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According to official estimates, in 1990 cocaine exports through Venezuela totaled between 82 and 88 metric tons, and in 1991, 175 to 220 MT. Last year's figure represents about a quarter of the cocaine shipped by Colombian drug traffickers to the US and Europe. The traffickers, called the "Border Rat Cartel" by law enforcement officers, use centuries-old smuggling routes to transport drugs across the Colombian border to ships on the Venezuelan coast, and bring weapons on the return trip. The center of trafficking activity is the coastal city of Maracaibo, and the largely unpatrolled Colombia-Venezuela border. The Washington Post cited an unidentified Interpol official who monitors Colombia and Venezuela as saying, "Venezuela had the roads, ports and economic infrastructure to allow drug trafficking to spring up almost overnight...I have never seen a country change so dramatically in so little time." In 1991, the Venezuelan and US governments signed an information exchange agreement, but money laundering remains legal in Venezuela. Venezuelan law enforcement officials say millions of dollars are laundered by "smurfing," in which money from drug sales in the US is broken down into amounts under US$10,000 to avoid federal reporting requirements. The money is given to "smurfs," or low-level members of the trafficking organization, who buy thousands of traveler's checks or money orders, which are then deposited into dozens of bank accounts. Once the funds are dispersed, or "smurfed," they are moved to other accounts to make it appear as if they derive from legitimate business operations. The money is then transferred to traffickers in Colombia or Venezuela by smuggling out money orders and traveler's checks, or by wire transfers. (Source: Washington Post, 12/25/91)

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