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U.S. Drug Czar Asks Latin American Leaders to Cooperate on Anti-Drug Efforts

by LADB Staff

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Amid growing concern about US involvement in Latin America, Gen. Barry McCaffrey followed his visit to Colombia (see NotiSur, 1999-07-30) with stops in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Curacao. McCaffrey said the US is falling behind in the war against Latin American drug trafficking following the closure of Howard Air Force Base in Panama once the center of US anti-drug operations in the region earlier this year (see NotiCen, 1999-05-20). A new center in Key West, Florida, is now in operation with an "interagency" staff of 350 people, but the US wants to set up three new bases in Ecuador and the Netherlands Antilles.

Ecuador agrees to house US operations

Although not a large drug producer, Ecuador is a transit point for drug shipments from Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia to Mexico, the US, and Europe, McCaffrey said. "The threat in Ecuador is increasing," he said. "Ecuador is becoming a major drug-smuggling point where paste goes from Peru to Colombia and then finishes as cocaine and then comes into Ecuador by land, air, and river, and then leaves principally through Ecuadoran ports to the US."

If Washington reaches an agreement with the government of Ecuadoran President Jamil Mahuad, a base will be located in the port city of Manta, where the US already has an advanced observation post for regional anti-drug operations.

On July 21, Ecuadoran military authorities said the two countries completed the first phase of an agreement to establish an anti-narcotics center at Manta. During his recent visit to Ecuador, Gen. Charles Wilhelm, chief of the US South Command (SOUTHCOM), inspected the site, where an office for US computers and communication equipment has already been built. The US plans to invest between US\$20 million and US\$40 million in improvements to the base.

McCaffrey said US anti-drug efforts in Ecuador will be key in stopping the flow of illegal drugs. "Manta is in the right place," said McCaffrey. "There is a giant empty space in the Pacific now that Howard is gone, so I think Manta is in a very key place and is also safer." Venezuela refuses overflights From Ecuador, McCaffrey went to Venezuela. Warning that drug runners are increasingly using Venezuela as a transit point, McCaffrey said nearly one-sixth of Latin America's illegal drugs now passes through Venezuela. He said US radar had lost track of about 90 suspect planes over the country in the past year because it did not have permission for overflights.

On July 29, McCaffrey met with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who has repeatedly denied US requests to allow US surveillance planes to use Venezuelan air space. McCaffrey expressed concern that Colombian criminals will find their way to the US via Venezuela, and he warned that Venezuela could become a sanctuary for Colombian drug smugglers if Caracas denies access to US surveillance flights.

"I would suggest that what we have seen and will see is increasing penetration in Venezuelan airspace by international drug criminals," McCaffrey told a press briefing at the US ambassador's residence in Caracas. "They [the Venezuelans] don't want that to happen, but what they want to do is ensure they absolutely dominate their air, land, and sea space with their sovereign concerns. I agree." McCaffrey said drug seizures by Venezuelan police have risen significantly since Chavez was elected. But, he said, Venezuela is becoming more attractive for traffickers as they take advantage of Chavez's refusal to allow overflights.

Congress asked to expand anti-drug operations

"I am enormously encouraged with the strong commitment throughout the region," said McCaffrey in Miami on his return from the five-day trip. Leaders in those countries "saw the problem as one that would only succumb to some coordinated response." Meanwhile, some US senators were skeptical about the plans to set up additional bases. Sen. Ted Stevens (R-AK) said he was not satisfied with the explanations by Walter Slocombe, undersecretary of defense, and by Gen. Wilhelm.

ppearing before the Senate defense and military-construction subcommittees, Slocombe and Wilhelm said it is "absolutely essential" to gain access to the countries where drugs are produced and those through which they are shipped. Wilhelm said the administration is asking for US\$122.5 million for fiscal years 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 to finance operations in Ecuador, Aruba, and Curacao. He said that the US does not intend to build new US bases but to improve already existing installations. For example, the Manta air base has been chosen to monitor the main trafficking route to the US up the Pacific coast, but its runway is not strong enough to land airborne warning and control system (AWACS) surveillance planes.

Wilhelm said that, after 2001, annual operating costs for the three bases would be between US\$14 million and US\$18 million. He said between eight and 12 military personnel will be on permanent assignment at each base with approximately 200 assigned on a temporary basis. They would carry out about 2,000 flights a year.

Reports of invasion plans

The Argentine daily newspaper Clarin and Lima's La Republica reported in late July that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) informed the governments of Peru and Ecuador about contingency plans it was developing to attack the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) from their territory.

The newspapers reported that in early July Peruvian security head Vladimiro Montesinos told the Peruvian armed forces joint command that his CIA contacts referred to plans for Ecuador and Peru to participate in a multinational operation to help the government of Colombian President Andres Pastrana fight the guerrillas. A spokesperson for the US Embassy in Peru denied "any draft or concrete plan for military intervention" or any "formal or informal consultations" with the Peruvian and Ecuadoran government regarding an eventual participation by troops "in any operation, including of a peacekeeping nature."

Meanwhile, on Aug. 2, McCaffrey said President Bill Clinton's administration should re-evaluate US aid to Colombia. "At some point Secretary [of State Madeleine] Albright and Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary [of Defense William] Cohen and all of us involved in this will have to re-evaluate a dynamic situation that's going in the wrong direction in Colombia," McCaffrey told a White House briefing.

McCaffrey said Washington "probably ought to provide training. We ought to provide intelligence, where appropriate, as long as it's focused on the counterdrug mission, equipment, where appropriate, and political support in a regional sense for the peace process. And I think that's what we'll try and do." McCaffrey says Colombia's 20,000 "narcoguerrillas" earn up to US\$600 million a year from the drug trade that they use to finance their insurgency.

Despite the increasing use of a "narcoguerrilla" threat by some US Republican lawmakers, McCaffrey, and the Colombian military, both President Pastrana and Colombian Police Chief Gen. Rosso Jose Serrano deny the link. And, on Aug. 5, Klaus Nyholm, director of the Colombia office of the UN Drug Control Program, said the guerrillas are cooperating with a US\$6 million UN crop-substitution project. Critics of US policy say the "war on drugs" has been blended into the counterinsurgency struggle as a pretext for US intervention in South America.

A report published July 27 by the Bogota daily El Espectador cited a US source who said that those on board the US surveillance plane that crashed in Colombia killing five US soldiers and two Colombians were counterinsurgency agents, even though the plane was officially assigned to anti-drug operations.

The French nongovernmental organization International Observatory on Drugs recently said that Washington might prepare a direct military intervention in Colombia or sponsor an action by troops from South American countries. It noted President Clinton's designation of the conflict in Colombia as a US "national security issue." "When a US leader asserts something like this, it is because some level of intervention against the nation mentioned is being prepared, not necessarily with Washington at the head, but with it definitely behind the scenes," said a leader of Brazil's Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).

Political analysts in the US say the Clinton administration is divided into two camps one that fears that increasing military aid would escalate the conflict in Colombia, and the other, led by McCaffrey and others at the Pentagon, who would like to see increased military aid and training for Colombia's army. On Aug. 4, Colombia launched a new elite Navy unit that will use high-speed gunboats to fight drug traffickers and guerrillas along the country's extensive river networks.

President Pastrana and Gen. Wilhelm attended a ceremony to inaugurate the unit. It was not immediately clear what role the US played in the creation of the new brigade. But recent US government reports indicate US Special Forces, including Navy SEAL teams, have trained Colombian and Ecuadoran military in river warfare to counter the threat of both rebels and drug smugglers. "The guerrillas have a political agenda and narcotraffickers have an agenda which is profit," said Wilhelm. "They are different people but their agendas have come together and created a unique challenge for Colombia and the US." [Sources: Notimex, 07/15/99; Xinhua, 07/21/99,

07/29/99; Spanish news service EFE, 07/28/99, 07/29/99; Clarin (Argentina), 07/29/99; The Miami Herald, 07/30/99; Inter Press Service, 08/02/99; Reuters, 07/08/99, 07/27-30/99, 08/02/99, 08/05/99; Associated Press, 08/06/99]

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