

## Eye on Washington by Nicholas Benton

### Cocaine eradication herbicide readied

A new herbicide for destroying coca plants with aerial spraying is only a few of months away from being deployable, Jon R. Thomas, assistant secretary of state for international narcotics matters, told the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control here on Sept. 12. Thomas said that this new herbicide promises to make nations as effective in fighting cocaine as they have been against marijuana using the herbicide paraquat.

In an exchange with Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), chairman of the committee, Thomas took issue with Rangel's efforts to characterize the cocaine industry in Ibero-America as "uncontrollable."

Rangel was part of a seven-man congressional delegation that spent 17 days in Ibero-America studying the drug problem there, and came back spouting the dope-lobby line that the problem is simply too big to solve. Of course, Rangel did not openly the efforts of Peruvian President Alan García's war on cocaine; he made his point in a different way: "In coca growing areas of Columbia, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, governments are helpless in the face of sophisticated, well-financed narco-trafficking organizations."

Thomas took issue with this, saying that eradication of the drug problem is "directly related to measurable political commitment on the part of the government. Even a government

that may not be strong, or a government that may not have effective control over certain territories where narcotics are produced, if their political commitment is high, if it is sincere, then narcotics control programs become possible."

Thomas identified three effective narcotics control programs: 1) crop control, where the new coca herbicide offers great promise, 2) enforcement as close to the source as possible, and 3) going after corruption. He cited the developments in Peru on the latter two points, noting especially the large number of arrests of public officials involved in corruption.

### Narco-dollars no help to 'quality of life'

The most interesting exchange involved Rangel's backhanded attempt to say that narcotics are impossible to eradicate because they represent a major economic benefit to the countries where they are grown:

**Rangel:** In South America did you walk away with the impression that the narcotic traffic is interrelated with the economic crisis, such as trade and . . . foreign policy objectives?

**Thomas:** No. I walked away with the feeling that the narcotics trafficking basically feeds off many of the problems of these countries. The fact that there is economic difficulty, the fact that the government often cannot muster enough resources to project adequate enforcement presence in the area, the fact that the governments, themselves, may be weak or unwilling to deal with contentious problems because they've got so many other severe problems to deal with really provides the breeding grounds for narcotics trafficking organizations, and allows them to breed corruption and influence in those societies. . . .

**Rangel:** Well, we've had Presidents to tell us that they felt that in cracking down against narcotic trafficking and being successful in certain areas, that they would not be able to tell what success they would be having in having economic stability, because that hard dollar is out there, and the removal of that dollar sometimes adversely effects advancements they are trying to make to improve their economic conditions. . . .

**Thomas:** We have looked at this problem in great depth. We believe that most of the so-called narco-dollars do not reside in producing or trafficking countries, but move into safer, perhaps more lucrative banking safe havens. . . . We have seen no indications that the narcotics dollar generated by the narcotics trade has any positive impact in any of these countries. The dollars that do remain often go into financing other criminal activities through corruption or influence peddling, and will often go into investments, such as Bogota, Colombia, into high-rise buildings that certainly the common citizen couldn't afford to live in, or into investment into other organized criminal activities that have very negative and sometimes inflationary impact.

Rangel did not relent, however, asking two more questions about the improvement in the "quality of life" for farmers growing the coca plants.

The day before, Attorney General Edwin Meese III rejected the idea of cutting economic aid to Ibero-American countries as a way to pressure them to do more to eradicate drugs in their nations. Testifying to Foreign Relations Committee, Meese said such measures should be taken "only as a last resort," adding "I think we have few if any situations in which we need to have to apply such drastic measures now."