

Questions Rise About Newspaper Series on CIA-Cocaine Connection

The CIA admits it deals with some unsavory people—possibly even drug dealers—as it collects secrets.

But investigators so far have been unable to prove—or refute—the explosive allegation that the agency was linked in the mid-1980s to the spread of crack cocaine in America's poor black neighborhoods.

A three-part series called **"Dark Alliance,"** published in August by the San Jose (Calif.) Mercury News, said a Bay Area drug ring sold tons of cocaine to Los Angeles street gangs and funneled millions in drug profits to a CIA-run guerrilla army.

The series sparked widespread anger in the black community toward the CIA. In a lengthy article Friday, however, The Washington Post challenged several of the findings by the Mercury News.

The Mercury News stood by its report, saying the basic allegation that people associated with the CIA trafficked in cocaine had not been challenged.

The series traced the crack cocaine explosion to two Nicaraguan cocaine dealers, Danilo Blandon and Norwin Meneses, who were civilian leaders of an anti-communist commando group formed and run by the CIA during the 1980s.

Since then, CIA Director John Deutch has rejected the allegations in the series, while promising an independent investigation of the agency's actions. Deutch also vigorously defends the agency's right, and obligation, to deal with shady figures to gain intelligence.

"We are going to have to ask our case officers to be in some very dangerous places with some very unsavory characters," Deutch recently told lawmakers. In the hypothetical case of a known terrorist or narcotics trafficker willing to provide sensitive intelligence, Deutch said, "there is no intent on our part to constrain or stop or slow recruiting of that asset."

As investigations by the CIA, Justice Department and Congress proceed, the Mercury News series has taken on a life of its own, circulating on fax and copy machines and on talk radio, particu-

larly in black neighborhoods beset by crack abuse. Black leaders have held protests and demanded investigations.

"When you have a situation where you have people who can see the results of the drug right in front of them every day, and the people are generally distrustful of the government, when you put that in combination with this article, you have a formula for a tremendous amount of concern," said Cong. Elijah Cummings, a black congressman whose district includes poor minority sections of Baltimore.

Cummings said his office has been receiving 400 to 500 requests a day for copies of the Mercury News series.

One factor aggravating the anger among blacks, Cummings said, is the federal sentencing guideline that imposes a mandatory sentence of five years in prison for possession of five grams of crack cocaine whereas no such minimum exists for powdered cocaine, a more expensive drug less likely to be found in the ghetto.

Cong. Julian Dixon, a fellow member with Cummings of the Congressional Black Caucus and of the House Intelligence Committee, said some in the black community may be too quick to believe and exaggerate allegations raised in the newspaper series. At the same time, Dixon said, the voluminous record of the Iran-Contra scandal contains repeated references to drug trafficking connections among the CIA-backed Contra forces in Nicaragua.

"It's going to be very difficult to prove that the CIA was directly involved or aided and abetted" crack cocaine trafficking, Dixon said. "But just as serious is if they knew and ignored it, or just turned their head and said, 'Just don't tell me about it.'"

As Deutch has noted, a December 1981 executive order requires the CIA to report to the Justice Department information regarding an actual or suspected violation of federal, state or local laws.

The Mercury News did not allege directly that the CIA knew

about the two Nicaraguans' drug dealing.

"The key finding of the series, that people associated with the CIA also sold many tons of cocaine has not been challenged," Mercury News Executive Editor Jerry Ceppos said Friday in a telephone interview. "The beauty of the series is that it clearly went that far and didn't go any further than that."

In its report Friday, The Washington Post noted that the Mercury News series marked the first allegation that the Nicaraguan Contra drug activity extended into the United States. The Post challenged the newspaper's conclusion that the crack cocaine scourge traces its origins to crack dealer Ricky Donnell Ross, through supply provided by Blandon and Meneses.

The Post also reported that Gary Webb, the reporter who wrote the series, bolstered his own thesis by telling Ross' lawyer about the CIA connection to the drug traffickers before Ross' trial. Prosecutors complained that the newspaper then relied on information Ross' lawyers developed at trial as the basis for the series.

Ceppos said Webb approached Ross' lawyer, Alan Fenster, after the trial started with questions on issues that remained unclear up to that point.

The Post noted that Blandon traded about five tons of cocaine over a decade, as against a nationwide cocaine trade totaling more than 250 tons a year. The Post reported that while the Mercury News makes no direct link between the CIA and the drug trafficking, such a link is strongly implied.

The first installment of the series noted that cocaine "was virtually unobtainable in black neighborhoods before members of the CIA's army started bringing it into South Central (Los Angeles) in the 1980s at bargain basement prices."

Ceppos, the Mercury News executive editor, calls the Post's five-ton figure "just plain false" and notes that Ross "was the biggest and most successful crack dealer in South Central L.A."