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Venezuela Ends Cooperation with DEA

by LADB Staff
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Between August and October, the Venezuelan government pulled out of an anti-narcotics agreement with the US and alleged that agents of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) were conducting espionage. Since then, however, Venezuela has said that it continues to cooperate with the US in fighting drug trafficking, though it seeks to limit the powers the DEA has on Venezuelan soil. The US has since criticized the country's work on narcotics interdiction, but the Venezuelan government points to record-breaking captures of narcotics by its law enforcement and the military.

DEA faces espionage allegations, investigation

On Aug. 7, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez accused the DEA of using its agents for espionage and said Venezuela was suspending cooperation with the agency. Chavez said, "The DEA isn't absolutely necessary for the fight against drug trafficking."

US Ambassador to Venezuela William Brownfield said the previous week that the US had hoped to maintain cooperative anti-drug efforts in Venezuela and that without them "there is only one group that wins, and that group is the drug traffickers."

But Chavez maintained that the DEA has been using the fight against drugs as a pretext to gather intelligence on Venezuela. "The DEA was using the fight against drug trafficking as a mask, to support drug trafficking, to carry out intelligence in Venezuela against the government," Chavez said. "Under those circumstances we decided to make a clean break with those accords, and we are reviewing them." Chavez was referring to the cooperative agreements under which the DEA has operated in the country.

Prosecutors opened an investigation into the DEA in Venezuela in July. The government claimed it had information from two former DEA employees that led to the investigation and suspension of the government's agreement that allowed the DEA to operate inside Venezuela. "We have detected intelligence infiltration that threatened national security and defense," Chavez said. He recognized that Venezuela is a major transit point for cocaine moving from Colombia to the US and Europe. But he said Venezuela's armed forces have made important advances against trafficking.

Justice Minister Jesse Chacon told state news agency Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias (ABN), "We don't need even a machete from the US to combat drugs.... The armed forces are equipped" to do so. "We neither produce nor consume; geography simply obliged us to be between those who produce and those who consume, we are simply the transit point."

Chavez's government has criticized US policy on drugs, saying that, while the country is the world's top consumer of drugs, its government does little to try to lessen consumption. He also criticized the
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of not doing enough to catch major drug kingpins in the US. "How strange they don't find them," he said.

US officials rejected Chavez's allegations. "The accusations that somehow the DEA is involved in espionage are baseless," Deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said on Aug. 8. "There's no substance or justification for them." Later statements by government officials said that they were willing to work with the DEA if it would abide by Venezuelan norms.

"We are maintaining a link to people who work with the drug issue in the US Embassy, the DEA," Jorge Zambrano, a top official of Venezuela's Comision Nacional Contra el Uso Ilicito de Drogas, told the Associated Press. "The divergence of politics has nothing to do with the techniques we employ to fight drugs." Venezuelan and US officials began talks on a new accord to govern DEA work in Venezuela in September.

Venezuelan officials say DEA agents will no longer be authorized to carry out armed police operations and that they must work in concert with Venezuelan anti-drug authorities. Venezuela has taken increasing steps to detach itself from the US in various political and fiscal sectors.

In April, Venezuela cancelled a military-cooperation agreement with the US that it had maintained for 35 years (see NotiSur, 2005-05-13). In October it moved most of its foreign-currency reserves out of US Treasury securities and into Europe (see other NotiSur article this issue). It still remains one of the key oil suppliers to the US and neither party seems to want that to change, although Venezuela is cultivateing other major markets like China for its petroleum exports.

US criticizes Venezuela over drug control

The US revoked the US visas of six Venezuelan military officers, including a top anti-drug chief, just days after Chavez suspended cooperation with the DEA.

National Guard anti-drug commander Gen. Frank Morgado, Gen. Alexis Maneiro, Major Iran Salas, and three other lower-ranking officers had their visas pulled, US Embassy spokesman Ryan Matheny said on Aug. 12. "We cannot give any reasons for these revocations," Matheny said. In September, Washington excluded Venezuela from the list of countries cooperating in the fight against narcotics, saying the Chavez government had "demonstrably failed" in slowing the growing flow of illegal drugs across its territory. The country was not decertified as a drug-fighter, just removed from a list of US allies in the ongoing, decades-old drug fight.

The White House said Venezuela had failed to stem the flow through its territory of some 150 tons of cocaine and growing amounts of heroin, mostly coming from neighboring Colombia and bound for the US and Europe. The White House waived the cuts in US foreign aid usually attached to the "decertification" so that it can continue to support Venezuelan "pro-democracy" opposition groups that oppose Chavez.

Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel said of the annual certification process required by US law, "We reject it....It's infantile." "Mr. Bush's government knows perfectly well the strong action
by our country, the cooperation it offers, and the impressive volume of drugs seized," Rangel said in a statement. "But none of that counts because what matters to the US government is the political disqualification of Venezuela for the purpose of future aggressions."

Venezuela's Ambassador to the US Bernardo Alvarez said that, during the first half of 2005, "the National Guard confiscated and disposed of 22,000 pounds of cocaine, 17,500 pounds of heroin, 13,000 pounds of marijuana, and large quantities of other drugs and chemical precursors." Other officials pointed to similar record-breaking statistics in the interdiction field. Rangel said the US government congratulated Venezuelan authorities last year when they seized 43 tons of drugs, and so far this year seizures have netted 59 tons.

Across Venezuela's western border, Colombia has seized about 90 tons of cocaine this year, also a record. UN, US, and Colombian officials point to record hauls and decreased satellite detection of coca crops as proof that drug-interdiction programs in South America are effective, but critics of the drug war point to a steady street price for cocaine, meaning, they say, that the substance has not declined in availability in primary markets like the US and Spain (see NotiSur, 2005-04-08, 2005-08-26).

Evangelicals also accused of spying Other spying accusations cropped up in October when Venezuelan Justice Minister Chacon leveled accusations at the US-based church group New Tribes Mission, which had already been ordered to leave Venezuela. Chacon charged that the organization had illegally investigated uranium deposits and carried out drug research.

Chavez announced in the second week of October that he was expelling New Tribes, accusing it of having links to the CIA and collecting "strategic information" on Venezuela. The group has denied those allegations as well as the latest by Chacon. "There is no proof" that the missionaries have conducted any illegal activities, Fernando Andrade, the group's Venezuela-based lawyer, told the Associated Press. Though it has not received an official order to abandon its operations, Andrade said the group intends to fight any expulsion order through the courts.

Chacon said the group was using evangelical work with indigenous groups as a cover to help multinational drug companies develop drugs from the Amazon region. He also said it was operating in an area that contains uranium deposits of interest to foreign countries and groups for their nuclear potential. "In their camps they have airstrips, planes...very sophisticated equipment like computers and satellite transmitters, everything you can possibly imagine that isn't necessary to evangelize indigenous groups," Chacon said. The New Tribes Mission says it specializes in evangelism among indigenous groups and has 3,200 workers worldwide in 17 nations.

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