

'Narcontras' scandal blows up Central American policy

by Gretchen Small

Drug-running by the U.S.-sponsored Nicaraguan "contra" movement is being investigated by congressional offices, the U.S. Attorney for Southern Florida, and U.S. federal agencies ranging from the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the Customs Service, an April 11 AP story revealed. More scandal has followed the AP wire, run front-page across the United States, including details on a contra plot to assassinate our most hardline anti-drug envoy, Lewis Tambs, now ambassador to Costa Rica.

The revelations overturn the entirety of Reagan administration policy towards Ibero-America, reduced over the past year to forcing the rest of the hemisphere to join the United States in support for Nicaraguan "contras." Discussion of the economic crisis has been shunted aside for the "contra" policy, along with promises of U.S. support for a hemispheric War on Drugs. Governments from Peru, to Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia have been told relations with the United States hang or fall on their support for the contras. Those that oppose the policy have been labeled "communist-leaning," or, as Costa Rica has noticed, found U.S. economic aid "delayed."

People in Washington now talk of the Reagan administration's support for "narcontras." Administration efforts to cover up the charges worsen the scandal. Assistant Secretary of State for Interamerican Affairs Elliot Abrams, handed members of Congress a three-page document April 16, which admitted that some contras "may have engaged in such activity," but argued that "it was, insofar as we can determine, without the authorization of resistance leaders." Further, the document offers economic hardship as a justification for drug-running! The "limited number of incidents" found, occurred

during an 18-month period when the contras were receiving no U.S. assistance, the document argues, leaving them "particularly hard-pressed for financial support."

The document repeated the administration's argument that only "one" faction of the contras, the Costa Rica-based ARDE group of Eden Pastora, is believed to be involved in drug trafficking, and that other factions, such as the Nicaraguan Defense Forces (FDN) which receives the bulk of U.S. monies, are clean as a whistle.

Despite the public assurances, a "reorganization" of the narcontra command structure began immediately after the drug story hit, ordered by State Department officials anxious to "clean up the image" of the contras. Senators hurried to remind constituents that they had attached a clause to the aid package for the contras which they voted up March 27, specifying that no money could be given to contra leaders caught running drugs or violating human rights. The State Department released a public warning to the contras April 11, reiterating that the United States will suspend aid if they are caught running drugs.

Cover-up, however, cannot patch up this rotten policy. Documented cases of contra drug-running already go beyond excesses of a few "financially hard-pressed" loyalists to a cause. President Reagan's War on Drugs sits before the world as worse than a fraud: The United States has been financing drug-runners. A top-to-bottom inquiry into the contras, and any U.S. official who collaborated with narcotics traffickers, or suppressed evidence of such activities, is the minimum starting point for recouping U.S. strategic interests in the area.

To stop the Sandinistas, stop the drug trade

The policy crisis provoked by the scandal opens an opportunity to force sweeping changes in U.S. policy toward Ibero-America. U.S. military strategists, like many of their Central American counterparts, have warned that Washington has no comprehensive strategy to deal with the Central American crisis. No competent officer believes the contras can overthrow the Sandinistas, nor rally the Nicaraguan people to their side.

Investigate who designed the "contra" policy, and the same personnel appear who ran the Vietnam War, not to defeat an enemy, but as a bargaining chip in global deals with the Soviet Union. Lacking, however, has been sufficient will to impose a strategy to win.

In March 1985, *EIR* founder Lyndon H. LaRouche outlined a 15-point plan for a Western Hemisphere Alliance for a war on drugs. Drug traffic supplies the logistics for insurgencies throughout the Americas, he argued. Thus, a War on Drugs, combined with economic cooperation with our neighbors, can destroy the support base of Soviet-backed insurgencies in the region quickly and efficiently. Unlike direct U.S. military intervention against Nicaragua, the option advocated by Trilateralists such as Henry Kissinger or McGeorge Bundy, the LaRouche War on Drugs strategy can unite the continent against the major Soviet capability in the region, the drug business, while sidestepping Soviet efforts to draw the United States out of Europe, and into the Central American arena.

The region's defenses, from Mexico down to Colombia, must be strengthened against the drug and arms trade, with the U.S. providing the armed forces of cooperative nations in the region with financial and technological assistance for a military War on Drugs. Joined with a policy of enforcing strict respect for national borders, the Sandinistas would find themselves without the drug- and gun-running infrastructure, on which they depend to subvert the rest of Central America, and without an external threat to justify their internal repression.

The need for coherent regional strategy was demonstrated on April 5, when the Sandinista government shot down the latest efforts of the Contadora group of nations to reach a regional peace accord. The Sandinistas claimed U.S. build-up of the contras as the excuse for their intransigence. But Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escotto then called a press conference in Panama, to assert that Nicaragua still claims rights to the Colombian islands of San Andrés and Providencia. Colombian sovereignty over the islands had been recognized in the 1930 Treaty of Esguerra-Barcenas signed between Nicaragua and Colombia.

San Andrés has become a major center of drug and arms contraband in the Caribbean, centered around the free port on the island. In recent weeks, however, Colombian and Panamanian military cooperation on drug investigations led to a series of important busts on the island, threatening the Sandinistas' and others' "freedom" to run dope. With the

proximity of the island to the Central American coastline, a build-up in the Colombian military base on San Andrés, including basing state-of-the-art radar facilities, could turn the island into a central interdiction point against the gun and drug smuggling which criss-crosses the Caribbean Basin.

The tip of the iceberg

On Dec. 20, AP broke the story of American law-enforcement knowledge of drug-running operations of the contras. AP's sources, who refused to be named, included officials from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Customs, FBI, Costa Rica's Public Security Ministry, American "volunteers" working with the contras, and a "new secret CIA-prepared analysis" on contra drug-running. According to AP, the contras provide airstrips and protection for cocaine shipments brought in from South America, on their way to the United States. One current route includes landing planes at rebel airstrips in northern Costa Rica, where the dope is unloaded and transferred to a port on the Atlantic. There it is loaded onto shrimp boats heading for Miami.

Several contra factions are involved in the drug operations, AP asserted, including the FDN, ARDE, and a little-known "M-3" group. M-3 faction leader, Sebastian González Mendiola, was indicted in Costa Rica for cocaine trafficking in 1984. The secret CIA report documents that a top commander of Pastora's ARDE bought a helicopter and \$250,000 in arms with his cocaine profits, AP reported. Former members of the Brigade 2506, the CIA-led Cuban team formed for the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, oversee the Costa Rican drug operations of the FDN, according to AP's sources. American military officials responsible for Ibero-America have identified the Brigade 2506 group as riddled with drug-runners.

On March 16, the *San Francisco Examiner* broke the story of another contra faction's involvement in drug-running, this one the Nicaraguan Democratic Union-Nicaraguan Revolutionary Armed Force (UDN-FARN), a contra group based in Costa Rica associated with a faction of the Conservative Party. A major Bay Area cocaine ring, operating for years, was broken up in 1983 when a team working under Reagan's Drug Task Force seized 430 pounds of cocaine as smugglers tried to unload a Colombian ship docked in San Francisco. Worth an estimated \$100 million on the street, it was the biggest cocaine seizure ever made on the West Coast. Subsequently arrested, tried, and convicted for that ring, were two Nicaraguan exiles working with the UDN-FARN; two others associated with them are still free in Costa Rica.

Both arrested men claimed they used their "earnings" to help the contra cause. The U.S. Attorney's Office in San Francisco, the *Examiner* charged, not only "ignored" the political angle, but sent \$32,020 seized from one of the convicted men as drug profits, to UDN-FARN representatives in Costa Rica, after the contra group sent two letters protesting that "the retention of this money [by prosecutors] is prejudicing the progress of liberation." San Francisco's attorney de-

clined to comment on the convicted men's allegation that the CIA was involved in the drug-running, the *Examiner* reports, but did admit that the money had been released.

The tip-off: threat to Tambs

New in the latest round of exposés on federal investigations into the contras, comes the report of an alleged contra plot to assassinate the U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica, Lewis Tambs. That report alone identifies the command structure running the contras. The cocaine mafia placed Tambs, previously ambassador to Colombia, on a mafia hit list by late 1984, because of his close collaboration with Colombian military and government authorities in their War on Drugs. Tambs had been a personal friend of Colombian Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, assassinated by a mafia team on April 30, 1984. By the middle of 1985, mafia death threats became so serious Tambs was transferred out of Colombia.

The contras plotted to kill Tambs at a meeting in Miami in February 1985, Jesús García, a Miami prison guard, reported to authorities, and later to the press. That plan was set for May 1985, when Tambs was to be blown up, and the murder blamed on the Sandinistas, in order to provoke the United States into escalating the war against Nicaragua, according to these reports. The contras would then collect the \$1 million bounty which the Colombian cocaine chiefs placed on Tambs's head.

García reported that shortly after he denounced the plot, he was arrested on trumped up firearm charges by the FBI, and that another witness to the planning disappeared in Costa Rica, and is believed dead. But Jack Terrell, a former coordinator of U.S. mercenaries fighting with the contras, reported to AP and the *Houston Post* that he has been questioned by federal authorities on what he knew of the Tambs plot.

A red alert on Tambs's security should have gone up with the March 19 escape of one of the top Colombian-based cocaine kings, Matta Ballesteros, to Honduras, the major base of operations of the FDN faction of the contras. Matta, a Honduran national who sits at the top of the South America-U.S. cocaine mafia, commands sizable political and military networks in Honduras.

Accused of being one of the masterminds of the 1985 mafia killing of American DEA agent Enrique Camarena, Matta was arrested in Colombia in 1985, but paid some \$1.5 million to bribe his way out of Colombia's maximum security prison in March. Since Honduras's constitution outlaws extradition of nationals, Matta turned himself over to authorities when he arrived in Honduras, and told the press he expects to be free within days.

When first published, Mr. Tambs denied the contra threat to himself, saying it had been concocted by a journalist. But on April 17, terrorists bombed the U.S. consulate in San José, Costa Rica, across the street from the U.S. embassy. U.S. officials tied to the contra policy will be held responsible, should any harm come to Ambassador Tambs.

United Brands and the Lansky factor

"Elliot [Abrams] put down the word that in response to pressure from all sides we are going to have to see a change in their leadership style," one Nicaraguan contra leader told the press April 17. The FDN has named a new Miami-based coordinator to serve as executive coordinator of money, supplies, and public relations, in the "first step in a contra shuffle," the *Miami Herald* reported on April 8.

The reorganization is explained as an effort to downplay the FDN's image as dominated by the old Somoza crowd. Most field command positions in the FDN, including FDN military commander Col. Enrique Bermúdez, are held by former members of ex-dictator Somoza's National Guard. The public role of the "civilian" leadership is to increase, and the base of the United Nicaraguan Opposition, the U.S.-created contra umbrella group dominated by the FDN, "broadened." The *Herald* reports the shuffle could "eventually lead to the incorporation into the contra military leadership of former Sandinista hero, Eden Pastora, and some of his allies."

But Abrams admits that "evidence" exists that Pastora's ARDE may be involved in drug-running. Were *Miami Herald's* sources at State referring instead to the other faction of ARDE, led Fernando "El Negro" Chamorro Rappaccioli? State's April 1985 *Resource Paper on Groups of the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance* describes "El Negro" as "a prominent anti-Somoza figure . . . repeatedly jailed or exiled by Somoza." But Chamorro Rappaccioli heads the UDN/FARN, whose assistant treasurer now sits in jail for cocaine running.

Maybe the State Department plans to "broaden" the United Nicaraguan opposition base by bringing in the Misurata, an Indian resistance group described by State as "also fighting to force the Sandinistas to return to the original goals of the anti-Somoza revolution." Why not? Qaddafi's American Indian Movement (AIM) is now "fighting" the Sandinistas, the *Washington Times* tells us!

In short, a replay of the Batista-Castro show has begun. For decades, U.S. policy in Central America and the Caribbean has been dominated by the United Fruit Company, now United Brands. The history of how the United Fruit Company set U.S. policy toward the region through its private network in the State Department and CIA, is a matter of record. So, also, how control in the region was handed over to organized crime king Meyer Lansky—headquartered in Batista's Cuba. United Fruit and Lansky's mob controlled several generations of political networks in the area: Nicaragua's Somoza, Cuba's Batista, and the "Democratic Legion" of Costa Rica's "Pepe" Figueres.

Today, some of those networks work the contra side of the street, some the Sandinista side. The headquarters of the cocaine trade for which they all work, however, sits now in Castro's Cuba. There, Batista's old labor minister, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, still works the trade he began with Lansky, now with Robert Vesco.