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Peru: U.S. State Department Suspends Paramilitary Action Against Drug Traffickers In Upper Huallaga Valley

by John Neagle

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According to statements by Rep. William J. Hughes (D-NJ) on April 12, the State Department has suspended a paramilitary campaign against drug traffickers in Peru's Upper Huallaga Valley because of security threats against US Drug Enforcement Administration agents. The Valley is described as the source of more than half of the cocaine that enters the US, and is also the site of a stepped-up campaign by the Sendero Luminoso guerrillas. DEA agents, who were acting as advisers to Peru's Civil Guard, were coming under repeated attack while flying helicopter missions against cocaine processing laboratories in the jungle region. In late January, US officials reported that the chief security officer at the US embassy in Lima was shot and wounded while on a helicopter inspection of the area. It was unknown whether the helicopter was fired on by rebels or drug traffickers. Hughes, chair of a House judiciary subcommittee, held the first congressional hearing April 12 on the DEA-State Department undertaking, called Operation Snowcap. He said that US Ambassador Alexander Watson suspended Snowcap in Peru in mid-February and some of the DEA agents have been withdrawn. Hughes said the suspension will be in effect until a new and more secure base camp can be established for the DEA personnel. DEA spokesperson Maurice Hill confirmed that the agents have been moved out of the Valley. He said he had "no idea" how long it would be before the new base would be complete. In light of the dangers involved in Snowcap operations, which have been extended to Bolivia, a House foreign affairs team in March recommended that the DEA agents be substituted with US Special Forces. Hughes said this would be "an absolute mistake" since it would provoke nationalist sentiment in both countries. (Basic data from Washington Post, 04/13/89)

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