



JUSTIFY MY WAR

Why Clinton Eyes Haiti's Drug Trade and Ignores Guatemala's

By Frank Smyth

While Bill Clinton's White House invokes Haitian drug trafficking as a key rationale for invasion, it is continuing the Bush administration policy of virtually ignoring massive cocaine shipments—and related mass murders—by Guatemala's military. U.S. officials on Friday said that they were investigating a possible drug indictment against two top Haitian officials, military leader General Raoul Cédras and police chief Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Michel François. But they are being far less aggressive toward Guatemala, which transships at least six times as much cocaine into this country than Haiti.

Like his predecessor, Clinton claims to have struggled against foreign governments and especially militaries involved in trafficking. President Bush used this pretext to invade Panama and later to put General Manuel Noriega on trial. Today the Clinton administration's special adviser on Haiti, William Gray III, says that democracy, drugs, and refugees—in that order—are its justifications for a possible invasion.

In May, Clinton administration officials began to say that the Haitian military's involvement in cocaine trafficking was a threat to

U.S. national security. Three weeks later, on June 8, *The New York Times* quoted unnamed administration sources "saying that the Haitian officers are earning hundreds of thousands of dollars each month for allowing their country to be used as a transshipment center by the main Colombian drug rings in Cali and Medellín." But, the same day, when asked to elaborate by members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Gray declined, saying, "What type, size, who are involved, [are] currently under review, and when that review is completed we'll get back to you."

On the contrary, the facts about Haiti's role in the cocaine trade are already well-known to State Department's International Narcotics Matters (INM) bureau and DEA experts, including the DEA's Miami Field Division chief, Thomas Cash; all describe it as "relatively insignificant." They say that before the export embargo was imposed last year, Haiti transhipped only between six and 12 metric tons of cocaine annually, much if not most of it to Europe.

While Clinton focuses drug attention on Haiti, vastly more cocaine pours into this country from Guatemala. INM and DEA experts say Guatemala today transships between 50 and 75 metric

tons annually to the United States. Similarly, the largest single seizure of cocaine known to involve Haiti is the 160 pounds discovered in three unclaimed suitcases at JFK airport in New York in April 1992; the same month, authorities confiscated 6.7 metric tons—14,740 pounds—of cocaine discovered inside cases of frozen Guatemalan broccoli in Miami.

This seizure led to the arrest of Harold Ackerman, whom the DEA's Cash described as "the Cali cartel's ambassador to Miami." He was working with confederates in Guatemala, where U.S. embassy press attaché Lee McClenny said "the vast majority of cocaine trafficking is Cali cartel-related." As has been widely reported, U.S. experts say the Cali cartel now controls at least 75 per cent of the world's cocaine trade, and two-thirds of the cocaine entering the United States passes through either Mexico or Guatemala, on NAFTA's southern border.

While federal prosecutors now try to indict François and, perhaps, Cédras, the DEA has implicated Guatemalan military officers of all ranks. They include one air force general, two air force majors, one army lieutenant colonel, and six army captains; the DEA has collected enough evidence against each to either recommend or take

legal action. But because Guatemala's military and the courts it controls protect them, not one officer has gone to trial. "Guatemalan military officers strongly suspected of trafficking in narcotics rarely face criminal prosecution," reads this year's *INM International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*. Instead, the officers above were either expelled or retired from military service. But this is no deterrent. "In most cases, the officers continue on with their suspicious activities," according to the INM report.

The DEA has even observed air force officers using military aircraft to smuggle cocaine. One suspect is General Carlos Pozuelos Villavicencio, the former air force commander. Last October, the State Department denied him an entry visa to the United States under the section of the U.S. immigration law that allows barring entrance to known narcotics traffickers. Another is Army Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Ochoa Ruiz, who, along with two army captains, was set up in a DEA sting way back in 1990. While agents watched, Ochoa and his men loaded a half metric ton of cocaine, worth \$7.5 million wholesale, on board a private plane. It landed in Tampa, where Ochoa was later indicted by a U.S. grand jury. But Guatemalan civilian courts

have three times denied Ochoa's extradition to stand trial. And although the evidence against him includes the half ton of seized cocaine, a military tribunal ruled last year to dismiss all charges for lack of evidence. Rather than demand his extradition, the Clinton administration doesn't want anyone to know Ochoa's still wanted. While not *one* Haitian military officer is currently charged in any U.S. court, Ochoa, an alleged multimillion-dollar trafficker, walks away from the U.S. indictment.

In addition to the above 10 officers implicated by the DEA, seven more officers, a town mayor currently being prosecuted in federal court in Brooklyn, and 19 other paramilitary "commissioners" under military control are accused of narcotics trafficking in legal testimony recorded by the office of Guatemala's Human Rights Ombudsman. The charges include illegal detention and torture.

Guatemala's army has the absolute worst human rights record in the hemisphere, and most of its victims are native Mayans. (On Friday, Guatemalan authorities said the charred bodies of 1000 men, women, and children had been found near the Mexican border.) Previous abuses include an estimated 40,000 people disappeared, and another 100,000 murdered, usually for their involvement in either armed resistance or politics.

But today, Mayans are killed for greed. In Los Amates, near Guatemala's Caribbean coast, dozens of Mayans, 32 of whom added both their thumbprints and signatures to the human rights testimony, claim local military and municipal authorities tortured three men before killing one of them, and then killed eight more people, including a mother and son. Their objective was to force them and hundreds of survivors off land that most of them have farmed for two generations. Why? To build clandestine runways to run drugs.

In January 1991, the ombudsman made a ruling on the initial charges of illegal detention and torture, declaring them "proven," and implicated, among others, Colonel Luis Roberto Tobar Martínez, Colonel Baltazar Aldana Morales, Colonel Luis Arturo Isaac Rodríguez, Colonel Alfredo García Gómez, Major Reyes, Captain Carlos Rene Solórzano, and Arnaldo Vargas Estrada, the ex-mayor of Zacapa. Vargas alone had just been indicted in Brooklyn on separate but related trafficking charges. The ombudsman also acknowledged that one of the tortured men had since been murdered, and then declared open a second investigation he never completed.

The ombudsman, Ramiro de

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Leon Carpio, is now Guatemala's president. He was supported for the post by President Clinton a year ago in June, after Guatemala's last civilian president tried to give himself—and the military—dictatorial powers in a "self-coup." After it failed in the face of popular and foreign opposition, the military allowed De Leon to assume office. This year, in a letter to President Clinton, President De Leon promised to continue the ombudsman's work and bring authorities who have "committed a crime or human rights violation" to justice. Nonetheless, the above case remains open.

Survivors say the runways were built from 1990 to 1992, when the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala was Thomas F. Stroock. A quintessential political appointee, Stroock met George Bush at Yale, and later, as a successful oil magnate from Wyoming, was a major fundraiser for Bush's presidential campaign. Throughout his term in Guatemala, Ambassador Stroock—who was replaced by 1993—denied that the military, as an institution, was involved in cocaine trafficking. Similarly, today, the Clinton administration lists Guatemala as one of the countries "cooperating fully" with U.S. efforts against drug trafficking.

The first murder victim was Celedonio Pérez. Along with about 8000 other families, he lived among the five hamlets of Los Amates in eastern Guatemala, about 35 miles across the state line from Zacapa. There, in December 1990, the DEA broke up an operation that it charged "smuggled several tons of cocaine to the U.S. each month in tractor-trailers" overland through Mexico. This led to the arrest of Arnoldo Vargas Estrada, a/k/a "Archie," according to the Brooklyn grand jury indictment against him. "He was a real big fish," said one U.S. expert. "The kind of guy who could order a guy killed."

Vargas was a local paramilitary member of the Mano Blanco death squad since age 19, says one army lieutenant colonel. By the time Vargas became mayor of Zacapa in 1990, he owned a ranch house across the street from the army base. Vargas denies the charges of trafficking against him. His attorney, David Cooper, told the *Voice*: "If [any planes] landed in Zacapa, the only landing field was on the army base." Guatemala's military attaché in Washington, Colonel Benjamin Godoy, denies that the Zacapa base was used to run drugs.

In Guatemala, according to the INM report, "All drug enforcement activities must be coordinated with military intelligence, which actively collects intelligence against traffickers." Guatemalan military commanders deny that military intelligence would, instead, share information with traffickers, even if they included military officers and other officials. But according to peasants' testimony, around the same time that the DEA informed Guatemalan military intelligence that it sought to arrest Vargas, Vargas and his accomplices began forcing peasants off their land in Los Amates; five weeks later, after Vargas was finally arrested and his operation busted in Zacapa, local army authorities built more runways in Los Amates.

When Celedonio Pérez resisted, according to testimony, he and two other men were captured on November 18, 1990, "by the Commander and seven soldiers from



Native Mayans protest military thuggery in Guatemala.



Guatemalan soldiers keep demonstrators in line.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEREMY BIRWOOD

the Los Amates military detachment," who were "ordered by the Justice of the Peace." Inside the detachment, the men claimed they were threatened and tortured by Army Lieutenant Maldonado and paramilitary authorities Byron Berganza and Baudilio Guzmán, who have "sufficient power and economic resources to dispose of the life and liberty of any peasant." This claim of torture is supported by a signed doctor's medical report as well as a photo of a man's neck encircled by a pencil-thin laceration.

On January 6, 1991, one of the men was captured again, scaring him enough to make him and his family finally flee their land. But Pérez still resisted. Survivors say that on January 19, military authorities killed him. As word of his murder spread, many more frightened families fled Los Amates. With much of its land now cleared, the army stepped up construction of runways. But in April, after many were completed, military authorities began to target individuals, like Daniel Melgar, a tractor driver, who knew about them. "Since this man had worked on the construction of the clandestine runway owned by Francisco Villafuerte, he was assassinated by men paid by narco-traffickers," reads the testimony, "and today that runway is found camouflaged with tree trunks over it."

Still, the public did not know what was happening, and survivors feared that they might be killed next. They decided to denounce the murders publicly. After pooling their funds, they took out an ad in *Prensa Libre*, one of three Guatemalan dailies. But nothing changed. Four days later, survivors claim the army killed two more peasants—"a mother and son on the shoulder of the highway CA-9 near the Seaford crossroad. This woman and her husband worked loading and unloading the planes of the narco-traffickers."

A week later, in May, survivors took out another ad in *Prensa Libre*, and this time, "we mentioned the existence of the clandestine landing strips built by narco-traf-

fickers." Survivors also named five officials in the General Registry of Property whom they accuse of falsifying titles to "our lands that we have possessed for more than 50 years." Still, nothing changed. The next day, military authorities killed another man, survivors claim, while three other peasants were falsely arrested for his murder. A month later, in June, survivors accused military authorities of murdering three

SOME SUSPECT THAT A MOB ATTACK THIS MARCH AGAINST AMERICAN TRAVELER JUNE WEINSTOCK WAS ENGINEERED BY THE ARMY.

more men, who had "worked guarding the finca [ranch] situated in the Palmilla property of Arnoldo Vargas Estrada."

Later that month, in response to the newspaper ads, the head of the homicide department for the National Police, José Miguel Mérida Escobar, and three other agents finally arrived. But rather than investigate the murders, "They lived for various days on the finca Rancho Maya of Byron Berganza and in the house of Baudilio Guzmán, where they were well-received," reads the testimony. Despite being explicitly informed about the clandestine runways, "these men forgot to make mention of them in their report." A month later, in July, another peasant was arrested by a group of soldiers and two police agents,

this time on charges involving national security. Five days later, survivors claim, another group of military authorities assassinated another man.

Three more months passed before something happened that survivors thought might at last attract outside attention. On October 11, "before sunrise, one of the planes that transports cocaine crashed when it couldn't reach the runway on the finca Rancho Maya." Guatemala's national director of aeronautics came to investigate. But in his report, he said the plane was not headed for the finca, and that its crash was merely accidental. As a result, nothing changed, and the killings continued into 1992. Finally, in March, survivors decided to take their case to officials who they thought would listen, and addressed a copy of their testimony, from which all quotes above are taken, to "Señores D.E.A."

While most of the killings were going on in 1991, that June, shortly after the two ads ran in *Prensa Libre*, a privately funded human rights delegation arrived in Guatemala City (this reporter was a member). It was led by U.S. Senator James Jeffords (Republican of Vermont) and Representative Jim McDermott (Democrat of Washington). Their report concludes, "One source said the military facilitates drug trafficking, especially cocaine, flown on small planes coming from other countries. . . . Non-American Western diplomats further confirmed to delegation members the Guatemalan military's growing involvement with drugs." Ambassador Stroock, however, denied it, saying that only a few officers were involved and that they had already been charged.

In a letter to *The Progressive* dated April 14, 1992, Stroock challenged: "If [anyone] has any evidence that any other army personnel are involved in drug smuggling, he should make that information available and we will act on it immediately." But Stroock's mission already had evidence on hand. Officials from the ombudsman's office said they helped survivors deliver their petition to the U.S. Embassy on March 12, a month before Stroock's letter. Press attaché McClenny later confirmed that the DEA received it.

This testimony was consistent with the DEA's own case against Vargas, but its agents didn't act on it. One possible reason is that, even if they did, it's unlikely that they could have brought the officers responsible to trial. It took the United States 17 months of constant pressure to finally extradite Vargas, who, although he was linked to the military through death squads, was never a military officer. And almost four years of pressure to extradite Ochoa was failed. Now, once optimistic State Department officials no longer believe that the extradition of any current or former officer is possible.

Therefore, in Guatemala, the DEA measures success not by the number of arrests, but by the tonnage of cocaine interdicted. In July 1992, for example, DEA agents, heavily armed and rappelling from helicopters, seized 2.8 metric tons of cocaine from a small house in Jardines de San Lucas near Antigua. The DEA reports that the house "was rented to a Colombian male, his supposed wife, and his supposed

young daughter," and that it is owned by a retired Guatemalan air force captain. This seizure was then the largest in Guatemala to date, and, within a month, it led to a three-ton seizure in Guatemala City. No suspects have been arrested for either. Nonetheless, these operations are still considered successful because the seizure of 5.8 tons of cocaine, worth \$87 million wholesale, more than doubled the DEA's interdictio record for that year.

On drug matters, the most visible difference between Haiti and Guatemala is that Haiti no longer cooperates with the United States in interdiction, while Guatemala does. The result has given Guatemala in the 1990s the highest rate of interdiction of any Latin American country after Mexico, with between seven and 16 metric tons seized each year. But critics charge that this merely suggests that the amount of cocaine passing through Guatemala may be higher than estimated. The DEA maintains that anywhere else in Latin America, it is rare to interdict more than 10 per cent of the total cocaine flow. For Guatemala: that would mean that the actual tonnage passing through is between 75 and 150 tons.

Indeed, *Siglo Veintiuno*, the Guatemalan daily that has given the most coverage to trafficking reports, "Regional experts indicate that the Cali cartel is well established in Guatemala and is able to transport more than 15 tons of cocaine through the country each year." So much was passing through by November 1992 that a group of exporters organized a conference around the sole theme: how to detect whether their products were being used to run drugs. These business leaders say that narcotics profits are not crowding out and taking over legitimate commerce.

But while newspapers can report these general trends, almost no information has been reported about who in Guatemala is behind it. Rony Sagastume, a national police detective, was appointed in September 1992 to lead an investigation to find out. An experienced professional, Sagastume also has a reputation for honesty. But the very day after his appointment, he was shot to death in his car by death squad in Guatemala City.

Recent victims include journalists and their families. Hugo Arc is the editor of *Nuestro Tiempo*, critical weekly in Guatemala City. In February, he and his 22-year-old nephew, a delivery worker, were arrested by police. Arce was released, while the nephew, in detention, suffered broken ribs, kidney complications, swollen arm and legs, and could hardly walk. Similarly, diplomats and other suspect that a mob attack this March against June Weinstock, an American traveler, was engineered by the army: it eventually drove most foreigners abroad. While Haiti formally expels its UN human rights monitors, Guatemala seems to have found another way of keeping middle-income foreigner quiet.

Besides issuing a travel advisor about Guatemala after the attack on Weinstock, the Clinton administration has done little or nothing about anything else. The reason is that this administration, like previous ones, maintains that the mere presence of a civilian president in office denotes success. Guatemala now has such a figure head; Haiti does not.