

Andean Report by Manuel Hidalgo

Open skies for cocaine

Peruvians are charging the U.S. with "defecting" from the war on drugs, and with pursuing legalization instead.

On May 30, the U.S. State Department abruptly announced that it had suspended all its support for the identification and interception of drug planes in Peru and Colombia through the withdrawal of U.S. surveillance planes and radar in those two countries. Implementation of the new policy had already begun on May 1.

The news hit like a bath of ice water on those two countries, which have relied heavily on the AWACS and radar as the key ingredient in anti-drug cooperation between the drug-producing countries and the leading drug-consuming country. "This unilateral and inexplicable decision affects the war against drug trafficking," said a high-level Colombian official the next day. "Every moment that the radars don't operate, the flights of the drug traffickers increase. . . . For 30 days, they have been freely coming and going, without any control."

Peru's political leaders and press fully agree that Washington's "open skies policy toward the drug trade" can only benefit the cartels. Influential Peruvian journalist Patricio Ricketts went even further, charging in his June 1 column in the daily *Expreso* that the United States had "defected" from the war on drugs. "After we have put up with years of accusatory insolence and minimal participation in the war on drugs, they open the skies to cocaine," Ricketts bitterly protested.

And in a June 3 column, Ricketts described as "unacceptable" the manner in which the United States had

informed Peru and Colombia of the suspension of its anti-drug cooperation, especially in view of the fact that "the decision was backed by an argument that we should reject. To insinuate that the identification and interception of drug planes might not be in agreement with U.S. and international law is stunning. . . . A new human right is born: that of the drug flight. Woe to the country which dares to ask a narco-plane where it comes from, where it is going, and what it carries."

The State Department has justified the withdrawal of its anti-drug collaboration with the argument that providing information to a state which might use that intelligence to shoot down a "civilian aircraft" (carrying drugs) is in violation of the 1944 Civil Aviation Agreement.

The truth behind this argument, wrote Ricketts, is that "the United States is moving toward the legalization of drugs. The incident of the radars is nothing more than a link in a long chain. But it is a very important one, because with it, the entire program is now evident to all." Ending this last level of U.S. anti-drug cooperation with the Andean nations also provided one more excuse to the would-be drug legalizers, who immediately surfaced to demand that Peru *officially* abandon its war on drugs.

For example, the daily *Expreso* on June 8 editorially proposed that, given that Peru cannot fight drugs singlehandedly and that the United States has deserted the fight, "it were better to begin to evaluate in coordi-

nation with the United States and the international community . . . the possibility of legalizing the drug trade."

The most hypocritical arguments against the war on drugs come from those who seek to smear its prosecutors with corruption charges, namely the police and defense forces. Such is the case with Hernando de Soto, the advocate of a black market economy. It is also the case with the anti-military Andean Commission of Jurists, which is linked to the "human rights" organization Americas Watch. Americas Watch gets money from international speculator George Soros, who is also a funder of the pro-legalization Drug Policy Foundation in the United States. One of Americas Watch's directors is Peter Ball, who is also a director of the pro-legalization and anti-military Inter-American Dialogue.

U.S. Assistant Secretary for Narcotics Affairs Robert Gelbard had declared on April 4, "Still worrisome is the fact that Peru's government is not trying drug traffickers . . . and the continued corruption of the Army in the [coca-growing] region of the Upper Huallaga Valley." On May 30, Peruvian Armed Forces commander Gen. Nicolás Hermoza denounced such charges as originating with "the real protectors of the drug trade," and added that "surely they seek to take away the moral force [of the Armed Forces] and give time to the narco-terrorists to regroup."

While the military authorities announced that the war on drugs would continue, the Peruvian Congress approved a contrary law on June 2, which ratifies the decriminalization of the "micro-trade" and "personal consumption" of drugs. Strangely enough, with the exception of the Ibero-American Solidarity Movement and a handful of journalists, nobody has protested.