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On U.S. Reactions To Cuban Anti-drug Commitment

by John Neagle
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In a series of congressional hearings in late July, US congresspersons and administration officials testified on President Fidel Castro’s motives in implementing a broad-ranging crackdown on soldiers and bureaucrats for involvement in drug trafficking. For instance, on July 26 outgoing Customs Commissioner William von Raab described Castro as "another piece of 'narco-trash' floating in the Caribbean" during testimony at a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee hearing. He dismissed the idea of any dialogue with Cuba. Instead, according to von Raab, Castro "is looking to the United States for a life preserver" by requesting cooperation in the drug war. He added, "I suggest we throw him an anchor." Von Raab said a US Customs investigation codenamed Operation Greyhound led Cuba to bring charges that led to the execution of four officials. The investigation discovered that then-Interior Minister Jose Abrantes Fernandez had directed elite Cuban forces to oversee drug transfers on Cuban territory, said von Raab. Abrantes was fired June 29 in the midst of the trial of the four officials, including a hero of the Cuban revolution, Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa. Von Raab told the subcommittee on terrorism, narcotics and international operations that he believed Operation Greyhound, initiated in February, was probably what triggered the prosecution of Ochoa and three colleagues. However, on July 27, David Westrate, assistant Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) for operations told the Washington Post that the reduction in drug flights over Cuba in July appeared to represent a major change in smuggling patterns as a result of Castro’s crackdown. He confirmed that the DEA and other federal agencies were considering sharing some law enforcement information with Havana to help both with drug traffic investigations. Citing figures compiled by DEA’s El Paso Intelligence Center, Westrate said drug flights over Cuba had increased dramatically earlier this year primarily due to an expansion of US interdiction efforts in the Bahamas. He said confirmed air drops north of Cuba rose from one in 1987 to six in 1988 and to 39 in 1989. Since June 10, two days before Castro ordered the arrest of Gen. Ochoa and 13 other officials on drug smuggling charges, said Westrate, only three such drops had been detected. Those drops occurred on July 7, July 11 and July 13, he said, and two of them were by the same smuggling group and resulted in later seizures by US authorities of 3,340 pounds of cocaine. (Basic data from AP, 07/27/89; Washington Post, 07/28/89)

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