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U.S. Issues Annual Certification Recommendations; Opposition to Process Grows

by LADB Staff

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On Feb. 26, US President Bill Clinton sent to Congress his yearly recommendations regarding certification of cooperation for 30 major drug-producing or transit countries. In Latin America, Colombia, which was decertified for two consecutive years, and Paraguay were granted "national security" waivers, while all other countries received full certification.

Certification has been controversial since Congress mandated it in 1986. It has angered Latin Americans who see the US blaming producing countries for its drug problem while minimizing its role as the leading consumer nation (see NotiSur, 02/09/96, 03/08/96, 03/07/97).

Certification is also criticized as political and, more important, ineffective. Support is growing in Latin America and the US for regional monitoring of drug trafficking. The Clinton administration's recommendations are based on the yearly report by the US State Department, which was also released Feb. 26. In explaining the waivers for Colombia and Paraguay, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said both countries will hold presidential elections within the next few months, and it is important that the US prepare to work with the new administrations.

Bolivia threatens to refuse US aid if amount is cut

The State Department report said Bolivia produces more than one-fourth of the world's coca leaf and nearly 30% of refined cocaine. The report praised Bolivia's success in meeting eradication goals and President Hugo Banzer's pledge to eliminate illegal coca fields by 2002 (see NotiSur, 08/22/97). However, the Clinton administration also recommended reducing anti-drug trafficking funding to Bolivia. Bolivian government officials are concerned that the US Congress might accept the proposal to reduce aid from US\$46 million this year to US\$12 million next year. Colombia is slated to receive US\$80 million and Peru US\$31 million.

One State Department official said 75% of the cocaine arriving in the US comes from Colombia, therefore most anti-drug aid should be earmarked for that country. He said Peru's aid would not be cut because it reduced its coca fields by 40% in 1997, which made Bolivia's 5% reduction in coca cultivation "modest." On March 2, a government communique said Bolivia will turn down US aid if the reduction is confirmed, but it also "reaffirms its objective and political will to remove Bolivia from the drugs circuit in the next five years."

During a visit to Washington following the certification announcement, Bolivian Vice President Jorge Quiroga complained that aid to Bolivia was cut even though it met the US-set eradication goals, while aid to Colombia was increased. "The message is very clear," said Quiroga. "If a country is certified, the US cuts the funds, and if it is not certified, the US give it more funds." Colombia's waiver could increase US military involvement. The State Department report

acknowledged Colombia's progress in drug seizures, arrests, and crop eradication and the passage of a constitutional amendment reintroducing extradition of Colombian nationals. It complained, however, that the extradition law was not retroactive and noted that imprisoned drug traffickers continue to run their operations from inside prison (see NotiSur, 12/12/97).

Colombia remains the world's leading producer and distributor of cocaine and an important supplier of heroin and marijuana, and the report said coca cultivation in Colombia increased by 18% in 1997. Despite the increase, the State Department praised police efforts. "The Colombian National Police and counternarcotics forces have conducted an effective eradication and interdiction effort," said Secretary Albright. "But the current government has not demonstrated full political support for counternarcotics efforts." Nevertheless, key Republicans in the US House of Representatives pressured for Colombia's waiver. They say increased aid is essential to prevent guerrillas, who they claim are involved in drug trafficking, from overthrowing the government (see NotiSur, 10/03/97).

US and Colombian human rights groups are concerned that the waiver and the increased aid will inevitably lead to a greater role by the US military in Colombia's drug war as lines blur between drug traffickers and guerrillas (see NotiSur, 10/24/97 and 01/30/98). "Is there a covert war in Colombia now? Yes," said Eduardo Gamarra, a political scientist at Florida International University. Increased US involvement would only lead to more violence and more abuses on all sides, while giving the guerrillas a propaganda boost, he said.

Such fears are ill-founded, said Col. Byron Conover, a spokesman for the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in Miami. "There are a lot of heroes in the Colombian military and police who are fighting the drug war every day," said Conover. "SOUTHCOM wants to help them." Exact figures on military involvement are classified. Coletta Youngers of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) said, however, US military presence is growing, with 130-250 personnel on the ground on a given day, including 80 running two radar stations. "The talk in Washington is about increasing the number," Youngers said. "Even if the training comes under the title of counternarcotics, it is just as applicable to counterinsurgency it's jungle warfare. There is more talk now of combating guerrillas. We believe this has very serious implications."

Precise figures on military aid are also hard to confirm. Youngers estimated that about US\$140 million in military aid was allocated last year. Some of that was held up, including US\$10 million to the army because of human rights concerns. "It's hard to track," said Youngers. "There are several channels of Pentagon funding." Not in dispute is that funding increased to Colombia despite decertification. At a press conference, acting assistant secretary for international narcotics and law enforcement matters Randy Beers said decertification had not resulted in less anti-drug trafficking aid. "In 1995, we provided approximately \$28.85 million; in 1996, we provided approximately \$62.93 million; in 1997, we provided \$95.95 million," said Beers. "And we expect that the total this year will be comparable or greater."

Calls for regional monitoring US officials acknowledge the annual certification is not working. Clinton's drug-policy chief, Gen. Barry McCaffrey, has vowed to bury the process in five years. The flaws became evident last year when Clinton certified Mexico just after its top drug-fighting official, Gen. Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, was charged with links to the drug cartels (see Sourcemex, 03/05/97).

Despite strong opposition from Congress, the White House insisted on certification to avoid damaging relations with Mexico, a partner in the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). "In 10 years the process has not succeeded in reducing the supplies of drugs coming into the US, and drugs are now cheaper and more available than ever before," said Mathea Falco, former assistant secretary of state for narcotics affairs during the Carter administration.

In a recent article in the Harvard International Review, Sen. Paul Coverdell (R-GA) said the US should quit spending money measuring anti-drug cooperation in other countries and instead promote an international alliance with countries such as Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Coverdell suggested the proposed Centro Multilateral Antidrogas (CMA), which is being negotiated between Panama and the US, as a possible vehicle for such an effort. The US is expected to propose a continental anti-drug alliance that will include an evaluation process on each country's drug efforts, including the US, at the Summit of the Americas in Chile in April. "I think we can convince Congress that the law can be changed," said Beers, but he added that an alternative mechanism would be necessary for congressional approval.

Last year Sens. John McCain (R-AZ) and Christopher Dodd (D-CT) proposed suspending certification for two years, but the measure was defeated. Latin America is also pushing a new approach, and countries such as Colombia and Mexico have long insisted that the war on drugs must be waged multilaterally. Brazil recently added its criticism to the present process. "It is encouraging that Brazil's efforts against drug trafficking are recognized by the US, but we consider that these efforts should be evaluated by multilateral organisms," said Luiz Mathias Flach, president of the Consejo Nacional de Estupefacientes (CONFEN).

At the Ibero-American summit on the Venezuelan island of Margarita in October 1997, Bolivian President Banzer proposed that unilateral certification be replaced by a collective process, perhaps under the Organization of American States (OAS). On March 4, OAS secretary general Cesar Gaviria said the OAS is making progress in its plans to set up a multinational body to monitor drug trafficking. Gaviria said the OAS proposal would be discussed at the summit in Santiago. (Sources: Notimex, 02/17/98, 02/25/98; Inter Press Service, The New York Times, 02/26/98; Spanish news service EFE, 02/25/98, 02/27/98; Reuter, 02/26/98, 03/02/98; BBC News, 02/24/98, 02/26/98, 03/04/98)

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