

U.S. Probes Narcotics Unit Funded by CIA

Venezuelans Allegedly Smuggled Cocaine

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The Justice Department is investigating allegations that top officers of a special Venezuelan anti-drug unit funded by the Central Intelligence Agency smuggled more than 2,000 pounds of cocaine into the United States with the knowledge of CIA officials between 1990 and 1991, according to sources familiar with the probe.

The department's inquiry has established that two CIA officers based in Caracas, Venezuela, tacitly approved at least some of the drug shipments, believing they were part of a legitimate undercover investigation by the Venezuelan anti-drug squad.

But in what one law enforcement source described as the "worst breakdown" in communications since the CIA became involved in anti-drug intelligence in the 1980s, U.S. law enforcement agencies were never informed about the shipments entering the country. Federal investigators since have determined the ultimate beneficiary was actually an arm of Colombia's Medellin cartel headed by fugitive trafficker Pablo Escobar, sources said.

Dave Christian, a CIA spokesman, said yesterday that a CIA inspector general's investigation found "there was no evidence of criminal wrongdoing" by any CIA officials. But the probe did "turn up instances of bad judgment and poor management on the part of some

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CIA officers involved and appropriate disciplinary action followed," he said.

Mark McFarlin, one of the CIA officers assigned to work on drug intelligence, has resigned under pressure, Christian said. The CIA Caracas station chief, whose identity has not been disclosed, also was disciplined and has since retired.

Officials familiar with the probe, aspects of which have been publicized in Venezuela, say it prompted strong complaints to the CIA about the Drug Enforcement Administration and a wide-ranging review of the agency's anti-drug role. It also has embarrassed the agency because CIA officials had worked closely with the chief target of the Justice Department investigation—Gen. Ramon Guillen Davila, who was chief of a special Venezuelan National Guard anti-drug unit.

The investigation is being handled by the U.S. attorney's office in Miami. Sources familiar with the probe say that Guillen confessed to some of the allegations when first confronted by DEA agents. "He admitted to our investigators that he had run loads behind our back," said one source familiar with the probe.

"He justified it as a law enforcement technique."

Guillen, who has since stepped down from his post, was subpoenaed to appear before a federal grand jury last week but failed to appear. A Justice Department spokesman said neither McFarlin nor any other current or former CIA official is a target of the probe.

Sources familiar with the probe say that in December 1989, the CIA station chief in Caracas approached the DEA attache in that city and reported that the agency was working with Guillen's anti-drug unit on an undercover investigation that would involve the shipment of cocaine into the United States. The CIA wanted the DEA's permission to "let the dope walk"—in effect, be sold on the streets—in order to gather further intelligence about smuggling by the Medellin cartel.

Sources say the DEA turned the

request down as a clear violation of policy. But the DEA later learned that the load went through anyway. Four shipments of cocaine totaling more than one ton ultimately went through before the last one, about 800 pounds, was intercepted by U.S. Customs agents in Florida.

During this period, at least some

of the drugs were stored at a special Venezuelan anti-narcotics center funded by the CIA, sources said. In addition, sources said, McFarlin was found to have tipped off Guillen about a drug investigation into one of his associates by another Venezuelan agency, thereby compromising the probe.

In a further complication, the DEA launched its own internal inquiry when it learned that one of its Caracas-based female agents was having a sexual relationship with McFarlin. The probe ultimately found no wrongdoing by the female agent but turned up evidence about Guillen's role in the drug trade.

In a broadcast of CBS's "60 Minutes" scheduled to air Sunday night, former DEA chief Robert C. Bonner is quoted as saying there was "at least some participation in approving or condoning" the drug smuggling by the CIA. Bonner declined to comment yesterday.

CIA spokesman Christian said that by and large, the CIA gets "great cooperation" from those it works with on drug intelligence. But, he added, "from time to time, we are badly disappointed . . . this is one of those regrettable incidents."