Drug Cartels Corrupt DEA Agents in Colombia

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Drug Cartels Corrupt DEA Agents in Colombia

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At the end of March, two separate official reports from different sources upset people in Colombia and once again brought into question the role and behavior of US civilian and military advisors in this South American country. The presence of the advisors in Colombia since the mid-20th century is in accordance with various bilateral agreements signed by Bogota and Washington.

The first report, written by the Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y las Víctimas, established that, between 2003 and 2007, US military advisors and "contractors" involved in Plan Colombia (NotiSur, Jan. 19, 2001) abused at least 54 adolescents, including a girl only 12 years old. This commission is made up of foreign and domestic persons chosen by the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) within the framework of the peace negotiations being held in Cuba since November 2012 (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012, and April 3, 2015).

The second report was written by the US Department of Justice and reveals that between 2005 and 2008 there had been several confirmed cases in which Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents assigned to the war on drugs participated in "sex parties" organized and paid for by leaders of Colombian drug cartels. In addition, these agents also received expensive gifts, including cash, from the cartels.

The sex crimes committed by the military personnel and contractors—in the language of the Pentagon that's what civilians or veterans are called who are hired by specialized private firms like those that operate in Iraq and Afghanistan to carry out "special actions," intelligence work, or dirty work—were denounced on several occasions in the past several years. Nevertheless, the complaints had not been described with such precision nor had they come from official sources.

The Comisión Histórica released the first reports simultaneously in Havana and Bogota on March 25. The second, titled "The Handling of Sexual Harassment and Misconduct Allegation by the Department’s Law Enforcement Components," was leaked to the public by John Bresnahan y Lauren French, staff writers on the US Web site politico.com. In both cases, there was an emphasis on showing that military personnel and contractors commit their crimes—kidnapping, trapping people by drugging them, rape, and, in many cases, filming pornographic videos to market in international pedophile rings—under the protection of diplomatic immunity that Colombia provides the agents, giving them the benefit enjoyed by members of the diplomatic corps (such as freedom of movement and the right to bear arms under the terms of the Vienna Convention of April 1961).

DEA director forced to resign; no such repercussions in Colombia

In the US, the situation led to the forced resignation of DEA Director Michele Leonhart on April 22 after Congress and the White House withdrew their support upon learning of the events and confirming that this type of misbehavior is common among agents assigned to posts abroad.

Colombia, however, saw no institutional fallout even though, during the period analyzed by one or the other report, the minister of defense, the person directly in charge of overseeing fulfillment
of the country’s military or intelligence agreements, was Juan Manuel Santos, none other than the current president.

"Santos was saved because the right, allied with the gringos [the US], is up to its ears in the same situation and because the left doesn’t want to damage his image until a definitive peace agreement is signed with the guerrillas," wrote an El Espectador reader on the Bogota newspaper’s Web site comments page published April 4.

The report from the Comisión Histórica said the perpetrators in the 54 rape cases—"barely a minimum of the 7,234 cases of women raped by North American troops here"—received immunity "thanks to the bilateral agreements and the diplomatic immunity that US personnel enjoy." The document, which defines the sexual assaults as "acts of sexual imperialism," is based solely on events registered in Melgar (a municipality in the Tolima Department, 109 km southwest of Bogota) and in Girardot (a city in the department of Cundinamarca, 133 km southwest of the capital).

In 2009, the alternative online daily El Turbión had denounced the assaults in both cities, but the administration of then President Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) had managed to cover up the situation. El Turbión reported that the complaints, which added that the aberrant events had been filmed and marketed, reached Santos, who was minister of defense.

At that time, the digital daily said, and the Comisión Histórica now confirms, it was known that the two men who had kidnapped and raped the 12-year-old girl were Sgt. Michel J. Coen and César Ruiz, a contract worker. Both were relieved of their jobs in Colombia and sent to the US for trial, though it is not known whether that happened despite the case having an enormous public repercussion.

Olga Castillo Campos, mother of the girl who was raped and the protagonist of an ongoing campaign calling for justice, told El Turbión her hopes "were thrown in the garbage," after she learned from the March 26 US Department of Justice report that "7 of the 10 agents admitted attending parties with prostitutes while they were stationed. The DEA imposed penalties ranging from a 2-day suspension to a 10-day suspension."

"They were only suspended briefly," reported the Bogota magazine Semana, a publication closely linked to the local establishment.

The shocking revelation of the US Department of Justice report arose as the first result of a specific investigation into sexual harassment that included, in addition to the DEA, agents of various official agencies, among them the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), and the US Marshals Service (USMS). "The foreign officers further alleged that in addition to soliciting prostitutes, three DEA SSAs in particular were provided money, expensive gifts, and weapons from drug cartel members," the Justice Department document reported.

"The official US report falls very short of the truth. What happened is much more scandalous," said Semana on March 28. On that day, the weekly published an extensive investigation that included interviews with active and retired DEA agents, Colombian officials who worked with the US agency, drug cartel defense lawyers, and several prostitutes who participated in the parties financed by the drug cartels.
Corruption worse than reports

"The report doesn't even get close to what has been happening with these guys for many years," an unidentified Colombian official told Semana. "What happens is that no one dares to say anything because it would be career suicide."

Another agent, who Semana identified only as someone who worked with the Special Intelligence Unit (SIU), a special binational group, added, "If you complain or report what they do, they will surely put you before some general and, in the best-case scenario, you’ll be thrown out. When that doesn't work, they make it look like you’re involved in the drug trade and you’ll end up in jail or extradited to the US." This official’s story, which the magazine said was collaborated by three other colleagues, refers to what occurred in the historic city of Cartagena, which is second to Bogota in the number of DEA agents assigned to Colombia.

"I didn’t see that it was the drug dealers who paid for the parties, but that’s what people said. And there was a group of DEA guys who were on very close terms with the drug dealers. Suddenly, they began to receive expensive gifts—Rolex watches, Montblanc pens, and lots of cash—which was used to hold big orgies with prostitutes who charged US$2,000 a night and to buy the best cars," this source added.

Two Colombian lawyers and three US lawyers who specialize in defending drug dealers extradited to the US told how drug cartels corrupt DEA agents. "With money it’s very easy," one said. "One begins by having a few drinks in the bars of the best hotels and then continues by taking them to eat in luxury restaurants where, in addition to drinking a lot, you end up leaving them in the hands of very affectionate prostitutes. The women figure out the agents’ weaknesses—whether to give them Rolexes or Montblanc or simply money (for them, nevertheless, there’s nothing better than the latest version of Sig Sauer or Pietro Beretta pistols)—and then the agents give details about the case concerning our clients and they suggest legal alternatives," explained a lawyer who represents two drug lords extradited to the US.

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