

GAO

Report to the Chairman and Ranking  
Minority Member, Committee on Foreign  
Affairs, House of Representatives

May 1993

# DRUG CONTROL

## Revised Drug Interdiction Approach Is Needed in Mexico



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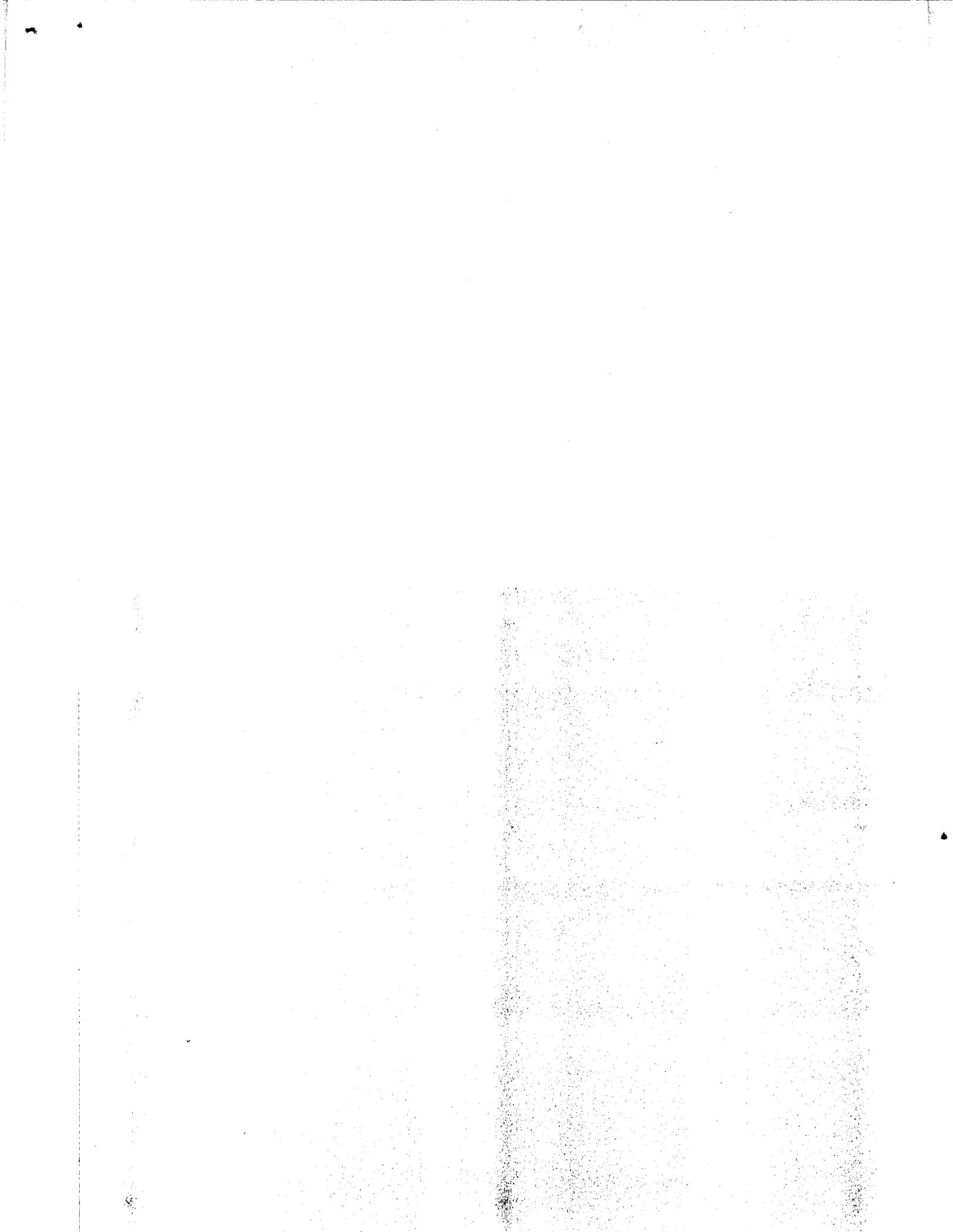
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May 10, 1993

The Honorable Lee H. Hamilton  
Chairman  
The Honorable Benjamin A. Gilman  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
House of Representatives

As requested by the former Chairman and Co-Chairman, Task Force on International Narcotics Control, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, we reviewed the Northern Border Response Force program, which was established by the United States and Mexico to eliminate the use of northern Mexico as a staging area for U.S.-bound cocaine shipments. Our objectives were to examine the (1) status of the program, (2) problems encountered in implementing the program, and (3) future plans to expand drug interdiction activities in Mexico and neighboring Latin American countries.

Unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 10 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to appropriate congressional committees, the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Attorney General, the Administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Directors of the Office of National Drug Control Policy and the Office of Management and Budget. Copies will also be made available to other interested parties on request.

This report was prepared under the direction of Joseph E. Kelley, Director-in-Charge, International Affairs Issues, who may be contacted on (202) 512-4128 if you or your staff have any questions. Other major contributors to this report are listed in appendix III.

Frank C. Conahan  
Assistant Comptroller General

# Executive Summary

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## Purpose

Mexico is the primary transit country used by South American drug traffickers to transport cocaine into the United States. The Drug Enforcement Administration reported that two-thirds of the cocaine smuggled into the United States during 1990—an estimated 350 metric tons—was trafficked through Mexico. The United States and Mexico created the Northern Border Response Force program in 1990 to interdict airborne South American drug traffickers and eliminate their use of northern Mexico as a staging area for U.S.-bound cocaine shipments. Since that time, the United States has provided \$38.9 million in direct assistance for the program.

The Chairman and Co-Chairman, Task Force on International Narcotics Control, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, requested that GAO examine the (1) status of the program, (2) problems encountered in implementing the program, and (3) future plans to expand drug interdiction activities in Mexico and neighboring Latin American countries.

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## Background

The objectives of the Northern Border Response Force program are to detect drug-laden smuggling aircraft, interdict the aircraft as they land in Mexico, arrest traffickers, seize aircraft and narcotics, and conduct follow-up investigations to collect evidence that can be used to dismantle trafficking groups. The original plan called for the creation of seven self-contained mobile operating bases that were to be strategically located primarily along Mexico's northern border. Each base was to have three helicopters, a rapid response interdiction team of Mexican police officials, and necessary support equipment and personnel.

The Departments of State and Defense, Drug Enforcement Administration, and U.S. Customs Service provide the Mexican government with the intelligence and aircraft tracking assets needed to detect drug-smuggling aircraft. In addition, under the provisions of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, the United States leases to Mexico 21 U.S. Army UH-1H helicopters to be used to transport the interdiction teams to the destinations of suspect aircraft. The United States has also provided necessary spare parts and related support services for the program.

The Mexican government conducted a pilot project between April and July 1990 to test the program. The project was based at the commercial airport of the northeastern Mexican city of Monterrey. U.S. Customs Service P-3 surveillance aircraft detected and tracked aircraft suspected of carrying drugs. Since the United States had not yet decided to provide

Mexico with UH-1H helicopters, Response Force personnel used Mexican fixed-wing aircraft to transport interdiction teams. The Response Force interrupted aerial drug traffic near the U.S. border, resulting in the seizure of over 8 metric tons of cocaine and 6 aircraft and the arrest of 23 traffickers. The program was officially implemented in October 1990 and seized an additional 9.6 metric tons of cocaine on its first interdiction operation.

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## Results in Brief

Although the Northern Border Response Force seized a large amount of cocaine and trafficking assets during its pilot project and the first day of the program, the concept of mobile bases has not become a viable operation, and the majority of trafficking flights continue to successfully transit Mexico. The initial success of the Response Force caused traffickers to quickly change their tactics and move their operations into central and southern Mexico. As a result, the Response Force became responsible for interdicting narcotics shipments throughout Mexico (a country three times the size of Texas) under a plan that was designed for a limited, well-defined area along the U.S.-Mexican border. None of the seven bases has been established, and the feasibility of employing self-contained mobile operating sites has not been tested or validated. Also, the fleet of U.S.-supplied UH-1H helicopters has never been fully operational or used as intended, since the helicopters lack the range and speed necessary to interdict drugs throughout Mexico.

Implementation of the Northern Border Response Force program has experienced numerous problems since its inception. The program has been delayed because of two prolonged negotiations of military assistance agreements, unfamiliarity with the complexities of the Department of Defense's supply system, and the higher priority of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Equipment incompatibility and the lack of communication capability between aircraft and ground forces have hampered the implementation of the program. Another setback occurred when one UH-1H helicopter crashed and caused the helicopter fleet to be grounded for 4 months while the crash was being investigated. In addition, Mexico has had long-standing problems in retaining the required number of UH-1H qualified helicopter pilots and mechanics.

In response to changes in smuggling tactics, U.S. and Mexican officials are planning to expand the Northern Border Response Force activities to include land and sea operations. The Mexican government is currently identifying personnel, equipment, and training requirements needed for

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the expansion, but it is too early to determine the costs of expanding the program. The officials do not foresee the need for additional UH-1H helicopters, since the Response Force has not effectively used the helicopters and the proposed land and sea operations do not include activities that will require helicopter support. The creation of a regional drug interdiction force in other Latin American countries may encounter significant obstacles, including sovereignty issues of the individual countries and the coordination that is required before and during an interdiction operation.

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## Principal Findings

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### Feasibility of the Northern Border Response Force Has Not Been Validated

The Northern Border Response Force pilot project and the first day of the program were successful because no previous effort had been made to interdict drug-smuggling aircraft transiting Mexico, and, as a result, the traffickers were initially caught off guard. However, once the traffickers became aware of how the program was operating, they began to change their established trafficking patterns, block landing strips from the interdiction teams, and initiate various evasive maneuvers while in flight. Traffickers also moved their landing sites from northern Mexico to central and southern Mexico and to neighboring Guatemala. The Northern Border Response Force concept of self-contained mobile operating bases has not been able to respond to the changing drug-smuggling tactics and varying airstrip locations. Also, since the traffickers have moved their operations, the concept of an air interdiction force located solely along the U.S.-Mexican border has become obsolete.

The concept of establishing self-contained mobile bases of operation has not been fully validated, since no operational bases have been established and the U.S.-supplied UH-1H helicopters have not been used as initially envisioned. U.S. and Mexican officials began establishing the first operating base in August 1992 in southern Mexico to combat increased trafficker use of that region. However, a considerable amount of training and work remains to be done, and technical and logistical problems need to be resolved before the base can be considered operational.

According to U.S. officials, the UH-1H has speed and operating range limitations that prevent it from effectively transporting interdiction teams. Instead, Mexican officials have been relying on the same type of

fixed-wing aircraft that were used during the pilot project to transport interdiction personnel to traffickers' landing sites. The UH-1H helicopters have been used for secondary, after-action missions, but they have been used for this purpose only 11 times since they became operational in January 1991.

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**Program Has Experienced Significant Delays and Implementation Problems**

Numerous delays and implementation problems have occurred in the Northern Border Response Force program. Delays in negotiating acceptable aid transfer agreements that complied with U.S. legal requirements and were not offensive to Mexican sensitivities about national sovereignty was one of several interrelated factors that resulted in the program receiving between 75 and 80 percent of the dollar value of the spare parts it needed and \$26 million of the \$43 million in assistance authorized. Another problem involved the Department of Defense's supply system, which frequently filled supply requests for the program only if it could fill the entire order and still maintain the Department's stocks at a war reserve level. The Department did not notify the U.S. Embassy in Mexico if orders were not completely filled. The higher priority of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm was another reason the program did not receive needed equipment and spare parts. For example, the program first requested defense stocks 6 weeks after the start of Operation Desert Shield and the drawdown of defense inventories by military units prior to deployment to the Persian Gulf. Also, the lack of spare parts has resulted in the loss of another UH-1H, which was cannibalized for parts.

The concept of maintaining seven self-contained mobile operating bases has been hindered by the Mexican government's long-standing problems in retaining the required number of UH-1H qualified helicopter pilots and mechanics. Compensation offered by the government of Mexico for trained and qualified UH-1H pilots and mechanics does not compare with the amount offered by the Mexican private sector. As a result, U.S. officials do not expect the government of Mexico to have the required number of qualified mechanics and pilots necessary to implement the concept of seven operating bases throughout Mexico.

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**Expansion of Program and Creation of Regional Interdiction Force Face Difficulties**

U.S. and Mexican officials are planning to expand the Northern Border Response Force program to include land and maritime operations to address the shift in suspected trafficking patterns and change in tactics. Drug smugglers are now hiding cocaine shipments among legitimate

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freight, airdropping cargo to other smugglers, and transporting drugs throughout Mexico using various forms of transportation. Program officials believe that additional assets will be required, since past drug interdiction operations and assistance have focused solely on the threat posed by the air transport of cocaine. However, the officials do not foresee a role for additional UH-1H helicopters in future land and sea interdiction operations.

Since traffickers are beginning to develop new routes for transporting drugs to the United States, Drug Enforcement Administration officials are considering creating a regional drug interdiction force in other Latin American countries. However, certain issues will have to be addressed before the this type of force is established; for example, who will pilot the aircraft and who will have jurisdiction to make arrests as the interdiction teams cross national borders. Also, the limited use of UH-1H helicopters in Mexico needs to be considered in creating this force.

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## Recommendation

Since the UH-1H helicopters the United States provided to the Northern Border Response Force have not been used for interdiction as originally intended and the mobile operating base concept does not appear to be suited to combat the changing drug trafficker tactics in Mexico, GAO recommends that the Secretary of State re-evaluate the need to continue to lease the helicopter fleet to the government of Mexico. In making this decision, the Secretary should consider whether the helicopters could be more effectively used in other areas or countries for drug interdiction purposes.

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## Agency Comments

As requested, we did not obtain written agency comments on this report. However, we discussed the contents of a draft of this report with officials from the Departments of State and Defense and the Drug Enforcement Administration and incorporated their comments where appropriate. The officials generally concurred with the contents of the draft but believed that a clearer distinction needed to be made between the positive results of the Response Force in detecting, monitoring, and tracking suspect aircraft and the problems associated with establishing self-contained mobile operating bases and utilizing the UH-1H helicopters. Even though GAO did not conduct a detailed examination of the Response Force's efforts in detecting, monitoring, and tracking suspect aircraft, GAO generally agrees with the officials' comment and, where appropriate, made changes in the report to reflect this view.



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**Abbreviations**

DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DOD	Department of Defense
GAO	General Accounting Office
IAC	Information Analysis Center
NBRF	Northern Border Response Force
PGR	Procuraduria General de la Republica (Office of the Attorney General of Mexico)

# Introduction

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The United States is the world's largest consumer of cocaine. Mexico is the primary transit country used by traffickers for transporting cocaine produced in South America to the United States due to its strategic location between the two. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimates that as much as two-thirds of the cocaine smuggled into the United States in 1990—an estimated 350 metric tons<sup>1</sup>—transited Mexico.

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## Cocaine Traffic Through Mexico

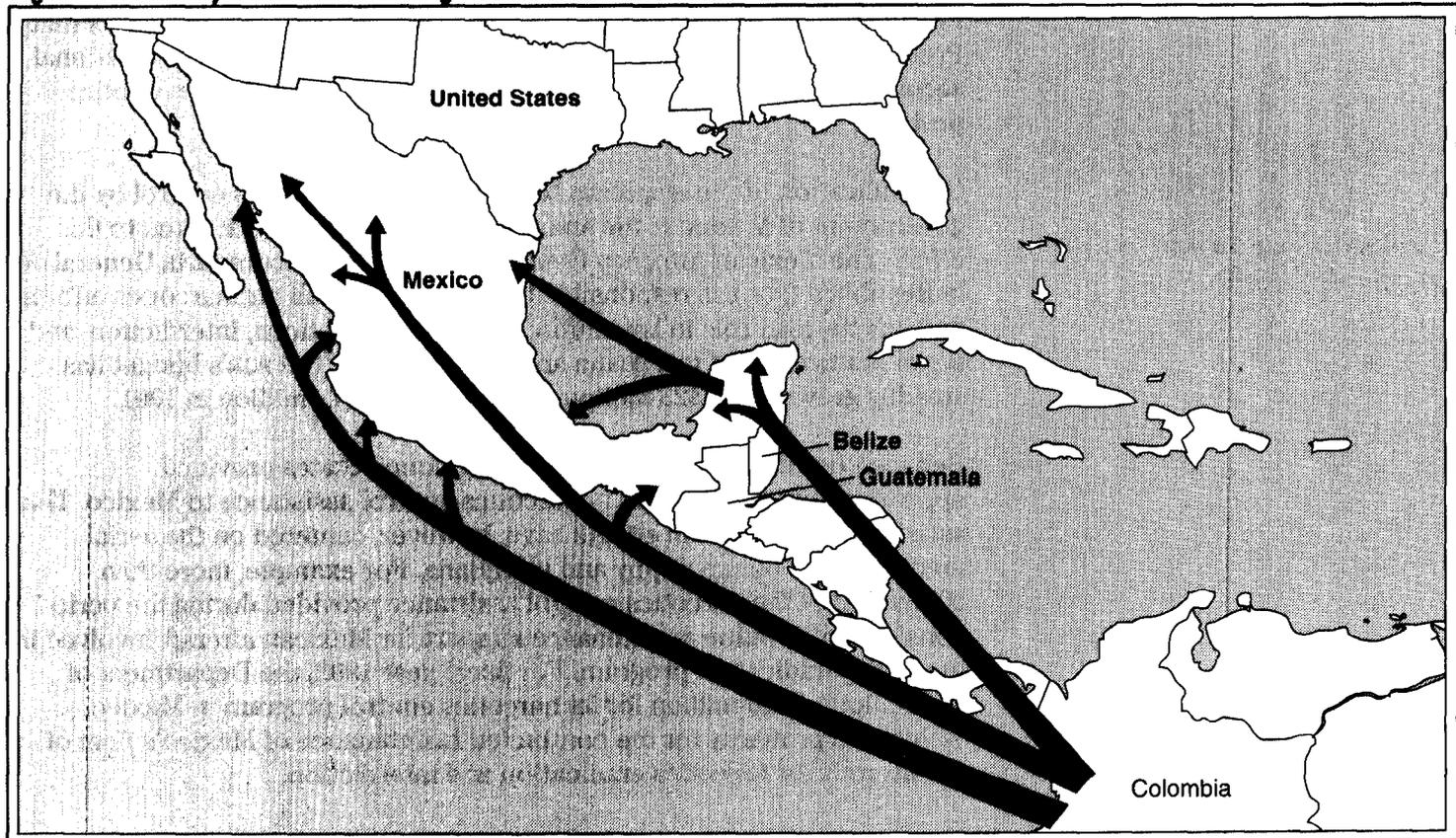
Successful U.S. law enforcement efforts in the southeastern United States and the Caribbean during the mid-1980s caused cocaine traffickers to find new routes to the drug markets in the United States. The traffickers' preferred new routes were through Mexico. Increased aerial surveillance and interdiction operations by the United States along the Mexican border forced traffickers to change their smuggling tactics from flying directly into the United States to landing in northern Mexico and moving drug cargos over land into the United States.

According to officials at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, narcotics traffickers currently use three primary air routes in moving cocaine from Colombia (the world's largest manufacturer of cocaine) to Mexico: the western Caribbean corridor, the eastern Pacific corridor, and the newly recognized central corridor along the Central American land mass (see fig. 1.1). When using the latter, traffickers often make intermediate stops in Guatemala or Belize to off-load drugs for over land or marine transport through Mexico or refuel their aircraft before entering Mexican airspace.

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<sup>1</sup>One metric ton equals 1,000 kilograms or 2,205 pounds.

Figure 1.1: Primary Cocaine Trafficking Routes From Colombia to Mexico



Source: Office of the Attorney General of Mexico.

The Mexican law enforcement community was aware that Mexico was being used as a transit point for cocaine, but it was limited in its ability to respond to the problem. No system was in place to detect smuggling aircraft entering Mexican airspace; the only available response to interdict suspect aircraft was by land vehicle.

The government of Mexico's commitment to combating drug trafficking has long been a concern to U.S. policymakers, especially after the 1985 kidnapping, torture, and murder of DEA Special Agent Enrique Camarena and the 1986 torture of DEA Agent Victor Cortez by Mexican police officers. A major change in Mexico's approach to the problems associated with

narcotics trafficking occurred in late 1988 with the inauguration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The Department of State reports that President Salinas has elevated the threat posed by narcotics to a national security issue and has taken aggressive action to combat the narcotics problem.

One indication of the emphasis being placed on narcotics control by the government of Mexico is the amount of resources being devoted to this effort. The Mexican Attorney General's Office, or Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), is responsible for coordinating all antinarcotics efforts and has the lead role in law enforcement, investigations, interdiction, and aerial eradication of marijuana and opium poppy. The PGR's budget has steadily grown from \$23 million in 1988 to over \$75 million in 1991.

Between fiscal years 1975 and 1992, the United States provided approximately \$237 million in narcotics control assistance to Mexico. This assistance and Mexican efforts have, however, centered on the aerial eradication of opium poppy and marijuana. For example, more than 60 percent of the narcotics control assistance provided during the period consisted of aviation maintenance support for Mexican aircraft involved in the aerial eradication program. For fiscal year 1992, the Department of State allotted \$20 million for its narcotics control program in Mexico, which was primarily for the contracted maintenance of Mexico's fleet of 134 aircraft for narcotics eradication and interdiction.

## The Northern Border Response Force

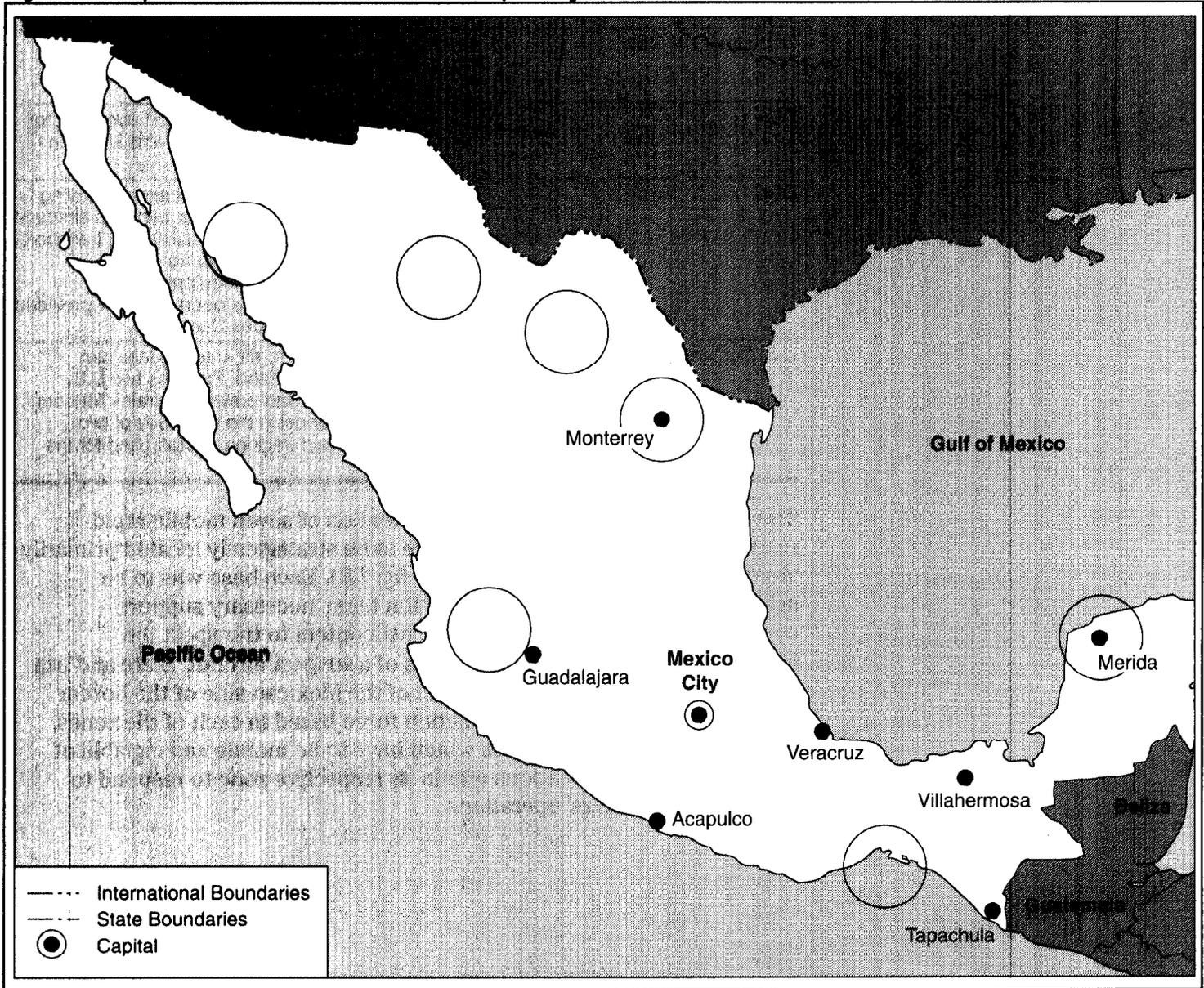
To eliminate the use of northern Mexico as a staging area for cocaine shipments, the United States and Mexico jointly established the Northern Border Response Force (NBRF) program in 1990. This program involves using U.S. radar assets to detect and monitor suspect aircraft leaving Colombia, tracking suspect aircraft by specially equipped U.S. and Mexican aircraft from the time they enter Mexican airspace until they land, arresting traffickers and seizing their cargos, and conducting follow-up investigations to collect evidence that can be used to dismantle trafficking groups. The Department of State and the Department of Defense (DOD), DEA, and the U.S. Customs Service work with the PGR to achieve these objectives. These U.S. agencies are responsible for detecting and monitoring suspect aircraft and assisting the Mexican government with all other aspects of the program, except for interdictions, which are performed solely by Mexican Federal Judicial Police. The specific roles of these agencies are listed in table 1.1 and described in more detail in appendix I.

**Table 1.1: Role of U.S. Organizations Involved in Supporting the NBRF**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Role</b>
Department of State	Provides diplomatic, logistic, financial, and aircraft maintenance support and training assistance.
DEA	Provides program leadership and oversight for U.S. participants; assists and trains Mexican investigative personnel.
DOD	Detects and monitors suspect aircraft leaving South America until they enter Mexican airspace. Provides communications assistance, transport helicopters, and aviation spare parts. Intelligence resources, equipment, and personnel to coordinate operations are provided through the U.S. Forces Command.
U.S. Customs Service	Tracks suspect aircraft entering Mexican airspace until they land. Provides two U.S. tracking aircraft and crews and trains Mexican aviation personnel in the operation of two Mexican-owned tracking aircraft used for the program.

The original NBRF plan called for the creation of seven mobile rapid response interdiction bases that were to be strategically located primarily along Mexico's northern border (see fig. 1.2). Each base was to be self-sustaining and have an interdiction team, necessary support equipment and personnel, and three helicopters to transport the interdiction teams to the destinations of a suspect aircraft. State and DEA officials determined that virtually all of the Mexican side of the border could be covered with an interdiction force based in each of the zones. However, each operating base would have to be mobile and capable of moving to different locations within its respective zone to respond to changes in traffickers' operations.

Figure 1.2: Proposed Location of the Seven Mobile Operating Bases



Note: Circles represent a helicopter operating range of 125 miles.

Source: U.S. Embassy, Mexico City, Mexico.

A total of 21 helicopters (3 per base) are required for both safety and security reasons. A minimum of two helicopters are needed to mount an assault against a trafficking aircraft position. One helicopter circles the landing site and provides surveillance of the area while the other off-loads the initial assault force. Once the first helicopter has discharged its personnel, it can circle the area and provide surveillance while the second helicopter discharges its personnel. In addition, because helicopters are maintenance-intensive and are frequently unable to fly due to mechanical problems or scheduled maintenance checks, another helicopter is needed so that two are available for interdiction operations at any one time while the third is grounded for mandated or unanticipated maintenance.

The State Department and DOD determined that the United States could provide 21 U.S. Army UH-1H helicopters to the government of Mexico through section 506(a)(2) of the Foreign Assistance Act.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Embassy proposed that the United States lease 21 UH-1H helicopters to Mexico as well as provide the necessary spare parts and related support services and equipment. President Bush approved this request in July 1990. The UH-1H helicopters were provided in two shipments. The first shipment of 9 helicopters was delivered in November 1990, and the second shipment of 12 helicopters was delivered in March 1992.

Before the U.S. government decided to provide the UH-1H helicopters to the NBRF program, the Mexican government initiated a pilot project to test the NBRF theory of air interdiction. The pilot project was conducted from April to July 1990. It operated from the commercial airport at Monterrey in northeastern Mexico and consisted of both Mexican Federal Judicial Police officials and DEA agents. However, the practice of DEA agents accompanying Mexican law enforcement officials on interdiction missions was ended early in the program due to DEA safety concerns. During the pilot project, NBRF interdiction personnel relied on fixed-wing aircraft from the PGR to transport them to the traffickers' landing sites. Offshore detection and tracking information of suspect aircraft was provided by U.S. Customs' P-3 surveillance aircraft. The pilot project resulted in the seizure of over 8-1/2 metric tons of cocaine, 6 aircraft, and 15 vehicles and the arrest of 23 individuals. Due to the positive results attained during the pilot project, the NBRF program was officially implemented in October 1990.

<sup>2</sup>Section 506(a)(2) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, gives the President authority to direct a drawdown of defense articles, services, and training for international narcotics control.

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The most successful NBRF seizure occurred on October 14, 1990—the day the program became operational. On this date, the NBRF responded to information developed by U.S. surveillance assets and interdicted seven Colombian trafficker aircraft as they landed on a dirt road in north central Mexico. Five of the aircraft were trapped on the ground and seized or destroyed. This operation also resulted in the seizure of over 9-1/2 metric tons of cocaine and the arrest of several Colombian pilots.

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## Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The Chairman and Co-Chairman, Task Force on International Narcotics Control, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, asked us to examine the (1) status of the NBRF program, (2) problems encountered in implementing the program, and (3) future plans to expand drug interdiction activities in Mexico and neighboring Latin America countries.

We interviewed program officers and reviewed planning documents, studies, and cables at the Department of State, DOD, DEA, U.S. Customs Service, and Office of National Drug Control Policy, Washington, D.C. We also met with program and operational officers at DEA's El Paso Intelligence Center in Texas.

At the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, Mexico, we interviewed responsible officials from the Narcotics Affairs and Political Sections, Military Liaison Office, Defense Attache Office, Information Analysis Center, U.S. Customs Service, and DEA. We attended meetings of the Country Team and the NBRF Steering Committee. To examine and evaluate the NBRF, we reviewed documents prepared by U.S. Embassy personnel and supplemented the information in interviews with U.S. officials.

At the PGR's aircraft maintenance facility in Guadalajara, Mexico, we met with U.S. and Mexican government and Bell Helicopter Services, Inc., officials responsible for maintaining the U.S.-provided UH-1H helicopters and the NBRF interdiction air fleet. In Guadalajara we also met with U.S. Forces Command personnel responsible for establishing the initial NBRF mobile operating base. To obtain the views of the Mexican government, we met with the PGR's Director of Air Interdiction Operations in Mexico City and Director of Aviation Maintenance in Guadalajara.

We conducted our review between March and December 1992 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. As arranged with your staff, we did not request written agency comments on this report. However, we discussed the information in a draft of this report

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with officials from the Department of State, DOD, and DEA and incorporated their comments as appropriate. The officials generally concurred with the contents of the draft but believed that a clearer distinction needed be made between the positive results of the NBRF in detecting, monitoring, and tracking suspect aircraft and the problems associated with establishing mobile operating bases and utilizing the UH-1H helicopters. We generally agree with the officials' comment and, where appropriate, made changes to reflect this view.

# Changes in Drug Trafficking Patterns Reduce the Usefulness of UH-1H Helicopters

Although the NBRF seized a large amount of cocaine and traffickers assets during its pilot project and the first day of the program, the program's concept of using helicopters and self-contained mobile operating bases has not become a viable operation, and the majority of trafficking flights continue to transit Mexico successfully. The initial NBRF seizures caused traffickers to quickly change their tactics and move their operations into central and southern Mexico. As a result, the NBRF became responsible for interdicting narcotics shipments throughout Mexico under a plan that was designed for a limited, well-defined area along the U.S.-Mexican border. However, no standards exist to measure the effectiveness of the NBRF program or its impact on curbing the flow of cocaine into the United States.

None of the seven bases that was originally envisioned has been established, and the feasibility of employing self-contained mobile operating sites has not been tested or validated. Also, the fleet of U.S.-supplied UH-1H helicopters has never been fully operational or used as intended, since they lack the range and speed necessary to interdict drugs throughout Mexico.

## Cocaine Seizures Increase, but Traffickers Continue to Transit Mexico

The State Department, DEA, DOD, and the Mexican government believe that the NBRF has been extremely effective as a drug interdiction force. They cite the redirection of smuggling flights away from the northern border into the central and southern regions of Mexico and into Guatemala, change in smuggling tactics, amounts of cocaine seized, and intelligence gained from seized trafficking aircraft as major indicators of the NBRF's impact on drug trafficking. About 137 metric tons<sup>1</sup> of cocaine was seized in Mexico between 1990 and 1992. As shown in table 2.1, the NBRF was responsible for seizing 65 metric tons, almost half of this amount, since its inception in April 1990. The NBRF also provided information and intelligence to non-NBRF Mexican agencies and drug interdiction organizations of neighboring countries during this time, which resulted in the seizure of an additional 18 metric tons of cocaine.

<sup>1</sup>This amount represents all seizures made by the NBRF, other elements of the PGR, and the Mexican armed forces.

**Table 2.1: Total NBRF Seizures  
 Between April 1990 and  
 December 1992**

	Metric tons of cocaine seized <sup>a</sup>	Number of arrests made	Number of planes seized
1990	18	25	9
1991	18	23	25
1992	29	96	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>51</b>

<sup>a</sup>Figures have been rounded.

Although the amount of cocaine seized by the NBRF appears impressive, when interdictions are compared with the number of narcotics flights tracked through Mexico, it becomes evident that most flights are transiting Mexico without being interdicted. According to information developed by the Information Analysis Center at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, 107 of the 339 acquired tracks<sup>2</sup> in 1991 landed in Mexico. Of the 107 suspect flights, 23, or 21 percent, were interdicted. During the first 7 months of 1992, 59 of the 119 flight tracks acquired by the Information Analysis Center landed in Mexico. Of the 59 suspect flights, 8, or almost 14 percent, were interdicted. The Rand Corporation has reported that approximately 92 percent of the more than 100 suspected trafficking flights transiting Mexico during 1989, before the initiation of the NBRF concept, succeeded in landing their cargos.

DEA also cites the evidence and intelligence gathered by follow-up investigative teams as indicators of the success attained by the NBRF. For example, according to DEA officials, the fuel pump of a seized trafficking aircraft was traced to a U.S. firm that was under indictment for narcotics trafficking. The fuel pump was used to tie the activities of the firm to narcotics trafficking. In another example, an AK-47 assault weapon seized by the NBRF during an interdiction operation was traced to a pro-Castro group in California, which was later raided by federal law enforcement personnel.

## No Standards Exist to Evaluate the NBRF's Effectiveness

The United States does not use any formal standards to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the NBRF on drug trafficking. A 1990 interagency group that examined proposals for increased counternarcotics cooperation with Mexico believed that a conditioned, incremental approach to the NBRF program should be taken with a year-end evaluation

<sup>2</sup>An acquired flight track is assumed to be a smuggling flight, since it meets the established profile by which trafficking aircraft are normally identified. These flights cannot be determined to be smuggling drugs with 100-percent certainty unless they are interdicted.

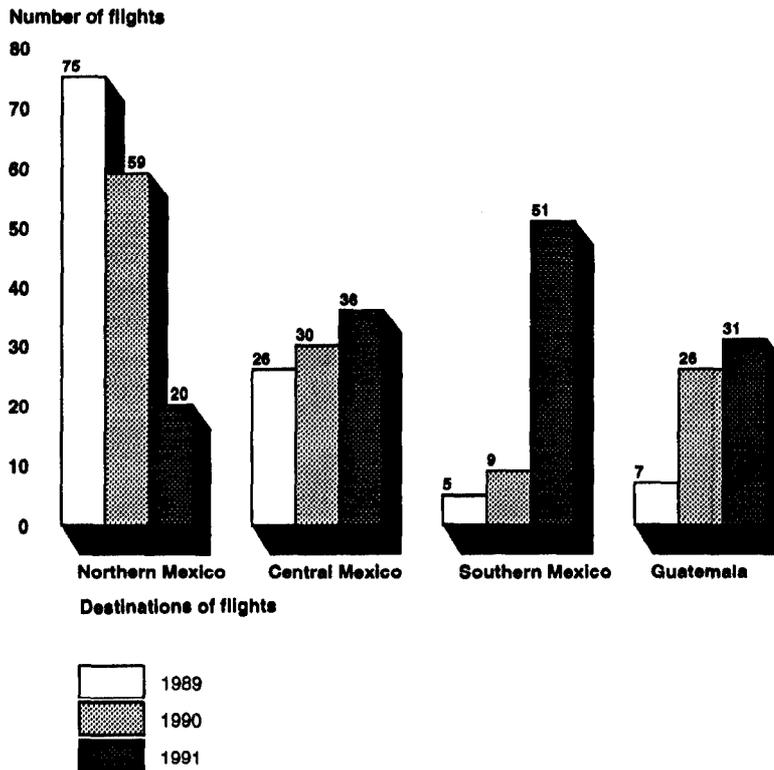
of the force's effectiveness. Support for the provision of additional units, that is, the second shipment of 12 UH-1H helicopters, would then be contingent on how well the Mexican government had utilized the initial shipment of 9 UH-1Hs and the interdiction results attained. Such an in-depth review of the effectiveness of the force and the utilization of the initial nine UH-1H helicopters was not conducted.

DOD conducted three separate assessments of the NBRF during 1990 and 1991 that focused primarily on Mexican capabilities to absorb, maintain, and operate the helicopters. Although the assessments surfaced a number of issues that should have been addressed before the delivery of the helicopters, the recommendations made did not appear to have been taken into consideration when planning for the effective and efficient use of the helicopters. For example, a DOD assessment performed during July and August 1990 noted that the UH-1Hs needed radios and auxiliary fuel tanks installed before being delivered to the Mexican government. Because the radios and the tanks were not initially available, they were not installed until after the helicopters were delivered to Mexico. The first nine UH-1Hs were delivered in November 1990; however, because of the delays in equipment deliveries, only about five were fully operational during 1991. Similar problems arose in March 1992 when the second shipment of 12 helicopters was delivered without the necessary radios and the parts required to install the auxiliary fuel tanks. The absence of auxiliary fuel tanks has prevented the PGR from expanding the operating range of the UH-1H helicopters. U.S. officials in Washington and Mexico concurred that speed and range limitations were the two primary disadvantages of using the UH-1H helicopter for interdiction operations in Mexico.

## **Initial Success Changes the Operational Approach of the NBRF**

U.S. officials in the United States and Mexico concurred that the 1990 NBRF pilot project and the first day of program implementation were successful because no previous efforts had been made to disrupt or interdict air shipments transiting Mexico, and, as a result, traffickers had been caught off guard. However, once the traffickers became aware of how the NBRF program was operating, they began to change their established trafficking patterns, block landing strips, and initiate various evasive maneuvers while in flight. The traffickers also moved their landing sites to the central and southern regions of the country and to neighboring Guatemala. Figure 2.1 illustrates the extent to which drug trafficking operations moved from northern Mexico between 1989 and 1991.

**Figure 2.1: Number and Destination of Detected Flights Entering Mexico and Guatemala Between 1989 and 1991**



Source: Information Analysis Center.

Mexican and U.S. officials determined that the relocation of trafficking operations required a response force that could cover all of Mexico instead of only the northern border area. Thus, the NBRF program had to be modified to interdict narcotics shipments throughout Mexico—a country three times the size of Texas—under a plan that was designed for a limited, well-defined section along the border.

**No Operating Bases Are Functional**

The NBRF has not fully established any of the seven mobile helicopter operating bases it had originally envisioned. As a result, the concept of employing self-contained operating sites to interdict drug-laden aircraft has not been tested or validated.

In August 1992, DEA, State, U.S. Forces Command,<sup>3</sup> and PGR officials began establishing the first helicopter response base at a commercial airport in southern Mexico. However, a considerable amount of training and work remains to be completed before the base can be considered functional. According to a U.S. Forces Command representative, it will take some time before the personnel, including specific Mexican Federal Judicial Police officials, have been assigned and equipment is in place. In addition, some technical problems still have to be resolved. For example, the operating instructions for the mobile travel trailers, which will house interdiction teams while they are on alert at the mobile bases, need to be translated into Spanish and appropriate hitchers for the trucks, which will transport the travel and maintenance trailers to the mobile base locations, need to be obtained. According to U.S. Forces Command and DEA officials, as of October 1992, three trucks, two living quarters/communications trailers, one maintenance trailer, one tracking aircraft, and three fully equipped UH-1H helicopters were collocated at the base.

By establishing only one base initially, the NBRF expects to be able to resolve any communications, personnel, maintenance, or other problems before establishing any other bases. For example, they plan to test the radios that link the base with the air and ground interdiction teams to determine if everyone can communicate with each other. According to a U.S. Forces Command official, the PGR has prepared an operational plan for the bases. The Command will recommend changes to the plan if necessary.

## **Helicopters Have Received Little Use**

The 21 UH-1H helicopters leased to Mexico by the United States were intended to be used to transport interdiction teams to traffickers' landing sites within a limited geographical area along Mexico's northern border. The major advantages of using helicopters are that they are not restricted to where they can land or discharge personnel, interdiction teams can withdraw quickly from an operation if they come under heavy gun fire, and interdiction teams can take off and chase traffickers fleeing in ground vehicles. However, none of the helicopters has been used to transport interdiction teams because of the change in traffickers' landing sites and limitations inherent with the UH-1H helicopter. Instead, Mexican officials have been relying on fixed-wing aircraft furnished by the PGR to transport interdiction teams.

<sup>3</sup>Mexico's joint border and unique relationship with the United States has resulted in the U.S. Forces Command being given responsibility for overseeing all narcotics-related military assistance provided to Mexico by the United States.

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According to officials, even though the UH-1H helicopter is an extremely reliable helicopter that is suited for many diverse missions, it lacks the speed and operating range necessary to transport interdiction teams to traffickers' landing sites throughout Mexico. These limitations have prevented the NBRF teams from arriving at landing strips in time to conduct interdiction operations. Our August 1992 review of operational records and after-action reports developed by DEA and NBRF officials at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City found that the UH-1H helicopters had only been flown 11 times, primarily to transport joint U.S.-Mexican after-action investigative teams and to make secondary-phase searches around landing areas to locate cocaine once it had been off-loaded by traffickers. According to State Department officials, the secondary-phase searches performed by the UH-1H helicopters resulted in the seizure of additional amounts of cocaine that would probably not have been made if the helicopters had not been available.

DEA representatives in Washington and Mexico City believed the 11 flights of the UH-1H helicopters in support of NBRF operations represented a cost-effective use of the 20 UH-1H helicopters now in-country and the \$38.9 million in direct U.S. support provided to date. The DEA officials knew of no other means for transporting the after-action investigative teams to the interdiction sites.

According to State and DOD representatives, Mexican officials have become frustrated with the limitations of the helicopters and therefore continue to rely on PGR fixed-wing aircraft for transportation during interdiction operations. DEA officials acknowledged that the UH-1H helicopter had not proven to be the best aircraft for primary interdiction use. The officials believed the helicopters would probably be used more effectively if they supported the interdiction mission by transporting personnel and equipment, conducting search and rescue operations, and being used for training, for example. These officials, however, did not indicate the number of helicopters that would be required to perform this supporting function.

One of the primary justifications for the United States providing the 21 UH-1H helicopters was the serious safety concerns involving the use of PGR fixed-wing aircraft, which were discovered during the pilot project. The helicopters would allow the interdiction teams to land in difficult terrain and out of the range of trafficker automatic weapons fire. PGR fixed-wing aircraft, however, must land directly behind the trafficker aircraft and, in some cases, not land at all if a vehicle or other obstacle is

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placed on a landing strip after the trafficker's plane lands. Another safety concern involves the location of the engine on some fixed-wing aircraft used by the PGR. For example, the only door on the Turbo Commander aircraft—a plane frequently used by interdiction teams—is located immediately in front of an overhanging propeller, and the propeller must come to a complete stop before the door can be opened and the interdiction team can safely disembark the aircraft. This delay and the time required for the aircraft to restart its engines before takeoff may compromise the safety of NBRF personnel if they encounter trafficker gunfire. According to DEA, the PGR has limited its use of the Turbo Commander and currently prefers to use fixed-wing aircraft with doors located in the rear of the aircraft.

Even though the helicopters are not being used for their intended purpose, the future cost of maintaining the aircraft and procuring necessary spare parts must be assumed by either the Department of State or the government of Mexico. The U.S.-funded aviation maintenance contract between the government of Mexico and Bell Helicopter Services, Inc., was amended to include maintenance of the 20 UH-1H helicopters.<sup>4</sup> In 1992, the Mexican government stated that it wished to reduce the amount of assistance provided by the United States and assume more of the costs associated with narcotics control. The U.S.-funded aviation maintenance contract expired on December 31, 1992, and the PGR entered into a new contract with Bell Helicopter Services, Inc., that would be solely funded by the government of Mexico. Representatives from Bell Helicopter and the Department of State estimate that it will cost up to \$5.8 million to maintain the helicopters for the 2-year period ending June 30, 1993. Table 2.2 provides additional information on this estimate.

**Table 2.2: Estimated Cost of Maintaining UH-1H Helicopters From July 1, 1991, to June 30, 1993**

	July 1, 1991, to June 30, 1992	July 1, 1992, to June 30, 1993
Parts	\$1,840,000	\$2,991,000
Personnel	381,546	597,018
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,221,546</b>	<b>\$3,588,018</b>

The NBRF now plans to use the helicopters to saturate a particular area or known trafficking corridor, such as the Pacific coast region of the Mexican state of Sinaloa, and then move on as the traffickers continue to shift their operations. NBRF officials believe that this will enable the interdiction teams to disrupt trafficking operations in a particular area, force

<sup>4</sup>This number excludes one UH-1H helicopter that was destroyed in a March 1992 crash.

traffickers to operate in unfamiliar territory, and then use the benefits associated with highly mobile helicopter operating bases to their advantage.

According to DEA and State officials, seizures and arrests of traffickers should become easier each time traffickers are forced to conduct operations in unfamiliar territory where they do not have an established smuggling infrastructure or personnel in place. Also, if the helicopters are located at several operating bases within a given geographic area, the NBRF can stagger deployment of interdiction teams as a suspect aircraft nears the range of a mobile base.

According to a State official, alerting the helicopter bases early during interdiction operations is essential to addressing the change in trafficking tactics. This would allow an NBRF unit to be airborne when a trafficking aircraft enters the helicopters' operating zone and would permit the interdiction team to take advantage of the helicopters' safety and operational benefits and minimize the adverse effects of the helicopters' limited speed and operating range. Mobility, communications, and coordination would become even more essential to the success of interdiction operations when NBRF units are airborne early. This method of utilizing the UH-1H helicopters, however, has not been tested.

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## Recommendation

Since the UH-1H helicopters the United States provided to the NBRF have not been used for interdiction as originally intended and the mobile operating base concept does not appear to be suited to combat the changing drug trafficker tactics in Mexico, we recommend that the Secretary of State re-evaluate the need to continue to lease the fleet of helicopters to the government of Mexico. In making this decision, the Secretary should consider whether the helicopters could be more effectively used in other areas or countries for drug interdiction purposes.

# The NBRF Program Has Experienced Significant Delays and Implementation Problems

Numerous problems have arisen in implementing the NBRF program, causing setbacks and delays in virtually all areas of the original plan. There have been prolonged negotiations over the language contained in aid transfer agreements that would allow for the timely provision of assistance to the NBRF. Other factors adversely impacting on the provision of U.S. assistance include unfamiliarity with the complexities of DOD's supply system and higher U.S. government priorities. These factors resulted in the NBRF receiving between 75 and 80 percent of the dollar value of the helicopter spare parts it needed and \$26 million of the \$43 million in assistance authorized.

The NBRF program has faced other obstacles. A major setback occurred when one UH-1H helicopter crashed and the helicopter fleet was informally grounded for approximately 4 months while the cause of the crash was being investigated by U.S. Army personnel and representatives of the engine manufacturer. The entire fleet was inspected to ensure that the faulty engine parts that were responsible for the crash were examined and replaced. Also, NBRF air operations were curtailed in November 1991 after the killing of seven Mexican NBRF personnel in a shoot-out with soldiers of the Mexican Army. Another obstacle affecting program implementation is the lack of sufficient detection and monitoring radar assets and the inappropriate placement of available radar assets. To minimize the effectiveness of available detection assets, traffickers have changed their delivery tactics to include greater use of Guatemala and Belize, two countries with minimal interdiction capabilities, as staging areas for drug shipments.

In addition, compensation offered by the government of Mexico for trained and qualified pilots and mechanics has been a serious problem because it is much less than that offered by the Mexican private sector and has resulted in a long-standing shortage of trained personnel. Mexico probably will not be able to implement the NBRF program's goal of establishing seven self-contained mobile operating bases without major changes in the amount of compensation offered to pilots and mechanics.

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## **Program Implementation Has Been Adversely Affected by Problems in the Provision of U.S. Assistance**

The largest portion of U.S. assistance for the NBRF program has been provided through section 506(a)(2) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which allows for the provision of commodities drawn directly from existing U.S. defense stockpiles. Since section 506 assistance is designed to provide the recipient with a quick infusion of military assistance, the aid must be provided within 120 days of the President's notification to Congress of his intention to provide such assistance. To date, the President has authorized two section 506(a)(2) drawdowns in fiscal years 1990 and 1992 of up to \$17 million and \$26 million, respectively, to provide the NBRF with 21 UH-1H helicopters, spare parts, and various types of supporting equipment and services. Problems caused by the delays in the negotiation of an acceptable transfer agreement, the complexities of the defense supply system, and higher U.S. government priorities have been encountered in providing the assistance. As a result, Mexico has received about 60 percent of the \$43 million in assistance initially authorized.

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## **Delays Caused by the Negotiation of an Acceptable Transfer Agreement**

To ensure that U.S.-provided military assistance is properly maintained and not misused, section 505 of the Foreign Assistance Act sets forth certain assurances that recipient governments must make before the United States can transfer defense-related commodities and services. Mexico declined to sign a standard section 505 agreement for either of the drawdowns. As a result, the United States and Mexico were involved in lengthy negotiations to develop agreements that satisfied the requirements of section 505 and were more sensitive to Mexican concerns about national sovereignty. The primary objections of the Mexicans centered on language that the government of Mexico would be subjected to requirements of a U.S. law (i.e., the Foreign Assistance Act). Negotiations for the first drawdown were initiated during the summer of 1990 and concluded on September 21, 1990, with the exchange of diplomatic notes and an accompanying letter that clarified the intent and meaning of some terms in the note. The diplomatic note, letter, and the U.S.-Mexican 7-year lease agreement for the transfer of nine UH-1H helicopters served as the section 505 agreement for the initial transfer. Negotiations for the second transfer began in July 1991 and concluded on February 24, 1992, with the signing of a somewhat similar diplomatic note and an accompanying letter. These two documents and a 2-year lease agreement served as the section 505 agreement for the second transfer of 12 UH-1H helicopters. Table 3.1 provides additional information on section 506(a)(2) assistance provided to Mexico and key dates in the provision of this aid, and appendix II provides a detailed listing of the specific types of assistance provided to Mexico.

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**Table 3.1: Assistance Authorized and Provided to Mexico Through Section 506(a)(2) in 1990 and 1992**

	1990	1992
Assistance authorized	\$17,000,000	\$26,000,000
Assistance provided	\$12,392,234	\$13,637,057
Assistance authorized but not provided	\$4,607,766	\$12,362,943
Number of UH-1H helicopters provided	9	12
Date of congressional notification	July 25, 1990	Nov. 8, 1991
Date of Presidential determination	Aug. 19, 1990	Feb. 26, 1992 <sup>a</sup>
Date of section 505 agreement	Sept. 21, 1990	Feb. 24, 1992
End of initial 120-day drawdown period	Nov. 22, 1990	Mar. 7, 1992

<sup>a</sup>Presidential determination 92-17 was signed after the section 505 agreement was approved by the governments of the United States and Mexico.

Defense Security Assistance Agency officials responsible for obtaining and delivering the assistance told us that the time consumed in negotiating an acceptable agreement was one of the factors that prevented it from providing the full amount of assistance in a timely manner. For example, when the negotiated agreements were signed, only 60 and 12 days remained in the initial 120-day delivery periods for the drawdowns authorized in 1990 and 1992, respectively. Even though extensions were granted, many of the spare parts requested by the U.S. Embassy were no longer available when the embassy's request was processed.

Delays in negotiating an acceptable agreement and procedures used to fill requests for equipment resulted in Mexico receiving \$13.6 million of the \$26 million in assistance authorized in the second transfer of section 506 assistance. According to a Defense Security Assistance Agency official, many of the spare parts and much of the equipment requested by the U.S. Embassy were available for disbursement when the negotiations for the second drawdown began in July 1991. However, during the 8 months of negotiations, spare parts for UH-1H helicopters were continually being drawn from existing defense stocks by active duty and reserve military units who were restocking their inventories after they returned from the Persian Gulf. Another cause of the large drawdown by military units was, according to one Defense Security Assistance Agency official, the announcement by the Army that it would greatly reduce the amount of UH-1H spare parts to be procured in future years. This announcement resulted in military units trying to obtain as many UH-1H spare parts as possible. As a result, many of the spare parts requested by the U.S. Embassy were either not in stock or were not available in the quantities requested.

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Even though the second drawdown period was extended to July 7, 1992, a Defense Security Assistance Agency official said that the U.S. Embassy was late in submitting both its initial spare parts request and its follow-up requests. Since section 506(a)(2) allows only for drawing equipment from existing defense stocks and does not provide authority for the purchase of new equipment, the embassy's request for specific items was either completely filled, partially filled, or not filled at all.

A State Department official told us that the inability to obtain UH-1H spare parts through section 506(a)(2) means that replacement parts would have to be obtained either through commercial purchases, a third section 506(a)(2) drawdown, or the cannibalization of in-country UH-1H helicopters. The State official noted that one UH-1H had already been cannibalized for spare parts. It is unclear whether the U.S. or Mexican governments will be required to purchase these parts, since the Mexicans have expressed a desire to phase out U.S. assistance to the narcotics interdiction effort.

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**Delays Caused by the  
Complexities of the  
Defense Supply System**

A major obstacle in the provision of section 506(a)(2) assistance was encountered by the Department of State and the U.S. Embassy when they attempted to obtain equipment through DOD's supply system. According to officials involved in this process, requests for spare parts and equipment were developed at the U.S. Embassy and submitted to defense supply depots. When the depots received a request, personnel checked their inventory and determined if they could fill the entire order and still maintain their stocks at a war reserve level. If they could, then the order was filled and forwarded to Mexico. If they could not fill the entire order, depot personnel had the discretion of either partially filling the request or canceling the order.

U.S. officials in Mexico were not being informed when orders were either partially filled or canceled or when existing stocks would be replenished to a level that would allow the depots to fill a reorder for the commodity or completely fill an order that had been partially filled. According to one U.S. official in Mexico, the only way U.S. field personnel knew if the order was filled was when they opened boxes that had been delivered to the aviation maintenance facility in Guadalajara. In addition, the order/reorder process is time-consuming and occurs while the 120-day drawdown period for providing section 506(a)(2) assistance is expiring.

These obstacles were partially offset by long-standing personal friendships developed between officials of Bell Helicopter Services, Inc., in Guadalajara and U.S. Army supply personnel. Bell Helicopter representatives assisted U.S. Embassy personnel in developing the initial listing of the items that would be required for a 2-year supply of spare parts for both drawdowns. This was accomplished, in part, through personal experience and a detailed knowledge of the maintenance requirements of UH-1H helicopters deployed to tropical environments.

According to officials in Guadalajara, U.S. Army supply personnel in the United States would informally tell the Bell Helicopter representative when a request had been partially filled or canceled and when inventories would be replenished to a level that would allow for the complete filling of a request. This informal relationship allowed the U.S. Embassy to obtain equipment that would otherwise not have been available.

### **Delays Caused by Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm**

The quantity of military equipment and UH-1H spare parts available and DOD's ability to provide the requested stocks were adversely affected by the higher priority of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The first section 506 (a)(2) drawdown began at the end of September 1990, 6 weeks after the initiation of Operation Desert Shield. At that time, U.S. military units were obtaining large quantities of equipment and helicopter spare parts from DOD's supply system as they prepared for deployment to the Persian Gulf region. As a result, much of the equipment and spare parts requested by the U.S. Embassy were not available when its requests were processed.

The nine UH-1H helicopters authorized for the NBRF in the first drawdown were delivered to Mexico during late November 1990. Delivery of the spare parts and other equipment, however, was delayed until late February 1991 because of the priority placed on Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Delays in the delivery of such critical parts as spare transmissions, main rotor blades, and ground support equipment resulted in the conservative and limited use of the initial nine helicopters during their early deployment. The lack of available DOD stocks was cited by U.S. officials in Washington, D.C., and Mexico as one of the primary reasons why all of the assistance authorized in the first drawdown was not provided.

As previously noted, the second drawdown occurred at a time when active duty and reserve military units were restocking their own inventories after

the conclusion of Operation Desert Storm. As a result, many of the items sought by the U.S. Embassy were not available.

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## **Obstacles Have Prevented More Effective Interdiction Operations**

Despite the initial success of the NBRF, the program faces a number of obstacles and operational problems, including (1) the lack and limited use of assets, (2) communications problems, and (3) gaps in aerial coverage. According to DEA, State, and DOD, addressing these issues can make the NBRF a more effective drug interdiction force.

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### **Lack and Limited Use of Assets**

According to DOD, one of the main reasons suspect aircraft are able to transit Mexico without being interdicted is the lack of tracking and interdiction assets. Once a suspect flight enters Mexican airspace, two U.S. Customs and two PGR specially equipped Cessna Citation aircraft are allowed to monitor and track the flight. According to officials of the Information Analysis Center in Mexico City, flight tracks of suspect aircraft are often lost when the Citation must break contact to refuel. On several occasions, U.S. assets successfully tracked airplanes from Colombia, but once the airplanes entered Mexican airspace, no assets were available to continue the tracking. Except for the two U.S. Customs aircraft, Mexican sovereignty prevents other U.S. tracking assets from operating while in Mexican airspace.

One of the reasons the UH-1H helicopters have been used very little in interdicting drug flights is the extensive amount of scheduled and unscheduled maintenance downtime that is associated with general helicopter use. DEA acknowledged that it took Mexico a long time to fully understand the downtime involved with helicopters and had therefore not been able to appropriately plan for their use. This problem was further compounded by the fact that Mexico is not obligated to inform DEA when it launches a UH-1H or provide helicopter usage reports or statistics so that the appropriate maintenance can be performed.

In addition, the helicopters were informally grounded after the March 1992 crash of one UH-1H helicopter and the November 1991 killing of seven NBRF interdiction personnel in a shoot-out with Mexican Army personnel, who were protecting a landing strip for drug traffickers. A Department of State official told us that even though the helicopter fleet was not formally grounded after these two events, use of the helicopters was greatly curtailed until investigations of the incidents could be conducted and corrective action completed. The investigation identified a damaged

combustion liner in the engine as the cause of the crash. An examination of the 20 remaining UH-1H helicopters by the U.S. Army and the engine manufacturer found that a second helicopter had a similar defective part. The State official also stated that even though all of the helicopters were closely inspected and the defective engine part was replaced, Mexican pilots and crews became more reluctant to use the UH-1H helicopters after the crash.

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**Lack of Appropriate and  
Compatible  
Communications  
Equipment**

Communications between interdiction participants remains a serious problem, which, according to the State Department and DOD, makes each interdiction operation an exercise in creativity and innovation. One Mexican official stated that, on numerous occasions, the lack of adequate communications equipment resulted in up to 3 to 4 hours passing before the Mexicans were aware of the outcome of an interdiction operation. Further, NBRF radio frequencies had been found to have been monitored by drug-smuggling pilots on several occasions.

The lack of communications equipment was identified as early as July 1990, when State Department officials examined problems being experienced by the PGR in communicating between ground stations and aircraft. The officials noted that the problems stemmed primarily from aging ground and airborne radio units and recommended that the communications requirements for the NBRF be reviewed as soon as possible. In its 1990 assessment of the capability of the PGR to operate and maintain the UH-1H helicopters, DOD noted that the necessary high-frequency radios<sup>1</sup> were not installed in the UH-1Hs and recommended that a countrywide communications plan be developed. The UH-1Hs, however, were delivered to Mexico without the recommended radios, and, as of February 1993, the communications plan was still being developed.

To alleviate some of the communications problems, the Department of State has provided the PGR with 8 high-frequency base station radios for use by the mobile operating bases and 15 backpack radios for use by the NBRF interdiction teams. Embassy officials in Mexico City reported in February 1993 that five of the base station radios were operational and, at the direction of the PGR, four of the backpack radios were being used to support other PGR activities.

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<sup>1</sup>The PGR uses high-frequency radios within Mexico for ground-to-ground and air-to-ground communications.

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In addition to the lack of appropriate equipment, the secure communications equipment that is currently used by PGR and NBRF interdiction units is not compatible with U.S. equipment at the Information Analysis Center—the communications center of the NBRF—at the U.S. Embassy. A secured radio system that allows communication between U.S. assets was installed at the center in mid-1991, but it is not anticipated that the Mexican government will be equipped with this system. To supplement the system and permit communication between NBRF participants, additional high-frequency radios are being procured by the State Department.

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**Gaps in Aerial Coverage**

Because the NBRF program is primarily an air interdiction force, it depends heavily on the information provided by U.S. detection and monitoring assets. These assets, however, support the NBRF as well as other antinarcotics operations in Central and South America. Thus, the assets are not sufficient to provide a continuous 24-hour watch over the major trafficking routes to Mexico—the western Caribbean, the eastern Pacific, and the Guatemalan-Mexican border. These assets also tend to be mostly concentrated in one area (i.e., the western Caribbean), and, as a result, the number of tracks of potential trafficking aircraft passed to the NBRF is limited.

DEA and Information Analysis Center officials believe that more attention should be paid to Mexico, since most of the cocaine entering the United States transits Mexico. The Center notes that the concentration of assets in the western Caribbean corridor, to support interdiction operations in the Caribbean, leaves all other trafficking routes opened. According to the Center, Mexico has three established trafficking areas of concern in addition to the western Caribbean region—Mexico's Pacific coastline and the east and west coasts of the Baja, California, peninsula.

Lengthy gaps in U.S. detection and monitoring capabilities also occurred as a result of the redeployment of assets during Operation Desert Storm. A congressional committee visited Mexico in August 1991 and noted that although the war in the Persian Gulf had concluded 6 months earlier, many of the U.S. aircraft, ships, and radars used to detect Caribbean drug trafficking aircraft had not returned to their assignments in the Caribbean and the southern border region.

The use of Guatemala and Belize as a refueling point for trafficking aircraft has adversely affected Mexican interdiction efforts. The distance between

Colombia and Mexico caused traffickers to (1) modify their aircraft by adding fuel bladders to increase fuel capacity and (2) fly at relatively high altitudes to conserve fuel. However, aircraft flying at high altitudes from Colombia are easily tracked by radar and have little reserve fuel available once they reach Mexico. Thus, the planes are forced to either land immediately or crash. By refueling in Guatemala or Belize, Colombian traffickers are able to make the short flight into Mexico at low altitudes, which allows them to avoid radar and mix with legal air traffic. This trafficking tactic also greatly reduces the reaction time available to NBRF interdiction personnel.

The continued shift in flights to southern Mexico and other Central American countries, in particular Guatemala, has demonstrated the need for a more reliable detection and monitoring network through central and southern Mexico. The Mexican Air Force recently implemented a radar network in southern Mexico that will eventually become the backbone of the Mexican air surveillance system. According to the Department of State, information obtained by the radar network is being provided to the recently established Mexican Counternarcotics Coordinating Center.<sup>2</sup>

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## **Qualified Pilots and Trained Mechanics Are Needed**

Several DOD assessment teams that have examined various aspects of the NBRF program have voiced concerns about the PGR's ability to train and retain enough pilots and mechanics to implement the NBRF concept. For example, before the 1990 transfer of nine UH-1H helicopters, a DOD technical assessment team examined the ability of the PGR to accept and maintain the UH-1H helicopter. The team reported that, since the PGR had no experience with the UH-1H, 20 mechanics would have to attend maintenance school and 14 pilots would require transition training from the helicopters they were currently flying, Bell 206/212s, to the UH-1H. In June 1991, a U.S. Army team visited Mexico to determine what was needed to bring the nine previously delivered UH-1H helicopters on-line. The team reported that the PGR's absorption of additional helicopters could be limited by the number of trained pilots and mechanics.

The problems associated with the PGR's inability to adequately retain and compensate trained mechanics and qualified pilots have long been recognized. For example, in 1987 a senior State Department official testified before Congress that the shortage of PGR pilots, mechanics, and

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<sup>2</sup>Similar to the Information Analysis Center at the U.S. Embassy, the Mexican Counternarcotics Coordinating Center was established by the PGR and is tasked with coordinating the activities of all Mexican civilian and military organizations involved in narcotics control, including the activities and operations of the NBRF.

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navigators had impeded the aerial eradication campaign and that the PGR would continue to lose pilots as long as it did not offer a competitive wage. In our 1988 report on Mexico's aerial marijuana and opium poppy eradication program, we stated that the PGR's inability to retain trained mechanics adversely impacted aircraft operations and that the PGR had been unable to retain a sufficient number of pilots to fly eradication missions on a full-time basis.<sup>3</sup> In September 1990, the Department of State's Inspector General reported that many of the aviation-related problems previously identified by us, including the PGR's inability to retain trained pilots and mechanics, continued to exist.<sup>4</sup>

In an effort to enhance pilot retention, the PGR instituted a new policy in March 1992 that requires all PGR pilots to sign a contract for one year of service following the completion of their flight training. Before this change, pilots and mechanics were free to terminate their employment at any time and were not obligated to remain employed by the PGR after they complete PGR-provided training. Mechanics are not required to sign retention contracts.

In August 1992, officials at the U.S. Embassy told us that 84 pilots and 56 mechanics would be required to sustain NBRF interdiction operations on a 24-hour basis from the 7 planned mobile operating locations. At that time, the PGR had 30 pilots qualified to operate the UH-1H, 15 UH-1H-trained mechanics, and 6 mechanic assistants.

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**Shortage of Pilots**

Most NBRF helicopter pilots come from either the PGR's marijuana and opium poppy eradication program or PEMEX, Mexico's national oil company. The pilots are usually familiar with flying the commercial version of the UH-1H helicopter and are cross-trained on the UH-1H through a transition course. According to the U.S. aviation advisor to the PGR, helicopter pilots are anxious to leave the eradication program because they are usually required to stay in poor accommodations at remote field locations. Under the NBRF program, pilots will stay in travel trailers at the operating bases while on alert; all other times they will be staying in local hotels. Also, NBRF pilots will receive per diem allowances before being assigned to the operating bases, rather than afterward as in the eradication program.

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<sup>3</sup>Drug Control: U.S.-Mexico Opium Poppy and Marijuana Aerial Eradication Program (GAO/NSIAD-88-73, Jan. 11, 1988).

<sup>4</sup>Review of Drug Control Activities in Mexico (Department of State Inspector General Memorandum Report 0-CI-027, Sept. 1990).

A problem associated with the practice of cross-training PGR pilots is that even though additional helicopters are being added to the air fleet and new jobs are being created, no new pilots are being developed. Furthermore, it is strongly possible that one program will suffer if resources are suddenly shifted. This is currently not a serious problem, since the UH-1H helicopters have been frequently grounded and the operating bases have not been established. However, when the helicopters were informally grounded after the March 1992 crash, some UH-1H pilots left the program because they were not receiving enough flying time and corresponding flight pay. Future dependence on cross-trained pilots and mechanics could become a problem if the NBRF concept of using UH-1H helicopters becomes operational.

One component of the section 506(a)(2) assistance provided in 1990 was the training of 10 NBRF pilots at Fort Rucker, Alabama. According to U.S. officials, this training effort encountered several problems, including language difficulties, the type of operational training being taught by the U.S. Army, the difficult time civilian NBRF pilots had in adjusting to a military lifestyle, and the cost of the program. As a result, future UH-1H training will be conducted at the PGR's Acapulco training facility.

According to one U.S. official, there are no long-range plans for NBRF pilot training. In the past, the PGR has been unable to implement plans due to the day-to-day management approach in the organization. In addition, milestones are often dictated by the time remaining in the term of office of the current Mexican president. Since President Salinas will be leaving office in less than 2 years, some PGR officials are reportedly reluctant to put much effort into long-range planning.

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## Shortage of Mechanics

Thirty mechanics were first trained in 1991 to maintain the UH-1H helicopters. However, according to the senior Bell Helicopter representative at the PGR maintenance facility in Guadalajara, only about eight of these original mechanics are still employed by the PGR to maintain the helicopters. The amount of compensation available to trained mechanics in the private sector has been the primary reason for the turnover of mechanics. According to one U.S. official, the pay gap has increased since our 1988 report, and trained aviation mechanics can now make from three to five times as much working in the Mexican private sector. Other factors cited by U.S. officials for the PGR's inability to retain mechanics included moving the aviation maintenance facility from the prestigious location of Mexico City to the less desirable city of

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**Chapter 3  
The NBRF Program Has Experienced  
Significant Delays and Implementation  
Problems**

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Guadalajara, the high attrition rate normally found among workers in Mexico, and the slowness of the PGR and the government of Mexico in paying their employees.

A direct affect of the high turnover rate is that the U.S.-financed UH-1H mechanics training program rarely progresses beyond the most basic level of training. One U.S. official in Mexico told us that there were few, if any, mechanics employed long enough to receive or complete intermediate or advanced training.

In August 1992, the PGR authorized 50 additional UH-1H mechanic positions and, since then, had begun hiring for the positions. Training of the newly hired mechanics is expected to take about 2 to 3 months. One reason cited for the delay in training additional UH-1H mechanics was that, before the arrival of the UH-1H helicopters, the PGR did not have enough mechanics to support the aircraft already in its inventory. Furthermore, since the arrival of the UH-1H helicopters, the PGR's aviation maintenance operations have been overloaded and constantly trying to catch up.

To maintain the UH-1H helicopter fleet in the interim, the U.S. Embassy submitted a request in July 1992 for the 30- to 45-day deployment of a 15-person maintenance assistance team from the U.S. Forces Command. The request was evaluated by the Command, and it determined that the most pressing NBRF need was airborne assault training, not mechanics training. Command personnel were deployed to Mexico to instruct NBRF personnel in helicopter assault tactics in November 1992.

# Expansion of Drug Interdiction Activities Is Planned in Mexico and Neighboring Countries

DEA and the PGR are planning to expand the NBRF mission within Mexico to include land and maritime interdiction capabilities. Officials from these organizations believe that small boats and chase vehicles will be required to support the NBRF's expanded mission, but they do not anticipate the need for additional UH-1H helicopters. To counter increased trafficking activities in neighboring Latin American countries, DEA plans to expand ongoing activities in Guatemala and establish a regional interdiction force that will support operations in all Central American countries. The latter, however, faces numerous problems, such as coordination between countries and sovereignty concerns of each country.

## NBRF Activities Are to Include Land and Maritime Interdiction

DEA and the PGR are planning to expand the NBRF mission within Mexico to include land and maritime interdiction capabilities and operations. DEA believes that the expansion is necessary to respond to changes in transportation methods due to successful NBRF air interdiction operations, and that the additional interdiction capabilities should make the overall program more effective. According to DEA, trafficking organizations no longer perceive smuggling drugs by light aircraft into Mexico as a cost-effective or risk-free means of transporting drugs. Although DEA expects air smuggling flights into Mexico to continue, recent trends indicate that the number of suspect flights entering Mexico is declining. Smugglers are now hiding cocaine shipments among legitimate freight, airdropping their cargos to maritime recovery crews, and transporting large quantities of drugs over land across the Guatemalan-Mexican border for shipment into the United States.

According to analysts of the Information Analysis Center, land and maritime tactics used by drug smugglers will be extremely difficult to counter, primarily because Mexico does not have assets available or in place to detect or counter these new tactics. Over land smuggling through Mexico, the most significant threat and the most difficult to counter, begins at Mexico's border with Guatemala and Belize, which is mostly open range and entirely unprotected, and extends to the U.S.-Mexican border. Drugs can be moved north using different modes of transportation such as commercial trucking, railroads, and personal vehicles.

Also, Mexico has about 28 major commercial seaports that will require surveillance. There is no method for gauging the maritime drug trafficking threat, since most of the drug interdiction detection and monitoring assets are directed at the air threat. To date, large quantities of cocaine have been found hidden among legitimate freight only because confidential

informants alerted authorities in advance to the presence and location of the drugs.

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**Additional Assets and Resources Will Be Needed**

The PGR is currently in the process of identifying personnel, equipment, and training requirements needed to address the expansion of interdiction capabilities. Maritime expansion is expected to eventually require the greatest amount of resources. Preliminary indications are that equipment such as small boats—both fast and patrol types—will be needed for the NBRF to build an effective marine interdiction program. High seas interdictions and large commercial vessel boardings would be accomplished with the support of the Mexican Navy. Equipment requirements for land-based interceptions are expected to include chase vehicles, personnel protection equipment, blockades, road signs, and search equipment to be used at checkpoints. DEA initially plans to focus on maritime expansion until Mexican officials approve the establishment of road checkpoints. The use of checkpoints across Mexico was discontinued several years ago after allegations of abuse by the police force conducting the searches. DEA also notes that the expansion of interdiction activities will require the recruitment of additional confidential informants.

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**Need for Additional UH-1H Helicopters Is Not Expected**

The additional assets needed for the expansion does not include additional UH-1H helicopters. According to a DEA official, the UH-1H helicopters will not play a key role in the planned maritime expansion, since their only mission is air interdiction. Further, Mexican regulations prohibit single-engine aircraft, such as the UH-1H, from flying over water. Likewise, UH-1H helicopters will not have a role in land-based interdictions.

DEA stressed that, as the NBRF program expands, it wanted to avoid many of the problems faced in integrating the UH-1H helicopters into air interdiction operations. DEA plans to gradually develop the proposed expansion and accomplish it in phases to ensure cohesion and appropriate direction and planning.

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**Expansion Costs Are Currently Unknown**

According to one DEA official, it is too early to determine the cost of expanding the NBRF. The Mexican government has not requested any additional financial assistance from the United States and has, in fact, stated its intentions to eventually fund all of its antinarcotics programs. DEA is providing funding for confidential informants, and the PGR is planning to fund the establishment of the checkpoints once they are

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approved by the Mexican government. However, neither DEA nor the PGR were able to provide any cost figures for these activities.

The biggest expenditures are expected to be related to the provision of equipment for the Mexican Navy, which will be a major participant in future maritime interdiction operations. DEA and DOD officials noted that the NBRF needed to address the Mexican Navy's equipment deficiencies. According to a DOD official, most of the Navy's equipment is old or obsolete, and approximately one-third of its surface fleet will be retired in the next few years. Even though the Mexican Navy is exploring the possibility of acquiring used U.S. equipment such as fast frigates, docking ships, and radars, it has no funding available to do so.

## **Drug Interdiction Operations Will Also Be Expanded in Guatemala**

As U.S. and Mexican enforcement activities force trafficker aircraft south from the U.S. border and northern Mexico, traffickers are beginning to develop new routes through Central American countries for transporting drugs to the United States. To counter this shift, DEA plans to expand ongoing interdiction operations in Guatemala. Of the new routes being employed by drug traffickers, Guatemala is growing in importance as a transit point for cocaine; it is currently third only to Mexico and the Bahamas.<sup>1</sup> Guatemala is considered an ideal cocaine transshipment point, since it has dozens of uncontrolled airfields that traffickers use to either refuel their aircraft on their journey to Mexico or off-load cocaine to U.S.-bound vessels, aircraft, or trucks. The government of Guatemala has neither a radar system capable of tracking trafficker aircraft nor the means to intercept them.

To intercept trafficking aircraft that land in Guatemala and disrupt cocaine transshipment through the northern part of Central America, the United States initiated a joint law enforcement/interdiction effort known as Operation Cadence in July 1991. Operation Cadence involves various U.S. and Guatemalan law enforcement agencies, including the Guatemalan Treasury Police, DEA, DOD, the Department of State, and the U.S. Customs Service. During 1992, Operation Cadence was responsible for virtually all of the 9.5 metric tons of cocaine and 10 aircraft seized in Guatemala. However, unlike NBRF seizures in Mexico, which are mostly the result of detection and monitoring efforts, seizures in Guatemala are primarily the result of investigative information and controlled or preplanned operations.

<sup>1</sup>To facilitate enforcement actions in the Caribbean, the United States has a multiagency initiative in place known as Operation Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands, or OPBAT.

To support Operation Cadence, the Department of State provided two Bell 212 helicopters to transport interdiction personnel to suspected trafficking sites. Two other Department of State helicopters already in-country to conduct opium poppy eradication operations are also being used for Operation Cadence. State later sent a fifth helicopter to Guatemala to be used as a maintenance replacement for the four already assigned to Operation Cadence and State's aerial eradication program.

The proposed expansion of Operation Cadence is currently focusing on the provision of additional aircraft, mainly helicopters, and organizing, training, and equipping a rapid reaction force to be deployed by helicopters to landing strips. In June 1992, DEA announced that it was planning to replace the Bell 212 helicopters with newer and faster UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters; however, congressional concerns have forced DEA to re-evaluate its plans. As of February 1993, DEA had not decided whether additional helicopters would be requested for the operation or the type of helicopter that would be most appropriate for use in Guatemala. For fiscal year 1993, DEA is planning to allocate about \$1.5 million<sup>2</sup> to establish additional interdiction teams for deployment to Guatemala. The Department of State requested \$3 million to support all its narcotics control efforts in Guatemala during fiscal year 1993.

## **Plan to Create a Regional Counternarcotics Force Faces Many Obstacles**

Although the cocaine transit problem in other Central American countries is currently not as severe as in Mexico and Guatemala, DEA and the Department of State expect that counternarcotics interdiction operations will eventually encompass all of Central America. Rather than developing independent interdiction programs in each country, DEA has a goal to create a regional interdiction force capable of moving between all Central American countries. However, many obstacles remain before such a force can become a reality.

Two of the greatest obstacles to creating a regional interdiction force are sovereignty concerns of the individual countries and the coordination that would be required among the countries before and during interdiction operations. For example, the countries must decide which aircraft can fly over their territory, who will pilot the aircraft, and who will have jurisdiction to make arrests. An indication of the potential problems confronting a regional interdiction force occurred in February 1992 when DEA's Mexico office expressed concern over Mexican-based U.S. Customs

<sup>2</sup>DEA's funding for antinarcotics operations in Guatemala is provided under DEA's Andean Strategy Support Program, which also includes Bolivia and Peru. DEA normally allocates about 25 percent of the budget for this program for Operation Cadence.

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Expansion of Drug Interdiction Activities Is  
Planned in Mexico and Neighboring  
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tracking aircraft, with PGR agents on board, flying over any foreign country to support local interdiction efforts. The office's concern resulted from an NBRF operation in which a U.S. Customs Citation with Mexican markings and registry tracked two suspect aircraft into Guatemala and attempted to assist Operation Cadence interdiction efforts by flying over Guatemala. Although the mission had been initially authorized by the PGR and Guatemalan authorities, the PGR later retracted its approval due to the potential political problems involved in having an aircraft bearing Mexican registry and carrying PGR agents flying over Guatemala.

DOD officials referred to the positive statements by Central American presidents at the conclusion of an early 1993 meeting in Belize as an indication of the concerns regional leaders have over problems associated with narcotics production and trafficking. DOD officials believe this meeting may be the initial step toward greater regional cooperation in the fight against narcotics trafficking.

A DEA official in Mexico noted that although DEA would like to see a regional program established in Central America, further expansion of interdiction operations must depend on the narcotics threat to and the particular needs of the individual countries. According to this official, the threat must be assessed before any program is developed to determine the resources required for a successful response. For example, the speed and distance capabilities of the proposed interdiction aircraft should be reviewed to determine if they would be sufficient to respond to the threat. In addition, the countries' ability to operate and maintain the aircraft should also be considered. According to DEA, the difficulties experienced with the UH-1Hs in Mexico must not be repeated. Furthermore, most other Central American countries do not have the facilities or prior experience in operating and maintaining helicopters that Mexico had before it acquired the UH-1Hs.



# U.S. and Mexican Agencies and Organizations That Support the NBRF's Mission

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## U.S. Involvement

The U.S. agencies involved in supporting NBRF operations are the State Department, DEA, DOD, and the U.S. Customs Service. U.S. involvement is coordinated at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, Mexico, which is also the location of the Information Analysis Center.

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## Department of State

The State Department, through its Bureau for International Narcotics Matters, is responsible for formulating and implementing international narcotics control policy and coordinating narcotics control activities of all U.S. agencies operating overseas. In Mexico, through its Narcotics Assistance Section, the Bureau is primarily responsible for providing funding and supplies for NBRF operations as well as negotiating and overseeing the U.S.-funded maintenance contract for the PGR's counternarcotics air fleet, which includes the UH-1H helicopters. The Narcotics Assistance Section also provides three aviation specialists who provide maintenance and training assistance to the PGR, monitors the PGR's maintenance of U.S.-provided aircraft, and ensures that the equipment and aircraft provided to the PGR by the United States are appropriate and in good condition.

Narcotics Assistance Section representatives estimated that \$4.8 million of the \$22.5 million maintenance contract was designated for supporting NBRF interdiction activities during fiscal year 1992. This estimate consists of \$3.3 million for the maintenance of the UH-1H helicopters (including the purchase of spare parts, such as \$168,000 for new high-frequency radios) and \$1.5 million for the maintenance of the 10 PGR fixed-wing aircraft used to support NBRF interdiction activities. The State Department also supported NBRF interdiction activities by providing an estimated \$530,000 in logistics assistance through its field support project. This assistance focused on establishing the mobile operating bases and involved the provision of items such as vehicles, radios, and mobile maintenance trailers.

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## Drug Enforcement Administration

DEA is the lead U.S. agency responsible for implementing the U.S. portion of the NBRF program and is primarily responsible for overseeing and coordinating most aspects of U.S. involvement. Because of personal safety concerns raised during the NBRF pilot project, DEA does not conduct interdiction operations in Mexico, even though it often assists in interdiction operations in other Central and South American countries. The DEA Assistant Country Attache is the U.S. manager for NBRF activities, and all other supporting U.S. agencies report to this official. DEA also

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provides three coordinators who work full-time on the program. The coordinators rotate shifts, during which time they are on-call 24 hours a day. DEA has planned since the 1990 NBRF pilot project to provide three full-time permanent analysts to the program. As of February 1993, it had assigned two analysts to the Information Analysis Center. DEA's budget for NBRF activities in fiscal year 1992 was \$240,000, of which \$200,000 was allocated to operations and \$40,000 to the purchase of information and evidence.

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**Department of Defense**

DOD provides assistance, such as equipment and training, to the program and supports NBRF operations through detecting and monitoring of aerial narcotics trafficking. Under section 506(a)(2) of the Foreign Assistance Act, the United States, through DOD, leased 21 UH-1H U.S. Army helicopters, spare parts for 2 years, and related training and technical assistance for the NBRF, at no cost to the government of Mexico. In addition, the U.S. Forces Command, the military organization responsible for administering narcotics-related security assistance activities in Mexico, anticipates providing the NBRF with 18 travel trailers and 2 trucks for use at the mobile operating bases.<sup>1</sup> U.S. Forces Command interests are maintained through the Military Liaison Office, which is responsible for administering all U.S. security assistance activities in Mexico, at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City.

DOD also provides most of the necessary assets and resources for detecting and monitoring drug traffic before the targets enter Mexican airspace.<sup>2</sup> The surveillance support is provided by the U.S. Atlantic, Pacific, and Southern Commands. Further assistance is provided by Joint Task Forces in Key West, Florida, and Alameda, California, which were established to assist their respective commands in counternarcotics detection and monitoring. U.S. military assets operate in international airspace and over international water in the Caribbean and the Pacific and provide the information to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City.

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**U.S. Customs Service**

The U.S. Customs Service also provides detection and monitoring support to the NBRF program. Customs provides two Cessna Citation aircraft and

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<sup>1</sup>Section 1004 of the fiscal year 1991 National Defense Authorization Act directed that DOD could provide up to \$50 million in assistance to local, state, federal, and foreign law enforcement organizations.

<sup>2</sup>The fiscal year 1989 National Defense Authorization Act assigned DOD responsibility for serving as the single lead federal agency for detecting and monitoring aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs into the United States.

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crews to track suspect aircraft once they enter Mexican airspace. The planes, crews, and mechanics are assigned to Mexico on a 30-day temporary rotational duty basis and are located at two commercial airports. Due to sovereignty concerns, Mexico requested that these aircraft be given Mexican tail numbers, have their flight plans filed by a Mexican pilot, and have a Mexican pilot aboard all flights. These practices also allow for joint cooperation and training on the operation of the Citation aircraft. In May 1991, the government of Mexico purchased two Citations to assist in tracking suspect aircraft in Mexican airspace, and Customs personnel assist in training Mexican personnel on the operation of these aircraft. Because of the limited number of assets, the Citations operate only during the periods when the majority of suspect aircraft enter Mexico. Currently, Customs has 14 individuals temporarily assigned to Mexico to support its participation in the program.

Customs estimated that it provided almost \$4.3 million in interdiction assistance from November 1990 through the end of fiscal year 1992. The major expense incurred by Customs involved the 2,797 hours flown by the Citation aircraft, which Customs estimated to cost \$1,214 per hour, or a total of \$3.4 million to operate. Other costs incurred during this period included \$706,000 in lodging and airfare for individuals on temporary duty and \$185,000 in overtime and double-time compensation. Employee salaries were not included in Customs' estimate.

Even though they are not directly assigned to NBRF operations, Customs' P-3 Orion aircraft also provide aerial detection and monitoring support to the program by patrolling the coasts of Mexico. However, the activities of the P-3s are more limited than those of the Citations, since the P-3s do not land in Mexico except for emergencies. They are only allowed to fly over Mexico when a Mexican official is on board the aircraft and their radar is off or in a standby mode while flying over Mexico.

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**Information Analysis  
Center**

The Information Analysis Center (IAC) was established at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City in May 1990 to increase the flow of U.S. counternarcotics intelligence and analysis to support all interdiction efforts in Mexico. The IAC provides the communication and information needed to coordinate effective NBRF interdiction operations. U.S. detection and monitoring support provided to the NBRF is coordinated through the IAC, which maintains a 24-hour watch capability. The IAC also receives limited intelligence from confidential informants and other sources. It is equipped with secure communications equipment and a high-frequency radio

system. Information sharing among intelligence organizations is facilitated through the use of the Center's Anti-Drug Network system.<sup>3</sup> While a suspect aircraft is being tracked from the cocaine-producing countries of South America toward Mexico, the IAC notifies the NBRF coordinator on duty, who then contacts the PGR to launch interdiction crews.

The IAC will eventually be composed of nine permanent staff positions, including five DOD civilian officials, three DEA officials, and one U.S. Customs official. DOD was the only agency that had fulfilled its staffing requirements for the IAC. DEA has recently assigned two intelligence analysts to the IAC on a permanent basis and is completing its staffing commitment with an analyst assigned on a temporary-duty travel basis. Customs is also providing its personnel on a temporary-duty travel basis because of difficulties encountered in filling their allotted positions.

The U.S. Forces Command, which has been responsible for constructing and equipping the IAC, spent an estimated \$1.6 million in supporting its five staff members and IAC operations during fiscal year 1992. For fiscal year 1993, the U.S. Forces Command has budgeted approximately \$1.7 million for supporting IAC activities and expects to spend up to \$300,000 for equipment upgrades and replacement. According to a Forces Command budget official, much of the equipment currently in the IAC was either in the Command's inventory or was borrowed from other military organizations at the time the IAC was established.

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## **Mexican Involvement**

Mexican support for the NBRF program is directed and coordinated through the PGR. Other organizations that currently participate in the NBRF program are the Mexican Air Force and Navy. While it does not directly participate in NBRF activities, the Mexican Army is extensively involved in the manual eradication of marijuana and opium poppy plants.

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## **Procuraduria General de La Republica (Office of the Attorney General)**

The PGR has sole responsibility for coordinating all antinarcotics operations in Mexico and has the lead role in the country's interdiction efforts. The PGR is also the lead Mexican agency in the NBRF program and coordinates all other Mexican agencies' participation in the program. The Mexican Federal Judicial Police, the law enforcement arm of the PGR, performs the bulk of PGR's interdiction work. The PGR has approximately

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<sup>3</sup>The Anti-Drug Network is a secure counterdrug communications system that allows federal law enforcement agencies to communicate and exchange information. The system contains 120 high-resolution, graphics-capable computer work stations that can, among other things, plot aircraft and ship movement tracks so a suspect shipment can be followed.

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100 police agents assigned to its overall interdiction program, of which 62 are assigned to air interdiction operations, including the NBRF. According to a U.S. Forces Command official, the PGR assigned an additional 60 new police agents to the NBRF program in October 1992.

Local Federal Judicial Police units also play a role in NBRF operations. The PGR coordinates NBRF efforts with police ground forces and alerts local Federal Judicial Police officials where a suspect aircraft is expected to land. In many instances, the local police officials have performed the actual seizure.

The PGR's Division of Air Services is responsible for maintaining the PGR's counternarcotics air fleet, including the two Mexican Citation tracking aircraft, fixed-wing interdiction aircraft, and the UH-1H helicopters. All maintenance of the UH-1H helicopters is performed at a newly built, U.S.-funded facility in Guadalajara, Mexico, under the supervision of contract personnel from Bell Helicopter Services, Inc.

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**Mexican Air Force**

The Mexican Air Force provides detection and monitoring support to the NBRF program through its radar network in southern Mexico, although the network is not yet fully operational. Information developed by the radar network is passed on to the NBRF through the PGR. This network, however, is not integrated into the U.S. tracking system or directly linked to the IAC. Once the radar network becomes fully operational, it is expected to be linked to the Mexican Counternarcotics Center, which will pass some information to the IAC.

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**Mexican Navy**

The Mexican Navy is responsible for drug interdiction operations around the Mexican coasts and on both sides of all navigable in-land waterways. Even though it is not considered part of the country's armed forces, the Mexican Navy has arrest authority and is heavily involved with law enforcement organizations, such as the PGR. The Navy has conducted several interdiction operations based on information developed and provided to them by the NBRF. Its involvement in interdiction activities is expected to increase as traffickers employ other tactics, such as airdrops into the sea. According to several U.S. Embassy officials, however, there have been some coordination difficulties between the PGR and the Navy when their assistance is needed to support an NBRF operation.

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## **Mexican Counternarcotics Center**

The PGR has established the Mexican Counternarcotics Center to coordinate the efforts of all Mexican civilian and military agencies involved in antinarcotics activities, including NBRF operations. The center began limited operations in November 1992. According to DEA, the necessary mechanisms are in place to ensure that all agency representatives will be able to commit assets and personnel needed to support Mexico's counternarcotics efforts in an effective manner.

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## **Joint U.S.-Mexican Involvement**

The NBRF's First Investigative Special Team is a joint investigative team composed of DEA and PGR agents responsible for conducting follow-up investigations of NBRF interdictions. Established in August 1991, the team is tasked with performing in-depth investigations at NBRF seizure sites to gather intelligence and evidence related to the seizure so that proper follow-up can be conducted. The team is composed of one DEA agent and three Mexican Federal Judicial Police agents. In-country DEA agents are assigned to the team on a 30-day rotational basis; PGR agents rotate every 6 months. DEA also assigns one of its three NBRF coordinators to the team to follow up on necessary information gathered through the team's investigations.

Once an NBRF operation successfully interdicts a trafficking plane or vehicle, the joint investigative team is transported to the interdiction site, usually by DEA aircraft stationed temporarily in Mexico City.<sup>4</sup> According to a DEA official, the team is sent to investigate most NBRF interdictions, especially when an aircraft seizure has occurred because most of the useful information obtained from an interdiction operation is found in the aircraft, particularly navigational and radio information. After each investigation, both U.S. and Mexican team members prepare a report of their findings, which is shared with U.S. and Mexican antinarcotics agencies. According to a DEA official, this postinterdiction investigative operation is unique, since no other DEA drug interdiction operation has such a component.

The NBRF has also established two joint committees to assist in U.S.-Mexican coordination of the program. The NBRF Steering Committee consists of representatives from the U.S. and Mexican agencies involved in the NBRF program and meets once a week at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City to make deployment decisions, formulate operational strategy, and address problems faced by the NBRF. In addition, bilateral committees

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<sup>4</sup>The DEA office in Mexico City requested that DEA headquarters in Washington, D.C., permanently assign the aircraft to the team but, as of February 1993, had not received approval.

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consisting of technical experts in areas such as aviation, maintenance, and tactical operations from both the United States and Mexico meet when needed to address NBRF issues and make recommendations.

# Section 506(a)(2) Assistance Provided to Mexico in 1990 and 1992

**Table II.1: Section 506(a)(2) Assistance Provided to Mexico in 1990**

<b>Equipment and commodities</b>	
UH-1H helicopters (9) <sup>a</sup>	\$6,430,000
Spare parts and equipment	3,628,493
Ground support equipment	101,940
Special tools and test equipment	201,679
Avionic float maintenance	47,000
Avionic tool and test equipment	26,908
Flight suits	11,280
UH-1H manuals and publications	36,411
Tool set	24,729
Maintenance equipment	20,438
M102B 5/4-ton truck (1)	56,564
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>10,585,442</b>
<b>Training</b>	
Pilot training in the United States	269,884
Technical assistance training team	20,000
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>289,884</b>
<b>Packing, crating, and handling</b>	<b>435,672</b>
<b>Air transport</b>	<b>1,081,236</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$12,392,234</b>

<sup>a</sup>Helicopters are being provided to Mexico through a no-cost lease arrangement.

Source: Defense Security Assistance Agency.

**Appendix II**  
**Section 508(a)(2) Assistance Provided to**  
**Mexico in 1990 and 1992**

**Table II.2: Section 508(a)(2) Assistance**  
**Provided to Mexico in 1992**

<b>Equipment and Commodities</b>	
UH-1H helicopters (12) <sup>a</sup>	\$9,000,000
Spare engines (3)	1,400,000
Aircraft support equipment	1,256,000
Aircraft repair parts	800,000
Aircraft maintenance and support equipment	120,000
Auxiliary fuel tanks (55)	105,000
Communications equipment	112,000
M816 wrecker truck (3)	245,000
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>13,038,000</b>
<b>Training</b>	
Inventory assessment team	27,000
<b>Packing, crating, and handling</b>	<b>461,157</b>
<b>Air transport</b>	<b>110,900</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$13,637,057</b>

<sup>a</sup>Helicopters are being provided to Mexico through a one-cost lease arrangement.

Source: Defense Security Assistance Agency.

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# Major Contributors to This Report

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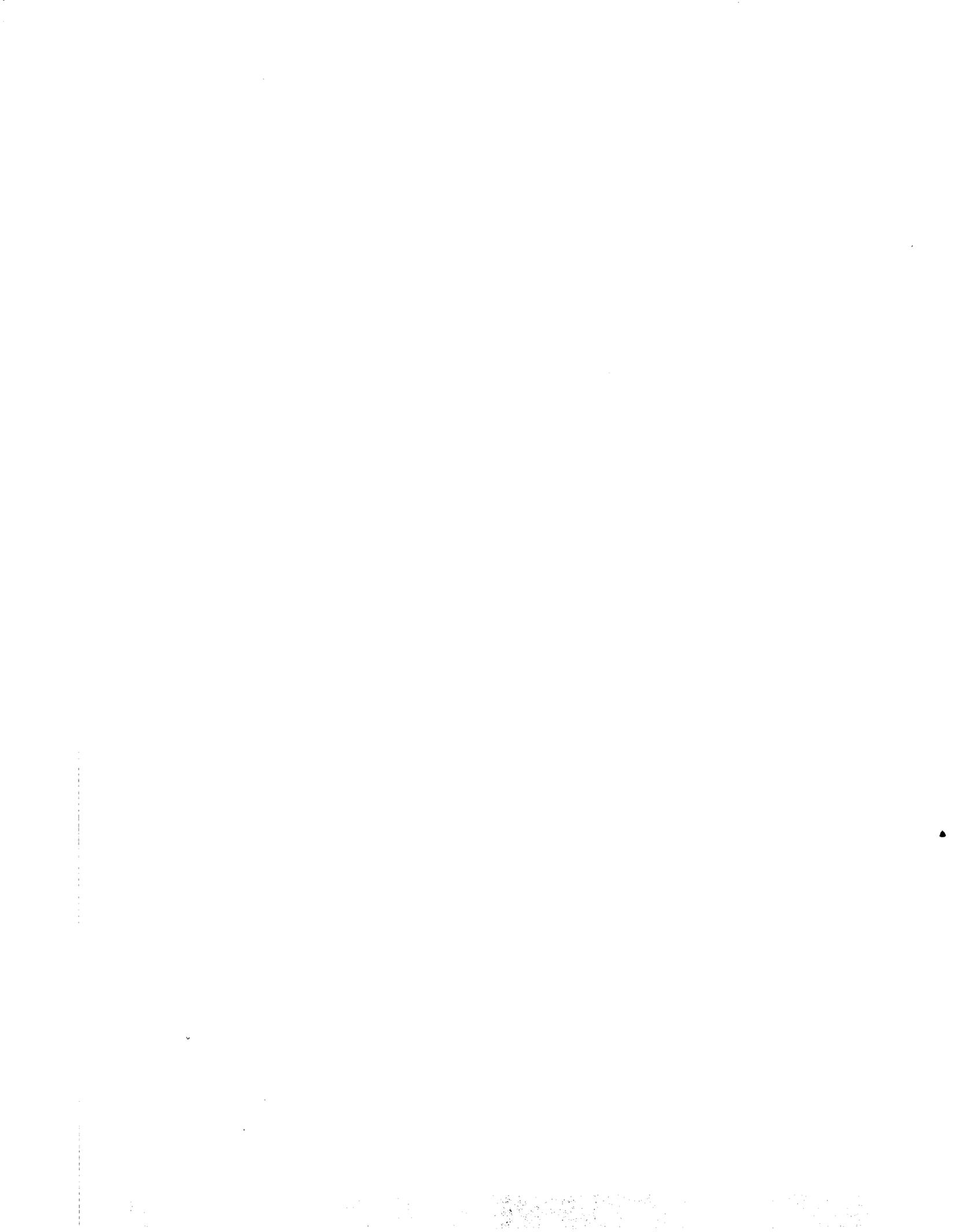
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