA SAID GOC PLANS TO ERECT GLASS PARTITIONS IN THE VISITING ROOM WERE CHALLENGED BY THE INMATES IN A "TUTELA" ACTION (INJUNCTIVE RELIEF FOR BASIC CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS) AND WERE RULED UNCONSTITUTIONAL.

11. (C) THE REAL DANGER LIES IN THE POSSIBILITY THAT, AS TIME GOES ON, THE GOC WILL MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE AS AT ENVIGADO OF LEAVING THE PHYSICAL INSPECTIONS OF THE PRISON TO LOWER-LEVEL FUNCTIONARIES MORE VULNERABLE TO INTIMIDATION OR BRIBERY. WHEN POLCOUNS DESCRIBED TO VICE JUSTICE MINISTER HINESTROSA HOW SOME JOURNALISTS TOLD US THEY BELIEVED THE INMATES HAD THE RUN OF THE PRISON, HINESTROSA WAS VISIBLY TAKEN ABACK. HINESTROSA,

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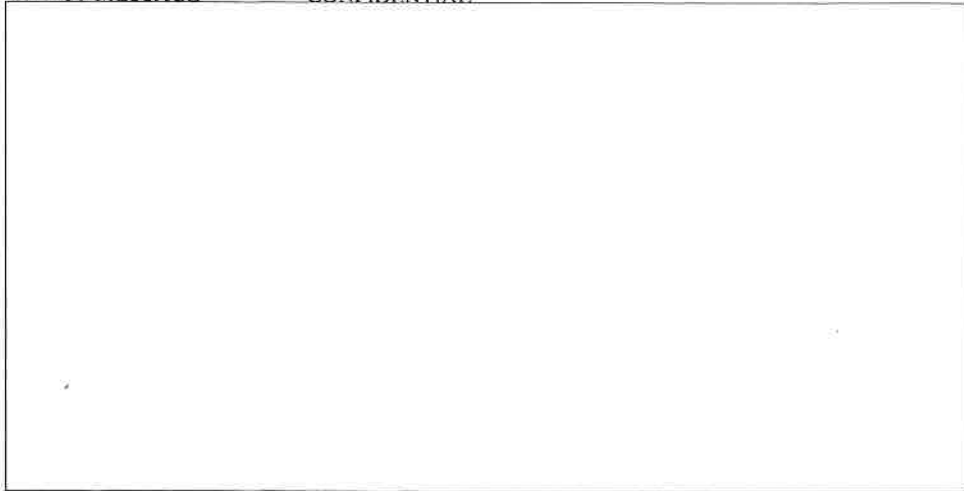
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IN RESPONSE TO POLCOUNS' QUESTION, SAID HE PERSONALLY HAD VISITED ITAGUI, BUT HE DID NOT ANSWER THE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION OF WHEN. IN ANY EVENT, WE WOULD HOPE A SEED OF DOUBT HAS BEEN PLANTED, AND THAT MINJUS GONZALEZ, IN CONTRAST TO HIS PREDECESSOR, WILL PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO DETAIL IN THOSE PRISONS WHERE TOP NARCOTICS TRAFFICKERS ARE HELD. THE REGULAR PRESS VISITS WILL HELP ENSURE THINGS DO NOT GET AS OUT OF HAND AS THEY DID AT ENVIGADO, BUT IT ALREADY APPEARS THAT INMATES HAVE USED BRIBERY OR INTIMIDATION TO SOFTEN PRISON LIFE AT ITAGUI.

12. (C) HINESTROSA AND OTHERS HAVE ASSURED US THAT IF PABLO ESCOBAR IS CAPTURED OR SURRENDERS, HE WILL BE HELD AT ITAGUI BUT AWAY FROM HIS HENCHMEN. NEVERTHELESS, HIS INTIMIDATING PRESENCE WILL MAKE IT EVEN MORE DIFFICULT FOR THE ITAGUI PRISON STAFF TO LIMIT SPECIAL PRIVILEGES AND CONTROL THE PRISONERS.

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