

Journalism & drug tra

CARACAS (Venezuela): The Press plays "an indispensable role" in keeping pressure on drug trafficking organisations by focusing attention on the drug trade and the effects of corruption on democratic societies, the top State Department policymaker on narcotics issues told the Inter American Press Association (IAPA).

"Like any organism that thrives on rot and corruption, the drug trade cannot survive when exposed to light", Robert S. Gelbard, assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement affairs, said in an Oct. 16 speech at the annual IAPA General Assembly.

"The job of the Press is to focus public attention on the drug trade and the corruption that makes it possible. The greater and more sustained the exposure, the more the illegal drug trade will suffer".

But he noted that "even the Press is not immune" to corruption. "Traffickers, wise to the power of mass communications, have also purchased large media outlets in order to manipulate public opinion".

He warned that "drug traffickers have shown they can effectively penetrate and manipulate the essential elements of democratic societies, posing a threat to the very foundations of certain democracies. It is to counter that threat that we must work closely with one another or risk the nightmare of so-called 'narco-democracies, or other truly non-democratic solutions from springing up in our midst'".

IAPA is a non-profit organisation of Western Hemisphere publications devoted to the promotion and protection of freedom of the Press.

Following is the text of Gelbard's speech:

"It is a great honour to be with you here today, as well as with my colleagues at the podium (Carlos Sanchez Berzain, Bolivian minister of government, and Nestor Humberto Martinez, Colombian minister of justice).

"I would like to talk with you about the United States" government's view about the narcotics situation, and I will also share with you my views about the media's role in combatting the drug trafficking problem.

"Serious veterans of the drug trafficking issue no longer engage in the futile debate over whether the problem is one principally generated by supply or demand. After significant involvement in all aspects of the problem for the last decade, I am well able to formulate strong arguments to defend either side of the argument. But, in the fi-

nal analysis, finger-point is not only beside the point, it is highly dangerous, since the only ones who ultimately profit from that type of sterile debate are the drug traffickers themselves.

"As experience of the last 20 years has shown, no country is safe from drugs. Drug producing countries, which once felt that drug abuse was exclusively the disease of industrialised North America and Europe, have now learned from bitter experience that drugs spare no one.

"Even though some important progress has been made — most recently in the Colombian government's capture of most of the leadership of the so-called Cali cartel — the threat and consequences of drug trafficking are today significantly greater than they were 10 or 20 years ago.

"First, every country in this hemisphere is now significantly affected by one or more aspects of the drug problem, whether through various parts of the production cycle, unchecked manufacture or export of precursor chemicals, trafficking, transit, money laundering, or consumption.

"Second, with the extraordinary financial resources that these criminals have accumulated, they have the ability to corrupt — and are actively corrupting — entire nations. We know that drugs in large consumer nations such as the United States produce massive societal costs in terms of increase health care, lost productivity, and violent crime. But as we are now seeing in drug producing and transit countries, drugs can be said to pose an even more insidious threat, since the enormous profits the drugs generate give criminals the wherewithal to corrupt on an unprecedented scale, often in newly democratic nations.

"And, as we have seen in recent years and are seeing at present, this corruption can undermine and even destroy democratic institutions and can dramatically distort economic and social institutions too. This is not to say that drug or broader-defined criminally induced corruption is not present in the United States or other industrialised or drug-consuming countries. Of course it is. What we try to do is to recognise, it and make major efforts to confront it, whether the problems are at the federal level, such as we have sometimes found in law enforcement agencies on the Mexican border, or at the municipal level in our cities.

"But just as the United States has defined the problem of drugs — in all its aspects — as a significant

concern to our national security, is certainly our sense that it has reached that same level for many — and perhaps all — nations of this hemisphere because of the multi-faceted threat that this relatively new type of subversion represents to the consolidation of democracy, the development and strengthening of strong democratic institutions, and the ways it undermines prospects for legitimate, sustainable economic growth.

"Let me be clear, though, in the event that my calling drug trafficking a threat to the national security of many hemispheric nations is seen as some type of excuse for US interventionism. It is not.

"Rather, it is based on what many of us from many nations have seen about the changing nature of this threat — now often less confrontational but more effectively insidious, less now of the Pablo Escobar or Rodriguez Gacha violence and more of the Rodriguez Orejuela or Santacruz Londono corruption and coercion.

"And so we see dramatic examples such as Colombia is now confronting or the narco-corruption of the Paz Zamora government in Bolivia, or in islands such as St. Kitts and Antigua, where trafficker influence has been pervasive.

"It should come as no surprise to you to hear that even the Press is not immune. Traffickers, wise to the power of mass communications, have also purchased large media outlets in order to manipulate public opinion. In short, drug traffickers have shown they can effectively penetrate and manipulate the essential elements of democratic societies, posing a threat to the very foundations of certain democracies. It is to counter that threat that we must work closely with one another or risk the nightmare of so-called "narco-democracies" or other truly non-democratic solutions from springing up in our midst.

"I am well aware that in recent years a kind of counter-narcotics fatigue has set in. The most dramatic evidence of this has been that in many countries, including the United States, a number of individuals, including seemingly intelligent ones, apparently frustrated by the slow pace of progress against narcotics, are calling for legalisation or decriminalisation. We all know their facile arguments.

"Let me just say that I consider this wrong-headed and poorly thought out. But in other ways, we are seeing some of our hemisphere's political achievements on this issue beginning to unravel. We see the return to finger-pointing, to blaming each other — producer and

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consumer — threatening the extraordinary achievement of the 1988 Vienna Convention that my colleagues referred to, and our subsequent agreements on shared responsibility. In the United States there are some people — albeit a small minority — who urge an isolationist view of counter-narcotics and say that we should not support any international programmes, that we should withdraw to our own borders, and instead should concentrate only on reducing demand for drugs in the United States.

"We do recognise our particular responsibility to reduce US demand, and the Clinton administration has put new, major emphasis over the last few years on that side of the equation, with much greater stress on education, treatment, and rehabilitation.

"During 1994, the United States at the federal level alone spent \$12,000 million on drug control programmes, of which 91 per cent went toward domestic programmes. The number of cocaine users has dropped dramatically in the last six years, but has now levelled off. We clearly need to do much more. But we cannot disavow our international obligations, and other countries in this hemisphere cannot disavow their obligations to their own peoples and to ours.

"When President Clinton established our Western Hemisphere counter-drug strategy two years ago, it was based on our perception of the new, more subversive nature of this problem, on the fact that this required a long-term solution as well as on the need to approach it by touching on all of its aspects. Our strategy in essence has four primary elements:

— supporting the development of strong democratic institutions, including institutions that counter the scourge of narcotics trafficking;

— "backing sustainable alternative development programmes to strengthen the economies of key drug producing and transit countries, and linking the economic development to drug crop eradication;

— "promoting greater involvement by a wider range of multilateral and regional institutions in drug control efforts; and

— "enhancing worldwide law enforcement efforts to target the major traffickers and their organisations.

"Traditionally, we have seen the vertically integrated trafficking organisations which, for the most part, have had their headquarters in Colombia, move what has largely been semi-finished material — coca paste or cocaine base — north to Colombia for refining into cocaine.

It was then distributed through their own transportation networks to the United States or, more recently, increasingly to Europe. In recent years, we have estimated that some 70 per cent of the cocaine entering the United States has come through Mexico. With the decapitation of the Cali cartel's leadership, there is at least a partial vacuum which now exists. In recent years, transit through Venezuela and Brazil to Europe and the United States has soared.

"But increasingly, the Mexican trafficking groups appear to be taking advantage of at least some of this new vacuum that now exists, although much trafficking from and through Colombia continues.

"But Bolivia and Peru are now taking their places as major producers of cocaine. When I was ambassador to Bolivia just a few years ago and spoke about Bolivia's having become the second largest producer of cocaine, as well as of coca, I was vilified as an alarmist, but it was true. Now, the 4.2 tons of Bolivian cocaine seized a few weeks ago in Lima on its way to Mexico is proof that the Bolivian cocaine industry itself is of major importance and a serious threat to the country. Similarly, Peru has had major seizures of cocaine, including one of over three tons, in recent months, showing that it, too, but more recently, has completed the entire dangerous production cycle.

"Nevertheless, eradication of coca used to produce cocaine lags dramatically. Both Peru and Bolivia showed increases in coca production over the last several years. While Bolivia is now working to achieve compliance with its international and national commitments and laws regarding eradication, the Peruvian government continues to refuse to eradicate mature coca, with both countries continuing to produce ever more raw material for the cocaine production cycle, which they themselves have now entirely mastered.

"As a rule, we estimate that the best interdiction efforts seize about 10 per cent of drugs heading to market. To the degree that more coca is produced, yes, more coca will be seized, but more will be available, too. As we look through the cocaine production cycle, it is thus crystal clear that eradication of coca that is not used for traditional purposes is the only answer.

"The United States certainly supports the concomitant need for alternative development programmes to support eradication efforts. Our bilateral assistance programmes to Bolivia over the last decade has been more than \$1,200 million,

second highest in the hemisphere and one of the highest worldwide on a per capita basis. We have now succeeded in convincing the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to open their doors to support alternative department programmes, but neither country has been willing to use this opening, although their governments supported the concept at previous drug summits.

"These and other nations must take the initiative themselves to seek funding for funding for alternative development and administration of justice programmes which they must put high on their own national economic and political agenda in order to help consolidate their democratic progresses.

"Other nations too must work to ratify and implement fully the 1988 Vienna Convention, which was presided over by a senior Bolivian official. Only by doing this will we all have the tools we need to put the traffickers out of business.

"The Press plays an indispensable role in keeping the pressure on these drug criminals. Like any organism that thrives on rot and corruption, the drug trade cannot survive when exposed to light. The job of the Press is to focus public attention on the drug trade and the corruption that makes it possible. The greater and more sustained the exposure, the more the illegal drug trade will suffer.

"Journalists and the Press have an unparalleled power to reach and influence the public, uncover painful truths and, in the process, threaten the often stable and prosperous power bases of both criminals and public officials. This power is an integral part of democratic society, a part of the checks and balances necessary in a free nation. A free and vibrant Press can have an overwhelming influence on the behaviour and discussions of both elected officials and other citizens in a functioning democracy.

"But please don't think that I am advocating any sort of formal partnership between government and the Press. Quite the contrary. Your independence to be effective in uncovering the truth, as painful as that may be to all parties concerned.

"But while our respective roles do not always coincide, we do share a very strong common interest, presenting facts as objectively as possible to that democratic governments and the voters who elect them can make the right choices. I think you will agree that this is a partnership that we can both be proud to participate in.

Thank you". —USIS