

NEWS

Leaked Memo Reveals Illegal DEA Operation in Venezuela

The 2018 document seen by AP revealed unilateral covert actions as part of broader regime change efforts by the US government.

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Former US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Geoffrey Berman, gestures during a press conference announcing indictments against Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and other officials in this archive photo. (@SDNYnews / X)

Vancouver, Washington, February 5, 2024 (venezuelanalysis.com) – The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) ran an illegal operation utilizing undercover agents targeting high-level Venezuelan officials, including President Nicolás Maduro.

The **Associated Press** stated that the goal was to build a drug-trafficking case. However, the operation came as the US government engaged in a determined effort to secure regime change in Venezuela.

According to the report, planning began within weeks of the 2018 presidential election that saw Maduro re-elected to a six-year term in Venezuela. Following that victory, the Donald Trump administration implemented a “maximum pressure” campaign aimed at the ouster of Maduro from power. The White House subsequently recognized opposition figure Juan Guaidó as president of the Caribbean country and a wide-reaching sanctions program on Venezuela that amounted to an economic blockade.

Former President Hugo Chávez ended cooperation with the DEA in 2005 after accusing it of espionage in his country. Those allegations eventually were proven **true** after The Intercept published leaked documents that showed close collaboration and information sharing between the DEA and the National Security Agency (NSA).

Wes Tabor, a critic of Maduro who worked in Caracas for the DEA from 2010 to 2012, nonetheless maintained that the operations from 2018 were aimed at the interdiction of drugs. Tabor told AP that unilateral covert actions were effective tools, suggesting that these sorts of operations are in fact common within the agency.

In March 2020, then-US Attorney General William Barr unsealed an indictment against Maduro, alongside 14 other current and former officials, accusing the Venezuelan leader of conspiring with Colombia’s FARC rebels to “flood the United States with cocaine” as far back as 1999. The Venezuelan president fervently **rejected** the US accusations, while US officials did not provide any evidence publicly.

At the time the accusations of widespread state-sanctioned drug trafficking, with Venezuela as a major transit point, were widely **disregarded** as implausible as only a small fraction of cocaine flows through the Caribbean, with most illicit substances moving through the Pacific corridor to Central America.

“We’re not in the business of abiding by other countries’ laws when these countries are rogue regimes and the lives of American children are at stake. And in the case of Venezuela, where they’re flooding us with dope, it’s worth the risk.” Tabor told AP,utilizing language similar to that employed by Barr.

The Venezuelan government did not provide comment regarding the latest revelations. The DEA and Justice Department also declined to answer questions.

According to AP, given the lack of cooperation between the US and Venezuela, the DEA intended to send three undercover informants. The plot aimed to surreptitiously record top officials discussing alleged drug trafficking operations.

The plan actually represented an expansion of Operation Money Badger, which began in 2013. It is not clear if the operation is still ongoing.

The election of Joe Biden in 2020 saw only a modest scaling back of US policy toward Venezuela. The Biden White House has largely kept most of Trump’s policies, only recently offering limited **sanctions relief**. Last week, the US **reimposed** select sanctions on Venezuela, with White House officials threatening a further snap back of coercive measures after the Supreme Court upheld a ban on presidential hopefuls.

According to Evan Criddle, a law professor at William & Mary in Virginia, an effort to engage in undercover operations without consent from the country likely runs afoul of international law. The plot detailed in the leaked memo, which was accidentally released, would have been subject to the Sensitive Activity Review Committee, or SARC, which is tasked with reviewing and approving sensitive cases, particularly those that could produce blowback for the US government.

The AP story claimed that current and former DEA officials who saw the leaked memo “were surprised less by the brazenness of the plan than the agency’s acknowledgement of it in internal documents.”

In recent years, the DEA has been embroiled in a number of scandals, with accusations ranging from money laundering to corruption.

The latest Venezuela story was published on the heels of a separate report involving surreptitious activity whereby the DEA intended to carry out a sting operation against close aides of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador ahead of the 2012 election. The mission would have seen agents offer his campaign US\$ 5 million in cash in exchange for lenient treatment of organized crime groups should he win the election. The SARC provisionally approved the plan before eventually reversing course.

The timing of the report, shortly before the start of the campaign period for the 2024 election in Mexico, drew suspicion from López Obrador who **called** it a smear operation against his government.

The Mexican president went on to ask Biden to formally apologize and **suggested** that cooperation between Mexico and the US on migration and drug trafficking could suffer as a result. The two presidents later spoke by phone on Saturday in order to reduce tensions.

Edited by Ricardo Vaz in Caracas.

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