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Summary: State Withdraws Recommendation To Certify Panama For Cooperation In Anti-narcotics Trafficking Campaign

by Deborah Tyroler

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Feb. 19: Administration officials cited by the New York Times said that a draft State Department report has concluded that while Panama and Mexico have failed to take all necessary steps to control drug trafficking, the two countries should not be penalized by the US. According to legislation passed in 1986, the president must certify that countries where major drug trafficking takes place are "fully cooperating" in efforts to reduce/eliminate the trade. Countries that do not receive certification lose US military and economic aid, trade preferences, loans and several other economic advantages. The State Department report concludes that although Panama and Mexico have not performed adequately in the fighting against drugs, they should be certified nonetheless because there are "other national interests" that warrant continued economic and other assistance. In 1987, both nations received unqualified certification. The decision on Panama is curious in light of federal indictments of racketeering and other drug-related charges earlier this month against Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega and some of his aides. Since the US has already suspended economic and military aid to Panama, the effect of decertification would be largely symbolic. The report stated that although the indictments of Noriega cannot be ignored, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and other agencies have received official cooperation on many occasions. Since certain investigations are continuing, these agencies wish to ensure Panama's continued cooperation, said the report. The report was described as provisional and is subject to clearance by other government agencies and the regional assistance secretaries of State before it goes to Secretary of State George Shultz and President Reagan. The president is scheduled to announce his decision by March 1. "It's ridiculous and stupid, absolutely ludicrous, and sends the wrong signals to both countries," said Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato (R-NY). Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), who concluded a week of subcommittee hearings on Noriega's activities last week, said that if reports of the State Department recommendations are correct, "it is totally outrageous, particularly in the case of Panama." A senior Customs official said William von Rabb, Commissioner of the US Customs Service, will object to any qualified certification of the two countries. The DEA, which traditionally opposes the penalization of any country because such action might limit the access of its agents, had no comment. Feb. 23: The State Department has recommended that President Reagan penalize Panama for failing to "fully cooperate" in Washington's world-wide anti-drug trafficking campaign. State had apparently rejected the conclusions of its bureau in charge of drugs, and the wishes of the DEA and the Justice Department, in response to strong criticism from Democrat and Republican congresspersons. According to a Department official cited by the New York Times, "The one thing no one wanted to do was to give Noriega any message that he could use to his advantage inside Panama." Next, some State officials realized that the Congress would likely reverse a presidential recommendation perceived to be favorable to Panama, said the official cited by the Times. (Basic data from New York Times, 02/20/88, 02/24/88; Washington Post, 02/21/88)

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