

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Bolivian anti-drug war declared a success

"Operation Blast Furnace," the joint U.S.-Bolivian military crackdown against drug trafficking launched in July, has scored major successes against cocaine production at its source, reported Gen. John Galvin, commander-in-chief of the U.S. Southern Command, at a Pentagon press conference Aug. 14. This, despite a persistent media campaign to portray the operation as a failure.

The war on drugs being waged by countries in the region, he said, is increasingly the result of a struggle for national survival, and is therefore being launched way ahead of any initiatives from the United States. He cited Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil, in particular, for their anti-drug efforts. All except Brazil have been "firing weapons" in the war on drugs, he pointed out.

Both General Galvin and a senior White House spokesman confirmed that the argument made by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), some State Department officials, and author James Mills, blaming the governments of Ibero-America for the drug trade, is a "total fallacy."

At a White House briefing on the visit of three Bolivian government officials to President Reagan and members of his cabinet in Washington on Aug. 14, for example, a State Department spokesman exclaimed that reality in Bolivia is "100% opposite" from

the picture that Helms and others are trying to paint. "For President Paz of Bolivia to have gone after the cocaine the way he did, knowing how big a part of the Bolivian economy cocaine had become, is absolutely extraordinary."

General Galvin pointed out that the U.S. helicopters and personnel that went into Bolivia were invited by the Bolivian government, which was in charge of the operation, and that the U.S. involvement was under the direction of the Drug Enforcement Administration, not the military.

Reports that Bolivian government officials had asked for the early removal of U.S. military personnel were not true, according to a White House spokesman. In fact, the timetable for the departure of the U.S. team and equipment is being kept secret, to keep the drug traffickers off balance.

The State Department spokesman said that "Operation Blast Furnace" proved to be far more effective than originally conceived, even though advance leaks (from the *New York Times* and other press) let the drug kingpins know days ahead of time that the operation was under way.

Seven major cocaine-processing labs have been destroyed, and an estimated 24 tons of finished cocaine wiped out—an enormous quantity. This will begin to affect the availability of cocaine on the international market within weeks, a White House spokesman said.

He also reported that all the major producers have fled Bolivia "and are now hanging out in hotels in Paraguay and Panama," waiting for the heat to come off. Extradicting those kingpins requires court-admissible evidence, which is sometimes hard to obtain.

Nonetheless, the key to the success of "Blast Furnace" will be the

ability of the Bolivian government to continue the effort after the U.S. assistance is withdrawn. Providing the Bolivian government with the means to do this—both military and economic—was the subject of the discussions with the Bolivian officials Aug. 14.

Effect on the world drug markets

The White House spokesman said the reason that spraying herbicides was not used in Bolivia, is that legal cocaine is also grown there, for sale to the United States, where the coca leaves are processed, part for use in making Coca-Cola, and the cocaine part for medicinal use. That makes the situation in Bolivia different from that in Colombia, for instance, where all the coca is illegal, and thus spraying with deadly herbicides is effective.

But detroying the labs in Bolivia has had the effect of driving the price of illegal coca leaves down to roughly half the cost of production, which will ultimately have the same effect as a herbicide, the official said.

He also noted that other governments are now in negotiation with the United States for help in eradicating marijuana crops and stopping transport of drugs through their countries.

He said that the marijuana eradication efforts in Mexico, Colombia, and the United States itself have now created a "severe shortage" of marijuana, which the media is attributing to drought. "That's a bunch of bull," he said. "They won't report what's really going on, and that is that our efforts are working. We've wiped out so much marijuana here and in Colombia and other places, that there is now a record shortage on the streets in the United States. We hope to see the same thing happen with cocaine soon."