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## Notes On U.S. "drug War" In Latin America

*by John Neagle*

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Coca production in Latin America is reportedly escalating. Output is high enough for 1 million pounds of cocaine this year, twice the quantity of the mid-1980s. State Department reports indicate that Colombian traffickers have begun planting in Brazil's Amazon jungles. US-financed programs to manually uproot the coca crop have been halted in Peru, and are stagnating in Bolivia. On May 13, a Drug Enforcement Administration agent, five State Department contract employees, and three Peruvians were killed in a plane crash in Peru. DEA agents in the Upper Huallaga Valley had been instructed weeks earlier to return to Lima every night for their own safety. US and Peruvian officials have said there was no evidence of sabotage, but US officials decided to conduct a full investigation. By some estimates, as much as 200,000 acres of coca are cultivated in the Upper Huallaga, making it the source of more than half the cocaine entering the US. US sources report that Peruvian army troops in the valley rarely leave their garrisons for fear of encountering guerrillas. As many as 40 employees of CORAH, the Peruvian Coca Reduction Agency, have been murdered since a US-financed program to manually destroy coca plants began three years ago. This program and another called "Snowcap" were suspended in February. Snowcap involved DEA agents accompanying Peruvian police in paramilitary attacks on drug traffickers. US officials cited by the Washington Post said the operations were too dangerous until a new, more secure military base could be built to house the DEA agents. Sendero Luminoso rebels, according to the Washington Post (05/27/89) have shot to death 10 policemen in the area, described as the world's major coca production region. Earlier in May, President Alan Garcia returned from a tour of the Upper Huallaga Valley and said the government "will never allow massive eradication" by herbicides on the region's coca crop. Despite a new eradication law passed last year, as of late May Bolivia's coca control agency had destroyed barely 1,500 of that country's 192,000 acres of the coca crop. One reason for the slow pace, US officials said, is that DEA agents working with Bolivian antinarcotics police have failed to disrupt the coca trade in the Chapare, Bolivia's prime coca-growing region. Prices offered by drug traffickers for the crop are so high more than \$60 per hundredweight that it is not economical for peasants to grow anything else. Unidentified administration officials cited by the Post said US Ambassador to Bolivia Robert Gelbard has urged new "rules of engagement" that would permit US Army Special Forces units to join antinarcotics patrols in Bolivia. Others have suggested more drastic action, including covert operations against the cartels and "neutralization" of their leaders. Some State Department and DEA officials, including DEA Administrator John C. Lawn, argue that such actions would be counterproductive. According to Lawn, "You're talking about sovereignty issues here you would have a foreign government bringing military forces. We would have a substantially negative impact." In the third week of May, the State Department failed to meet a deadline in the 1988 Antidrug Abuse Act to produce a comprehensive strategy for attacking the Latin cocaine trade. A comprehensive review of anti-drug strategy is due in September. The seriousness of the problem reportedly prompted the National Security Council to undertake a more accelerated review that is scheduled to be completed in June. This review includes examination of a broad range of options including military action, an expanded role for US intelligence agencies, and increased economic and military aid to Latin American governments attempting to curb the drug trade. In its May 28 issue, the Washington Post reported that CIA director William Webster had created an anti-

narcotics unit that will "lend analytical and operational support" to the fight against international drug trafficking. Sources cited by the Post said the Counter Narcotics Center, modeled after a CIA counterterrorism unit established several years ago, could serve as locus for a broad range of covert operations toward destabilization and disruption of Colombian drug cartels. Center personnel number over 100 agents and intelligence analysts. Unidentified congressional sources familiar with the plans cited by the Post said that at present the precise scope of the center's activities is undefined pending the outcome of a National Security Council review of US anti-drug strategy due to be completed in June. CIA spokesperson Bill Devine said the center was created by Webster in early April, and will be based at CIA headquarters. Devine said it will consist of drug trade analysts, and include personnel from the Drug Enforcement Administration, Customs Service, Coast Guard, the NSC, and other agencies. Devine said he could not comment on the nature of the "operational" support the center will provide. Congressional Research Service international narcotics specialist, Rafael F. Perl, said: "More and more policy people are beginning to categorize this as a form of low-intensity conflict similar to the threat of international terrorism. There are people who are speaking about a wide range of possibilities ranging from... psychological warfare" aimed at creating dissent among the cartels to targeted strikes against cartel leaders. "If we could selectively eliminate or neutralize four or five leaders of the cartel at one meeting, we could possibly disrupt their operations for as long as 18 months," said Perl. On June 11 the New York Times reported that according to the State Department, Bolivian coca leaf production rose by over 20% last year, and is expected to continue increasing in 1989. US figures, said the Times, indicate that last year US and Bolivian agents captured about 4% of the country's potential cocaine yield of about 230,000 pounds. Arrests dropped to 509 from 904 in 1987. US officials say the caliber of trafficker caught in 1988 was higher. Next, in 1988, US and Bolivian agents seized 11 aircraft and destroyed 45 of the dozens of jungle laboratories that handle the final phases of cocaine refining. Bolivia has reportedly become the focal point of US anti-cocaine programs in South America because guerrillas have hampered US efforts in Peru and Colombia. More US anti-drug agents are working in Bolivia than in any other country on the continent. Bolivia is receiving about \$100 million in US aid this year, more than any other country in the region, and about half of the money is earmarked for anti-coke efforts. US and Bolivian officials say a sudden end to the traffic would be devastating to the national economy. Even with the price of cocaine reduced because of over-supply on the world market, government officials estimate the value of Bolivia's production last year at up to \$1 billion, as much as \$250 million of which circulated in the country, constituting nearly a quarter of the nation's foreign exchange earnings. Up to 300,000 people are working at jobs that derive from cocaine production in a country where at least 20% of the labor force are unemployed. Many Bolivians argue that the anti-narcotics effort must be coordinated worldwide. In the absence of such coordination, they say, if Bolivia alone stops cocaine production the traffickers may simply move next door to Brazil or Peru, leaving Bolivia poorer and the world no better off. At present, the US and Bolivia are embarked on a plan to gradually eliminate cocaine exports in eight to 10 years. The strategy is to try to persuade Bolivian coca growers to switch to other crops that yield four to five times less cash. The government is using both indirect force and the offer of a one-time payment of \$2,000 in cash and technical assistance for every 2.47 acres on which coca is eliminated. On June 13, Walter Soriano, president of the Bolivian Chamber of Deputies and member of the rightist Nationalist Democratic Action (ADN) party, told reporters that congresspersons would officially request information from President Victor Paz Estenssoro about the June 14 arrival of extra US troops. The troops were scheduled to arrive for a four-month stay with some 300 US military technicians and medical specialists. In late 1988, the US Congress approved the visit of 300 US technical and medical personnel for "civic

action" programs, such as military-sponsored medical clinics for civilians. During their stay, the US technicians are also to help Bolivian troops flatten Pati Pati hill to expand airport facilities in Potosi, 750 km. southeast of La Paz. The Information Ministry recently announced that extra US troops would arrive to conduct joint military maneuvers with Bolivian soldiers. The announcement triggered complaints against all US military activities in Bolivia from opposition parties and the Roman Catholic Church's newspaper, *Presencia*. Leader and presidential candidate in the May 7 elections, Antonio Aranibar, said the joint maneuvers "violate national sovereignty." Moreover, he said, "We in the Congress tenaciously oppose the arrival of the US troops because the demolition of the Pati Pati Hill is not at the legitimate request of the Potosi residents." Aranibar said the US military operation was only another aspect of Washington's continual practice of low intensity warfare. In its lead editorial, *Presencia* said that the "growing presence of US military troops who act under the guise of civic action and have the run of the nation is alarming." Meanwhile, Aeronautics Minister Gen. Jaime Zegada denied the Information Ministry's announcement that extra US troops would be arriving. "We have nothing to hide," he added. "The activity of the North Americans on our territory will be clear." Most non-governmental analysts argue that given the high level of production, the emphasis on supply is a loser. Even with unprecedented success of all the above measures, production might fall by half, but this would not appreciably stem the flow of cocaine into the US. Many Latin Americans have argued the only viable long-term means of making a dent in the trade is to reduce demand in the US. They are weary of being blamed for what they see as an essentially US problem, which is also connected to the economic deterioration throughout the region during the 1980s. The US is not perceived as having offered much significant help in this arena either. Thus, in societies characterized by high un- and underemployment, overall economic stagnation and often high inflation as well, there are thousands and sometimes millions of desperate people. Growing drug crops or working for the drug cartels, are often the most lucrative or the only lucrative economic alternatives available. (Basic data from Washington Post, 05/27/89, 05/28/89; New York Times, 06/11/89; AFP, 06/13/89)

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