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Why Bolivia Quit the U.S. War on Drugs

By Jean Friedman-Rudovsky/La Paz

Some may see Bolivia's decision last weekend to opt out of Washington's war on drugs as the inevitable consequence of electing a president who was not only a leftist opponent of U.S. influence in the region, but also a coca farmer himself. But President Evo Morales, elected in 2005, cast his decision on Saturday to suspend the activities of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency in his country as a matter of national security. "We have the obligation to defend the dignity and the sovereignty of the Bolivian people," said Morales. "There have been DEA agents who, carrying out espionage, financed rogue groups with the intention of taking the lives of [Bolivian government] officials, though not the President's."

No evidence has been produced to substantiate Morales' allegations, which mark a new escalation in tensions with Washington following September's ouster of US Ambassador Philip Goldberg, also accused of conspiring against the leftist government.

Morales' government has accused a DEA agent of delivering money to opposition groups in the Amazon region during the wave of antigovernment violence that peaked on September 11, claiming the lives of more than 25 indigenous peasants and wounding hundreds more. Over the past year, Bolivia's eastern lowlands have been racked with conflict as opposition groups have sought to wrest control from the central government over vast natural gas reserves and laws governing the ownership of land. The Bolivian government has continually blamed the U.S. for fomenting the violence, but Washington routinely denies any malicious meddling.

"These accusations are false and absurd," said a senior State Department official in response to Saturday's announcement. "The DEA has a 35 year track record of working effectively and professionally with our Bolivian partners," the official added.

Morales' government, in fact, was acknowledged by the U.S. earlier this year to have successfully brought coca cultivation under control, and increased Bolivia's rate of interdiction of coca destined for cocaine production. But Washington has been skeptical of Morales' talk of expanding the production of coca for non-narcotic uses such as teas and other products. Morales, for his part, was elected in part because of his strident opposition to the decades-long U.S. war on coca cultivation in his country. The leaf has traditionally been brewed in tea for centuries to stave off hunger and fatigue, and combat altitude sickness, and the U.S. led campaign to

militarily eradicate the crop had claimed over 70 lives and wounded more than 1,000 people in Bolivia since the late '80s.

The details and possible consequences of effectively expelling the DEA are unclear. The U.S. embassy will not reveal the number of DEA officials working in Bolivia, but it's assumed to be several dozen, most of whom work out of the embassy in La Paz training Bolivian anti-drug personnel and coordinating intelligence efforts with other South American countries. Bolivia's own anti-drug police, the Anti-Narcotics Special Forces, has yet to explain how this will affect their operations. The State Department fears the worst.

"Should U.S. cooperation be ended, more narcotics will be produced and shipped from Bolivia," says a senior official, adding that "the corrupting effects, violence, and tragedy which will result will mainly harm Bolivia, as well as the principal consumers of Bolivian cocaine in neighboring Latin American countries, Europe, and West Africa."

But Morales points to his track record over the past three years in containing coca cultivation and improving interdiction numbers. He says Bolivia is capable of fighting drug trafficking without U.S. intervention, and has called on the Union of South American Nations to begin playing the international coordination role that the U.S. DEA has been playing. There has been no comment from the U.S. thus far on how Morales' latest move will affect the annual \$35 million Bolivia receives from Washington to fund drug-control efforts.

Some suspect that Bolivia's move against the DEA could be part of a tit-for-tat escalation that began after Ambassador Goldberg's expulsion, when the State Department put the Andean nation on its "drug blacklist", accusing it of having "not cooperated with the U.S. in important efforts to combat drug trafficking." Bolivia counters that while its coca production has increased 5%, in Colombia — Washington's number one ally in the region — it has increased 26%, according to the U.N.'s drug monitoring agency, without Colombia being added to the blacklist.

In October, the Bush Administration announced the upcoming suspension of legislation that has, since 1991, offered Andean nation trade benefits in exchange for drug war cooperation. That legislation currently allows about \$150 million in Bolivian goods, primarily textiles, to enter the U.S. tariff-free — exports that help sustain about 20,000 Bolivian jobs. "Bush's decision is a mistake because it sanctions the industrialized sector," says Marcos Iberkleid, owner of Ameritex, Bolivia's largest private employer whose 4,000 worker textile factory does \$30 million dollars a year in tariff-free business with the U.S. under the suspended legislation. "The US's biggest concern should be limiting the growth of illegal sectors and promoting economic development, and this suspension does exactly the opposite."

Bolivia has already been moving to replace the U.S. with alternative markets for its industrial exports. Last week, it signed an accord with its main regional ally, Venezuela, to import all those products recently denied tariff-free entry into the U.S., although this deal involves government to government trade rather than that between private enterprises. Mexico, Brazil and possibly also European countries have offered to take Bolivia's exports on the same beneficial terms offered by the U.S. until last month.

But Bolivians are hoping that Tuesday's U.S. election produces a government with which La Paz can make a fresh start. "I don't want this to be taken as me campaigning for anyone, but let's hope the U.S. goes blue too," said Morales on Saturday — his own party's colors are the same as those of Senator Barack Obama. The Bolivian President made clear he envisages repairing the relationship once President Bush has gone. More than once, he referred to his own victory in Bolivia as having brought "the change we need".