

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#509 - America's Secret War

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Recently eight high-school students, members of the Baltimore Environmental Justice Project, visited us. Over a brown-bag lunch, we asked what environmental problem they considered biggest or worst. Without hesitation, they said drugs, especially crack cocaine.

Homeless addicts, crack babies, drive-by-shootings, gangs, burglaries, robberies, muggings, black-on-black youth violence. Where did this scourge come from?

The twin centers of the crack cocaine industry are Los Angeles and Miami. The first time the MIAMI HERALD ever mentioned crack cocaine was April 20, 1986.[1] The first time the LOS ANGELES TIMES ever mentioned crack cocaine was two months later on June 30, 1986.[2] The news service Facts on File first mentioned crack on August 15, 1986, under the headline, "'Crack' Explosion Alarms Nation." [3] That story said crack had been around for "as long as 3 years, but its use was said to have exploded in the last months of 1985 and the first half of 1986." From these sources, we conclude that crack first appeared about 1983 and began spreading quickly; by mid-1986, it was a nationwide problem. What happened between 1983 and 1986?

Cocaine had been around as a sniffable white powder since the mid-1970s, but it cost \$200 a gram (\$5600 an ounce) providing recreation for the rich, not for working people. But by 1986 that had changed. The MIAMI HERALD wrote April 20, 1986, "Described until recently as a rich man's drug, cocaine has filtered down to blue-collar households and is finding an eager market among high school students who can ante up \$10 or so to buy some 'crack,' cocaine in a highly purified form suitable for free-basing [smoking]." [1] The LOS ANGELES TIMES wrote September 21, 1986, "The economics of cocaine have changed so radically that it is no longer restricted to the well-to-do. The processing of crystallized cocaine as 'rock' or 'crack' has so lowered the price--and increased the availability--that junior high school students are pooling their lunch money... to buy cocaine from schoolyard dealers." [4] How did crack spread throughout urban neighborhoods during 1983-1986?

The story begins in Nicaragua. In 1979, the "Sandanistas" --a left-wing revolutionary army --defeated the U.S.-trained army of dictator Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. Less than two years later, according to the WASHINGTON POST (March 10, 1982), on November 16, 1981, CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] Director William Casey proposed to President Reagan that he approve \$19 million for the CIA to organize a counter-revolutionary force to overthrow the leftist Sandanista government. [5] The POST reported that President Reagan accepted Casey's proposal and authorized the CIA to finance and train a paramilitary commando force to provoke a counter-revolution in Nicaragua. According to TIME magazine, throughout 1982 the CIA rallied anti-Sandanista military forces, creating bases of operation in Honduras, on Nicaragua's border. [6] This became known as Ronald Reagan's "secret war," but it wasn't much of a secret. In fact, it was so public that on December 8, 1982, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed the "Boland Amendment" to the 1983 military appropriations bill stating that none of the appropriated defense funds could be used to "train, arm, or support persons not members of the regular army for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua." [5] This amendment made it illegal for the CIA to continue funding its anti-Sandanista army, which by then was calling itself the FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Forces), but was better known as the Contras.

After passage of the Boland amendment, the Contras desperately needed a new source of funds. (This was several years before Oliver North set up his Iran connection to divert money from arms sales to the Contras.) According to a year-long investigation by the SAN JOSE (California) MERCURY NEWS based on court records, recently declassified documents, undercover audio tapes, and files retrieved via the Freedom of Information Act, the FDN solved its problem by opening the first pipeline from the Colombian cocaine cartels to black gangs --the Crips and the Bloods --on the streets of

Los Angeles.[7]

The MERCURY NEWS investigation highlights three individuals in particular: Danilo Blandon, Norwin Meneses, and Ricky Ross.

At Ricky Ross's drug trial in San Diego in March, 1996, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) star witness was Danilo Blandon, telling his story for the first time. Blandon was the son of a wealthy Nicaraguan family who fled from Nicaragua to Los Angeles on June 19, 1979, at age 29, just as the Somoza dictatorship collapsed. His family's ranches and real estate holdings in Managua, and his wife's substantial wealth, were confiscated by the Sandanista government. The Blandons worked in Los Angeles to build an anti-Sandanista movement, holding rallies and cocktail parties, but Blandon testified that their efforts raised little money. The trial record shows that, in 1981, Blandon was introduced to Norwin Meneses, another Nicaraguan living in California. With Meneses, Blandon flew to Honduras where they were introduced to the military chief of the CIA's Contra army, Enrique Bermudez. According to the MERCURY NEWS, "Bermudez was hired by the Central Intelligence Agency in mid-1980" to create the FDN. The MERCURY NEWS says, "Bermudez was the FDN's military chief and, according to congressional records and newspaper reports, received regular CIA paychecks for a decade, payments that stopped shortly before his still-unsolved slaying in Managua in 1991." (The Contra-Sandanista war ended in 1988.) After meeting with the CIA's Bermudez, Blandon testified in court, he and Meneses started raising money for the Contra revolution by selling drugs in L.A.

Blandon's partner, Norwin Meneses, was known in Nicaragua as "Rey de la Droga" (King of Drugs). In 1979, Meneses was under active investigation by the DEA and by the FBI for selling drugs in the U.S. According to the MERCURY NEWS, "despite a stack of law enforcement reports describing him as a major drug trafficker, Norwin Meneses was welcomed into the U.S. in July 1979 as a political refugee and given a visa and a work permit. He settled in the Bay Area and for the next six years supervised the importation of thousands of kilos of cocaine into California." (A kilo, or kilogram, weighs 2.2 pounds.) Meneses supplied Blandon with tons of cocaine and with assault weapons, which Blandon sold to young blacks in L.A. Blandon's profits went back to Honduras and Nicaragua, to support the CIA's Contra army. There seems little doubt that the CIA cooperated in Blandon's operation. Indeed, NEWSWEEK magazine on two occasions printed interviews and other evidence indicating that the CIA and the DEA both cooperated in the Contras' guns-and-drugs pipeline. (NEWSWEEK 1/26/87, pg. 26, and 5/23/88, pg. 22; and see WASHINGTON POST 1/20/87, pg. A12.) The MERCURY NEWS has now provided additional confirming evidence.

Blandon didn't really know what he was doing until he met Ricky Ross, a small-time African-American drug dealer. Because Blandon could supply limitless amounts of cocaine at rock-bottom prices, Ross began to build an enormous drug empire. When methods for turning cocaine into crack became known in 1983, Ross already had a drug-dealing network in place. Norwin Meneses routinely shipped 200-to-400-kilo quantities of cocaine from Miami to Blandon on the west coast, who sold them to Ross. Ross had 5 "cook houses" turning cocaine into crack. A former crack dealer described for the MERCURY NEWS one of Ross's cook houses where huge steel vats of cocaine were being stirred with canoe paddles atop restaurant-sized gas ranges. At his recent drug trial, Ross testified that it was not unusual to take in between \$2 and \$3 million a day. "Our biggest problem had got to be counting the money," Ross testified. Blandon told the DEA last year that during 1983 and 1984 he supplied Ross with 100 kilos a week. As this crack flooded into the streets of L.A., the gangs, chiefly the Crips and the Bloods, set up a national distribution network, and crack cascaded across the country into black neighborhoods everywhere, offering a cheap vacation from the miseries of ghetto life. For \$20, anyone could get wasted. The gangs themselves were immensely strengthened by the

money, guns, and connections that the crack business brought them. And of course the CIA's army got the millions it needed to keep alive Ronald Reagan's secret war.

Today Ricky Ross is facing life in federal prison without the possibility of parole. Danilo Blandon is free, working as an informant for the DEA. Norwin Meneses has never spent a day in a U.S. prison. Although he figured in 45 separate federal investigations, he openly supplied Ricky Ross's crack empire from his home in the Bay area, and was never touched by the law. He has since moved back to Nicaragua.

According to the MERCURY NEWS, agents of four law enforcement agencies --DEA, U.S. Customs, the L.A. County Sheriff's Office, and the California Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement --say their investigations into Ross's empire were thwarted by the CIA or by unnamed "national security" interests.

The rise of the crack industry has had lasting effects on communities across America. In 1980, one out of every 453 Americans was incarcerated. By 1993, one out of every 189 Americans was incarcerated. Between 1980 and 1993, the U.S. prison population tripled (from 329,821 to 1,053,738).[8]

But not just anyone went to jail. Crack is a poor person's drug; powder cocaine remains a recreation of the rich. Congress and 14 states passed laws making penalties for crack up to 100 times as great as penalties for powder cocaine. As a result, blacks were much more likely to go to jail, and for longer periods, than whites. In 1993 blacks were seven times more likely to be incarcerated than whites; an estimated 1471 blacks per 100,000 black residents vs. 207 whites per 100,000 white residents were imprisoned at the end of 1993.[8]

Prisons are now the fastest-growing item in almost all state budgets. California spends more on prisons than it does on colleges and universities. (NY TIMES 6/2/96, p. 16E) Former defense contractors are now getting into the lucrative incarceration business. (NY TIMES August 23, 1996, pg. B1.) Almost three quarters of new admissions to prisons are now African-American or Hispanic. If present trends continue for another 14 years, an absolute majority of African-American males between the ages of 18 and 40 will be in prison or in detention camps. (NY TIMES 8/10/95, pg. A14.) A secret war indeed.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

[1] Bruce Goldman, "Cocaine: The Powder That Corrupts," MIAMI HERALD April 20, 1986, pg. 10G.

[2] Scott Ostler, "Sudden Death Has New Meaning," LOS ANGELES TIMES June 30, 1986, Section 3 (Sports), pg. 3. Ostler writes, "...the new rage in the drug world is crack cocaine, which is smokeable coke. It is cheap, plentiful, and intensively addictive."

[3] "'Crack' Explosion Alarms Nation," FACTS ON FILE WORLD NEWS DIGEST August 15, 1986, pg. 600F3.

[4] Bill Farr and Carol McGraw, "Drug Enforcers Losing Nation's Cocaine War; Massive Government Eradication Efforts are 'Overwhelmed by the Bad Guys,' Official Says," LOS ANGELES TIMES September 21, 1986, pg. 1.

[5] "U.S. Shows Photos to Prove Nicaragua Buildup; CIA-Trained Commandos to Hit Economic Targets," FACTS ON FILE WORLD NEWS DIGEST March 12, 1982, pg. 157A1, quoting the WASHINGTON POST of March 10, 1982.

[6] George Russel, "Nicaragua's Elusive War," TIME Vol. 121 (April 4, 1983), pgs. 34-35.

[7] Gary Webb, "'Crack' Plague's Roots Are in Nicaragua War; Colombia- Bay Area Drug Pipeline Helped CIA-Backed Contras '80s Efforts to Assist Guerillas Left Legacy of Drugs, Gangs in Black L.A.," SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS August 18, 1996, pg. 1A; Gary Webb, "Testimony Links U.S. to Drugs-Guns Trade; Dealers Got 'Their Own Little Arsenal,'" SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS August 18, 1996, pg. 17A. Gary Webb, "Odd Trio Created Mass Market for 'Crack'; L.A. Dealer Might Get Life; Officials Quiet About Role of Nicaraguans," SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS August 19, 1996, pg. 1A. And: Gary Webb, "S.F. Drug Agent Thought She Hit on Something Big; As Trail Got Warm, Her Superiors Took Her Off the Case," SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS August 19, 1996, pg. 10A.

[8] Allen J. Beck and Darrell K. Gilliard, "Prisoners in 1994," BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS BULLETIN [NCJ-151654], August, 1995, pgs. 1-13.

Descriptor terms: cocaine; crack; drugs; crime; violence; race; african americans; criminal justice; prisons; gangs; california; nicaragua; los angeles; miami; florida; contras; anastasio somoza; cia; dea; drug enforcement administration; inner cities; urban life; hispanics; statistics; central intelligence agency; colombia; sandanistas;