

# Bolivia takes up the anti-drug war

by Valerie Rush

When the bulk of U.S. troops and military equipment were withdrawn from Bolivia in November 1986, the big question was whether the Paz Estenssoro government could continue the anti-drug battle on its own. Bolivia's actions since that time have confirmed the government's awareness that its war against drugs is a battle for sovereignty.

However, the government is applying draconian austerity, which creates widespread unemployment and a vacuum of productive activity from which drug traffickers benefit. If Bolivia does not break with International Monetary Fund policies and does not receive necessary foreign support, it will lose the war on drugs.

An ambitious three-year plan for total eradication of illicit drug cultivation and trafficking in Bolivia has been proposed by the government. The will is there, but the Paz government's worldwide peregrinations in search of the funds and logistical backup it so desperately needs, have only been marginally successful.

"Operation Blast Furnace," as the joint Bolivian-U.S. anti-drug campaign was called, succeeded in creating a major disruption of the cocaine "pipeline," by shutting down laboratories and the flow of industrial chemical inputs required for processing the coca leaf, through which Bolivia supplies half of the world cocaine market. Although most of the big and medium-sized traffickers managed to escape, the damage to the production process itself was reflected in a collapse of coca leaf prices to below the production cost.

As a Bolivian government document submitted to the Reagan administration on Aug. 14, 1986 recognizes, "The interdiction operations have produced a great opportunity, but also a profound risk for the people of Bolivia. Operation Blast Furnace caught the drug traffickers off guard. If they are allowed to regroup, they will come back armed and stronger than ever. The result could well be the emergence of a new and deadly guerrilla movement joining extremists, destitute peasants, and the drug traffickers. The Bolivian government thus has no choice but to aim for the total eradication of all coca destined for conversion to cocaine, as well as the elimination of all drug trafficking in the country."

This analysis by the Bolivian government poses at least two simultaneous challenges: 1) winning the financial and logistical support from abroad for interdiction efforts; and 2) securing economic assistance to both stabilize the Bolivian

economy, under siege from the drug trade, and to provide a means for crop substitution and peasant relocation as necessary.

## Crackdown begins

Immediately following the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the Paz government ordered the creation of a 1,200-man anti-drug force, to be based in the key cocaine-producing centers of the country. Simultaneously, a purge of the anti-narcotics police force was ordered, with the firing of a score of officials for "links to the drug trade" and "official immorality." On Nov. 22, the government ordered the occupation of all private airports in the Santa Cruz and El Beni departments, after the owners of some 440 identified small aircraft had refused to reregister the planes. An official inventory is now being conducted as a step toward confiscation of all those operating illegally.

The first important raids since "Operation Blast Furnace" were conducted in December in the coca-producing bastion of Chapare-Chimore. Joint military-police forces used four of the helicopter gunships donated by the United States to smash several cocaine laboratories and a score of large maceration pits, while extensive on-the-ground search and detain procedures were effected.

On Dec. 24, the flight from Santa Cruz jail of an important drug trafficker was met with the harshest response yet from the government. Thirty policemen were arrested on personal orders of President Paz, and the police chief, the attorney general, and the head of the narcotics office of Santa Cruz were forced to resign.

The other half of the battle is still in the planning stages, however. As Bolivian Ambassador to the United States Fernando Mlanes told *EIR* in a July 1986 interview: "Drug trafficking today exports more than tin, more than oil, more than agricultural products, timber, etc. There is no reason for it to have grown so much, but rather the decline of the traditional and legal exports owing to the fall of prices of our raw materials in the international market. . . . I fear that if we do not do something fast, we could easily see that the drug traffickers, if they got together, could eventually elect their own President. . . . This is the degree of the problem, and this has also to be the scale of the solution."

As far back as June 1986, Bolivian Vice-President Julio Garret toured Europe in search of anti-drug aid. France, Austria, Italy, and West Germany were some of his stops. In December, the West German government offered 2 million deutschmarks in aid, approximately \$1 million. The World Bank has just agreed to lend Bolivia \$300 million, but it is earmarked for "social improvements." Planning Minister Sánchez de Lozada reported on Dec. 11 that the Paris Club of international creditors was offering a three-year loan of \$1.4 billion to Bolivia, \$300 million of which would be tagged as anti-drug aid. However, it is not clear under what conditions the loans are being proffered.