U.S. Embassy in Bolivia Asked Academics, Peace Corps Volunteers to Spy

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Tensions between the governments of Bolivia and the US have heightened since the media revealed that an official at the US Embassy in La Paz repeatedly asked academics and Peace Corps volunteers to spy during their stays in Bolivia. Additionally, President Evo Morales has accused US-funded aid agencies of delivering money to his opposition and threatening instability in Bolivia's volatile political situation (see NotiSur, 2007-11-16, 2007-12-14 and 2008-02-01).

US Ambassador Philip Goldberg has denied the allegations and challenged Bolivia's government to stop accepting US aid if it objects to the way it is distributed. Embassy wanted names, locations of Venezuelans, Cubans Reporting for ABC News, Jean Friedman-Rudovsky and Brian Ross said on Feb. 8 that a Fulbright scholar and a group of Peace Corps volunteers were asked "to basically spy" on Venezuelans and Cubans in Bolivia.

"I was told to provide the names, addresses, and activities of any Venezuelan or Cuban doctors or field workers I come across during my time here," Fulbright scholar John Alexander van Schaick told ABC News in an interview in La Paz.

Van Schaick's account matched that of Peace Corps members and staff who said that last July their entire group of new volunteers was instructed by the same US Embassy official in Bolivia to report on Cuban and Venezuelan nationals. The State Department says any such request was "in error" and a violation of long-standing US policy, which prohibits using Peace Corps personnel or Fulbright scholars for intelligence purposes. "We take this very seriously and want to stress this is not in any way our policy," said a senior State Department official.

Fulbright scholar van Schaick, a 2006 Rutgers University graduate, said the request came at a mandatory orientation and security-briefing meeting with assistant regional security officer Vincent Cooper at the embassy on the morning of Nov. 5, 2007. Van Schaick said the request for information gathering "surfaced casually" halfway through Cooper's 30-minute, one-on-one briefing, which initially dealt with helpful tips about life and security concerns in Bolivia. "He said, 'We know the Venezuelans and Cubans are here, and we want to keep tabs on them,'" said van Schaick, who recalls feeling "appalled" at the comment.

"I was in shock," van Schaick said. "My immediate thought was, 'Oh my God! Somebody from the US Embassy just asked me to basically spy for the US Embassy.'" A similar pattern was described by the three Peace Corps volunteers and their supervisor. On July 29, 2007, just before the new volunteers were sworn in, they say security officer Cooper visited the 30-person group to give a talk on safety and made his request about the Cubans and Venezuelans. "He said it had to do with the fight against terrorism," said one of the Peace Corps volunteers.
Others remember being told, "It's for your own safety." Peace Corps deputy director Doreen Salazar remembers the incident vividly because she says it was the first time she had heard an embassy official make such a request to a Peace Corps group. Salazar says she and her fellow staff members found the comment so out of line that they interrupted the briefing to clarify that volunteers did not have to follow the embassy's instructions, and she later complained directly to the embassy about the incident. "The Peace Corps is an apolitical institution," Salazar said. "We made it clear to the embassy that this was an inappropriate request, and they agreed."

The State Department admitted having acknowledged the infraction and assuring Salazar that it would not happen again. Yet, it was just four months later that van Schaick says he was asked by the same embassy official, Cooper, to "spy" on the Cubans and Venezuelans. Van Schaick says he never considered complying with the request, fearful that he would violate Bolivian espionage laws and that he would jeopardize the integrity of the Fulbright program, which yearly sends hundreds of US college graduates to countries around the world. "I am supposed to be a cultural ambassador increasing mutual understanding between us and the Bolivian people," van Schaick said. "This flies in face of everything Fulbright stands for."

The Fulbright program receives its funding from the US State Department, and the Peace Corps is a federal agency, but the State Department insists that neither group has the obligation to act in an intelligence capacity. In fact, both have strict regulations against members getting involved in politics in their host country.

The press director at the Peace Corps told ABC News in no uncertain terms that the corps was not involved in any intelligence gathering. "Since Peace Corps' inception in 1961, it has been the practice of the Peace Corps to keep volunteers separate from any official duties pertaining to US foreign policy, including the reality or the appearance of involvement in intelligence-related activities," said Amanda Beck. "Any connection between the Peace Corps and the intelligence community would seriously compromise the ability of the Peace Corps to develop and maintain the trust and confidence of the people in the host countries we serve."

Like many of the Peace Corps workers, van Schaick is carrying out his research in the Santa Cruz countryside, where a number of Cuban doctors are deployed providing free medical services as part of Cuba's solidarity with its socialist ally. "These are serious incidents that we will investigate thoroughly," said Bolivia's Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca in an interview. "Any US government use of their students or volunteers to provide intelligence represents a grave threat to Bolivia's sovereignty."

Bolivian law provides severe penalties in espionage cases. According to Article 111 of the country's penal code, anyone "who procures secret documents, objects, or information concerning [Bolivia's] foreign relations in an espionage effort for other countries during times of peace, endangering the security of the state, will incur a penalty of 30 years in prison." According to Friedman-Rudovsky, that means that any US citizen who provided information of use in a spying effort would be subject to Bolivia's maximum prison sentence. But the US citizens who reported being approached in this way by the State Department official said no mention was made of any legal risks arising from complying with the request to keep tabs on foreign nationals in Bolivia. "I came forward because the
Bolivian people have a right to know," former union activist van Schaick said. "Asking Fulbrighters to spy is just not OK."

Three of the other four Fulbright scholars now in Bolivia say they were never asked about Cubans or Venezuelans in their briefings. A fourth Fulbright scholar declined repeated requests from ABC News for an interview on the subject. The US Embassy in La Paz acknowledged the July incident, but both the embassy and the State Department claim it was "an error" and emphasized that it should not have been interpreted as a request for US citizens to spy.

"This was not in the parameters of the kind of briefings that we give to Fulbright scholars or Peace Corps volunteers," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said in a Feb. 11 press briefing in Washington DC. He reaffirmed that it was not US policy to ask either programs' participants to have any relationship with US intelligence operations. "These are guidelines, and anybody suggesting any modification or even playing close to those lines is themselves out of line," he concluded.

Embassy official charged with espionage, leaves Bolivia

Government officials in Bolivia filed espionage charges against Cooper, marking the first time in history that the Bolivian government has charged a US Embassy official with a criminal offense let alone for one as serious espionage.

Officials from Bolivia and the US met for hours on Feb. 11 in La Paz. Both sides said their intentions were to better relations, and they made clear that Cooper would not return to Bolivia. "We accept the [US] ambassador's explanations, and we want to get past the issue," said Choquehuanca at the press conference that followed the more than three-hour meeting that included himself, Bolivian Minister of Government Alfredo Rada, and Ambassador Goldberg.

Pressing charges may be a moot point, however, since US officials confirmed that Cooper was back in the US and that he would not return to Bolivia. Government sources have also told ABC News that, since Cooper has a diplomatic passport, he could have claimed immunity against any penalty. USAID funding the autonomy movement? Potentially more problematic for Bolivian political stability than possible spying on Venezuelans or Cubans are allegations that support from US-government-funded groups like the US Agency for International Development (USAID) is going to opposition groups seeking to weaken the Morales government. Benjamin Dangl, reporting for The Progressive magazine and news bulletin Counterpunch, said declassified documents and interviews on the ground in Bolivia proved that the administration of US President George W. Bush is using US taxpayers' money to undermine the Morales government and co-opt the country's social movements as it tried to do recently in Venezuela and as it has done traditionally throughout Latin America.

Much of that money is going through USAID, said Dangl. In July 2002, a declassified memo from the US Embassy in Bolivia to Washington included the following message, "A planned USAID political party reform project aims at implementing an existing Bolivian law that would...over the long run, help build moderate, pro-democracy political parties that can serve as a counterweight to the radical MAS [Movimiento a Socialismo] or its successors." MAS is Morales' party.
After Morales' December 2005 presidential victory, USAID, through its Office of Transition Initiatives, decided "to provide support to fledgling regional governments," regional governments headed by MAS opponents, USAID documents reveal. US Embassy spokesman Eric Watnik told Dangl, "Our cooperation in Bolivia is apolitical, transparent, and given directly to assist in the development of the country. It is given to benefit those who need it most." But Dangl said documents showed the money going to opposition figures.

Throughout 2006, four of the five resource-rich lowland departments headed by MAS opponents pushed for greater autonomy from the Morales-led central government, often threatening to secede from the nation. US funds have emboldened them, with the Office of Transition Initiatives funneling "116 grants for US$4,451,249 to help departmental governments operate more strategically," the documents state. "USAID helps with the process of decentralization," says Jose Carvallo, a press spokesperson for the main right-wing opposition political party, Poder Democratico y Social (PODEMOS). "They help with improving democracy in Bolivia through seminars and courses to discuss issues of autonomy."

"The US Embassy is helping this opposition," said Raul Prada, who works for MAS. "USAID is in Santa Cruz and other departments to help fund and strengthen the infrastructure of the right-wing governors." In August 2007, Morales told a diplomatic gathering in La Paz, "I cannot understand how some ambassadors dedicate themselves to politics, and not diplomacy, in our country....That is not called cooperation. That is called conspiracy."

Bolivian Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera said that the US Embassy was funding the government's political opponents in an effort to develop "ideological and political resistance." One example is USAID's financing of Juan Carlos Urenda, an adviser to the right-wing Civic Committee and author of the Autonomy Statute, a plan for Santa Cruz's secession from Bolivia. "There is absolutely no truth to any allegation that the US is using its aid funds to try and influence the political process or in any way undermine the government," said State Department spokesperson Tom Casey.

USAID officials pointed out that this support has gone to all Bolivian governors, not just those in the opposition. Despite Casey's assertion, the funding has been controversial. On Oct. 10, Bolivia's Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) approved a decree that prohibited international funding of activities in Bolivia without state regulation. One article in the law explains that Bolivia will not accept money with political or ideological strings attached. Dangl claimed there were multiple examples of what the US government had been doing to influence economics and politics in Bolivia.

Luis Gonzalez, an economics student at the University of San Simon in Cochabamba, described a panel he went to in 2006 organized by the Millennium Foundation. That year, this foundation received US$155,738 from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) through the Center for International Private Enterprise, a nonprofit affiliate of the US Chamber of Commerce. Gonzalez described a panel that focused on criticizing state control of the gas industry, a major demand of social movements and central plank in the Morales platform. "The panelists said that foreign investment and production in Bolivia will diminish if the gas remains under partial state control," said Gonzalez. "They advocated privatization, corporate control, and pushed neoliberal policies."
That same year, the NED gave another US$110,134 to groups in Bolivia through the Center for International Private Enterprise to, according to NED documents, "provide information about the effects of proposed economic reforms to decision makers involved in the Constituent Assembly."

According to documents obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request by muckraker Jeremy Bigwood, the NED also funded programs that brought 13 young "emerging leaders" from Bolivia to Washington between 2002 and 2004 to strengthen their right-wing political parties.

The MAS, and other leftist parties, were not invited to these meetings. The NED was also implicated in funding opposition to Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez (see NotiSur, 2002-05-03, 2004-08-20 and 2005-06-10). USAID's Web site says it has 48 projects in Bolivia divided in five areas: democracy support, productive-sector development, health, environment, alternative development, and development of economic opportunity. Several programs began in 2005 and 2006 and last three years.

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