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U.S. Says Smugglers 'Overwhelm' Borders With Record Cocaine Flow

By **GEORGE VOLSKY**
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MIAMI, Aug. 7 — Despite improved vigilance by Federal and local agencies, more cocaine than ever is entering the United States, law-enforcement officials say. And they expect that improved smuggling strategies and unrelenting demand will keep the record-breaking flow coming.

The officials said Miami was the center of cocaine traffic in this country, adding that about three-quarters of the cocaine intercepted nationwide last year was seized in the Florida-Caribbean district of the Drug Enforcement Administration. With a long coast and thousands of unused airstrips, south Florida has for years been the main point of entry of cocaine into the United States, which, according to recent statistics, has seen a dramatic increase in cocaine use at all social and economic levels.

The officials, interviewed over several months, cited a shift from the use of large ships and airplanes for transporting cocaine to a wave of smaller boats and planes. They say this makes interception harder and, as one official said, "overwhelms our interdiction resources."

Trying to counter this new transportation technique, Congress has appropriated funds for a fleet of 104 high-speed boats to be stationed in south Florida and manned by United States Coast Guard and Customs personnel.

Cocaine in Artificial Yams

Concealment of cocaine has also become more professional. For example, it was by chance that agents of the United States Customs Service discovered 300 pounds of cocaine packed inside artificial yams in a freighter that had just docked at the Port of Miami in June. Agents said the artfully painted fiberglass yams were almost impossible to distinguish from the real ones they were mixed with.

"They're always ahead of us," William Rosenblatt, the top Customs Service agent in the area, said of cocaine smugglers. "They scheme 18 hours a day how to smuggle coke into the U.S. We often work more than 10 hours daily, but what we basically do is to react."

In Washington, a new report by the General Accounting Office says the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System, a new program to coordinate the seizing of drugs at the borders, was spending nearly all its energy on marijuana and making almost no effort on cocaine.

The officials interviewed suggested that the effort against narcotics smuggling had been weak basically because agents lacked detailed knowledge of the inner workings of the international drug business.

A Lack of Cooperation

Major drug organizations are very difficult to penetrate, they say. The smugglers who have been arrested are usually people in the low and middle levels of drug smuggling rings, and they refuse to cooperate with investigators because they fear reprisals by the organization.

Officials here have complained that over the last few years their resources have grown only moderately while the number of people working in drug syndicates has more than doubled.

A result is that Latin American cocaine is increasingly available to supply what by all indications is a steadily expanding demand for the drug in the United States.

According to Congressional staff experts, national cocaine consumption, which in 1984 was about 85 metric tons, will exceed 100 tons this year. The Drug Enforcement Administration estimated consumption of cocaine at 34 to 45 metric tons in 1981, 45 to 54 metric tons in 1982 and 50 to 61 metric tons in 1983.

Basing his statement on customs service projections, Senator Lawton Chiles, Democrat of Florida, said last month that 20 percent more cocaine would enter the Southeastern United States this year than in 1984. "From time to time there are suggestions that we are beginning to win the war on drugs," Senator Chiles said. "But in Florida and in the Southwest we are still in the trenches."

22 Kilograms Intercepted

These estimates contrast with the situation in 1967, when a commission on law enforcement appointed by President Johnson did not find cocaine consumption a matter of concern. That year agencies intercepted 22 kilograms in all at a time when experts estimated that seizures accounted for less than 10 percent of what was smuggled.

According to official reports, cultivation of coca leaves and their processing into coca paste, from which pure cocaine is refined, is taking place in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua and Venezuela in addition to the traditional sources of the drug, Bolivia, Colombia and Peru.

To be sure, more cocaine than ever is being discovered at the point of entry, or relatively shortly after arrival in the United States. But larger cocaine sei-

zures only suggest that proportionately more is getting through, according to law-enforcement officials.

"An analysis by the House Subcommittee on Operations has concluded that we are intercepting only 0.5 percent of the drug coming by air and about 5 percent of the sea shipments," said John P. Cusack, chief of staff of the House Select Committee on Narcotics.

"This is really frightening," he said, "because it shows that we have made no progress in detecting what is being shot at us."

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, 4,400 kilograms of cocaine was seized nationally in 1982, 7,300 kilograms in 1983 and 11,742 kilograms in 1984. In the first six months of this year, in south Florida alone over 13,000 kilograms of cocaine was seized, more than in the entire country in 1984.

"Colombian traffickers — and so far Colombia has been mostly what the cocaine problem is all about — have perfected the drug transportation, distribution and financing of operations,"

said S. B. Billbrough, assistant special agent in charge of the D.E.A. district office in Miami.

"They have realized that small planes and boats are very difficult to detect on the radar screens," Mr. Billbrough said. "Moreover, they use their boats and planes more efficiently. They have established refueling, transshipment and repair facilities in the Bahamas, Belize, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Turks and Caicos and other smaller Caribbean islands."

Traffickers have also become more proficient in packaging, rapid loading and unloading of shipments and in communications. Mr. Cusack believes many Americans are working for the drug syndicates.

Mr. Billbrough said that even though the United States had been pressing foreign countries to step up their anti-drug campaigns, "the extent of their cooperation is not known."

"The problem in working with them," he said, "is that drug business has become an important part of their economies."

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