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U.S. Alleges Venezuela Facilitates Drug Trafficking

by LADB Staff

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Just as the US and Venezuelan ambassadors returned to Caracas and Washington and it seemed that the ever-complex diplomatic relations between the two countries might begin to function on a mine-free field, Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN) dropped a bombshell from the US Capitol Building. The senator said on July 16 that, at the hands of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, the South American country was becoming a "narcostate."

To support the allegation, Lugar pointed to a report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), based in part on information the Colombian government obtained through interrogations of jailed guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The GAO report charges that Venezuela is at the center of a corruption and drug-trafficking scheme intended to inundate the US with drugs produced in South America.

From among the vast array of world media, Lugar released his allegation to only three dailies: The Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times of London, and Spain's El Pais; no Latin American paper was included. Reprinted by international press agencies, the story was front-page news around the world, but the three leading Venezuela opposition media Globovision TV station and dailies El Nacional and El Universal were circumspect in their coverage. They used a shortened version and then a day later. They also included government opinions and quoted no anti-Chavez leaders.

Lugar released the information the same day that the Pentagon announced the withdrawal of US military personnel from the Manta base in Ecuador (see NotiSur, 2009-07-31) and the Colombian government announced that the US military whose mission at Manta had been to repress drug trafficking would begin to operate from at least three, and possibly seven, military facilities in Colombia (five air bases and two ports).

GAO says Venezuelan corruption aids drug trafficking

The GAO report says US officials believe that "a high level of corruption within the Venezuelan government, military, and other law enforcement and security forces contributes to the permissive environment" in the country regarding drug trafficking. The report continues, "According to former FARC members interviewed by Colombian government officials, Venezuelan officials, including those in the National Guard, have been bribed to facilitate cocaine shipments across the border with Colombia."

The text released by Lugar's office claims that the quantity of drugs produced in Colombia and taken out through Venezuela went from 60 metric tons in 2004 to 260 MT in 2007. The drugs frequently leave onboard planes that take off from Venezuela and land in hundreds of clandestine airports in Mexico and other Central American and Caribbean countries.

The story in El Pais attributes to the GAO report allegations that US security agencies detected 178 flights originating in airports in Venezuela suspected of carrying drugs in 2007 compared with 109 such flights in 2004. In the same time frame, it added, flights originating in Colombia and carrying cocaine had been almost eliminated, which a Colombian Air Force official attributed to Colombia's Air Bridge Denial program, developed jointly by that country and the US.

The Spanish newspaper thus claimed, "Since 2004, Venezuela has, in fact, replaced neighboring Colombia as a transshipment point for cocaine. That has been accomplished, according to the report, thanks to the tight collaboration between the Venezuelan armed forces and the Colombian guerrillas, who are deeply involved in the business." This information was not included in the versions by the other two newspapers.

The three papers chosen by Lugar agree that "corruption within the Venezuelan National Guard represents the most significant threat," because it "reports directly to President Chavez and controls Venezuela's airports, borders, and ports." The three dailies also emphasized that "in some cases, drugs captured by the National Guard and Venezuela's Investigative Police, who are often themselves involved in drug trafficking, aren't destroyed, but are taken by the officials or returned to drug traffickers."

The Wall Street Journal and The Financial Times printed a quote from Sen. Lugar that is not included in the Spanish daily's version. "The findings of this report," pointed out Lugar, "have heightened my concern that Venezuela's failure to cooperate with the United States on drug interdiction is related to corruption in that country's government."

The Wall Street Journal devoted 593 words in 11 paragraphs to the report, of which four were given entirely to questioning President Chavez for Venezuela's alleged role in the crisis in Honduras, where President Manuel Zelaya was ousted from power on June 23 (see NotiCen, 2009-07-02). For The Financial Times, the news warranted 391 words; El Pais gave it 884 words. Chavez, government officials respond Venezuelan reaction was not long in coming.

The political aspects were addressed by Chavez and Foreign Relations Minister Nicolas Maduro, and the strictly informational aspects were handled by Interior and Justice Minister Tereck El Aissami and director of the Oficina Nacional Antidrogas (ONA) Nestor Reverol Torres. The president attacked "rapacious imperialism," but he was careful not to include in his criticism US President Barack Obama, with whom he has begun a respectful relationship that has already shown significant results the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

"The empire uses sophisms such as those of Sen. Lugar to try to demonize governments it doesn't like; it's an old imperial weapon. But we have shown before that the US is the largest drug trafficker in the world, it's where there are large drug-trafficking cartels, large amounts of drug capital, and the largest number of consumers. And it is where those responsible for the coup in Honduras are, an action for which we have to excuse Obama, because the empire the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department are in back of Obama, mocking him," said Chavez. "This report to which the reactionary Sen. Lugar alludes and the other reports published regularly by different US agencies

are tools of political blackmail that lack scientific rigor and a serious methodology, and their only objective is to ratify the US establishment's interventionist intentions in the world."

El Aissami had another task. On July 26, before the shrapnel from the bomb detonated by Lugar had reached Venezuela, the minister listed aspects of Venezuela's cooperation in the international fight against drug trafficking. That day, trafficker John Jairo Ballona Pardo was deported to Colombia on a red-alert (maximum priority) Interpol request for setting up an organization that used Venezuelan territory to send Colombia-produced cocaine to the US, Asia, and Europe. He was the ninth drug trafficker extradited under Venezuela's agreements with 37 countries on fighting drug trafficking.

Salvatore Micelli, one of Italy's 30 most dangerous fugitives, had been extradited on June 30. "What irony!" said El Aissami. "We are next door to the principal drug-producing country [Colombia] and confronting the largest consumer [the US], but it seems Venezuela and its government are responsible. What cynicism! The US consumes more than 31% of the marijuana and 45% of the cocaine produced in the world, but it's Venezuela's fault."

Reverol's job was to put numbers on Venezuela's participation in the international fight against drugs. "More than 464 tons of drugs seized in the last 10 years, 3,722 persons charged with crimes related to drug trafficking so far this year, 181 properties confiscated from traffickers and put at the disposal of the Venezuelan state, the nonexistence of drug-related crops on the border with Colombia, a new fully operational radar system, our anti-drug plan praised by the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS), much investment, much prevention. What we have accomplished is neither insignificant nor meaningless," said Reverol Torres.

Although international news agencies reported the opinions expressed by Chavez and his foreign minister, the information provided by El Aissami, and the numbers cited by Reverol Torres throughout the world, the journalistic judgment of The Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times, and El Pais have yet, one month after Sen. Lugar's charges, to present their readers with Venezuela's anti-drug trafficking campaign or with other information questioning the truth of the prisoners' confessions to the Colombian secret service, which is an interested part of the story.

The Colombian government has a poor reputation and little favorable opinion regarding human rights from those who, for example, assist its prisoners neither prestigious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (AI) nor specialized agencies such as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) or the OAS's Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR).

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