

Missionary plane shot down in Peru: collateral damage in US "drug war"

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24 April 2001

Following the revelation that a reconnaissance aircraft carrying CIA contract employees participated in the April 20 shoot-down of a plane carrying an American missionary family over the Peruvian Amazon region, Washington has attempted to pin the blame on the Peruvian military. US officials have charged that the Peruvian pilot failed to follow accepted procedures for the interception of suspected drug runners. They have also leaked reports that the American spies objected to the attack that claimed the lives of one missionary, Veronica Bowers, and her seven-month-old daughter, Charity.

Whatever the exchange between the CIA contractors and the Peruvian Air Force officer aboard the spy plane, a Peruvian jet fighter was called in and shot into the plane, killing the woman and her baby. It then continued strafing the survivors—the wounded pilot, Ms. Bowers' husband James and their six-year-old son—as they clung to the plane's burning wreckage after it crashed into the Amazon River.

Speaking at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec, President Bush called the killings a “tragedy,” but said that he would withhold judgment until an investigation is completed. Meanwhile, Washington announced, the US-sponsored air interdiction program has been suspended.

“Obviously, something went wrong and lives were lost in a program that is meant to fight the war on drugs,” said a White House spokesman, who characterized the killings an “isolated incident.”

This is not the first time that the US has called a temporary halt to the program. In the mid-1990s, Washington briefly pulled the plug on the program after a spate of incidents in which the Peruvian Air Force opened fire with little warning on suspect planes. The CIA-sponsored effort was resumed, however, after

the US Congress passed a law absolving Washington and its contractors of any liability for the shooting down of planes like the one carrying the missionaries.

The incident underscores the growing US intervention throughout the Andean region. After the shoot-down, there was some confusion as to which agency was responsible for the surveillance plane. Pentagon spokesmen denied that it was theirs, even though US military planes regularly carry out spy missions as well as cocaine eradication and support for military operations in neighboring Colombia. US officials said the plane, an Air Force Cessna, may have been operated by the State Department's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau “or another agency involved in counter-narcotics work.”

For its part, the Peruvian military first identified the plane as belonging to the Drug Enforcement Administration, and claimed that it was the DEA that directed the attack.

After being rescued by villagers, Bowers, his son and the wounded pilot were taken to the Amazon River town of Iquitos, together with the bodies of the woman and the infant. There, both the Peruvian military and DEA agents interrogated the widowed missionary before allowing him to identify his wife's body.

US officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, have defended the US-Peruvian interdiction program as a success. They point to some 30 planes that the Peruvian Air Force has either shot or forced down over the past several years. How many innocent victims have died in this campaign is not known. One thing seems certain: had the occupants aboard the small aircraft shot down last week been Peruvian or Colombian, little notice would have been taken by the US and international media.

“Collateral damage” is the term used by the Pentagon

to describe the deaths of innocent civilians caught in the path of US military offensives. There has been plenty of it in recent weeks as Washington has stepped up its intervention in neighboring Colombia, where the first installments of a \$1.3 billion military aid package have begun pouring in.

Right-wing death squads working in close collaboration with the US-backed military have massacred hundreds. In the Naya region, in Colombia's southwest, paramilitaries of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC, occupied various villages spreading terror and murder in the days before Easter. They tortured and murdered scores of peasants in an apparent attempt to force the entire population off the land and thereby deny left-wing guerrillas a base of support.

The right-wing thugs used a chain saw to cut the limbs off a 17-year-old girl and decapitate another person. Others were chopped down with machetes, their decomposing bodies left in a ditch for a week as the paramilitaries refused to allow villagers to bury them.

Meanwhile, the AUC has consolidated control over Barrancabermeja, a city of nearly a quarter of a million inhabitants 165 miles north of the capital. In what the organization terms a “social cleansing” campaign, right-wing gunmen have murdered over 180 people in the town since the beginning of the year, including a number of union leaders and left-wing activists. Death squads working with lists have gone house to house taking people out and shooting them. The military and police have aided and abetted this reign of terror.

In the midst of the carnage, the Colombian television network, RCN, broadcast a half-hour speech by the commander of the unit, Carlos Castano, who espoused his political program and demand for no dialog between the government and the country's two main guerrilla organizations.

Castano, a former Colombian army officer who was trained at the US School of the Americas, leads a force estimated at over 8,000. He has recruited large numbers of former officers, soldiers and police and is armed largely thanks to US equipment funneled to his forces through the Colombian military. Though much of his fortune was earned providing protection to top narcotics traffickers, including the late Pablo Escobar, Castano is a linchpin in the ongoing US “war on

drugs.” According to reports in Colombia, the DEA at one point promised him covert aid in return for assistance in capturing a group of drug traffickers wanted by US courts.

Like those flying in the surveillance aircraft that identified the missionaries' plane as smuggling drugs, Castano and his band of killers are, in the final analysis, also “contractors” waging a dirty war on behalf of Washington and the wealthy classes of the region.

The unspeakable violence that US intervention is stoking has done little or nothing to stop the supply and consumption of cocaine in the United States. Rather, its purpose is to suppress social revolt in a region that is plagued by intense poverty and stark social polarization.

The death of the American missionary and her child represent a tragic warning of the inevitable price that will be paid for waging such a war.

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