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## Colombian Warlord, Facing U.S. Charges, Turns On Charm

By JUAN FORERO

MONTERÍA, Colombia, Aug. 4 — The United States has called him a major drug trafficker, and human rights groups want him tried for the slayings of thousands of villagers in Colombia's long war.

But Salvatore Mancuso, one of Colombia's most notorious warlords, is not hard to find these days. He has embarked on a kind of charm offensive, trying to lure the United States into negotiations to drop its year-old indictment of him for drug running, even as his organization, a paramilitary group called the United Self-Defense Forces, begins what Colombians once thought impossible: peace negotiations with the government, announced last month.

No one thinks either goal will be easy. Mr. Mancuso is accused of trafficking 17 tons of cocaine. And his group is a confederation of regional factions with as many as 13,000 armed fighters who have tried to erode support for Colombian rebels by killing hundreds of Colombians every year. It finances itself with help from ranchers and other wealthy Colombians, from taxing coca farmers and drug dealers and, the United States says, from trafficking in cocaine.

Still, any move toward peace is welcome to Colombians desperately tired of war.

Washington has poured \$2.5 billion into the fight against drugs here, trying to stem the flow into the United States. But since drugs help finance the paramilitary groups and two Marxist rebel organizations, the American money has also helped curb their power.

Still, it was the American indictment of Mr. Mancuso and two other paramilitary commanders, coupled with the State Department's decision to label the United Self-Defense Forces a terrorist group, that appears to have done as much as anything else to drive the paramilitary groups to negotiate.

Mr. Mancuso has begun inviting foreign and Colombian reporters to interview and photograph him as he tries to put his group in a positive light, and to convince American officials that he is neither a drug trafficker nor a mass murderer.

There he was on RCN television earlier today, unmasked for the first time, sitting in a ranch house surrounded by books, including Henry A. Kissinger's "Diplomacy" and Plato's "Dialogues."

And there he was, looking melancholy, as he showed two American visitors pictures of his two children in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington and snowy Faneuil Hall in Boston, taken last year on a visit to the United States. (Mr. Mancuso did not go, of course.)

And here he is, in an interview today at a ranch in the mountains outside this city, telling a reporter that the American request for his extradition was "the hardest blow in my life."

"I have never cried as much and worried as much about a capture order," he said.

"When the empire asks for your extradition," he added, "you get scared."

Wearing tennis shoes and loose-fitting, draw-string pants, Mr. Mancuso, a tall, strapping man with big hands and thinning hair, tried to strike the part of a gentleman farmer, rather than a feared fighter. But the reality of paramilitary life was never far. Men with semiautomatic weapons patrolled the grounds, and a former guerrilla fighter, whose life was spared by the paramilitary fighters who captured her, served a lunch of fresh juice and lasagna.

Sitting at a picnic table with three aides whispering advice, Mr. Mancuso said he would like the State Department to send a commission to see him and the group's other leader, Carlos Castaño.

"We can sit down and clear up any situation that exists in relation to the extradition request," he said.

On the face of it, such meetings with paramilitary leaders seem unlikely. "They are drug traffickers, they are criminals, they are thugs, they are terrorists," John Walters, the White House drug policy chief, told American reporters in Bogotá last month.

But American officials are strongly supportive of the peace talks with the year-old government of Álvaro Uribe. And they say it is his government that should decide the fate of paramilitary leaders.

Such questions are sure to be on the agenda when two more American officials arrive in Bogotá to meet with Colombian officials. Gen. Richard B. Myers, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, arrives Monday, and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld is due on Aug. 20.

The center-right Uribe government, which has won widespread support here for its tough stance against the rebels, is open to negotiating a deal with the paramilitary leaders. After all, that could mean demobilizing 13,000 armed fighters within a couple of years and removing one of three of Colombia's major insurgent groups.

Luís Carlos Restrepo, the government's peace commissioner, has said a new law could be passed allowing paramilitary leaders to avoid jail by making reparations.

"We are advancing a pragmatic negotiation," Mr. Restrepo said. "What interests us is demobilizing an armed group."

To some human rights groups, reparations would be unacceptable. José Miguel Vivanco, who runs operations in Latin America for Human Rights Watch, warned that the money would come from drug proceeds and that granting impunity would weaken an already shaky rule of law.

For the moment, Mr. Mancuso is pleased by the new developments. His organization is, after all, still in control of huge swaths of territory and therefore negotiating from a position of strength.

And the talks are taking place with a government that Mr. Mancuso and other paramilitary leaders do not really see as an adversary.

"I am happy because there is a new horizon," Mr. Mancuso said. "Peace in this country is right around the corner."