

Internal Investigator Extends His Probe Of CIA-Contra Crack Cocaine Allegations

By Walter Pincus
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CIA inspector general Frederick R. Hitz has decided he needs much more than the planned two months to do a "thorough and complete" internal investigation into allegations the spy agency in the 1980s was involved in drug trafficking by Nicaraguans supporting the contra rebels, a CIA spokesman said.

"Hitz said he was working as fast as he can, but he doesn't want to be tied to a date," the spokesman said.

The CIA internal inquiry, along with a Justice Department investigation and a study by the Senate Intelligence Committee, were triggered by a series of articles in August by the San Jose Mercury News. The reports said the contras played a leading role in introducing crack cocaine in U.S. cities in the 1980s to raise money to battle Nicaragua's left-wing Sandinista government. The articles did not say directly that the CIA, which backed the contras, knew about the drug dealing but hinted strongly that the agency was involved.

Last month, CIA Director John M. Deutch said Hitz's review would be

completed within 60 days. At the same time he said a preliminary review by his staff "supports the conclusion that the agency neither participated in nor condoned drug trafficking by contra forces." Deutch added that the agency never had any relationship with Nicaraguan drug dealers Oscar Danilo Blandon or Norwin Meneses, two central players in the Mercury News accounts.

One reason for Hitz's delay is the vast amount of reporting on drug trafficking from CIA officers in the Central American region in the 1980s that must be reviewed, according to present and former CIA officers. Another is that the inspector general's team must go through records of the Iran-contra investigations by Congress and independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh.

Considerable documentation is available within the CIA because of a December 1981 executive order signed by then-President Ronald Reagan, according to the CIA spokesman and former agency officials. The order directed CIA officers to "collect, produce and disseminate intelligence on foreign aspects of narcotics production and trafficking."

CIA officers also were authorized to collect incidental information on possible U.S. drug law violations by foreigners and even Americans, in contrast to the normal bar on CIA gathering data on U.S. citizens. In addition, the agency was enabled to "participate in law enforcement activities to investigate or prevent . . . narcotics activities."

Allegations of contra drug dealing are not new. There were findings in the 1980s, by congressional investigators and journalists, that some contras, and some of the rebels' suppliers and supporters, were involved in drug smuggling. The CIA knew about some of these activities, and at times did little or nothing to stop them, according to accounts from then-senior CIA officers and other government officials.

But the available information does not support the conclusion that the contras, or Nicaraguans in general, played a major role in the emergence of crack as a narcotic in widespread use across the United States. Instead, government and academic data point to the rise of crack as a broad-based phenomenon driven in numerous places by players of different nationalities.