

U.S. drug agreement with Venezuela stalls again

The inability of the United States and Venezuela to sign an agreement to cooperate in the war on drugs points to a mutual distrust.

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CARACAS - It was supposed to signal improving relations between Venezuela and the United States. Instead, an attempt to resume bilateral cooperation on anti-drug matters -- halted last year by Venezuela -- has come to illustrate just how far away the two countries remain.

Both sides say the wording of a document detailing the cooperation is ready. And in late June, the head of Venezuela's counter-drug office, Luis Correa, announced he would be signing it in the presence of U.S. Ambassador William Brownfield on July 8.

The U.S. Embassy said, however, that Brownfield was not notified of any such signing. What's more, while Correa has described the document as a new agreement, U.S. officials say there's nothing new about the agreement and instead describe it as an "addendum" to a 1978 agreement on counter-drug cooperation.

Correa later corrected himself and declared that the signing would take place "at any moment."

The United States is still waiting for the invitation.

"We're ready to sign anything, anyplace," an embassy spokesman told The Miami Herald. "We're just waiting for the signal."

The wait may take awhile.

Venezuelan cooperation on counter-drug matters has been a point of contention with Washington since the 1998 election of President Hugo Chávez, the Bush administration's harshest critic in Latin America these days.

Under Chávez, Venezuela has banned U.S. anti-drug patrol aircraft from its airspace and has not extradited suspected traffickers to the United States despite a bilateral extradition agreement.

Then last year, Chávez ordered his government to stop working with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), accusing it of spying. The DEA denied the charges but distanced itself from the Venezuelan anti-drug authorities.

In the interim, trafficking through Venezuela from source countries like Colombia has skyrocketed. The Venezuela government acknowledges that it has increased fivefold since Chávez became president, but some foreign anti-drug officials say the situation is worse than Venezuela admits.

"It's worrisome; it's historic," José Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, Mexico's top anti-drug official, told a group of reporters of the new drug routes coming from Venezuela.

The criticism came just weeks after Mexican authorities captured 5.5 tons of cocaine aboard an airplane they said had left Venezuela's principal airport, Maiquetia. Venezuela's Correa insisted the airplane left Maiquetia without any illegal drugs and picked up the drugs outside Venezuela.

The possible new U.S.-Venezuelan arrangement to cooperate on drug matters seems to be a recognition of the gravity of the situation, said a former Venezuelan counter-drug official who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.

"The Venezuelan government realized that it had committed an error when they broke off relations with the DEA," the official told The Miami Herald.

But the arrangement, even if eventually approved, seems far from settling the issue.

The Venezuelans have insisted that while they'll permit contact between DEA and Venezuelan anti-drug officers here, they want to keep U.S. officials far away from any actual drug busts.

The United States has said the "addendum" gives it enough leeway to act in anti-drug matters without breaking the new arrangement. Without going into detail, one U.S. counter-drug official, who did not want to be named due to regulations at his agency, said that he was confident his men would be present when drug seizures were made.

In the meantime, little seems to be holding back the thriving drug smuggling industry here.

"The situation is becoming more chaotic," the former Venezuelan counter-drug official said. "We're like at the beginning stages of when the major cartels start to operate."