

3-6-2003

Cuban War on Drugs

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Cuban War on Drugs." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9062>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Cuban War on Drugs

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2003-03-06

In recent weeks, the Cuban government has tried to elevate national awareness of the threat from illegal drug sales and consumption. The campaign is backed by a powerful new law, extensive television and print coverage, and greatly increased educational efforts. At the same time, the government has called attention to the US refusal to enter into a joint anti-narcotics agreement with Cuba.

Official acknowledgement that drug use is on the rise in Cuba is not new. President Fidel Castro called attention to it in 1999 when he referred to an Interior Ministry report that said arrests in drug cases had doubled between 1997 and 1998. The stepped-up campaign got underway Jan. 10, with an editorial in *Granma*, the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, which talked of a drug trade ceaselessly expanding around the world. The editorial said that there was an "incipient" domestic market in drugs and that it was growing with the increase in tourism and the diversion into the Cuban market of drugs bound for the US and Europe.

"While neoliberal globalization is stimulating narcomafias to seek out new routes, methods, and markets to continue expanding, Cuba...is also confronting greater threats and risks posing dangerous challenges to our national security," said the editorial. The government has adopted ideological arguments to confront the drug problem, associating the campaign with the Battle of Ideas, an effort to contrast socialist accomplishments with capitalist failures. The anti-drug campaign is a "battle for the present and the future of our Revolution," said *Granma*, comparing its threat to that of imperialism, "which is trying to exterminate us." The newspaper quoted Defense Minister Raul Castro from a 1989 speech in which he said, "Drugs will never enter Cuba, only with blood and fire can they enter! Only with capitalism can drugs enter our nation!"

Cuban television has begun broadcasting public-service announcements warning of the dangers of drug use, as well as coverage of police raids in Havana districts known to be centers of drug sales.

Justice Minister Roberto Diaz Sotolongo said Cuba has trained 300,000 special anti-narcotics agents in the last three years. Council of State issues decree Legal muscle behind the anti-drug campaign is supplied by a law-decree issued by the Council of State Jan. 21. Declaring, "Humanity lives in the silent horror of a real war that recognizes no borders, generated by the illegal drug trade," the council provided for the confiscation of houses, farms, and other properties belonging to anyone convicted of producing, trafficking in, or using illegal drugs.

The decree sets similar penalties for "acts of corruption, prostitution, trafficking in prostitutes, procuring, pornography, corruption of minors, traffic in persons, or similar acts." Like other aspects of the drug issue in Cuba, the government relates the decree to revolutionary principles. Confiscation as a penalty is justified by defining property ownership as the product of "revolutionary labors benefiting working people." Employing those properties for activities leading to illicit enrichment, therefore, subverts the revolutionary struggle "to dignify" the people and build

"a new society." For foreigners, criminal penalties already exist. Government figures indicate that 252 foreigners were arrested at Cuban airports and charged with narcotics violations in recent years and 146 of those are currently serving prison sentences or awaiting trial.

Soon after Granma signaled the start of the anti-drug campaign, police made a well-publicized arrest of three foreigners. In mid-February, a Havana court sentenced Rafael Miguel Bustamante Bolanos, a major drug figure from Colombia, to life in prison. Mauricio Francisco Noguera Salcedo, also from Colombia, received a 23-year sentence, and Robert Lewis of The Bahamas, a 25-year sentence for drug trafficking and related charges. Bustamante Bolanos was convicted in Miami on drug charges but escaped from a Louisiana prison in 1992. Cuban authorities say the three men were conspiring to develop shipping links in Cuba between Colombian suppliers and markets in the US and other countries.

Cooperation from US lags

A key element in the drug question is Cuban relations with the US. While much of the cocaine and marijuana that passes through Cuban waters is consigned to the US market, the US government has shown only sporadic interest in bilateral cooperation with Cuba on drug interdiction. The US has been reluctant to join with Cuba mainly because of strong objections from anti-Castro exile organizations and members of Congress.

During the 1990s, Congress held unproductive hearings and the White House ordered an investigation into exile allegations that Castro's government traffics in narcotics. One exile leader compared the Cuban government to the Medellin drug cartel. In 1999, Castro began asking the US for a formal bilateral agreement on drug interdiction and has periodically renewed the request.

Last year, Justice Minister Diaz Sotolongo warned that efforts to disrupt the Caribbean supply routes that pass through Cuban waters were failing for lack of integrated action. During the administration of President Bill Clinton (1993-2001), US officials expressed surprise at the effectiveness of Cuban intelligence work in tracking shipments and notifying US authorities of where they would arrive in the US. However, no agreement has ever been signed between the two countries. "We have reiterated a willingness to sign an agreement in this area, considering it possible and necessary," said Diaz Sotolongo. Cuba has signed 29 such agreements with other countries.

However, US policy on the matter has followed a tortuous path. Clinton made tentative moves towards an agreement, going so far as to hold talks in Havana on the possibility of stationing a US Coast Guard officer there and improving communications with Cuban authorities (see NotiCen, 1999-09-16). While investigations turned up no evidence that the Castro regime was involved in drug trafficking, anti-Castro members of Congress forced then White House drug czar Barry McCaffrey to backtrack on his support for formal cooperation with Cuba.

On the other hand, Clinton never put Cuba on the State Department's list of major drug-producing or drug-transit countries (the "Majors" list). However, the State Department did designate Cuba as a "country of concern" (see NotiCen, 1999-11-18). This is a meaningless category for Cuba since

"concern" did not mean that Cuba was the source of drug production or shipments. By keeping Cuba off the Majors list, the administration avoided the unattractive choice of either certifying Cuba as cooperating with the US on drug interdiction a decision that would only have enraged the exile hard-liners or decertifying Cuba. Decertification would carry no real penalties because Cuba is already under an embargo and other sanctions, but it would make Cuba eligible for anti-narcotics assistance, an equally odious choice for the anti-Castro right. Essentially, US cooperation with Cuba on the issue has remained episodic, with no formal structure for intelligence sharing and interdiction.

McCaffrey and other government officials gave as reasons Cuba's lack of a two-party system and its socialist economy. Effectively, the US position has been to wait for radical changes in Cuba before such cooperation can be considered. Former Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) warned in 1999 that any US officials cooperating with Cuba on the matter could be subject to criminal prosecution. He said cooperation would only divert attention from the charges that the Cuban government was involved in drug trafficking (see NotiCen, 1999-08-05). Currently, the president designates countries as cooperating or having "failed demonstrably" to adhere to obligations under international agreements and US law.

Of the 23 states on the 2003 Majors list, only Burma, Guatemala, and Haiti were determined to have failed demonstrably. Guatemala and Haiti were found "vital to the national interests of the United States" and accordingly were cleared to receive US assistance. Burma was not found vital.

-- End --