

## ***Drug Plane Shoot-Down Policy In Latin America***

By JoAnn Kawell

When the Peruvian air force shot down a civilian Cessna last week, killing missionary Veronica Bowers and infant daughter Charity, it was the CIA-contracted crew of a U.S. surveillance plane who had tagged the tiny craft as a suspected drug carrier. This so-called “liberal shoot-down policy” would never be tolerated in this country, but it’s been part of U.S. policy in Latin America for years. In fact, military forces there, aided by the U.S., have “forced down” over 120 planes suspected of transporting drugs, according to the 1999 congressional testimony of General Charles Wilhelm.

Whether the CIA crew or the Peruvian military were more at fault is still not known. Whatever the full story turns out to be, the Bowers were collateral damage in a quiet, nasty war that continues to rage in Peru and neighboring nations. Below the radar screen of American public awareness, U.S. military, CIA personnel, and private military contractors have long had an important, if low-profile, role in this war. While this role is not secret, it remains unknown to the U.S. public.

Not to the people in the firing line, though. In 1988, when I first visited Tingo Maria, the main town in Peru’s Huallaga Valley, most of the other guests at the town’s best hotel were U.S. pilots and mechanics, civilian employees of a company widely reported to have ties with the CIA. The Huallaga was then partly under the control of leftist guerrillas, and was as well the world’s largest grower of coca used to make coca paste, a raw form of cocaine. The U.S. embassy had contracted the men to fly and maintain U.S.-owned helicopters used in the coca eradication program. Many local residents considered the U.S. crews to be part of an invasion force, an impression reinforced when DEA agents accompanied Peruvian forces on what amounted to full scale occupations of valley towns. In these operations hundreds of resi-

dents were indiscriminately arrested, all in the name of drug control.

Despite claims that the U.S. presence has contributed to significant “victories,” the main result has been a spread of war throughout the region. While the cocaine trade has brought violence and disruption to many remote locales—like the one where the Bowers died—U.S.-funded drug control efforts have often harmed rather than helped the people who live there. Thousands of people have been injured, dispossessed, or even killed as the result of the drug war. It is only when the victims are U.S. citizens that it makes the news here.

Moreover, private military contractors play a critical role in the war. The U.S. government, unwilling for political reasons to use our own troops, has hired so-called PMCs to do the actual flying, and sometimes shooting. The result is a clandestine war, one in which much of the action is far from accountability or even acknowledgment.

Yet, it is a war and the U.S. is central to it. President Ronald Reagan had opened the way for actual U.S. military involvement in the drug war in 1986, when he signed a secret directive naming international drug trafficking as a national security threat. By the end of that year, U.S. Army Special Forces advisers were training Bolivian drug police.

Joint U.S./Peruvian surveillance flights began in 1994 as part of an attempt to shut down the so-called “air bridge”—the network of drug trafficker small planes used to ferry coca paste from the Huallaga across the border to cocaine processing sites in Colombia. By 1999, U.S. officials were proclaiming that the air interdiction program, combined with aggressive coca eradication, had virtually shut down coca and paste production in the Huallaga. Indeed it had—but Colombian cocaine makers merely



turned to domestic producers for their raw materials.

At the same time, the Colombian conflict over drugs and guerrillas threatens to spread further, into Ecuador and Venezuela. In response to further attempts to shut them down, Colombian cocaine producers have further dispersed their production and distribution networks into

ever-more remote parts of the Amazon region—this makes “interdiction” more difficult, no matter how sophisticated the surveillance aircraft. And, in largely roadless areas where small planes are a basic mode of transportation, accidents like last week’s are ever more likely.

Whoever is to blame in the Bowers incident, there is no escaping U.S.

culpability in a policy that leads to death and destruction and is ultimately ineffective.

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