

**DRUGS &
CONFLICT**

DEBATE PAPERS
SEPTEMBER 2003

no. **8**

**Forward Operation Locations
in Latin America:**

**Transcending
Drug Control**

Drugs and Democracy Programme



TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE

TNI BRIEFING SERIES
No 2003/6

CONTENTS

EDITORS:

Amira Armenta
Tom Blickman
Martin Jelsma
Pien Metaal
Virginia Montañés
Theo Roncken

TRANSLATION:

Barbara Fraser
Amira Armenta

DESIGN:

Jan Abraham Vos
Zlatan Peric, MEDIO
Logo *Drugs & Conflict*:
Elisabeth Hoogland

PRINTING:

Drukkerij Raddraaier,
Amsterdam

FINANCIAL SUPPORT:

NOVIB (Netherlands)

CONTACT:

Transnational Institute
Paulus Potterstraat 20
1071 DA Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Tel: -31-20-6626608
Fax: -31-20-6757176
drugs@tni.org
www.tni.org/drugs

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Amsterdam, September 2003

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This publication summarises the results of a research project on the FOLs, carried out by Tom Blickman, Pien Metaal and Theo Roncken (project coordinator), as part of the TNI and Acción Andina Drugs & Democracy Programme. A complete report in Spanish, entitled *La lucha contra las drogas y la proyección militar de Estados Unidos*, will be published by Abya-Yala, Ecuador.

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In May 1999, the United States had to leave its military installations in Panama due to the Carter-Torrijos agreement that returned the Canal Zone to Panama. As a result, the US Southern Command (SouthCom) lost valuable assets for its counter-narcotics operations in the transit zone in the Caribbean and source countries in the Andes. While most functions could be moved to Florida and Puerto Rico, the capacity for intelligence flights near the major drug trafficking routes and production centres was seriously hampered.

The US started to look for existing airfields to install so-called *Forward Operating Locations* (FOLs), small-scale low-cost installations, to facilitate the 2,000 anti-drug flights that annually took off from Panama. Eventually three FOLs were created in Manta (Ecuador), Comalapa (El Salvador) and one using both civilian airports on the Caribbean islands of Aruba and Curaçao (part of The Netherlands). All three countries conceded the use of part of these airfields in ten-year treaties. The outcomes of these US efforts to ensure a 'post-Panama presence in the region' is reconstructed in this issue of *Drugs & Conflict*.

The three FOL host countries justified their decision by arguing that 'we cannot deny an allied nation co-operation in the field of drug control'. The effectiveness of the anti-drugs efforts carried out from the bases is in question, however. The US General Accounting Office (GAO), for example, concluded that "*adding military surveillance to the nation's interdiction efforts has not made a difference in our ability to reduce the flow of cocaine to American streets*".

While the FOLs are presented as outposts exclusively destined for anti-drugs operations, there are serious concerns that the bases may be used for more far reaching US foreign policy goals, especially in relation to the Colombian conflict. The US is heavily involved with providing military assistance and intelligence to the government in Bogotá in their fight against the guerrilla. The conflict is fuelled by drug revenues and US officials talk

about 'narcoguerrilla' or 'narcoterrorists', as they have been dubbed after the attacks of 9/11. The distinction between counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics operations has become "*so blurred as to be meaningless*" as the *Washington Post* once put it.

During the Clinton Administration, intelligence-sharing with Colombian security forces was prohibited unless specifically intended for drug control purposes. President Bush reviewed the Clinton decision, subsequently allowing the sharing of non-drug related intelligence about guerrilla and paramilitary activity, including tactical information about movements and locations. SouthCom now "*plans to provide Colombia with new levels of intelligence to assist its operations against insurgent groups and to instruct their armed forces in applying that information to operations*," according to its director of operations General Galen Jackman.

The assignment of the Joint Inter Agency Task Force (JIATF) that involves anti-drugs operations in the transit and source zone are already being expanded to arms interdiction and the monitoring and interception of 'illegal aliens' coming from Latin America. US aid to Colombia is being broadened to protection of oil interests. A special Colombian unit has been set up to protect the Caño Limón pipeline, provided with US intelligence. The US is also trying to get permission for flights over Venezuelan territory in order to use the corridor connecting Curaçao to the oil-rich department of Arauca in Colombia where the pipeline starts.

US law now allows the Colombian government to use all past and present counter-drug aid against the insurgents. The legislation calls this "*a unified campaign against narcotics trafficking [and] against activities by organizations designated as terrorist organizations*". Till now the host nations have insisted on the limited anti-drugs mission of the FOLs, but the question is how long can they resist US requests to broaden the scope of the intelligence missions, presuming they can even control whether or not current limitations are respected.



The relationship between drugs and security has a long history in the United States. In 1973 President Richard Nixon declared illicit drugs a threat to national security, and in 1989 the government of President George Bush gave the Department of Defense (DOD) prime responsibility for monitoring and detecting the transportation of illicit drugs in the hemisphere. The United States' National Drug Control Strategy for 1998-2007 delegated to the DOD, particularly the Southern Command (SouthCom) of the US armed forces, operations related to the detection and monitoring of the transportation of illicit drugs in 'transit zones' and programmes aimed at interrupting the production and shipment of drugs in 'source zones.'

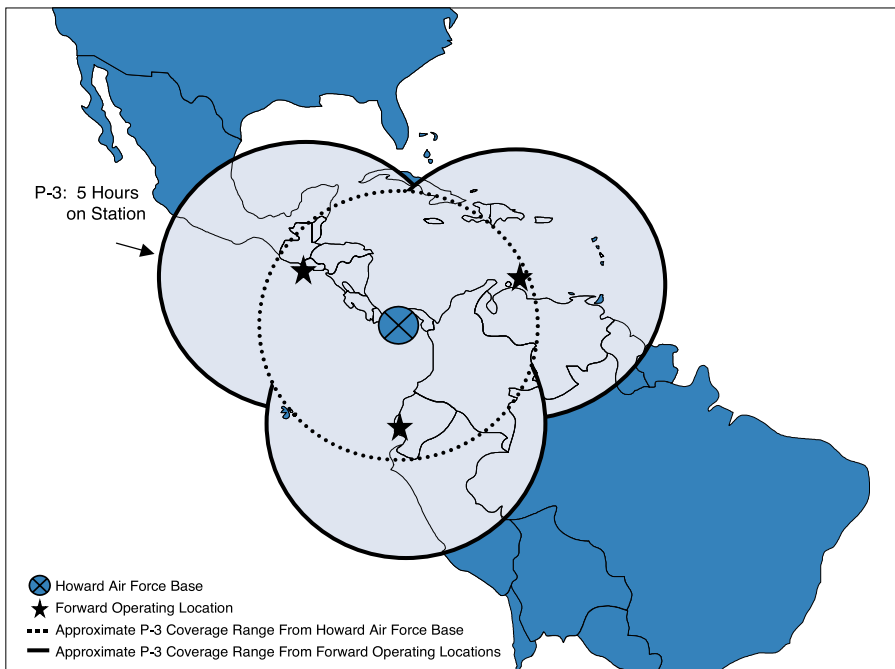
The May 1999 closure of the United States' Howard Air Force Base in Panama, where SouthCom operated, would affect the DOD's mission, forcing dramatic changes in its presence in Latin America and the Caribbean. While some functions and installations could

be moved to Florida and Puerto Rico without difficulty, mechanisms were needed to enable military programmes to continue in the region, especially those related to activities such as the training of troops under special conditions, intelligence gathering, and the detection and monitoring of the production and transportation of illicit drugs, which depended on direct contact with the transit and source zones. Without the Howard Base and with the failure of initial attempts to ensure continuation of US military presence in the region through the establishment of a multilateral counter-drug centre in Panama, the Forward Operating Locations (FOLs) became a new, alternative model that would substantially modify SouthCom's theatre of operations on the continent.

The concept was not entirely new. Since the 1980s, there have been air bases for the interdiction of drug shipments. The novelty in the FOL concept is that they are part of an extensive network of strategic US locations in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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Comparison of coverage of Howard Air Force Base and FOLs



Source: GAO, *Drug Control: International Counter Drug Sites being developed*, GAO-01-63BR, December 2000

The locations make use of airports for aircraft of various sizes, sophisticated intelligence equipment, radar and satellite antennae. In presenting the FOLs to the US Congress, General Charles Wilhelm (SouthCom commander-in-chief, September 1997 to September 2000) spoke of their economic advantages over the earlier model, which covered the FOLs' tasks from Panama. The general said that while Howard cost US\$75.8 million in its final year, the three air bases selected thus far (Ecuador, Aruba and Curaçao) required an investment of only US\$122.5 million, and once in operation, the FOLs' annual cost would not exceed US\$18 million.¹ In addition, according to the DOD, the three FOLs cover a larger geographic area than the Howard Base did, offering broader coverage of the production zone, and penetrating farther into the Eastern Pacific, where traffic is increasing.²

Counter-drugs and military strategy

The DOD's National Military Strategy (1997) stated that the United States had an unprecedented opportunity to shape the future of global security and proffered four strategic concepts for doing this: "Strategic Agility, Overseas Presence, Power Projection and Decisive Force." While the primary consideration in the development and use of force is combat ("the Armed Forces' core competence: we fight"³), among the elements that the strategy considered to be of prime importance for putting these strategic concepts into practice was military action in peace time, "a particularly important task of our forces overseas – those forward stationed and those rotationally or tem-

porarily deployed." To be able to conduct several missions simultaneously, the armed forces need inter-operability: "We remain committed to (...) technological development with our key allies and to combined training events and exercises that contribute to interoperability." In addition, "It is imperative that our Joint Forces also enhance their ability to operate in consonance with other US government agencies."⁴

Therefore, the military's strategy required greater inter-agency and international co-operation in order to perfect, in peace time, its ability to make war. Drug control activity, because of its civilian connotation, is the theatre of action that offered the DOD the best conditions for expanding and deepening both inter-agency bonds and mechanisms for multilateral co-operation. In the words of Brigadier General Galen Jackman (SouthCom) in September 2002, "One of the great competencies that we have here in the Southern Command is our interagency coordination, and we gained that competency because of the drug war."⁵

The 1997 National Military Strategy also indicated that the successful application of military power depended on air and sea access: "In addition our forces will normally require access to US and overseas support infrastructure to maintain our ability to project power in times of crises. Enroute infrastructure will assist our forces in rapidly establishing and positioning themselves to dominate any situation. (...) While the United States will pursue the cooperation of other governments to allow US forces access, it must not assume that such cooperation will always be forthcoming. A forced entry capability ensures that the US will always be able to gain access to seaports,



¹ General Charles E. Wilhelm (SouthCom), *Testimony before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control*, Washington DC, 21 September 1999. The figures would later be adjusted. The GAO cites DOD figures from July 2000 that place the cost of upgrading the four air bases at US\$136.6 million and subsequent annual "operation and maintenance" costs for the FOLs (once they are fully operational) at US\$135.1 million (GAO, *Drug Control: International Counterdrug Sites Being Developed*, GAO-01-63BR, December 2000). It is understood that the annual costs provided by General Wilhelm in 1999 correspond only to the right to use and to operational services, although the general calls them annual operating costs.

² GAO, GAO-01-63BR, 2000, Op. cit.

³ Shalikhshvili, J. M., former head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Prologue to the US National Military Strategy*, DOD, 1997.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Brigadier General Galen Jackman, chief of operations (US SouthCom J-3), at a press conference, 29 September 2002.

airfields, and other critical facilities that might otherwise be denied (..) and gives the United States the ability to go anywhere that US interests require.”⁶

This view leaves little room for doubt. In times of crisis (read, possible armed conflict) and/or when US interests require, the FOLs fit perfectly into the model of en route infrastructure whose objective is to help ensure that military forces have strategic agility, a presence abroad, a projection of power and the decisive use of force. In this regard, it is worth remembering that two decades ago, the United States emphatically denied that the Palmerola airport in Honduras was being used as a military base when it was known to have functioned for years as a forward post for US operations in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Meanwhile, there is still the possibility in peace time of obtaining diplomatic clearance for flights that do not fall within drug control agreements. Because the FOL installations provide infrastructure accessible to any type of aircraft, there could be a greater temptation to use them for missions other than anti-drugs operations.

FOLs and information superiority

Another area that directly involves the FOLs and transcends the bounds of counter-drug operations is the gathering of intelligence data, including human intelligence (HUMINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT or ELINT, in the case of electronic data), images (IMINT) or measurements (MASINT). The National Military Strategy clearly stated, “Our Armed Forces require the timely collection, evaluation, and assessment of a full range of geo-political, socio-economic, and military information throughout the full spectrum of conflict.” And the National Security Strategy for a New Century (1999) stated that “We are also committed to maintaining information superiority – the capability to collect,

process, and disseminate an uninterrupted flow of information while exploiting and/or denying an adversary’s ability to do the same”.⁷ To maintain this superiority, US agencies generally keep most of their intelligence information to themselves, away from the eyes of both enemies and allies, while not limiting their gathering of sensitive data and images to the enemy camp.

One concern that arose during debate over the bilateral agreements that established the FOLs, especially in Ecuador and The Netherlands, was the possibility that information gathered by the United States could be used for purposes not exclusively related to drug control activities. Was it realistic to assume that intelligence data gathered in anti-drugs efforts would not also become part of military analysis and action in other areas, such as counter-insurgency? During debate in the Dutch Parliament over the FOL in Aruba and Curaçao, this question became a decisive factor. According to Jozias van Aartsen, who was The Netherlands’ Foreign Minister at the time, the government would not have accepted the establishment of a FOL on its territory if one of its objectives had been to reinforce Plan Colombia’s military component. In the eyes of the Dutch government, “flights from the FOLs are not for fighting the guerrillas. The government of Colombia has other means for doing that.”⁸ When Dutch opposition members insisted on guarantees of faithful compliance with this limitation on the use of the Aruba-Curaçao FOL, Minister van Aartsen responded that one should have trust in the United States.

This trust is not shared by independent observers such as Loring Wirbel of the global network, Citizens for Peace, who says that the FOLs “rely on portable intelligence platforms, small airfields for unmanned aerial reconnaissance vehicles and real-time links to the Space Warfare Center at Schriever Air Force Base in Colorado

⁶ DOD, *National Military Strategy: Shape, Respond, Prepare Now – A Military Strategy for a New Era*, 1997, www.dtic.mil/jcs/core/nms.html.

⁷ The White House, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, December 1999.

⁸ Tweede Kamer der Staten General, *Verdragen in Voorbereiding. N. 39. Lijst van Vragen en Antwoorden*, 25.530, The Hague, December 8, 1999.



Springs, to provide a 'virtual' military base (...) since the mid-1990's, Schriever has moved towards regional counterintelligence." In addition, according to Wirbel, the 'Plan Colombia' FOLs served as the model for the installation of small bases in countries neighbouring Afghanistan.⁹

FOLs and expeditionary deployment

FOLs are not limited to the Western Hemisphere nor to drug control activities. In fact, the need to establish such sites has global dimensions and is related to strategic changes that followed the Cold War. During the Cold War, the US Air Force operated from fixed bases in the United States and across the globe. During the last decade, not only Howard in Panama, but many other bases in other parts of the world were closed, forcing the Air Force to modify its operating models. It was then that the military began to develop the concept of an Expeditionary Air Force (EAF), dividing the Air Force into 10 rotating vectors – each “lighter, with a more specific orientation and more lethal than ever” – constantly on the alert and able to attack ‘anywhere in the world within 24 to 48 hours’ if a situation so required.¹⁰

The concept of the EAF as a “force with its main base in the United States, but with a rotating expeditionary deployment capability is based on the FOLs, which routinely guarantee access and authorization to operate. Denying the United States this

“Denying the United States this privilege at an important geopolitical point would fundamentally undermine the strategy”

privilege at an important geopolitical point would fundamentally undermine the strategy implicit in the EAF. Put another way, access – including enroute overflights, landing rights and diplomatic authorization to operate from the FOLs – is a prerequisite for EAF operations.”¹¹

The combination of the EAF concept and the establishment of the FOLs enables the Air Force to “provide rapid aerospace capability, according to need, and be ready to carry out military operations related to all different aspects of a conflict.”¹² For the Iraq war, as for the war in Afghanistan, several FOLs were estab-

lished in the Gulf region in the course of operations. In Latin America, until recently, the only available justification for establishing FOLs had been the War on Drugs. By now they can also be presented as part of the global War against Terrorism. The FOLs

that have been established in the region have sufficient operating capacity to support any type of mission. The US Secretary of Defence instructed the team responsible for rebuilding the Manta air base to design and build “a FOL capable of fully supporting or carrying out any Southern Command mission.”¹³

Recent changes in military architecture

Although even before the 11 September 2001 attacks, the administration of President George W Bush had attempted to modify



⁹ Wirbel, L., “Forward Operating Locations: Plan Colombia Experiment Moves to Afghanistan,” *Peacework*, November 2001.

¹⁰ Whitten Peters, F., Air Force secretary, and General Michael Ryan, chief of personnel, US Air Force, *Air Expeditionary Forces*, DOD press conference, 4 August 1998.

¹¹ Dowdy, W.L., PhD; military defence analyst, *Expeditionary Diplomacy: POL-MIL Facilitation of AEF Deployments - ARI Paper 2001-02*, Airpower Research Institute, June 2001.

¹² Lt. Col. Bryan A. Holt (US Air Force, Expeditionary Aerospace Force Center), “Commentary: The expeditionary story, everyone’s responsibility,” *Air Force News*, 16 May 2001.

¹³ US Army Corps of Engineers, *Application form, Delivery Team for the Manta FOL project*; Calendar Year 2002 USACE Project Delivery Team of the Year Awards, www.hq.usace.army.mil/pmbp/awards/sad/pdmtanta.doc

certain aspects of the focus of the National Security Strategy that had been drafted between 1997 and 1999, the unilateral approach to the “terrorist threat” meant substantive change. Such a change implied obvious consequences for the American continent, especially the Andean region, where several of the insurgent groups on the State Department’s list of terrorist organisations, revised after 11 September 2001, operate. According to the *Center for International Policy* (CIP), “Even before September 11, 2001, the new Bush Administration had initiated a ‘review process’ to explore the possibility of going beyond the drug war to help Colombia’s government fight the guerrillas and the paramilitaries.”¹⁴ The current US Security Strategy, published in September 2002, also highlights the need for “new approaches to warfare, strengthening joint operations, exploiting U.S. intelligence advantages,” defining this as “our first line of defense against terrorists and the threat posed by hostile states,” and proposing “the proper fusion of information between intelligence and law enforcement” because an all-source analysis system will be needed.¹⁵

Changes in US military support for Colombia

While the aforementioned changes have become more radical and obvious with the younger Bush’s presidency, there were already substantial modifications in counter-drug activity in the hemisphere during the Clinton administration. Quoting the *Center for International Policy* again, until about 1999 “Colombia’s National Police received nearly all lethal U.S. aid. Washington was wary of getting too deeply involved in the country’s conflict (...). The Clinton Administration nonetheless shifted the bulk of aid to the military in 1999 and 2000.” Since

March 1999, US agencies have been sharing intelligence “in real time” with the Colombian armed forces, though they were limited by a Presidential Decision Directive (PDD-73) at the time that only permitted such activity within the framework of counter-drug activity, albeit without a guarantee of compliance with this restriction.¹⁶ Even then, it was increasingly evident that the United States was blurring the conceptual difference between the War on Drugs and counter-insurgency. In a conversation with the *Washington Times* in February 2002, some DOD officials called PDD-73 “very frustrating”.¹⁷ That year marked the beginning of efforts by Bush to change Clinton’s Presidential Decision Directive.

On 2 August 2002, a legal provision regarding anti-terrorist emergency funds (HR 4775) allowed “the Colombian government to use all past and present counter-drug aid – all the helicopters, weapons, brigades and other initiatives of the past several years – against the insurgents.” In this context, CIP also mentions a possible renegotiation of the FOL agreements, which currently prohibit the use of intelligence gathered from the sites for purposes other than counter-drug efforts.¹⁸ There are indications that from the start for the United States the use of the FOLs may not have been limited to counter-drug activities. In June 1999, the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* quoted a US State Department source as saying, “The new counterdrug bases located in Ecuador, Aruba and Curaçao will be strategic points for closely monitoring the guerrillas’ steps and their constant incursions into Venezuela, Panama, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador.” One State Department document to which *El Espectador* had access revealed the tactic used: “So as not to divert the missions, which will initially focus on counterdrug efforts, and in order to avoid polemics in the international arena

¹⁴ CIP, *International Policy Report: The ‘War on Drugs’ meets the ‘War on Terrorism’: The United States’ involvement in Colombia climbs to the next level*. Washington DC, February 2003.

¹⁵ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002.

¹⁶ GAO, *Drug Control: Narcotics Threat From Colombia Continues to Grow*, US General Accounting Office, GAO/NSIAD-99-136, June 1999.

¹⁷ “U.S. Law Bars Giving Colombians Data,” *The Washington Times*, 26 February 2002.

¹⁸ CIP, 2003, Op. cit.

and Congress, military intelligence work against the FARC and the ELN will mainly be framed in relation to their status as ‘narcoguerrillas.’”¹⁹

In September 1999, General Wilhelm told Congress that “the key to peace in Colombia is to cut off the insurgents’ income from drug trafficking”.²⁰ General McCaffrey, the Drug Czar at the time, agreed with this view: “if we catch a plane with drugs in the Caribbean, the guerrillas will have received their paycheck”.²¹ For General Peter Pace (SouthCom commander-in-chief, September 2000 to August 2002), Colombia was “key to the region’s stability,” and therefore SouthCom “needs greater redundancy in ISR [Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance] assets to mitigate risk during crisis. Specifically, we need additional airborne quick-reaction ISR capability.”²² When one of these planes, a De Haviland RC-7 Airborne Reconnaissance Low (ARL), crashed in Colombia in July 1999 while on a routine counter-drug patrol, the magazine *Newsweek* quoted a “source knowledgeable about the mission” who said, “We’re not supposed to be monitoring guerrillas, but that’s what they were doing”.²³

“The new counterdrug bases located in Ecuador, Aruba and Curaçao will be strategic points for closely monitoring the guerrillas’ steps and their constant incursions into Venezuela, Panama, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador.”

With the change of the law in August 2002, these practices became legal. In early 2003, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, a magazine specialising in military affairs, mentioned “plans to provide Colombia with new levels of intelligence to assist its operations against insurgent groups.”²⁴

Regional security and anti-terrorism

Five days after the adoption of HR 4775, the new president of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe, took office. Within a week, he had declared a state of emergency. This gave the security forces legal powers that included controlling movement and limiting access in certain areas, censoring the press and suspending democratically elected representatives who “contribute to public turmoil”.²⁵ While Uribe lost no time in reinforcing his military offensive against the insurgents with counter-drug equipment recently provided by the United States, on the international front the new president, along with State Department officials, lobbied for a greater commitment from

neighbouring countries to safeguarding “regional security.” One of the first steps in this area was to have Colombia’s insurgent groups formally declared terrorists. Although these diplomatic efforts encountered “differences of focus and concept” in Brazil, Venezuela and, to a certain extent, Ecuador,²⁶ there has been evident progress, in

Washington’s view, with regard to joint border monitoring, the creation of new military bases on the borders (16 in Ecuador and 13 in Brazil, including both police and the armed forces), sharing of information and other areas.



¹⁹ “La agenda secreta para Colombia,” *El Espectador*, Bogotá, 4 June 1999.

²⁰ “Paz necesita victoria en el campo de batalla: Wilhelm,” *El Tiempo*, Bogotá, 22 September 1999 (quoting General Wilhelm’s testimony before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, Washington DC, 21 September 1999).

²¹ “US Trains Colombia Force to Fight Rebels’ Drugs Profits,” *The New York Times*, 28 July 1999.

²² General Peter Pace (SouthCom), *Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, Washington DC, 27 March 2001; and *Testimony before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control*, Washington DC, 28 February 2001.

²³ “Fighting the Rebels: A Mysterious Plane Crash Highlights Covert US Operations,” *Newsweek*, 9 August 1999.

²⁴ “US Special Forces Give Colombians Anti-Terrorism Training,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, London, 8 January 2003.

²⁵ *The Washington Post*, 13 August 2002.

²⁶ Project Counselling Service, *Informe de Fronteras*, Bogotá, February 2003.

According to various observers, the US Special Forces in the Peruvian Amazon, on that country's border with Colombia, are engaged in exercises designed to capture top FARC leaders.²⁷ In January 2002, the Ecuadoran Congress' International Relations Commission stated that insecurity on the country's northern border was grounds for reviewing the terms of the agreement for the use of the FOL in Manta.²⁸ Less than two years earlier, Ecuador's national defence minister, General José Gallardo, had written in a confidential memo about the Colombian conflict, "It is not advisable to grant more facilities than those that currently exist for aerial operations against drug trafficking from the Manta base."²⁹ Nevertheless, in his first visit to Washington as president-elect of Ecuador, in February 2003, Former Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez expressed his desire to turn his country into the United States' best ally in the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism. In March, President Gutiérrez turned over control of Customs to the country's armed forces and the Ecuadoran Naval Air Corps moved from Guayaquil to Manta as part of efforts to unify naval air operations that established Manta as "the new axis of security for the northern border."³⁰

Throwing petroleum on the fire

It is clear that the military part of new US counter-drug investment in the region, first within the framework of Plan Colombia (2000-2001), and since 2002 as the Andean Regional Initiative (ARI), was not limited to the fight against drugs, neither in form nor in practice. In order to understand the impact that this strategy will have in the region in the near future, one specific issue merits further

examination: military protection for energy resources vital to the United States.

On 13 February 2003, the US Congress approved the 2003 Foreign Aid Bill, which included "the first significant non-drug military aid to Colombia since the Cold War: \$98 million to help the Colombian Army protect the 480-mile [770 kms] long Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline." For fiscal year 2004, the Bush administration has included "an undetermined amount, up to \$147 million (...) in order to continue the program."³¹ The pipeline is jointly owned by Ecopetrol (a state-run Colombian company, 50%), Occidental Petroleum (US, 44%) and Repsol-YPF (Spain, 6%). The protection programme began with training and equipment for as many as 800 Colombian soldiers who, with US assistance, are to protect the easternmost 120 kilometers of the pipeline. According to Anne Patterson, US ambassador to Colombia, these installations are among 338 "critical 'infrastructure points' in Colombia of concern to United States".³² In 2001, the Colombian government lost about US\$500 million (2% of the national budget) and Occidental Petroleum lost US\$50 million because of constant attacks on the pipeline by insurgents in Arauca. Between 1996 and 2000, Occidental spent nearly US\$8.7 million on contacts with US officials about policy toward Latin America, particularly Colombia. Although the company denies having asked the government for protection for its installations in Colombia, the new military programme could be considered partly a result of these contacts. Eventually, it is expected that 7,000 elite troops will be trained.³³

In 1998, General Wilhelm pointed out that new oil exploration increased Colombia's

²⁷ Project Counselling Service, *Informe de Fronteras*, Bogotá, March 2003. The first public mention of this plan was in *Narconews* (www.narconews.com), 25 October 2002.

²⁸ *La Hora*, Quito, 16 January 2002

²⁹ General José Gallardo Román, National Defence Minister, *Apreciación global estratégica del conflicto que sufre Colombia y sus efectos sobre Ecuador*, Quito, 2000 (no date).

³⁰ Project Counseling Service, February 2003, Op. cit.

³¹ WOLA, *Colombia Monitor: Protecting the Pipeline: The U.S. Military Mission Expands*, Washington DC, May 2003.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Forero, J., "New Role for U.S. in Colombia: Protecting a Vital Oil Pipeline," *The New York Times*, 4 October 2002. Cited by WOLA, 2003, Op. cit.



“strategic importance” for the United States.³⁴ In 1999, after Hugo Chávez was sworn in as president of Venezuela, Wilhelm noted that the country represented 18% of the United States’ energy imports.³⁵ Between 1996 and 2000, oil exports to the United States from Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador together were equal, on average, to the amount from all the Persian Gulf states combined, while projections of Colombia’s potential reserves have raised expectations that the country, which is not a member of OPEC (the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries), could, in the words of one Ecopetrol analyst, “help the United States put pressure on the market in times of limited supply.”³⁶

“In times of crisis, the Armed Forces can further improve possibilities for access by helping to ‘sell’ the idea of a threat in the host nation”

Ecuador also enters into the equation. In the northern part of the country, a consortium of multinational companies based in the United States, Spain, Canada, Italy and Argentina has backed Occidental Petroleum’s construction of the Heavy Crude Pipeline (known locally as the OCP, for its Spanish initials), which is expected to double Ecuador’s capacity for oil production and transportation. In that country, too, the line between national security affairs and the protection of private interests has become blurred. In August 2001, the trade magazine *Energy Com-*

pass noted that Petroecuador and 16 private companies operating in Ecuador “arranged a deal under which they can pay the military for protection.”³⁷ The military build-up on the northern border, therefore, is not gratuitous.

In February 1998, before FOL negotiations began, an Air Force official made a series of recommendations that now appear to have been prescient. Referring to the increasing importance of South American petroleum, he said that if “military attention follows this shift in vital interest [...] forward basing will be found woefully lacking.” Regional commands “must be proactive immediately in the establishment of new bases”. The “selection and development of four or five central bases with at least minimal infrastructure is the first step to ensuring forward access.” The same official emphasised that it is better to negotiate contracts with host nations before a crisis strikes, “anticipating the need for access and beginning dialogue without time constraints. Laying the political groundwork and obtaining initial approval is the first half of the process. (...) In times of crisis, the Armed Forces can further improve possibilities for access by helping to ‘sell’ the idea of a threat in the host nation” with the goal of gaining approval for expanded use of the site.³⁸

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³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ General Charles Wilhelm (SouthCom), *Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics Affairs and Terrorism*, Washington DC, 22 June 1999.

³⁶ WOLA, 2003, Op. cit., with data from the AER Database: www.tonto.eia.coe.gov/aer/aer-toc-d2000cfm, and *Crude Oil Imports From Ecuador (Non-OPEC)*; Mb/d.: www.economagic.com/emcgil/data.exe/doeml/coimpen.

³⁷ “Ecuadorean producers to pay military for protection,” *Energy Compass*, 10 August 2001. Quoted by WOLA, 2003, Op. cit.

³⁸ Major Tom Goffus (US Air Force), *Air Expeditionary Forces: Forward Base Access*, unclassified document, Naval War College, Newport, 13 February 1998

DOD & Drugs: The Honeymoon

The 1989 decision to make the Department of Defense (DOD) the lead agency for detecting and monitoring air and maritime shipments of illegal drugs led to a dramatic increase in the number of military assets and personnel dedicated to the counter-drug effort. According to the General Accounting Office (GAO), *“Funding for DOD’s surveillance mission and its associated flying hours and steaming days has increased from about \$212 million in fiscal year 1989 to an estimated \$844 million in fiscal year 1993 - nearly a 300-percent increase.”*¹ The period can be seen as the ‘honeymoon’ period of DOD and the counter-drug mission. In its heyday about half of all AWACS flying hours were dedicated to drug interdiction missions. *“The timing for large-scale military involvement was excellent: the Cold War was drawing to a close, freeing up large amounts of assets, but the dramatic drawdown had not yet begun.”*²

The honeymoon was short. In the course of 1993, GAO undertook a thorough review which led to devastating conclusions. *“Measured against interdiction success rates and supply reduction goals, the investment in the flying hours and steaming days that support DOD’s mission is out of proportion to the benefits it provides.”* According to the report, interdiction success at deterring the cocaine flow has been more symbolic than real. *“The hope that*

*military surveillance would make a difference has proven to be overly optimistic.”*³ The GAO made an explicit recommendation to Congress that *“in light of the negligible contribution that military surveillance has made to the drug war”, DOD’s involvement in interdiction “should be significantly reduced.”*⁴

The Clinton Administration had taken office that year, in 1993, and *“determined that a controlled shift in emphasis was required—a shift away from past efforts that focused primarily on interdiction in the transit zones to new efforts that focus on interdiction in and around source countries,”*⁵ a conclusion that was formalised in Presidential Directive 14 later that year.⁶ Subsequent years saw a decline in counter-drug funding for DOD of some 24% between 1993 and 1999. DOD flight hours allocated to tracking illegal drug shipments in transit areas declined from about 46,000 in 1992 to some 15,000 in 1999, a 68% drop. All combined flights (DOD, Customs and Coast Guard) dropped from over 60,000 to below 40,000. The number of DOD ship days declined from about 4,800 to 1,800, or 62%, over the same period.⁷ US SouthCom chief General Wilhelm reported that by 1999 DOD was unable to grant the majority of their requests for anti-drug flights: *“we requested slightly in excess of 900 aerial sorties (...). Our fill was less than 400.”*⁸

¹ GAO, Drug Control - *Heavy Investment in Military Surveillance Not Paying Off*; US General Accounting Office, GAO/NSIAD-93-220, September 1993.

² Major Kimberly J. Corcoran, *DOD Involvement in the Counterdrug Effort – Contributions and Limitations*, Air Command and Staff College, AU/ACSC/0077/97-03, March 1997 [the author is an Air Force pilot flying AWACS missions between 1994-96].

³ GAO, GAO/NSIAD-93-220, 1993, op. cit.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ The White House, *National Drug Control Strategy*, February 1995.

⁶ The White House, *Presidential Decision Directive for Counternarcotics* (PDD-14), 3 November 1993.

⁷ GAO, *Assets DOD Contributes to Reducing the Illegal Drug Supply Have Declined*, US General Accounting Office, GAO/NSIAD-00-9, December 1999.

⁸ General Charles Wilhelm (US SouthCom), *Testimony before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control*, Washington DC, 21 September 1999.



The phases and equipment of interdiction

A completed drug interdiction normally consists of six phases, some of which may occur simultaneously.

- 1 Provision of intelligence information to drug interdiction agencies indicating that a drug smuggling activity is planned or underway.
- 2 Initial detection of a potential smuggling aircraft or vessel.
- 3 Monitoring, which consists of tracking a target aircraft or vessel (maintaining information on its position, course and speed) and moving to intercept it.
- 4 Identifying the target and distinguishing drug smuggling traffic from legitimate traffic.
- 5 Hand-over, or shifting of primary responsibility between forces, such as from DOD to the Coast Guard.
- 6 Apprehending (detaining, arresting, or seizing) suspects, drugs or vehicles or causing the suspects to jettison their drugs or to turn back from their mission.

Official sources mention the following aircraft in relation to the FOLs:

large aircrafts:

- *US Air Force E-3 Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS)*, equipped with a rotating radar dome with a range of more than 250 miles. The E-3 can fly for more than 8 hours without refuelling and is used in air, ground and sea detection, control and communication operations.

medium aircrafts:

- *US Navy E-2C Hawkeye (Grumman Aerospace) AWACS*, also equipped with a rotating radar, can fly for 6 hours without refuelling and virtually perform the same tasks as E-3 aircrafts.
- *US Navy and US Customs Service P-3 Orion*, used for air and sea surveillance and detection. It can fly for more than 11 hours without refuelling.
- *C-130 Hercules (Lockheed Martin)*, used for troops (up to 128 people) and material transport.

small aircrafts:

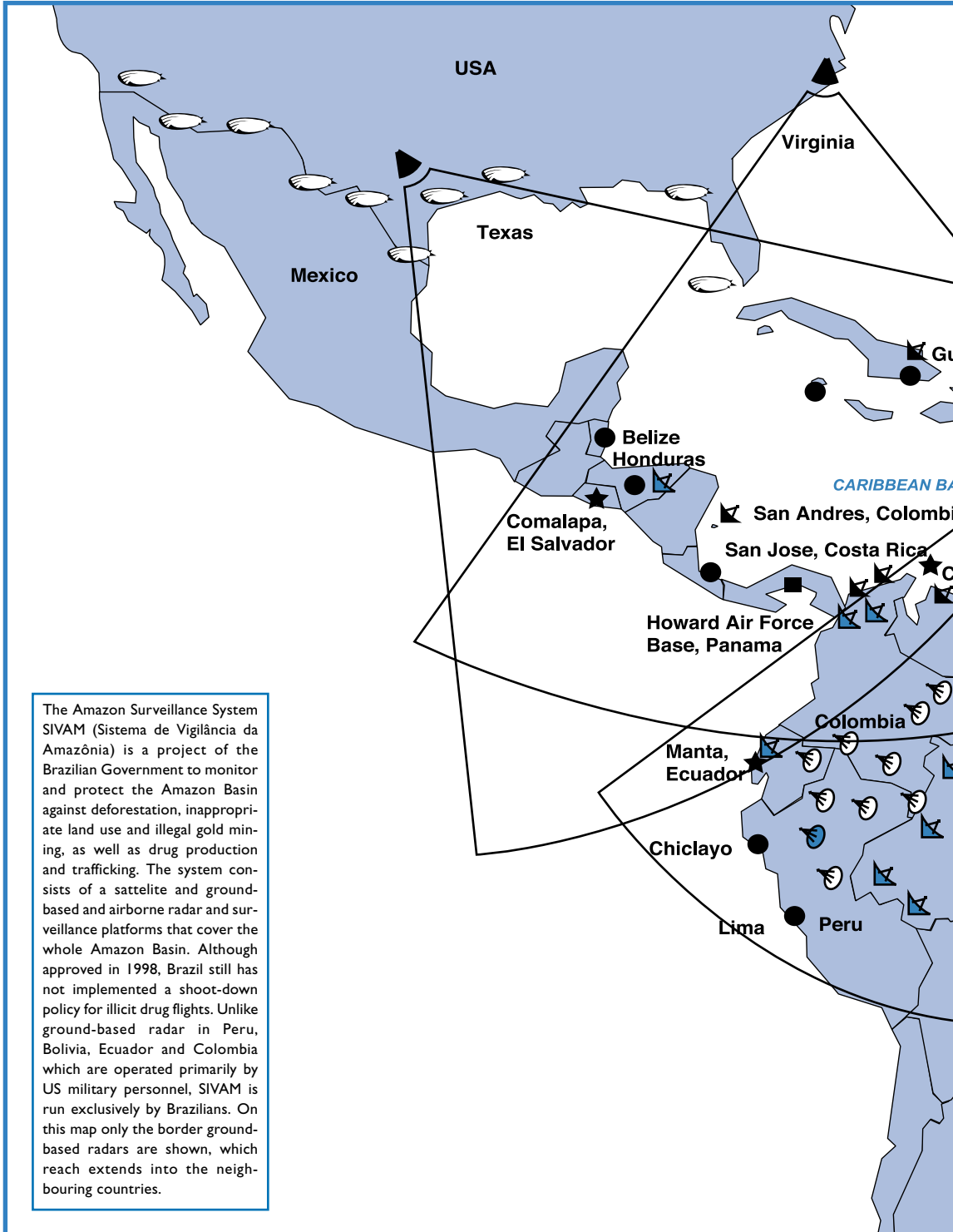
- *F-15 Eagle (McDonnell Douglas)*, used for verification (through radar and display) and interdiction (*tracker aircraft*).
- *F-16 Falcon (Lockheed Martin)*, used to perform the same activities.
- *Citation 550 (Cessna)*, *tracker* used by the Customs authorities.

There are three kinds of ground-based radars in the region (see Map):

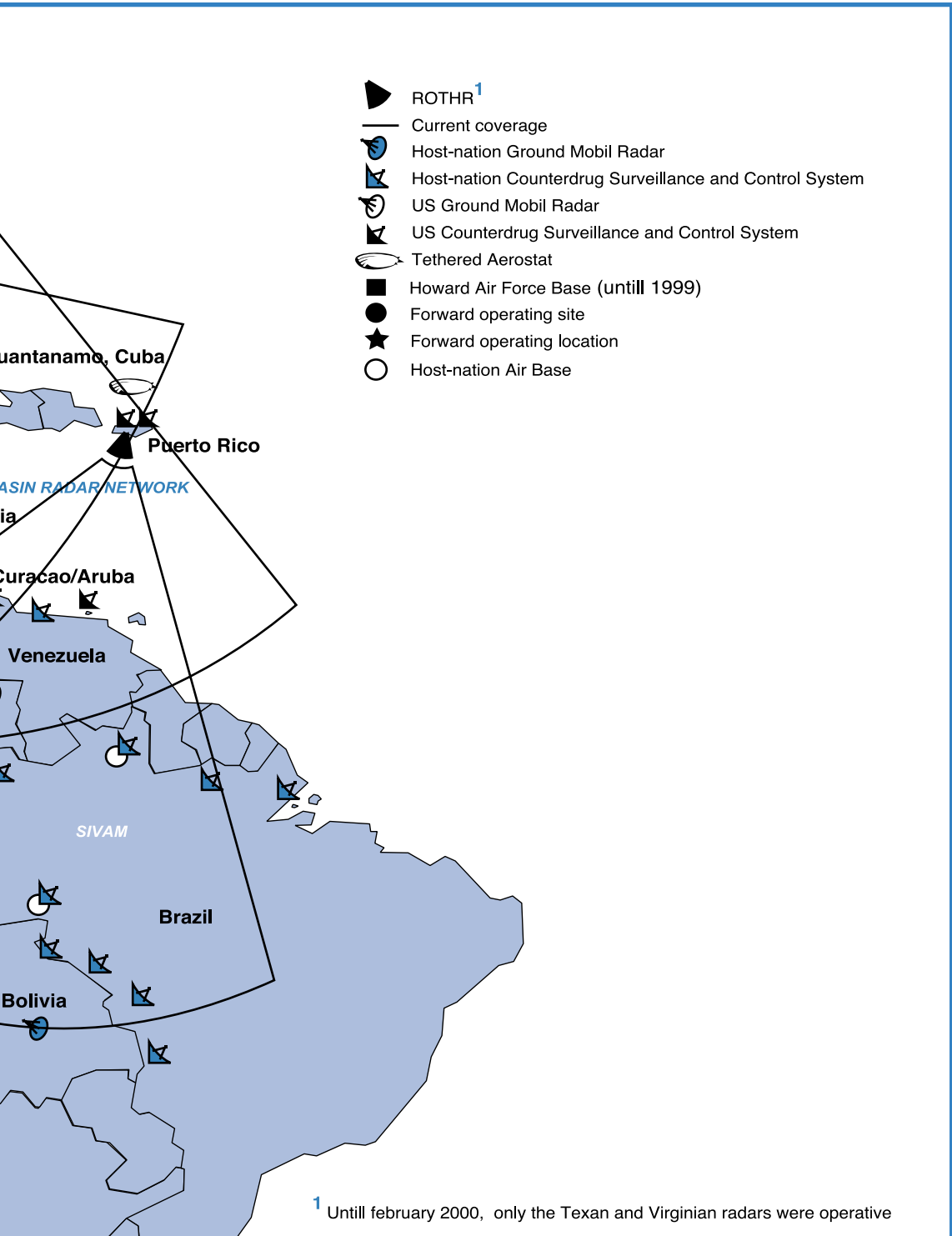
- Three *Relocatable Over-The-Horizon Radars (ROTHR)*s operating in Texas, Virginia (since 1994-95), and Puerto Rico (since 2000), respectively, with a range of 3218 kms though with limitations regarding the precision and the detection of low-flying objects.
- *Ground Mobile Radars (GMR)*s, managed by US Southern Command in locations in the Caribbean (*Caribbean Basin Radar Network*), amongst others in Riohacha and San Andrés; in Colombia (Leticia, Marandúa, San Juan de Guaviare, Tres Esquinas, and possibly in Araracuara and Tabatinga); in Peru (Iquitos, Andoas and Pucallpa); and probably in Ecuador (in Sucumbíos or Napo). Some observers report the operation of a total of 17 GMRs, which usually have a range of 386 kms.
- A series of ground-based radars managed by authorities in the region and generating information that is, to a higher or lower degree, shared with authorities from other countries. The best known system is SIVAM (Brazil), a set of 25 radars nearly completely installed (April 2003), generating information that the United States and Colombia especially wish to further access.



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The Amazon Surveillance System SIVAM (Sistema de Vigilância da Amazônia) is a project of the Brazilian Government to monitor and protect the Amazon Basin against deforestation, inappropriate land use and illegal gold mining, as well as drug production and trafficking. The system consists of a satellite and ground-based and airborne radar and surveillance platforms that cover the whole Amazon Basin. Although approved in 1998, Brazil still has not implemented a shoot-down policy for illicit drug flights. Unlike ground-based radar in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia which are operated primarily by US military personnel, SIVAM is run exclusively by Brazilians. On this map only the border ground-based radars are shown, which reach extends into the neighbouring countries.



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* This map does not pretend to be complete

After it became obvious that US conversations with Panama over continued use of the Howard Base as a multilateral counter-drug centre had failed, the US government made efforts to seek “alternative arrangements with other governments interested in carrying out (counter-drug) activities in the future.”¹ These “arrangements” began in 1998.² The first official mention came in July 1998, when James Rubin of the State Department stated that “possible posts include Honduras, Ecuador or a site in the United States, possibly Florida.”³ According to the US General Accounting Office (GAO), in September of that year the DOD drew up the basic criteria for site selection: 1) proximity to source and transit zones; 2) protection of US personnel and equipment; and 3) sufficient infrastructure to minimise construction costs.⁴ A presentation by the US Southern Command in October broadened the range of options to Aruba and Curaçao, Belize, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Peru and Trinidad. At that time, a combination of three locations, one each in South America, Central America and the Caribbean, was already being proposed. By the time the Howard Base finally closed, provisional agreements had already been signed establishing access to new sites in Ecuador and Aruba-Curaçao. On 31 March 2000, eleven months after Howard closed and following the breakdown of negotiations with Costa Rica, the United States and El Salvador signed a 10-year agreement for the installation of the Central American site near the Salvadoran capital.

Once the backing of the FOL host country governments was obtained, SouthCom’s concern became US congressional approval of the funds needed to upgrade the airports. Design and construction costs were initially included in the budget for supporting Plan Colombia, which approved in July 2000 a total of US\$1.3 billion.⁵

With clear differences in each of the host countries, the debate and criticism that preceded the signing of the various FOL agreements influenced the content of the accords that were finally signed. Although the three agreements are clearly based on a single model document, there are marked differences which indicate that certain governments had better positions or greater negotiating capacity than others. Although these differences are not decisive for the overall operations of the FOLS, they demonstrate the margins for negotiation that were used by the different governments to defend their own interests in the face of US demands.

While debate over the FOL agreements continued, the posts began to operate on a temporary basis. In comparison to the 2,500 troops that SouthCom had proposed stationing in the derailed multilateral centre in Panama,⁶ the FOLS seemed minor: between 10 and 15 permanent staff members and, “under normal circumstances”, a maximum of 300 (Ecuador and Curaçao) and 100 (Aruba and El Salvador) additional personnel on a rotating basis.⁷

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¹ Rubin, J. (State Department), “U.S. Blames Panama For Deadlock on Drugs Base,” *Reuters*, 20 July 1998.

² In December 1998, the Netherlands Antilles Justice Minister, Rutsel Martha, said that initial conversations had been held in June with the United States about establishing a FOL in Curaçao. It was later said that the first overtures had been made in October of that year (*Amigoe*, Willemstad, 12 December 1998; 12 January 2002).

³ “U.S., Panama to Abandon Canal Anti-Drug Center,” *Reuters*, 20 July 1998.

⁴ GAO, *Drug Control: International Counterdrug Sites Being Developed*, US General Accounting Office, GAO-01-63BR, December 2000.

⁵ The funds initially approved only included US\$116.5 million for the FOLS in Ecuador and Aruba-Curaçao. See: General Peter Pace, commander in chief of SouthCom, *Testimony before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control*, Washington DC, 28 February 2001.

⁶ Romero, P. (State Department), *Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources, Committee on Government Reform and Oversight*, Washington DC, 4 May 1999.

⁷ General Charles Wilhelm (SouthCom), *Testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Defense Subcommittee and the Military Construction Committee*, Washington DC, 14 July 1999; Van Aartsen, J. (Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs), *DVWH/AK-99/00*, The Hague, 18 July 1999; Patterson, A., *Letter to the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador*, 5 July 2000. The agreement with Ecuador allows for a maximum of 475 troops in special situations.

Initially, the construction of additional installations for housing these staff was only planned for Manta, Ecuador, although the construction of infrastructure for operations and training was planned for all the FOLs. The main airport upgrades involved their capacity to receive, station and maintain aircraft. Manta and Hato Rey (Curaçao) have been adapted for all types of aircraft, including the largest models,⁸ while plans for Aruba and El Salvador only included 'medium-size' and 'small' aircraft.

In mid-March 2001, the Manta air base was closed to upgrade the runway, lengthening it to 3,100 meters and building new communications towers and a taxiway to a new area for parking aircraft. After the first phase of the work was finished, Fernando Arroyo, a US Army engineer, said that Manta had "one of the best runways in South America".⁹ In Curaçao, maximum efforts were made to share installations with the Dutch Navy. In Aruba, the first evaluation of the FOL agreement between The Netherlands and the United States refers to an operational difficulty caused by the lack of space for parking aircraft. Construction of a new area was included in plans presented by SouthCom.¹⁰ In an adjustment to the national budget after 11 September 2001, however, the US Congress indefinitely postponed this funding. In 2003, operations from the Aruba site were almost completely suspended. As in Aruba, changes planned for the airport in Comalapa (El Salvador) have been reduced to the construction of a new tarmac area and access. The work is to be finished by the end of 2003.

US personnel operating from the FOLs

The tasks of oversight, monitoring, identification and interception in transit zones are

shared by DOD, Coast Guard and Customs personnel. The DOD is the co-ordinating agency for these activities. The Coast Guard is responsible for intercepting seagoing vessels, in collaboration with Customs. In production zones, local authorities are responsible for the detention of persons and seizure of drugs.

The agreements and operational annexes signed by the respective governments establish maximum limits for personnel from those agencies who can be present in the FOLs at any given time, though there is a fair amount of latitude in these figures. According to General René Vargas Pazzos, retired head of the Ecuadoran Army, the FOL is only required to provide information about personnel staying for longer than seven days at the Manta base: "The North Americans can have as many troops as they want. Those who fall under the requirements of the reports cannot exceed 450, but there is no control over the others, who stay for fewer than seven days." The general referred to the FOL operating agreement for Manta as a "war plan."¹¹ According to retired Ecuadoran Air Force officers, the capacity of the Manta runway and facilities would allow between 15,000 and 16,000 troops to pass through in a single week. The agreement does not limit the number of people who can use the FOL at any given time while in transit to another destination. Besides the airports, the agreements include the use of seaports in the host countries. During 2002, 15 US warships were reported to have arrived in the port at Manta.

While the DOD has concentrated on greater professionalism among its combat troops, the United States has also increased the delegation of support tasks to private contractors, a system known as 'outsourcing'. During 2002, the DOD and the State Depart-

⁸ One example of a "large plane" mentioned is the E-3 Sentry (AWACS) "spy" plane; nevertheless, the huge C-5 transport plane (which is 75 meters long, with a 68-meter wingspan) can also take off fully loaded from the runways at Manta and Hato Rey (www.af.mil/factsheets).

⁹ *La Hora*, Quito, 14 December 2001.

¹⁰ GAO, GAO-01-63BR, 2000, Op. cit.

¹¹ APDHE, *Base de EE.UU. en Manta y Plan Colombia: análisis de impactos y alternativas para el Ecuador*, forum organized by: APDH, Consultative Commission of the Monitoring Group for the Impacts of Plan Colombia in Ecuador and the Parliamentary Sub-commission to Evaluate Plan Colombia, Quito, May 2001.

ment contracted 17 and three private companies, respectively, for various duties. The company most involved in the FOLs is DynCorp Aerospace Technology. Its participation in anti-drugs operations in the Andean Region through State Department contracts dates back to 1991 and mainly involves aircraft maintenance and training for national pilots, not operational activities.¹² In The Netherlands and Ecuador, however, there is a great deal of sensitivity on this subject. The work of DynCorp, and of this type of company in general, is not subject to oversight, and employees of the company have been implicated in several scandals.¹³ DynCorp has also been contracted to do aerial spraying of coca and opium poppy fields in Colombia.

Information sharing and overflights

The sharing with host country authorities of information gathered from the FOLs is an issue plagued by contradictions. What is clear is that the US is keeping some of the information strictly confidential. At both Manta and Hato Rey, there are areas that are off limits to all local personnel. It is practically impossible to determine whether the FOLs are being used to gather information for purposes other than combating drugs. US law also limits how much information US civilian and military personnel can share with authorities of other countries. This also has to do with the risks of aerial interception which have become clear after the 2001 shooting down by Peruvian military of a missionary plane wrongly identified as a drug trafficking flight on the basis of information provided by a company working for the CIA. In such cases the US government might be sued for compensation by the victims' families.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the renewal of the aerial interdiction

programmes, recently restarted in Colombia and expected in the near future in Peru, will also mark a return to the sharing of information for this purpose.

According to the GAO, another obstacle to FOL operations is the fact that some governments in the region (including Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela) do not want to allow the United States free access to their air space. The case of Venezuela is one of the most notorious because of the strong position toward the United States taken by the Hugo Chávez administration, especially after allegations of possible US involvement in a coup attempt on 12 April 2002. According to the magazine *Intel Briefing*, "patrol aircraft operating from the (...) FOL in Manta, Ecuador, also provided intelligence on the military revolt against Chávez."¹⁵ The Venezuelan government has since changed its position, however, accepting a new request by the United States for an air corridor passing over Venezuela en route from Curaçao to the Colombian region of Arauca, where the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline begins and where US Special Forces personnel were recently deployed to support Colombian troops.

The possible use of the FOLs to support the coup in Venezuela is one example of how SouthCom's actions in the region are not limited to counter-drug operations. The arrival of a large number of US military vessels on the Ecuadorian coast has led to an unforeseen use of the Manta FOL. In early 2002, a programme began that uses satellite data to pursue boats carrying Ecuadorian migrants toward the United States. By June of that year, seven boats carrying 1,545 people had been intercepted in international waters and their passengers repatriated to Ecuador.¹⁶

¹² Amigoe, Willemstad, 28 February 2000.

¹³ *El Comercio*, Quito, 29 April 2002.

¹⁴ *The Washington Post*, November 4, 1999.

¹⁵ *Intel Briefing*, 13 April 2002.

¹⁶ Project Counselling Service, *Border Report*, Bogotá, June 2003.

Opposition to FOL agreements in the host countries

Among the obstacles in the negotiations with Panama over the possible use of the Howard Base for the Multilateral Counter-drug Center (MCC), two stand out: the 12-year minimum time frame sought by the United States and its desire to include access to the country for military training, regional logistics, search and rescue activities, and related missions. The State Department referred to the need for an “effective presence in relation to costs” that “could not be reconciled with Panama’s political requirements.”¹ After the publication of the interim agreement on the MCC between the United States and Panama in January 1998, Pérez Balladares faced strong opposition to the plan. In March, the State Department suspended the negotiations, partly because of Panama’s condition that MCC operations be limited to counter-drug missions.²

In Costa Rica, while confidential preliminary negotiations were underway for the installation of a FOL in Liberia, strong criticism arose over the Cooperation Agreement on Suppression of Illicit Trafficking ratified by the Legislative Assembly in September 1999 with one clear restriction: permission to use the country’s airspace and order suspicious planes to land referred strictly to US aircraft belonging to police, and not to military craft. This restriction was a direct consequence of the historical sensitivity of Costa Rica’s governments and citizens to the issue of military activity.

Such sensitivity did not have the same results in other cases. In Ecuador and El Sal-

vador, representatives of civil society and an opposition political party filed formal legal cases, charging that the agreements were unconstitutional. In both cases, similar arguments were used and strong criticism was made about national territory being used by the United States for military purposes and the inequitable distribution of rights and obligations in the agreements signed. The Salvadoran opposition raised the constitutional requirement that such agreements must be approved by a two-thirds vote in the parliament. In both countries, the courts rejected the cases.

The relationship between the FOLs and the Colombian conflict has been one of the reasons for resistance to the agreements in all the countries, but only in The Netherlands was this concern reflected in political measures. Opponents of the treaty warned that because they were part of the US budget for Plan Colombia, the FOLs were turning The Netherlands into an indirect player in a conflict in which human rights violations are daily fare. During the debate in the lower house of Parliament, the minister repeatedly stated that the FOLs can only be used for drug control missions and that his US colleague had given his word on this. A clause establishing an annual review of “the operation of the FOLs in a broad sense” helped overcome the lack of Parliamentary support for the Treaty. Nevertheless, the foreign minister rejected the declassification of essential data about the flights, which would have enabled the parliament to do real follow-up and have an oversight of the missions carried out from the FOLs.

¹ Rand Beers, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics Affairs and Law Enforcement, *Testimony before the House of Representatives*, Washington DC, 9 June 2000.

² This was how Peter Romero (State Department) put it in his *Testimony before the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources of the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight*, Washington DC, 4 May 1999.

Conclusion

The United States takes advantage of two basic tools of coercion to address what it considers threats to its national security: its capacity to wage war and its information superiority. The FOLs, and counter-drug activities in general, aid in this effort. Contrary to what General Wilhelm told the US Congress when he defined the FOLs as the result of “*agreements between the governments of the United States and the host countries, by which the United States obtains access to existing installations that are the property of and continue to be managed by the host country,*”¹⁷ in practice the FOLs operate under the command of a US ‘administrator’, co-ordinating with the local commander responsible for the host country installations. It is the US administrator, however, who directs FOL operations and the resulting information *in situ*. There are no mechanisms which would enable the host country or other observers to verify whether the use of the FOLs is truly limited to counter-drug operations.

The annual evaluation of the FOL in Aruba and Curaçao, which The Netherlands’ parliament established as part of the agreement, does not provide for this either. At the time, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs refused to provide details about flight plans, claiming

it was confidential information that would affect the effectiveness of interdiction operations if it were made public. Another explanation could be that the Dutch government simply does not have access to this information and the minister was trying to cover for this.

It is very likely that the agencies that use the FOLs have other priorities besides combating drugs. Although in theory the FOLs should fall within multilateral co-operation efforts, it was the United States that took the initiative to establish them, defining their use according to its own interests. Counter-insurgency efforts in Colombia, control of arms trafficking in the region, control of

migration and possible support for the coup in Venezuela are indications of other uses of the FOLs that are not laid down in the agreements. Nor should the possible implications be underestimated of military protection - whether official or contracted - for the petroleum interests of transnational companies operating in the region. The FOLs unquestionably form part of a US military strategy towards Latin America and the Caribbean. The host countries share with the United States, therefore, certain responsibility for the implications of this project.

There are no mechanisms to verify whether the use of the FOLs is truly limited to counter-drug operations.

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¹⁷ General Charles Wilhelm (SouthCom), *Testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Defense Subcommittee and the Military Construction Subcommittee*, Washington DC, 14 July 1999.

JIATF – Inter-agency cooperation

Clinton's Presidential Decision Directive 14 ordered a review of the nation's command, control and intelligence centres involved in international counter-narcotics operations, resulting in the establishment in 1994 of three Joint Interagency Task Forces (JIATFs). JIATF-West, based in Alameda, California, falls under US Pacific Command, and focuses on disrupting the trafficking of heroin and other drugs originating in South Asia, and assists JIATF-East to disrupt maritime smuggling of cocaine along the Eastern Pacific to Mexico. JIATF-East (for the Caribbean/Central American transit zone) came to be based in Key West, Florida. In Key West, the *Joint Southern Surveillance and Reconnaissance Operations Center* (JSSROC) already functioned, originally set up to monitor military build-up in Cuba. The centre, which mission nowadays includes a supportive role in counter-drug operations, collects and processes all military intelligence from air missions, radar systems, satellites and communication intercepts. JIATF-South (for the South American source zone) operated from the Howard Air Force base in Panama, but moved to Florida and merged with JIATF-East when the Panama base was closed down in May 1999.

The FOLs operate under this merged JIATF in Florida, placed under the command of US Southern Command. The Task Force co-ordinates the employment of ships and aircraft of US Customs, the Coast Guard, the Navy and the Air Force and from allied nations with a military presence in the Caribbean, namely France, Great Britain and The Netherlands. The Task Force is also meant to knot together drug intelligence flows from law enforcement and intelligence agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); Federal

Bureau of Investigation (FBI); Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA); Naval Criminal Investigative Service; Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA). Since the merger, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela have assigned liaison officers to JIATF. Improving co-ordination and intelligence-sharing between all the agencies and countries involved was meant to enhance the cost effectiveness of the combined surveillance capacity.

The merged JIATF also plays a major role in source zone interdiction, aimed at disrupting drug trafficking within the Andean-Amazon region. These Air Bridge Denial operations were suspended in the region after the 2001 shooting down of an aircraft in Peru carrying Baptist missionary Veronica Bowers and her 7 month old daughter Charity. Both were killed in the accident after private AirScan contractors working for the CIA mistakenly suspected the aircraft of drug smuggling. In April 2003, a new agreement was reached with Colombia to resume Air Bridge Denial operations, after a careful review of procedures to prevent such dramatic mistakes in the future. To avoid liability risks, the guidelines for JIATF attached to the agreement, stress that "*U.S. personnel will not (repeat – "not") be a participant in any decision to launch against or shoot down aircraft – as this is solely a Commander of the Colombian Air Force's decision.*"¹ After a series of test runs, operations in Colombia started again in August 2003, which is expected to significantly increase the number of flights from the FOLs in Manta and Aruba/Curacao. It has been announced that Air Bridge Denial operations in Peru might re-start at the end of the year.

¹ JIATF, *Air Bridge Denial Operations*, Director Joint Interagency Task Force South, Naval Air Facility, Key West Florida, 30 April 2003.

A “An effective, balanced drug policy requires an aggressive interdiction program to make drugs scarce, expensive, and of unreliable quality”, according to the latest White House drug control strategy.¹ By employing the military, the government wanted to dramatically increase the interdiction capability. Ever since, this decision has been questioned, not least by government agencies and armed forces insiders. Question marks surround the effectiveness of the interdiction strategy in general as well as the added value of bringing in the military. The political justification for the FOLs and the reason Ecuador, The Netherlands and El Salvador agreed to host them is built on very questionable assumptions about the usefulness of the FOLs for stemming the flow of drugs.

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Measuring effectiveness

The effectiveness of interdiction operations is often measured in terms of quantities of drugs seized. As an US Air Force observer said, however, “Tons of drugs seized’ are as false a metric for the ‘drug war’ as ‘body count’ was for the ‘Vietnam War’.”² The GAO in 1993 had already questioned the real impact of seizures regarding the availability of illicit drugs on the US market: “Some federal officials contend that interdiction at least reduces cocaine availability in the United States by the amounts seized. However, we know of no evidence to prove that theory, which apparently is based on an assumption that all available cocaine is already being shipped to the United States. [...] A different theory, which seems more consistent with supply and demand principles and estimates, is that the South American cartels ship to the United States whatever amounts their customers demand, with interdiction losses merely replaced by later shipments.”³

According to a military analyst sympathetic to a continued DOD role in the fight against drugs: “Oversight agencies as well as the DOD continue to look for the means to measure the effectiveness of military assistance with respect to interdiction. There are none. The only truly assessable MOE [measure of effectiveness] is the price and availability of illegal drugs within the U.S. which is currently a function of demand vice supply.”⁴ Here is where, again and again, reviews fail to observe any progress. “Despite long-standing efforts and expenditures of billions of dollars, illegal drugs still flood the United States. Although U.S. and host-nation counternarcotics efforts have resulted in the arrest of major drug traffickers and the seizure of large amounts of drugs, they have not materially reduced the availability of drugs in the United States.”⁵

Impacts on the market

A research institute in the US interviewed scores of imprisoned drug traffickers, in the context of an ONDCP-sponsored investigation into the effectiveness of interdiction operations. “Unless there is an informant involved, your odds are 95 percent in your favour” is the general assessment. “Most traffickers perceived government interdiction and investigative operations as manageable risks – ones that could be overcome by altering their routes and methods and being careful in selecting their associates. Ten percent of the smugglers stated that Customs aircrafts P-3s and aerostat balloons were a definite deterrent. In the case of P-3s, they would wait them out and they also found ways to thwart the aerostats by terrain masking techniques or simply waiting until one was down.” The researchers concluded that “smugglers don’t feel much of a threat on the water because law enforcement is unable to spot them. If spotted, they feel law enforcement can’t catch them, and if caught, the use of sophisticated com-

¹ The White House, *National Drug Control Policy*, Washington DC, February 2003.

² Lieutenant Colonel Stephen P. Howard (United States Air Force), *The Military War on Drugs: Too Many Assets, Too Few Results*, Air University, April 2001.

³ GAO, *Drug Control - Heavy Investment in Military Surveillance Not Paying Off*; US General Accounting Office, GAO/NSIAD-93-220, September 1993.

⁴ Lieutenant Commander Stephen B. Dietz III, U.S. Navy, *Sticking with the ‘Drug War’ – A viable and feasible course of action*, Naval War College, Newport, 13 June 1997.

⁵ GAO, *Observations on U.S. Counternarcotics Activities*, Statement of Henry L. Hinton, Jr., Assistant Comptroller General, National Security and International Affairs Division, GAO/T-NSIAD-98-249, 16 September 1998.

partments makes it virtually impossible for the drugs to be located.”⁶

The study probably represents the most sophisticated attempt thus far to calculate the impact of interdiction on price/purity trends in the US and on trafficking patterns. Apart from the smugglers’ own assessment, the study develops a detailed model to analyse market trends, identify statistically significant fluctuations and compare those with interdiction operations going on at the time. On the basis of their model, the researchers are able to show the impacts on the market caused by enforcement interventions. In all cases, however, these are shown to be temporary dents that have not influenced the longer term trend. The effects are comparable to the impact of periods of intensive hurricanes, such as when El Niño caused hurricanes almost every day for three months in the spring of 1997 making any sea or air transport in the transit zone virtually impossible, and affecting price and purity of cocaine on the US market.

Changing patterns

According to the researchers, the shift away from clandestine flights as a means of international smuggling, which occurred in the transit zone in the early 1990s and between Peru and Colombia during the mid-1990s, “suggests that operations were effective enough to force smugglers to change their transportation routes and/or methods. However, as the counter-drug community has long recognized, drug traffickers’ ability to get drugs from South America into the U.S. is limited only by their creativity.”⁷

This major shift casts further doubts about the usefulness of FOL-type surveillance and monitoring. The classical image of private cocaine smuggling aircraft that can be picked

up on radar and forced or shot down by fighter jets, for which the military surveillance and monitoring system was originally designed, have become exceptions to the rule – at least in the transit zone. Nowadays, shipments are primarily brought in via containerised cargo, coastal freighters and fishing vessels, all means of smuggling for which ground-based radars, AWACS, P-3s or F-16s are of little use. Go-fast private boats still play a significant role in the initial stage, bringing the cargo to a Caribbean island to enter commercial vessels or to a coast in Central America or Mexico, from where most of the cargo enters the US by trucks.⁸ Interdiction of drugs hiding within these immense commercial transport flows has become more dependent on intelligence, informers and border checks, and less on detecting ‘suspected aircraft’.

In the end, the protagonists of surveillance and monitoring-based interdiction strategies are left with a very meagre justification: “previous ‘failures’ do not preclude future successes”, and the lack of ability to measure any effectiveness “is not a justifiable reason to reward the drug traffickers with an additional degree of freedom to conduct criminal activity”.⁹

A new élan

Such doubts did not escape the attention of the White House. The latest National Drug Control Strategy (February 2003) mentions that “it is an article of faith among many self-styled drug policy ‘experts’ that drug interdiction is futile”. The Bush administration is trying to regain confidence in the strategy. “The drug trade is not an unstoppable force of nature but rather a profit-making enterprise where costs and rewards exist in an equilibrium that can be disrupted. Every action that makes the drug trade more costly and less profitable is a step toward



⁶ ONDCP, *Measuring the Deterrent Effect of Enforcement Operations on Drug Smuggling, 1991-1999*, Prepared for: Office of National Drug Control Policy, Prepared by: Abt Associates, Inc., NCJ 189988, August 2001.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ US Department of Justice, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2003*, National Drug Intelligence Center, Washington DC, Product No. 2003-Q0317-001, January 2003.

⁹ Lieutenant Commander Stephen B. Dietz III, 2001, Op. cit.

“breaking” the market. [...] current interdiction rates are within reach of the 35 to 50 percent seizure rate that is estimated would prompt a collapse of profitability for smugglers”.

Two recent developments are creating a sense of euphoria, a renewed confidence that all the efforts are finally paying off: the decline of coca cultivation in Colombia and the sustained decline since 1998 of cocaine purity. Drug Czar John Walters in July this year talked about a recession in the cocaine trade for the first time in 25 years and said that “we expect to see in the next 6 to 9 months significant disruptions in the purity and availability of cocaine throughout the world.”¹⁰

The reduction in hectares under coca cultivation in Colombia as a result of intensive spraying is confirmed by the UNODC Illicit Crop Monitoring Programme.¹¹ US officials talk about a ‘breaking point’. Though concerned about indications of expansion of coca cultivation in the rest of the Andean region, John Walters maintains: “I don’t believe that the magnitude of the changes in Peru or Bolivia, or those that we project for the next year, are conceivably capable of offsetting the destruction of the base of the business of cocaine in Colombia. [...] the shock that is being applied by the tempo in Colombia is beyond what we believe is any legitimate estimate of the capacity of the market to correspond and buffer with replanting or other ways of avoiding it.”¹²

Declining purity

DEA samples of export quality cocaine show a reduction in purity from 86% in 1996-98 to 78% in 2001. This declining purity also translates to lower stages of wholesale and retail distribution in the US. Since Colombian cocaine production was still on the rise during this period, this cannot be attributed to

the more recent decline in coca production. Different possible explanations are given.

The most detailed attempt is undertaken by a steering committee chaired by the DEA in which all involved US agencies sit together to assess the availability of illegal drugs on the US market. The Working Group on Cocaine is led by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The 2002 report points to two relevant factors. Firstly, that “over one half of all cocaine bricks leaving source zone labs are now being cut with diluents. At the end of 2000, about a third of all samples were diluted, which at that time was a significant increase from previous years.” “We assess that the fundamental cause for decreased cocaine purity is that Andean cocaine supplies have failed to keep up with expanding international demand. As a result of competition for limited supplies, traffickers have been motivated to “stretch” their product and/or maximize profits by adding diluents at cocaine HCl labs. [...] Consumption has increased most notably in South America and Europe. In 1990, global consumption was probably around 500 metric tons, of which the United States consumed about 400 metric tons. By 2001, global consumption had increased to more than 600 metric tons, while U.S. consumption had dropped to about 260 metric tons.”¹³

The other factor additional to the deliberate cutting is that “chemical analysis of samples revealed that illicit cocaine laboratories in Colombia are using significantly reduced amounts of the required essential solvents for processing, often skipping the use of one of the two key solvents in the final step of cocaine HCl processing.” The most likely reason behind this is the strengthened international effort, Operation Purple, to restrict the trade in potassium permanganate. Increased difficulty in obtaining this essential precursor forced traffickers to export cocaine “without the benefit of the total package of traditional purifying solvents.”

¹⁰ Walters, J., *Current Developments in Colombia in the Fight Against Drug Trafficking And Narcoterrorism*, Foreign Press Center, State Department, Washington DC, 29 July 2003.

¹¹ UNODC, *Colombia Coca Survey for 2002*, Preliminary Report, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, March 2003.

¹² Walters, J., 2003, Op. cit.

¹³ Drug Availability Steering Committee, *Drug Availability Estimates in the United States*, NCJ 197107, December 2002.



Their prediction is that “cocaine purities will probably continue to fall marginally overtime as eradication and interdiction prevent supply from matching demand.” With regard to the counter-strategy for traffickers, “the most viable strategy for them will be to make every effort to increase the global coca supply.”¹⁴

The National Drug Threat Assessment 2003, prepared under the responsibility of the US Justice Department, does not air any élan of renewed confidence and is quite careful in its assessment and predictions. “Powder cocaine is readily available throughout the country, and availability appears to be stable overall—rising slightly in some areas and declining slightly in others. [...] DEA reports that cocaine prices throughout the country were low and stable in 2001.” They concur with the analysis that as cocaine consumption markets expand in Latin America and in Europe the average purity of wholesale cocaine is likely to remain lower than mid-1990s levels. Depending on developments in Colombia, however, “the potential for production levels to increase in Peru and Bolivia may offset the increased demand brought on by market expansion, allowing purity levels to stabilize.”¹⁵

Conclusion

There is not yet much reason for drug control agencies to be optimistic about a strategic breakthrough. The renewed confidence in the War on Drugs at the political level is based on market fluctuations that can, at best, be regarded as tactical successes. Similar fluctuations have occurred before and can still level out over the next few years. Moreover, whatever the exact reasons behind the purity decline, they have little to do with the type of interdiction operations carried out from the FOLs. The conclusion reached by the GAO in 1993 still seems valid, that “mil-

itary surveillance has not demonstrated that it can make a contribution—to either drug interdiction or to the national goal of reduced drug supplies—that is commensurate with its cost. [...] adding military surveillance to the nation’s interdiction efforts has not made a difference in our ability to reduce the flow of cocaine to American streets.”¹⁶

After dedicating fifteen years of his military career to counter-narcotics efforts, flying AWACS missions, serving as a JIATF station officer and acting as radar station chief, US Air Force Major Daniel L. Whitten has not become convinced of its usefulness. “During the past two decades the administrations in power have continued to escalate the military’s involvement in this fight. [...] Interdiction has been the primary military application for more than 15 years. And after all this time we have not had a serious impact on the drug market if price and availability are an indicator. That stability in price is a profound indicator of our ineffectiveness in drying up drug supplies. [...] In my opinion the military interdiction effort is an extremely expensive and ineffective mission for our forces to perform.”¹⁷

A military colleague of Major Whitten at the Air University arrives at the same conclusion. “These operations met none of the goals or objectives outlined in the policies that called for these military endeavors. Interdiction operations aimed at the illegal drug supply achieve nothing of consequence.” The author, an Air Force officer who took time off to study the effects of interdiction, started from a fully supportive position but after six months concluded: “Further militarization of the drug war is not the answer. [...] It’s time to take the responsibility for America’s drug war from the hands of the military generals and give it to the Surgeon General.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ US Department of Justice, 2003, Op. cit.

¹⁶ GAO, *Expanded Military Surveillance Not Justified by Measurable Goals or Results*, Statement of Louis J. Rodrigues, Director, Systems Development and Production Issues, National Security and International Affairs Division, GAO/T-NSIAD-94-14, 5 October 1993.

¹⁷ Major Daniel L. Whitten (US Air Force), *Perspective on the Military Involvement in the War on Drugs – Is there a better way?*, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, Air University, AU/ACSC/227/1999-04, April 1999.

¹⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Stephen P. Howard, 2001, Op. cit.



Seizure rates

Seizure percentages for cocaine have grown to impressive levels. Roughly between a quarter to one third of all cocaine produced is probably being seized throughout the world each year. Estimates vary greatly from source to source.

For the year 2001, the calculation of the combined US agencies in the *'Drug Availability Estimates in the United States'* (December 2002) was that a total of 290 metric tons was seized worldwide. This would amount to 26% of the 1178 mt total production estimated by the US for 2001. For the same year, the UN calculation published in the *'Global Illicit Drug Trends 2003'* was that a total of 366 mt had been seized, representing no less than 44% of the much lower UN estimate of a total production of 827 mt.

The US seizure data bank appears to be incomplete regarding seizures by non-US agencies. The UN data bank, based on country reporting, on the

other hand, seems rather inflated due to double countings. A seizure in international waters off the Mexican coast, for example, is easily claimed by both the US and Mexico if agencies from both countries were involved in the operation. In both calculations, the cited percentages of global cocaine supply intercepted should be lowered as weights have not been adjusted for purity differences. A portion of the seizures is done further down the distribution chain, where purity levels are way below the average purity of export quality cocaine. Despite the considerable margins of error, the estimates do support the conclusion that in the case of cocaine, interdiction rates have surpassed the figure traditionally cited in press reports that only '10% of drugs is intercepted'. The large amounts seized over the past decade do, however, seem to have been largely offset by increased production in the Andes. High seizure rates do not yet mean there is less cocaine available for consumption on the market.



FOLs & Seizures

Without detailed operational flight data, it is impossible to establish whether a specific seizure is the result of actions undertaken from one of the FOLs. A few specific examples have been highlighted, however, to illustrate the usefulness of the FOLs. In July 2001, the US ambassador to El Salvador congratulated the country for "*the biggest maritime drug seizure in US history*". On May 15, a shipment of 13 metric tons of cocaine was intercepted in an operation supported by a P-3 aircraft from the Comalapa FOL.¹ A similar mega-seizure of 12.8 metric tons was made on 11 February 2002, on the coast of Ecuador, with monitoring support from a P-3 aircraft operating from the Manta FOL. On May 25 that same year, another P-3 helped to detain a go-fast boat in the Caribbean carrying 900 kilograms of cocaine. And on 3 July 2002, the radar at Comalapa apparently detected a shipment of 1.93 metric tons of cocaine. There are not sufficient systematised data publicly available to assess the tactical contribution of the FOLs to the overall interdiction effort.

In the first annual evaluation, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs indicates: "Also thanks to aerial

surveillance undertaken from the FOLs, a contribution was made to interdicting the trade flow and seizing over 30 tons of cocaine and 7 tons of marihuana." These figures, however, represent total amounts intercepted in the area, not just those apprehended with support from the FOLs, hence the words 'also' and 'contribution' in the quote. The evaluation specifies that between October 2001 and September 2002, 424 flights were undertaken from Curacao and Aruba, with a total of 1,386 hours and concludes that these "flights have made a significant contribution to the international fight against organized drug crime."² The first year the FOL was operational, between May 1999 and April 2000, 531 flights were reported - 229 from Aruba and 302 from Curacao. During this period, a total of 35 shipments were intercepted in the Caribbean region, roughly 20 tons of cocaine and 10 tons of marihuana. Out of the total intercepted shipments, only two - representing 3 tons of drugs - "were the direct result of activities undertaken from the FOLs on Aruba and Curacao".³

¹ Rose Likins, US Ambassador to El Salvador and Anne Patterson, US Ambassador to Colombia, during a televised press conference, San Salvador, 19 July 2001.

² Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. J.G. de Hoop Scheffer, *Evaluatie Verdrag met de VS inzake Forward Operating Locations*, DWH/AK-02/1672, The Hague, December 2002.

³ Minister of Foreign Affairs J. Van Aartsen, *Vestiging van Forward Operating Locations op de Nederlandse Antillen en Aruba*, Letter to Parliament, DWH/AK-99/0018, The Hague, July 2000.

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USEFUL WEBSITES

www.tni.org/drugs

Transnational Institute Drugs & Democracy Programme
Special page on FOLs in Dutch and English: www.tni.org/drugs/research/fols.htm

www.lawg.org

Latin American Working Group

www.ciponline.org/colombia

Center for International Policy's Colombia Project

www.wola.org

Washington Office on Latin America

www.ciponline.org/facts

Just the Facts: A civilian's guide to U.S. defense and security assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean

www.cedib.org/accionandina/index.php

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This issue of *Drugs & Conflict* explains the background to and operation of the US Forward Operating Locations (FOLs) in Ecuador, El Salvador and Aruba/Curaçao, established since 1999. While FOLs have been set up in many parts of the world, most recently around Afghanistan and in the Gulf Region, the only available justification, until recently, for establishing these US-commanded airbases in Latin America had been the War on Drugs. The host countries agreed to the establishment of the FOLs to facilitate military surveillance for the purpose of interdicting drug shipments. There is no evidence that the FOLs have made any discernible difference to the flow of illicit drugs to the USA, however, as even US military sources and the US General Accounting Office publicly acknowledge.

There is little question that the FOLs form part of a US military strategy towards Latin America and the Caribbean. The FOLs came into being with the closure of the Howard Air Force Base in Panama in 1999 from which the US Southern Command had operated. The US Department of Defence had to come up with an alternative means of assuring operational capacity in the region. There is evidence that the FOLs are being used for a number of purposes, besides the ostensible role in counter-narcotics efforts. This includes gathering intelligence on arms trafficking in the region and migrant boats destined for the USA. Serious concerns have arisen about the possible use of the FOLs in support of US military involvement in the Colombian conflict. The war on drugs has been explicitly incorporated into the “global war on terrorism”. Though the host countries have insisted on the limited anti-drugs mission of the FOLs, the mission has gradually shifted to support what is now called a “unified campaign” against drugs and terrorism.

Founded in 1974, TNI is an international network of activist-scholars committed to critical analyses of the global problems of today and tomorrow. It aims to provide intellectual support to those movements concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable and environmentally sustainable direction.

Since 1996, the TNI Drugs & Democracy programme has been analysing trends in the illegal drugs economy and in drug policies globally, their causes and their effects on economy, peace and democracy.

The Drugs & Democracy programme conducts field investigations, engages policy debates, briefs journalists and officials, coordinates international campaigns and conferences, produces articles, publications and briefing documents, and maintains a daily electronic news service on drugs-related issues.

The aim of the project and of the *Drugs and Conflict* series is to stimulate a re-assessment of conventional prohibitive and repressive policy approaches and to argue for policies based on principles consistent with a commitment to harm reduction, fair trade, development, democracy, human rights, environmental and health protection, and conflict prevention.