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Colombia: U.S. Cooperates In Search For Pablo Escobar

by Erika Harding

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On July 29, a communique issued by the Air Force confirmed news reports that US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) planes were participating in the search for escaped drug kingpin Pablo Escobar Gaviria and nine of his men. The presence of DEA planes in Colombian territory provoked harsh criticism, following a report on Caracol radio that US planes were flying over the country on "an undetermined mission." The Air Force statement indicated that four Hercules C-130 transport planes with infrared sensors and aerial photography equipment were conducting overflights in conjunction with effort to locate Escobar. The statement emphasized that the flights had been authorized by the Colombian government in accordance with anti-drug cooperation agreements, that the planes were not carrying US troops, and that the mission "in no way violates Colombian sovereignty." In response to the criticisms, Foreign Minister Noemi Sanin dismissed the assertion that DEA participation might be part of an attempt to abduct Escobar and take him to the US for prosecution. US Defense Department spokesperson Doug Hart told reporters that the overflight of US military planes in Colombia was a "common" practice, always conducted with the authorization of the Colombian government. He would not confirm or deny US participation in a mission to locate Escobar. Rep. Robert Torricelli (D-NJ), who chairs the House Foreign Affairs inter-American affairs subcommittee, said Colombia's drug kingpins must be "taken out of commission," and "if Colombia, with our assistance, is unable to do that then we will have to review extradition issue." He continued, "And if we cannot do that, then the United States must reserve to itself the right of unilateral action, whether covert or overt." On July 30, judiciary spokesperson Alvaro Lecomte announced that an investigation will be conducted into the constitutionality of President Gaviria's authorization of US military overflights. Gaviria reiterated legality of the measure and said he would continue to use "all means and international cooperation that the community of nations is willing to offer, in order to capture Escobar." On Aug. 2, Defense Minister Rafael Pardo told reporters that the US military surveillance operation would continue "as long as necessary." (Sources: Notimex, Spanish news service EFE, 07/29/92; New York Times, 07/31/92; Agence France-Presse, 07/29/92, 07/30/92, 08/02/92)

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