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Nicaragua crucial to drug pipeline

By James Morrison
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Cocaine kingpins working hand-in-glove with communist rebels in many parts of South America have made Nicaragua a conduit for the multibillion-dollar drug trade, a Venezuelan congressman said yesterday.

Vladimir Gessen, chairman of the Venezuelan congress subcommittee on illegal drugs, said that although

Nicaragua's ruling Sandinista party denies any involvement in drugs, a three-month study by the Caracas government concluded that drug trafficking in Nicaragua is "inevitable."

"It is inevitable that drugs go through Nicaragua. It is evident there must be functionaries of the Sandinista government involved," said Mr. Gessen.

Drug smugglers using a land route from South America have to travel through Nicaragua, and those who smuggle drugs by air probably refuel there, Mr. Gessen said.

He said he did not know how high involvement in the drug trade goes in the Sandinista government but noted that the powerful Nicaraguan interior minister, Tomas Borge, insisted that drugs could not be transported through Nicaragua without his knowledge.

Mr. Gessen, who discussed his committee's study at a Washington press conference, said he interviewed Mr. Borge about Nicaragua's involvement with drugs.

"I don't understand the attitude of the Sandinista government," he said. "When their functionaries are identified [as drug traffickers] by the

United States, they say it is a lie by the CIA."

The Sandinista link to illegal drugs has been described in detail by Alvaro Baldizon, a high-ranking Sandinista defector who worked for Mr. Borge. In statements to the U.S. government, he said the interior minister was personally directing cocaine smuggling through Nicaragua to obtain U.S. dollars.

U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese yesterday also accused the Sandinista government of involvement in drug smuggling.

Mr. Meese, ending a five-nation tour of drug-producing countries, said that "Sandinistas officials are definitely involved" in drug trafficking. Mr. Meese, interviewed on morning network news shows, also accused the Soviet Union of complicity in the drug trade in Afghanistan, which is under Russian occupation.

Cuba has long been reported to be an active partner in the drug traffic in the United States, skimming profits of tens of millions of dollars a year. The Cuban secret service has also been reported to arrange drugs-for-arms barter trade agreements between Marxist guerrillas and cocaine dealers.

Mr. Gessen, who came to Washington to discuss the Venezuelan findings with U.S. officials, called on the United States to help rather than punish South American countries that are unable to cope with a massive drug trade that regularly amasses more money through cocaine and marijuana than governments do through mining and agriculture.

Drug traffickers in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela make more money than the \$26 billion a year earned by the U.S. steel industry and a little less than the \$175 billion a year earned by the U.S. oil industry, he said.

He criticized efforts by Sen. Paula Hawkins to cut U.S. foreign aid to countries that fail to meet U.S. standards in fighting drugs. The Florida Republican has recently introduced legislation to cut Bolivia's \$96 million in U.S. aid.

"To remove Bolivia's U.S. aid would be to turn the country over to the drug traffickers," Mr. Gessen said, explaining that Bolivia's drug lords rake in up to \$2.5 billion a year while the government earns about \$750 million in mining exports.

The Latin American drug trade is a multinational operation with cocaine and marijuana growers operating in some countries, producers operating in others and smugglers crossing borders to ship drugs by land, sea and air, he said.

The drug lords cooperate with guerrilla groups to help finance rebel operations to distract governments from drug enforcement, he said, citing Colombia's M-19 terrorist movement and Peru's Maoist Shining Path guerrillas as examples.

"Where there is drug trafficking, automatically guerrilla groups become stronger, even in areas where there was no activity before," Mr. Gessen said.

Increased guerrilla actions and new cocaine and marijuana plantations have been identified in the Amazon River basin of northern Bolivia, western Brazil, southern Colombia and eastern Peru.

"I call this the 'Republic of Drugs,'" Mr. Gessen said.