



MN series on crack sale prompts call for investigation

• [A letter](#) to the CIA director

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U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer asked the director of the Central Intelligence Agency on Wednesday to investigate the CIA's apparent role in the sale of cocaine in California by members of a CIA-run guerrilla organization.

Citing a recent Mercury News investigation into the origins of the crack cocaine epidemic in black America, Boxer told CIA Director John Deutch that "even the notion that the U.S. government was involved in trafficking is sickening."

Mark Mansfield, a spokesman for the CIA, said Deutch was out of town and "has not yet received a letter from Sen. Boxer on this matter. He will, of course, respond after he's had an opportunity to review it."

Mansfield said the CIA was not currently looking into the situation because "charges of CIA involvement in such an operation are simply without merit. The CIA neither engages in nor condones narcotics trafficking."

The Mercury News' three-part series, which ran last week, showed how cocaine dealers working for the CIA's Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) helped spawn a crack cocaine epidemic by selling massive amounts of cut-rate coke to the gangs of South Central Los Angeles throughout much of the 1980s.

The head of the drug ring's Southern California operation, a former Nicaraguan government official named Danilo Blandon, has admitted in federal court testimony that he and other exiles began selling drugs in black L.A. neighborhoods in 1982 to help finance the CIA's army, known in the U.S. as the Contras. Blandon testified that once U.S. taxpayer dollars began flowing to his organization, he stayed in the cocaine business to make money for himself.

DEA records show he was dealing an average of 100 kilos a week to the Crips and Bloods in L.A. during the 1980s, an activity that helped spark the crack epidemic in Los Angeles and, eventually, across the nation. He sold them cocaine until his arrest in 1992, court records show.

Blandon testified that before the Contra drug operation began, he and the head of the drug ring -- Nicaraguan smuggler Norwin Meneses -- met with Col. Enrique Bermudez, a longtime CIA employee and the military head of the FDN, who was murdered in Nicaragua in 1991. Meneses also confirmed that meeting in an interview.

At the time Blandon made those revelations, he was a highly trusted operative for the Drug Enforcement Administration, which got him out of jail in 1992, gave him a green card and put him on the drug agency's payroll. The Justice Department has paid him more than \$166,000 since 1994, court records show.

Referring to past reports of Contra involvement in cocaine trafficking during the 1980s, Boxer told Deutch that "for over a decade, rumors of a Contra-CIA connection have persisted. I believe that these questions can be put to rest only by a candid and thorough investigation of the facts. I urge you to conduct such an investigation and make your findings public."

The CIA refused to release any documents regarding the FDN's cocaine dealers to the Mercury News, citing national security concerns. The DEA refused on the grounds that it would be an unwarranted invasion of the traffickers' privacy.

It is the second time in recent weeks that the CIA has been asked to look into apparent involvement by CIA operatives in drug smuggling and gun running.

The CIA's Inspector General announced on Aug. 6 that it would conduct an internal inquiry into an air base in Mena, Arkansas that was reportedly used in the mid-1980s to fly guns to the Contras, and drugs into Louisiana. The base, according to former National Security Council staffer Roger Morris, was run by a CIA and DEA informant named Barry Seal, who was murdered by Colombian gunmen in Baton Rouge in 1986.

Morris, who wrote a book on the topic recently, said in an interview that the CIA opened up a weapons-making facility near Mena, which provided guns to the Nicaraguan anti-Communists. The Inspector General's inquiry into Mena was requested by Rep Jim Leach, R-Iowa.

Boxer, in an interview, defended her decision to ask the CIA to investigate itself, saying that CIA director Deutch had promised to "change the culture" of the spy agency when Clinton appointed him in 1995.

"If they (the CIA) don't want to do it, there's always the possibility that the Congress will," Boxer said. But she said she was convinced Deutch shared her opinion that it was time to "clear the decks" at the CIA.

"No one has ever really evaluated the role of the CIA in the post-Cold War period," Boxer said, noting that the Mercury News' investigation provided "a good place to start. I want to get to the bottom of this."

Joe Hicks, head of the Multicultural Collaborative in Los Angeles, said "the real question is who's going to own up to his and...(will) the government admit to having a role in starting what has been this horrific scourge in the inner city?"

Hicks, an African American, said some politicians "have been pointing a finger at inner city communities, saying, 'We can't help these people because it's just the way these people are.' But if you inject the kinds of guns, drugs and apparatus to support trafficking in any community, it would have the same effects we're seeing now, irrespective of skin color."

This isn't Boxer's first involvement in the issue of the Contras and cocaine. In 1986, she asked for a Congressional investigation of a San Francisco drug bust that eventually became known as "The Frogman Case." Stories in the San Francisco Examiner at the time revealed direct links between some of the drug smugglers arrested and the Nicaraguan Contras, but then-U.S. Attorney Joseph Russoniello blasted those stories as "shameful" and predicted that Boxer and others would one day apologize for questioning his handling of the case "when they have all the facts."

Records show Russoniello returned \$36,000 seized from one of the traffickers in the Frogman Case after Contra leaders wrote the court and declared that the money was "for the restoration of democracy in Nicaragua." (The case got its unusual name from the fact that the police arrested frogmen swimming ashore at Pier 96 near Hunters Point in 1981 carrying 440 pounds of cocaine, the largest cocaine bust in California history at the time.)

The investigation Boxer requested was assigned to the House Judiciary Committee, where it died an unheralded death.

Former Judiciary Committee counsel Eric Sterling, who conducted the short-lived probe, said "there was just a tremendous holdup" in getting travel funds authorized for the investigation.

"The second part was, we were not trained investigators. I'm a Congressional staff counsel. I don't know anything about field investigation. And we tried to get some people to do it and just had a difficult time doing it," said Sterling, who now works in Washington on drug issues.

In Nicaragua, meanwhile, the Mercury's series has sparked a controversy involving allegations of press censorship.

La Prensa, which is Managua's largest daily, began reprinting the series last week, but ran a heavily censored version and quit running it after one day.

Commander Eduardo Cuadra, head of the Criminal Investigations Department of the National Police, admitted that he had urged the paper's editor, Pedro Xavier Solis, to stop publishing Blandon's name in the series, saying the former trafficker "is instrumental in an ongoing joint operation with the DEA".

Solis justified his action by claiming not to have seen the documents supporting the Mercury News' series, which are available on the Internet and are being widely read by Nicaraguan reporters. La Prensa began running the series again on Wednesday, minus Blandon's name.

Nicaragua's National Comptroller, Agustin Jarquin, expressed "great concern" about the stories and asked for a joint investigation by all of the nation's investigative agencies into the Nicaraguan role in the drug ring.

Correspondent Georg Hodel reported from Managua, Nicaragua.