

# The drug mafia invades Guatemala

by Jeffrey Steinberg

When the Reagan administration, during its first term in office, created the National Narcotics Border Interdiction Service in the office of Vice-President George Bush, things became complicated for some of Ibero-America's preeminent dope peddlers. With southern Florida virtually occupied by an army of U.S. Customs, Central Intelligence Agency, Coast Guard, Border Patrol, and other anti-drug enforcement agents, and, with the long-preferred "Caribbean route" congested with U.S. surveillance planes, ships, and satellites, monitoring and intercepting illicit cargoes, it was clearly "time for a change."

The early 1984 assassination of Colombia's leading anti-drug fighter, Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, only added more heat, as U.S. ambassador Lewis Tambs, a close friend of the slain minister, forged deeper anti-drug collaboration between Washington and Bogota.

## New smuggling route

South American sources have confirmed that the drug mafia responded to this temporary threat by shifting from the Caribbean route to an alternative smuggling channel running up South and Central America's Pacific Coast through western Mexico and into the southwest United States.

In this new schema, Guatemala has emerged as a prime piece of real estate targeted by the international dope-for-arms syndicate, with its deep ties to East bloc intelligence services.

According to several recent defectors from the drug syndicate, Colombian-processed cocaine is being flown from Cartagena, Colombia up the Pacific Coast in small planes to private landing strips along the southern plains of Guatemala. Reportedly, these clandestine airstrips once serviced the large plantations of Guatemala's agriculturally rich south, an area gutted by the terrorist upsurge of the early 1980s and the cumulative economic drain brought about by the Carter administration embargo of April 1977.

From their refueling stop in Guatemala, where dope runners are paying between \$50 and \$75 per liter for airplane fuel, for the security of knowing that no radar system exists in the area, and that most of Guatemala's reconnaissance planes have been grounded for lack of spare parts since the

1977 U.S. aid cutoff, the cocaine is shipped on to its final destination—the northwest Mexican city of Guaymas, Sonora—where it is smuggled across the border into the U.S. market.

Guatemalan authorities interviewed by this reporter estimate that each of the small planeloads of cocaine passing through Guatemala carry an average 250 kilos, street valued at over \$500 million a shot.

According to Guatemalan authorities, these drugs are "bartered" for weapons destined for the narco-terrorist gangs operating in the country's outlying areas.

Small planes bearing large volumes of M-16 rifles, grenade launchers, mortars, Russian hand grenades, and hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition have been flown from the coastal landing strips used for the Colombia-to-Mexico route into El Peten to the far north of the country, where the Cuban-tied FAR is engaged both in terrorist and separatist activities, and in large-scale cultivation and processing of marijuana.

Not coincidentally, Guatemalan authorities have now established direct links between the FAR and the Colombian M-19, the notorious narco-terrorist gang linked to cocaine trafficker Carlos Lehder Rivas and the Havana-based Robert Vesco.

## Opium wars—Latin style

On Sept. 9, Guatemalan officials opened a new flank in their war on drugs when several opium-poppy plantations in the mountainous region of San Marcos, on the Mexican border near the Pacific Coast, were raided. Over \$40 million in poppy (amapola) was seized and destroyed, and a dozen men arrested—all subsequently linked to various Guatemalan terrorist groups.

Months before the raid, three Mexican agronomists carrying passports issued in Tijuana, Baja California Norte, were arrested in Guatemala. Their passports showed frequent trips in and out of the United States. At the time of their arrests, the agronomists were working on expanding the opium cultivation in Guatemala's western highland departments of Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Chimaltenango, San Marcos, and Huehuetenango. This zone, lying conveniently adjacent to the Mexican border state of Chiapas, a hotbed of separatist insurgency, is believed by Guatemalan authorities to be targeted for major opium cultivation, augmenting the recently revived production in Mexico's own northwest "opium triangle."

## Border areas targeted

The opium production in the western highlands has been augmented by a heavy narco-terrorist deployment into the northern department of El Peten, where the border areas with Mexico and Belize have been singled out as preferred areas for cultivation.

The Yucatan region of Mexico, to the north of El Peten,

and Belize, to the east of El Peten, have been confirmed to be favorite areas of operation of Cuban intelligence agents dealing in arms-for-drugs support to the terrorists inside Guatemala.

During the previous, pro-Havana Price government in the former colony of British Honduras (now Belize), Cuban Direccion General de Inteligencia (DGI) agents were "leased" large tracts of land along the Guatemalan border north and south of Melchor de Mencos, as the result of which FAR terrorist cells established support bases inside Belize that to this day service the marijuana trade now flourishing in the region.

According to Guatemalan officials interviewed during the course of *Operation Guatusa I*, Cuban planes have been reported landing in the northeast corner of El Peten, picking up large volumes of marijuana, in exchange for deposits of arms for the FAR.

### European rings

Guatemalan officials have established that, in addition to the Cuban presence across the border in Belize, several smuggling rings made up of European nationals are running clandestine flights between El Peten and Belize bringing out the marijuana crops. Once inside Belize, under the watchful eye of British authorities and complicit local officials, the

drugs are trucked over the modern highway crossing the area to the port of Belize City, where the pot is shipped off to its final market.

Similar soft-border arms-for-pot operations have been confirmed by Guatemalan military units operating in the FAR stronghold area along the Usumacinto River, defining part of the Guatemala-Mexico frontier. Mexican officials have long defined this region as a no-man's-land which has been heavily targeted for penetration by Iranian, East German, North Korean, and Cuban agents working with local communist cells tied to the PSUM, formerly called the Mexican Communist Party.

To the extent that a domestic drug market exists, it has also been linked to the terrorist networks. According to Guardia de Hacienda officials familiar with the pot production in El Peten, trucks of grain and chicle have been recently used to covertly transport marijuana into the capital city, where it is distributed through the San Carlos University, a hotbed of insurgency activity. In September of this year, when serious urban disturbances threatened to explode into full-scale riots in Guatemala City, the Guatemalan army entered the campus of San Carlos University and siezed large volumes of pot and weapons which were being used by radical students tied to the banned PGT, once the center of an elaborate urban terrorist infrastructure.

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