

Below, an article and on-line commentary about the harms of the north-south cocaine trade. Produced in South America, cocaine is shipped through Central America and Mexico, into the USA. The impacts are harsh north and south – Guatemala is no exception.

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THE DRUG CONNECTION BETWEEN SEATTLE AND CENTRAL AMERICA

By Bill Clapp, Special to The Seattle Times, May 2, 2009,

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/opinion/2009159311_opinb03clapp.html

ON a recent trip to Guatemala, one of the most beautiful and violent countries in Central America, I was struck by what I heard and what could be the future for this fragile country, as well as how that might impact our own.

"We may have two elections left," a prominent Central American business leader told me. "Until what?" I asked. "Until it doesn't matter who is president — they will represent the drug cartels," he answered.

Shocked, I asked a highly placed justice official there if that were possible and he answered, "What is an election but money?"

Tucked right below Mexico, Guatemala, with a population of 13 million people, is gradually becoming controlled by drug money. In a December 2008 interview with Time, U.S. Ambassador Stephen G. McFarland said 400 metric tons of cocaine now pass through Central America, mostly through Guatemala.

And the problem is increasing, fueled by corruption, poverty and a global demand for high-quality drugs.

We've heard a lot recently about drug cartels and violence in Mexico. But we seldom hear about the price paid in the rest of Central America. Since the peace accords of the late 1980s, we have turned our attention elsewhere and all but ignored the region — possibly to our detriment. [...] is the possibility of the state's failure, fueled by millions and millions of dollars of drug money.

What would it be like if the entire Guatemalan government were controlled by drug cartels? Who would we work with to combat the problem? In essence, government would protect trade — controlling customs and ports. These questions and thoughts consumed me on my flight home.

The damage that the U.S. demand for drugs causes the societies through which these drugs travel is astonishing. In Guatemala, it started quietly with speedboats and small planes making clandestine drops of drugs in remote areas to be moved on to the U.S.

Today, the drug trade is no longer hidden. It affects the daily existence of millions living in Central America, in the form of lawlessness, violence, corruption and bribery — with Guatemala, perhaps, experiencing the worst of it. People living in rural areas, especially youth, often have only the option of going along or being killed. It is that black and white.

On my return home, and following the trips by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Obama to Mexico, we are greeted by the news in our own paper of the presence of a Honduran

drug gang right here in Seattle. A recent bust in Belltown put 30 of 52 targeted suspects under arrest. [...]

In the meantime, drug cartels in Guatemala are growing stronger, using their power to diversify into extortion and protection rackets. No person or sector is immune. Bus drivers, who must collect cash as part of their job, are the latest targets for extortion and murder in Guatemala City. Drug-related kidnappings are taking place in Atlanta and Phoenix.

Typically, we choose to ignore situations until there is a crisis. But we shouldn't wait for this crisis to go much further because it will grow only more violent, dangerous and widespread. As reported in The Week magazine's April 10 issue, retired drug Czar General Barry McCaffrey says: "We cannot afford to have a narco-state as a neighbor."

Well, we may get one, but it might be Guatemala, not Mexico, that gets there first. The risk here is apparent and growing day-by-day. As President Obama and members of his administration are meeting with Mexico to tackle border issues, it is important to remember the problem is far greater and systemic, extending far beyond the violence at the borders.

At the Summit of the Americas last month, Obama stated we should support wider engagement with Central America, our closest neighbors with extreme poverty. I applaud this notion and hope this re-engagement will allow the United States to address a critical problem affecting us in our own backyard. In my travels to the region for the past 15 years, I have met many people, in both government and civil society, working to alleviate poverty and build better societies. This is the time to make Obama's words real and work with these societies to tackle the drug issue and related poverty.

Fortunately, we also have a voice in the person of Obama's drug-czar nominee Gil Kerlikowske, Seattle's own former police chief, whom we can personally encourage to look afresh at the whole geographic, cultural, political and economic picture.

We need immediately to help these under-resourced Central American countries cope with the impact of the wealthy drug cartels. We have been too willing to sit idly by, while the government wastes millions of dollars on solutions that don't solve the problem. It is time we took a fresh look at what works and what doesn't.

In the meantime, the cost has been born in incomprehensible suffering by people elsewhere. But it is and will be a serious local problem. As far removed as we may think we are, Seattle should be very concerned.

[Bill Clapp is president of the Seattle International Foundation (www.seaif.org)]

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ON-LINE COMMENTARY BY ELIZA STRODE (athreadofhope@yahoo.com)
http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/reader_feedback/public/display.php?thread=118387&offset=0#post_402400

As someone who spends a considerable amount of time in Guatemala and who pays attention to its history and current situation, I think this column is right on. What a complicated situation though, given how much the US has influenced Guatemalan history over the past more-than-fifty years, including overthrowing a democratically-elected president in 1954, and then training the Guatemalan military at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning GA in "counterinsurgency" techniques -- that is, how to disappear and torture any dissident citizen or innocent person.

The upshot? A genocide that killed more than 200,000 people, mostly indigenous, with over 50,000 disappeared, and a million and a half fleeing for their lives.

Now the country suffers from a history of terrible trauma, racism, and extreme poverty. The narcotraffickers who behead people, etc. - many of them have been documented to be graduates of the School of the Americas. Go to www.soaw.org (School of the Americas Watch) for more information.

It is clear that the US MUST get its out-of-control demand for illicit drugs under control. Offer more treatment. And perhaps most importantly, legalize and regulate cocaine, marijuana, and heroin. Take the drug trade out of the hands of organized crime.

I encourage everyone to go visit Guatemala to see what a beautiful land it is, with an amazing indigenous population that has much to teach us regarding the value of the land and of our human relationships.

Another struggle in Guatemala is against international mining companies (e.g., Goldcorp Inc.) which have been given licenses to explore and exploit ONE THIRD (yes, ONE THIRD) of the territory of Guatemala in exchange for paying 1% (YES, ONE PERCENT) of their profits in taxes, while leaving behind environmental destruction and health problems for the population.

Why do they choose to mine in failed States like Guatemala? Because there is effectively no environmental regulation, total impunity, a lack of protection for human rights, and money talks.

Who is responsible? Anyone who is invested in these companies. We ALL have a responsibility to know what our government is up to, and to speak up. See www.rightsaction.org for more info.

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WHAT TO DO ...

“MINING INVESTING IN CONFLICT” SPEAKING TOUR, ONTARIO, QUEBEC & MARITIMES, APRIL 26 – MAY 18:

Carlos Amador, of the Siria Valley Environmental Defense Committee (Honduras), and Francois Guindon, Quebecois activist living in Guatemala and working for Rights Action, are on a speaking tour right now, addressing the impact of Goldcorp Inc. in Guatemala and Honduras. To find out where they are, Francois Guindon, c: 819-329-0223; francois.guindon@gmail.com

EDUCATIONAL DELEGATION TO GUATEMALA, JULY 6-14:

Please join this trip that will investigate harms and human rights violations caused by large-scale “development” projects (hydro-electric dams, mineral resource extraction, etc.) – in the context of Guatemala’s situation of on-going impunity and lack of justice; exploitation and widespread poverty; and generalized lack of democracy. Over 9 days, delegates will meet with development, environmental and human rights experts and activists. The group will also travel to isolated rural communities to: visit Mayan-Achi communities devastated by the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank-funded “Chixoy” hydro-electric dam; visit Mayan-Q’eqchi communities that may well be harmed by the pending “Xalala” hydro-electric dam; visit Mayan-Mam communities being harmed by Goldcorp Inc’s huge “Marlin” gold mine. TO SIGN UP FOR TRIP OR MORE INFORMATION, contact Karen Spring (spring.kj@gmail.com; 5962-8888, in Guatemala) or Francois Guindon (1-819-329-0223; francois.guindon@gmail.com)

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