
Ibero-America

War on drugs: a bloody toll

by Valerie Rush

The year just concluded was perhaps the bloodiest in the history of Ibero-America's battle against Dope, Inc., but in many ways it was also the most hopeful. Several new nations on the continent entered the war alongside embattled Peru and Colombia, as the national security ramifications of the illegal drug trade finally dawned on them. Others at least began to sit up and take notice. Regional collaboration against the drug mafia—albeit on a still limited scale—was launched.

Dope, Inc., unfortunately, continues to have the upper hand, thanks to the unresolved debt crisis afflicting all the nations on the continent, crippling their security capabilities as surely as their potential for economic and social progress.

The 'Condor' attacks

However, a look at the vanguard anti-drug successes of a nation as poverty-stricken as Peru, whose nationalist President Alan García has drawn the enmity of the international creditor community for his debt stance, makes clear how close the victory could be with a serious commitment of funds and technology to do the job right.

President García, like any good general, knows that one's tanks cannot turn back in mid-field. Thus, in 1986 he escalated the highly effective "Operation Condor" begun during the previous year. In the first three months of 1986, police conducted several anti-drug blitzes of the cocaine centers of the country, capturing over 28 tons of semi-processed cocaine paste, blowing up over a dozen laboratory complexes and 80 decanting pits, and destroying at least three clandestine airports.

In at least one of the Condor raids, the U.S. State Department paid for the gas used by the raiding helicopters, at \$500 an hour. Peruvian Vice-Minister of the Interior Agustín Mantilla suggested that U.S. national security could gain more from investing in Peru's anti-drug efforts than from financing the drug-running Contra mercenaries.

In August, under "Condor IV," the Peruvian government made history by deploying Air Force fighter bombers against traffickers' hideouts in the Amazon, and on Dec. 8, "Condor V" was launched. In the first 24 hours of assault, 730 kilos

of cocaine paste were seized. The raids continued throughout the month, and the results have yet to be tallied.

"Operation Blast Furnace," in which U.S. troops participated for the first time in a tri-national (Bolivia/U.S./Colombia) effort, gave testimony to the determination of the Bolivian government to call a halt to the years-long reign of the drug mob in that country. With the November withdrawal of U.S. soldiers from Bolivian territory, the Paz Estenssoro administration remained on the offensive, and most recently ordered the purging of corrupt elements within the police force as well as the creation of a new highly deployable anti-drug commando unit.

The Dominican Republic, which has long served as a compliant "bridge" for drug-smuggling between South America and the United States, has similarly cried "Enough!" On Dec. 13, the Dominican military did not hesitate to shoot down a suspicious aircraft which refused to heed its warnings to land. The airplane was sighted by recently installed radar equipment provided by the United States, and it turned out to be carrying \$6 million worth of cocaine. Dominican leaders are now asking the United States for more radar and sonar equipment.

It is in Colombia that the war against drugs has taken its most dramatic turn. As the fiercely anti-drug President Belisario Betancur entered his last six months in office, the drug mob in that country launched a blackmail campaign of vast dimensions. Building on the terror sown by the narco-terrorist assault on the Supreme Court in November of 1985, the traffickers escalated. Recalcitrant judges, independent journalists, patriotic soldiers, and honest politicians fell to mafia bullets.

When President Virgilio Barco was inaugurated in August, Dope, Inc. made its bid for power under the assumption that it could control the noncommittal administration. "Citizens above suspicion" were activated to pressure for legalization of drugs, and demanded a tax amnesty that would launder billions of drug dollars into the Colombian economy.

The Colombia-U.S. extradition treaty, a "sword of Damocles" over the heads of the cocaine kingpins, remained the key obstacle. And that's where the drug mob miscalculated, for when the mettle of President Barco was tested on the matter, they lost. A Supreme Court challenge to the extradition treaty resulted in Barco's reaffirmation of the treaty in December 1986. The orgy of revenge blood-letting that followed appears to have strengthened the resolve of the government and, as important, of the population to stand firm against the mob, and emergency powers have already been granted for prosecuting a serious anti-drug effort.

The world's citizens have reason to mourn the loss of such heroes as Col. Jaime Ramírez Gómez, who orchestrated the war against drugs in the Andean region, and the thousands of others who gave their lives in honorable battle with Dope, Inc. 1987 promises to be no less bloody, but through a genuine hemispheric commitment to win, victory can be had.