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US Releases Drug War Certifications

by LADB Staff
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The US government has released its annual drug certifications for 2003, once again without decertifying any South American countries. The "balloon effect" was evident in the State Department report, as successful eradication efforts in certain regions or countries led to greater cultivation in other places. Almost simultaneously, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), a UN organ, released reports and testimony showing that developed nations receive the most profits from the drug trade and are doing insufficient work to reduce demand for narcotics.

Over the years, many Latin American leaders have expressed dissatisfaction with the certification process as an arbitrary and demeaning one for their countries. The certification process has often been used to deny aid to countries judged soft on drug trafficking.

Developed nations profit most from drug traffic

The day after the State Department released its certification report, the INCB denounced that it is the economies of developed nations of the global north that benefit most from the illicit drug trade.

INCB representative Alfredo Pemjean said that studies of narcotics trafficking done by his organization showed that producing countries "are those that are benefited the least economically," while the principal consumers and economic profits remain in the most-developed countries. He pointed out, however, that producer nations are "the most visualized by the entire world [in relation to the drug war] and probably the most repressed by the international community." Distribution is the way illicit profit benefits the richest countries, says Pemjean. He indicated that repressive or "sanctions-based" policies against narcotics consumption would not have the intended effect and recommended prevention measures and adequate community attention to addicts and participation in rehabilitation programs.

Martin Hopenhayn, the head of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), also spoke out on the relation between drugs and poverty. "The type of conditions of social life, campesino poverty, lack of opportunity for the young, and informal labor are conditions which are a recipe for cultivation, on which drug trafficking seizes."

The INCB annual report for 2003 also pointed out that it is important to fight against the demand for drugs and not just focus on production. The reports' authors criticized various "Western European countries" without specifically naming them for "an ambiguous attitude toward drug abuse" by their populations.

Local anti-drug activists in Brazil like Janaina Conceicao Pascoal, president of the Council on Drugs in the southern state of Sao Paulo, praised parts of the INCB report. The report's emphasis on social aspects "is a step forward, but the police approach oversimplifies the question, it is reductionism,"
said Pascoal, who is also a professor of criminal law at the Universidade de Sao Paulo. "Also taking into account the various social and economic aspects of the problem would be more effective."

Pascoal says that in Brazil the penal approach to the drug question has fueled the extensive violence, causing tens of thousands of murders in her country per year. "Total criminalization pushes many people into marginality and crime," she said.

**Nation-by-nation statistics**

The State Department report for 2003 said Venezuela had continued with confiscations of cocaine and heroin even though it spent a great part of the year "distracted" by political instability. It led South America in the amount of drugs seized for the fourth year in a row, beating out even Colombia. It almost doubled the amount of cocaine seized in the previous year, taking 32 tons, plus a half-ton of heroin, about the same amount of heroin it seized in 2002.

In December, the government of President Hugo Chavez carried out massive operations to eradicate coca cultivation in the Sierrania de Perija on the Colombian border. Venezuelan authorities arrested 1,897 nationals and 290 foreigners connected with narcotics trafficking.

The US government called on Venezuela to expedite the passage of a law against organized crime, convinced that it would be crucial for strengthening intergovernmental cooperation against drug trafficking and money laundering. The US was satisfied with Peru’s actions in fighting drug production, even though it continued to be worried about the cultivation of coca there. The area of coca cultivation was reduced by 15% in 2003, said Washington, and 40% of that was the result of a voluntary program of eradication, which goes hand in hand with assistance for alternative development with the participation of local leaders. Thanks to that program, 4,000 fewer hectares were growing coca.

The US calculated that a total 31,350 ha were being cultivated, after 11,313 ha were eradicated. This was the smallest number, said the report, since 1999. High-density cultivations were indicated in the valleys of Monzon, Apurimac, and Ene, which continue to be "an important concern." The report also recalled protests by Peruvian cocalero organizations, which asked for an end to eradication programs and the delivery of direct economic assistance.

With three international airports and four important ocean ports, Ecuador continues to be an important point of drug transit and precursor chemicals for drug manufacture, said the US report. It mentioned the "porous border" between Ecuador and Colombia and the high rate of poverty there, which make interdiction difficult and make it easy for the population to enter into illicit activities. Arrests in Ecuador in 2003 were similar to 2002.

In Colombia the US is also satisfied with government efforts against drugs but is worried about "narcoterrorism." The US called the aerial fumigation of illicit crops, destruction of drug laboratories, and confiscation of goods associated with the drug trade important achievements. More than 127,000 ha of coca and about 3,000 ha of poppy have been fumigated. Since aerial interdiction was recently restarted (it was suspended after the downing of a plane in Peru in 2001 killed two US missionaries), four planes have been shot down and three more captured (see
NotiSur, 2001-05-18, 2001-11-09). More than five metric tons of cocaine were confiscated in Colombia and Guatemala by that program in 2003.

The increased activity of groups like the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in urban zones bothered the State Department, which called the activity "terrorist," as did the links of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) with "narcoterrorism." Washington is happy with the results of "Plan Colombia," an anti-drug program based mostly on military aid. The government and people of Ecuador, however, are concerned.

Ecuadoran legislators urged President Lucio Gutierrez to communicate the negative impact of Plan Colombia on their border region during Gutierrez's visit to Bogota to meet with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe. They say the fumigations are causing environmental contamination and that displaced Colombians are flooding their country.

The US is also satisfied with the efforts of Bolivia but says eradication is the "great challenge" facing the country. The report said that Bolivia had reduced the area cultivated with coca to 28,450 ha. It said there had been a virtual elimination of coca-growing in the New Jersey-sized Chapare region, but coca cultivation had increased 26% in Las Yungas region east of La Paz.

Bolivian cocaleros defy Washington, lives lost "If Chapare is out of the coca-cocaine circuit, then it is time to demilitarize the zone," asserted indigenous cocalero leader and Deputy Evo Morales the day after the State Department report came out. The legislator demanded that the embassy and government of the US "act responsibly with their speech and stop for once and for all eradication and repression."

Bolivia has been the scene of one the strongest challenges to US drug-war policy in the region, with the political rise of an indigenous cocalero, or coca-growers, movement. The campesinos who raise the coca leaf, a traditional crop to the region and the unrefined source for cocaine-based drugs, have rallied behind the leftist political leadership of Evo Morales and his Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS).

Morales came in second in the 2002 presidential elections against now-ousted Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (see NotiSur, 2002-08-09). Coca growers in the Chapare region have been using bombs and booby traps to fight back against Bolivian troops on eradication missions there, leading to seven dead troops and 91 others wounded in 2003.

"We need to do this. The soldiers are taking our children's food right off our table," said one cocalero in Villa Tunari, the largest town in the region of the attacks. The coca grower agreed to speak with Knight Ridder News only on condition that his name not be used.

Most violence has been in the Chapare's "Red Zone," an area to which former miners migrated when the government closed state tin mines in the 1980s, a time when Bolivia was the world's second-largest supplier of cocaine. The most resistant cocaleros farm there, and many have a knowledge of explosives from their work in the mines.

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When government-eradication troops moved against Red Zone cocaleros last fall, "We fully anticipated an increase in violence, and sure as hell it came," recalled a US official whose agency doesn't allow him to be quoted. "We were really having a hell of a time of it. It was almost every day, it seemed." The official added, "When you are telling them, 'We took your livelihood once [when the mines closed], and now we are going to do it again,' sure there is resistance."

On a recent visit in Bolivia, however, Robert Charles, assistant secretary, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, said it would be an error to suspend military eradication programs and praised efforts in the Chapare. He almost seemed to echo the arguments of cocalero opponents of eradication programs when he said that coca growers replant new coca as soon as the government gets rid of the existing crops. Charles claimed that resources donated by the international community would help transform the coca regions of the country, in particular the Chapare.

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