

The cocaine pushers' 'Honduras Connection'

by Valerie Rush

When cocaine kingpin Jorge Luis Ochoa was busted by Colombian police Nov. 21 for doing 110 mph in a 50 mph zone, he was driving a late-model white Porsche, later identified as the property of one Col. William Said, military attaché at the Honduran embassy in Bogotá. The embassy issued a statement that the car was being used "without authorization of the owner," denying any connection between Said and Ochoa. The Colombian government has nonetheless requested Said's replacement.

This latest evidence of "the Honduras Connection," if pursued correctly, could lay bare not only the continent-wide operations of Colombia's Medellín Cartel, but also a vast network of arms- and drug-smuggling that lies at the heart of the United States's Iran-Contra affair.

During April 1986 congressional hearings into the alleged drug-smuggling activities of the "Contras," Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams personally testified that the Honduras-based Contra organization, the FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Force), had no ties to the drug trade. FDN president Adolfo Calero also dismissed the idea, because Honduras "has never been known as an outlet for drugs."

Readers of *EIR* will remember, however, the March 19, 1987 "escape" from a Colombian jail of Honduran drug czar José Ramón Matta Ballesteros. A partner of the Medellín Cartel and owner of vast properties inside Colombia, Matta Ballesteros returned to Honduras, despite a double homicide charge awaiting him, and turned himself in to the police, bragging that he would buy himself out of jail. A few months later, he was freed by the courts.

Matta was already a leading drug trafficker when he left Honduras for Colombia in the late 1970s. His networks soon extended from Colombia to Honduras, Costa Rica, and Mexico. Upon his return to Honduras, Finance Minister Reginaldo Panting said, "We welcome the dollars that Mr. Matta Ballesteros has brought to invest in Honduras, and if he wants to buy up gasoline stations, I will sell him mine." Today Matta lives like a folk hero, giving interviews and promising to build "business schools."

While Matta "hides out" in Honduras, with no U.S.-Honduras extradition treaty to threaten his secure haven, it appears that he is pulling strings to help out his Medellín Cartel partner as well. One day after Ochoa's arrest in Colombia, a Honduran judge made it known that he is seeking

the extradition of Ochoa to his country, allegedly because of Medellín Cartel operations on Honduran territory. Should Honduras actually formalize such an extradition petition, it would not only sabotage ongoing efforts to extradite Ochoa to the United States, where he has been indicted on multiple drug trafficking, homicide, and racketeering charges, but would give the cartel boss the same safe haven as Matta.

The U.S. government silence on the Honduran drug connection is remarkable. Despite the fact that Matta Ballesteros was arrested in Colombia, as the alleged "intellectual author" of the 1985 mafia assassination in Mexico of Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique Camarena, Matta's disappearance from a Colombian prison and hero's welcome in Honduras did not elicit a peep of protest from the State Department. The 1986 mid-year review published by the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics Matters inexplicably made no reference to Honduras, despite its long-standing role as a drug-smugglers' port-of-call.

A clue to this silence may be found in recent U.S. congressional revelations that Lt. Col. Oliver North, formerly of the National Security Council staff, worked closely with the Central Intelligence Agency, State's Elliott Abrams, the Justice Department, and the Reagan White House to try to get former Honduran military chief of staff Gen. José Bueso Rosa freed from a U.S. jail, where he was serving time for his role in a 1984 conspiracy to assassinate then Honduran President Roberto Suazo Córdoba.

Bueso Rosa had worked closely with Abrams, the CIA, and the U.S. military, among others, in setting up logistics, bases, and support for Contra rebels in Honduras, and North was fearful that unless released from jail in a hurry, Bueso Rosa "might spill the beans" on U.S. covert operations. Bueso had surrendered to U.S. authorities and pleaded guilty to the conspiracy charges, apparently with assurances that he would do "a few weeks' time" at best.

Not mentioned in the congressional revelations are the fact that the assassination plot Bueso Rosa is accused of directing was financed with \$10 million worth of cocaine. Bueso Rosa's part in the assassination plot against Suazo was actually orchestrated from the top by his boss, former Honduran Defense Minister and "strong man" Gen. Gustavo Alvarez. It was in 1982 that Alvarez, in collaboration with then Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon and then U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte, helped convert Honduras into a "safehouse" for the drug- and arms-smuggling apparatus which serviced the Iran-Contra deal. Alvarez was ousted from power in a bloodless March 1984 coup, but many of his collaborators are now back in Honduras—no doubt in league with Matta Ballesteros.

Then, of course, there was the Nov. 18 seizure by U.S. federal agents in Miami, of a shipping container from Honduras, containing a record four tons of pure cocaine. It would seem clear that the drug trade is alive and well in Honduras, all protestations from the U.S. State Department notwithstanding.