

## The Latin American Times



### Mexico

## Mexico as a source of drugs

The relationship between the United States and Mexico is notoriously complex, but is increasingly influenced by the two countries' differing perceptions of the drug problem. Throughout Latin America, but especially in Mexico and Colombia, there is a tendency to argue, which US officials resent, that the availability of heroin and marijuana in the United States is a problem for the United States itself – and by extension is thus not a Mexican problem. It is caused by increased US demand, rather than by heightened Mexican supply.

This is an age-old debate, reminiscent of controversies surrounding, for example, the salacious newspapers. Such media proclaim, when pressed, that they merely meet the insatiable demand for tawdry features and stories – whereas in practice if the publications were not in circulation, then the demand might not exist. The counter-argument to this is always the same, and is, of course, familiar in the arms market: if we don't meet this demand, then it will be met by some other supplier. Thus, the theory of markets lets the suppliers of a socially undesirable or harmful product 'off the hook'; and exactly the same observation can be made about Latin American Governments which argue that the US drug problem is essentially a problem for the United States alone.

It is tempting to add that this rationale, so conveniently to hand, reflects, in addition, an echo of the principle of the forgiveness of sins. Under the Roman Catholic dispensation, a sinner who repents formally, is absolved of his sins and may be required to do no more than offer a modest penance. This principle allows the perpetuation of misdemeanours, although its purpose is fundamentally to correct them. But it is essentially the religion of 'the

blind eye'; and a clear link between this ingrained attitude and the approach of certain Latin American governments to the drug plague, can be discerned.

Mexican officials dealing with the American drug agencies also speak of programmes such as the drug eradication scheme as unilateral policies. This enables officials to display their resentment of persistent American attempts to influence the activities involved. Hence, Washington has been obliged to direct increasing diplomatic pressure on the Mexicans, in a long-term attempt to persuade Mexico City that the anti-drug campaign in which both countries are formally involved has extensive and mutual benefits and advantages. These issues are now at the top of the agenda in prospective discussions between the two countries, in view of the recent change of president in Mexico, and the unavoidably abrupt and pervasive change in the personnel administering the Mexican drug control programme.

### Corruption endemic

Officials from the US State Department and from other US anti-drug agencies have testified before Congressional Committees in recent years that corruption within the Mexican law enforcement administrations has been having a detrimental impact on the implementation of formally sponsored Mexican drug eradication policies, and that in particular, corruption has led to increased tolerance of poppy cultivation outside the scope of the eradication programme. It has emerged recently, for example, that US drug control officials operating in Mexico have observed some opium and marijuana fields marked with flags. They concluded that the purpose of these flags was to mark fields which were somehow off-limits to the spraying activities undertaken in collaboration with the United States.

Hence, Mexico remains a primary source for the heroin and marijuana consumed in the United States, and US official statistics indicate that the availability of Mexican heroin and marijuana is increasing. Despite years of eradication activity and significant bilateral funding, the aerial eradication programme has not kept pace with cultivation and, during the past two years, it eradicated less than 40% of the estimated total cultivation of opium poppy and marijuana. In addition, growers have not abandoned traditional growing areas, implying the frustrating and costly prospect of endlessly spraying the same growing regions season after season.

It is clear, therefore, that simply maintaining aerial eradication at current levels will not eliminate Mexico as a major source of heroin and marijuana. Without improved eradication results, the gap between cultivation and eradication will probably expand further. Indications that implementation of agreed anti-drug policies under former President Miguel de la Madrid were, at best, no more than half-hearted, have discouraged senior US officials. For example, American experts have routinely been excluded from nightly meetings held by Mexican drug eradication zone co-ordinators and military commanders to decide where the next day's spraying operations might occur.

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Mexico initiated its aerial drug crop eradication programme in the late 1970s. At that time, the opium poppy and marijuana were grown in large, open fields, easily accessible to specialised aircraft. The scheme managed to eradicate large numbers of opium poppy and marijuana fields and, for a few years, was considered one of the most successful in the world. However, the aerial eradication programme has not kept pace with cultivation, and Mexico is currently a primary source of the heroin and marijuana available in the United States. This state of affairs is considered highly unsatisfactory in Washington, given that no less than \$118 million of US taxpayers' money was spent on drug crop eradication in Mexico during fiscal years 1984-87 alone.

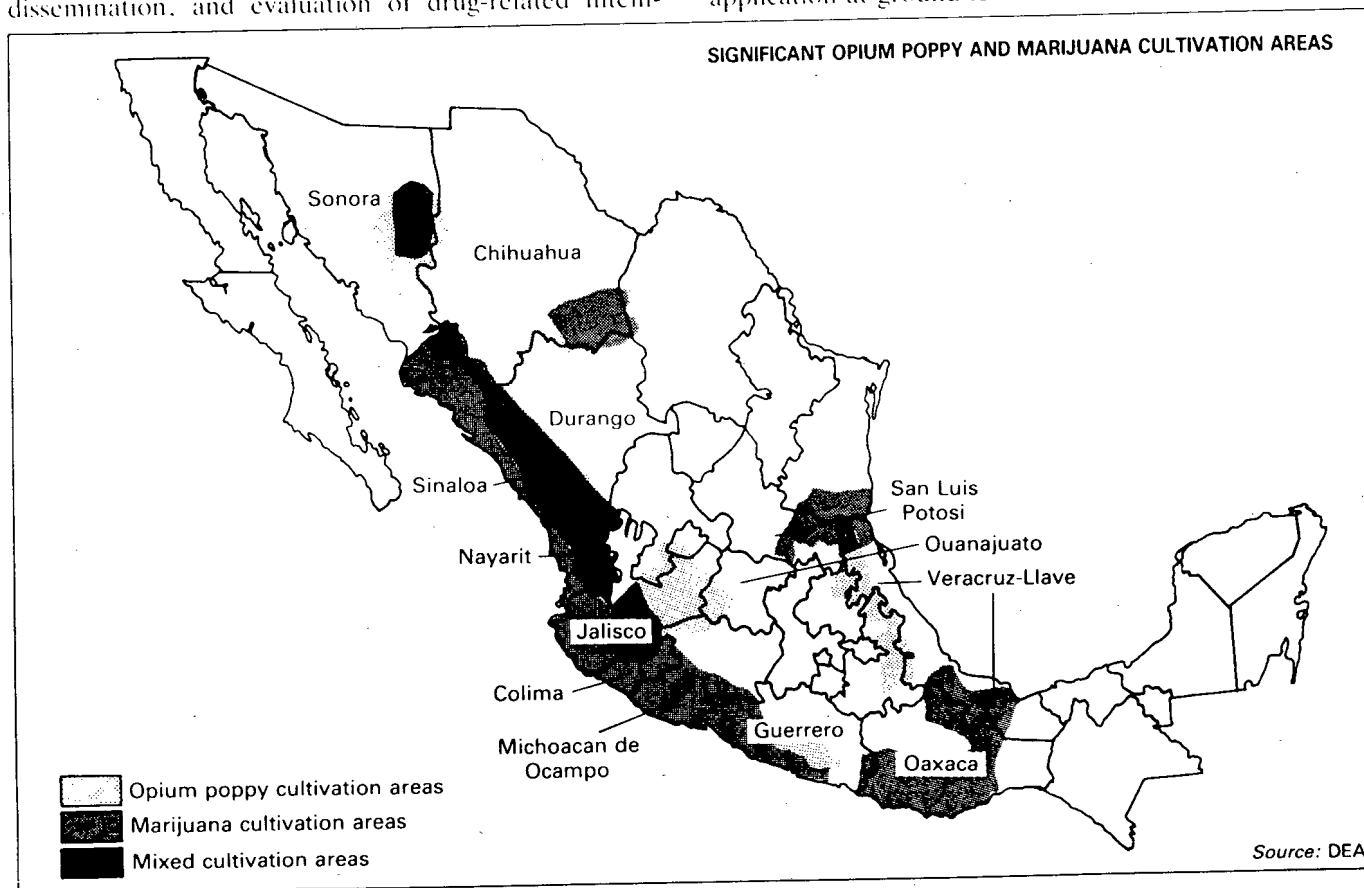
According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Mexico emerged as a prominent source of heroin to the United States in 1974, when growers stepped up production to fill the void left by the suppression of heroin supplies from Turkey in 1972. Although opium poppy and marijuana cultivation is illegal in Mexico, its growth has paralleled demand for heroin and marijuana in the United States. However, a National Narcotics Intelligence Consumers Committee (NNICC) report prepared in 1985-86 stated that Mexico was in the early stages of a national drug abuse problem, with marijuana among the most commonly abused substances. [Note: The NNICC was established by the US Government in 1978 to coordinate foreign and domestic collection, analysis, dissemination, and evaluation of drug-related intelli-

| Year | Metric tons | Source |                |                |
|------|-------------|--------|----------------|----------------|
|      |             | Mexico | Southwest Asia | Southeast Asia |
| 1980 | 3.70        | 37     | 52             | 11             |
| 1981 | 3.90        | 36     | 54             | 10             |
| 1982 | 5.47        | 34     | 52             | 14             |
| 1983 | 6.04        | 33     | 48             | 19             |
| 1984 | 5.97        | 32     | 51             | 17             |
| 1985 | 6.00        | 39     | 47             | 14             |

Table 1: Heroin available in the United States, 1980-85 (%).  
Source: US Drug Enforcement Administration.

gence. Membership consists of the US Coast Guard; Customs Service; Departments of Defense, State, and Treasury; DEA; Federal Bureau of Investigation; Immigration and Naturalization Service; Internal Revenue Service; National Institute of Drug Abuse; and White House Drug Abuse Policy Office. The Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency participate as observers.]

According to the US State Department, crop control is a cost-effective and efficient element of any narcotics control strategy, because it minimises the amount of drugs that can enter the international market and reduces the potential for corruption which often accompanies enforcement activities. Chemical eradication of opium poppy and marijuana is preferred to manual eradication, and aerial application of herbicides is preferred to application at ground level.



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Initial Mexican narcotics control efforts emphasised manual eradication, which proved to be insufficient. In late 1975, the government of Mexico decided to spray herbicides from aircraft to eradicate illegal plantings of the opium poppy and marijuana. This created a need for new equipment and technical and managerial experience. The United States provided funds to Mexico to purchase spray and support aircraft, construct forward bases, install a communications system, provide salary supplements to pilots and technicians, and hire aviation advisers for the campaign.

Overall responsibility for US international narcotics control efforts rests with the Secretary of State in Washington. The Department's responsibilities, carried out by its Bureau of International Narcotics Matters (INM), include policy development and programme management, diplomatic initiatives, bilateral and multi-lateral assistance for crop control, interdiction, and related enforcement activities. It also negotiates and manages narcotics control agreements with foreign governments.

INM is represented in Mexico City by the Narcotics Assistance Unit (NAU), directed by a senior US Foreign Service officer and staffed with aviation advisers under contract with INM. The DEA also has about 40 staff members stationed in Mexico. They are involved primarily in investigation and intelligence liaison activities; however, they also serve as US observers on eradication verification flights.

Both the Mexican Attorney General's Office, or the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), and the Mexican army are involved in narcotics crop eradication. The PGR concentrates on aerial eradication and has a roster of about 600 pilots, mechanics, administrative, and support personnel. The army concentrates on manual eradication and has a reported commitment of more than 25,000 troops. The PGR's aerial eradication programme is directed by the Deputy Attorney General, with field operations under regional zone coordinators.

Last year, the Mexican aerial eradication fleet consisted of 43 Bell 206 helicopters, 12 Bell 212 helicopters, 21 Cessna 206 aircraft and seven other planes. About 70 of these aircraft had been bought solely with US funds. The Procuraduria General also bought a further 14 Bell 206 helicopters for delivery in the course of 1987. A few aircraft in the Mexican fleet are known to have been confiscated from drug traffickers.

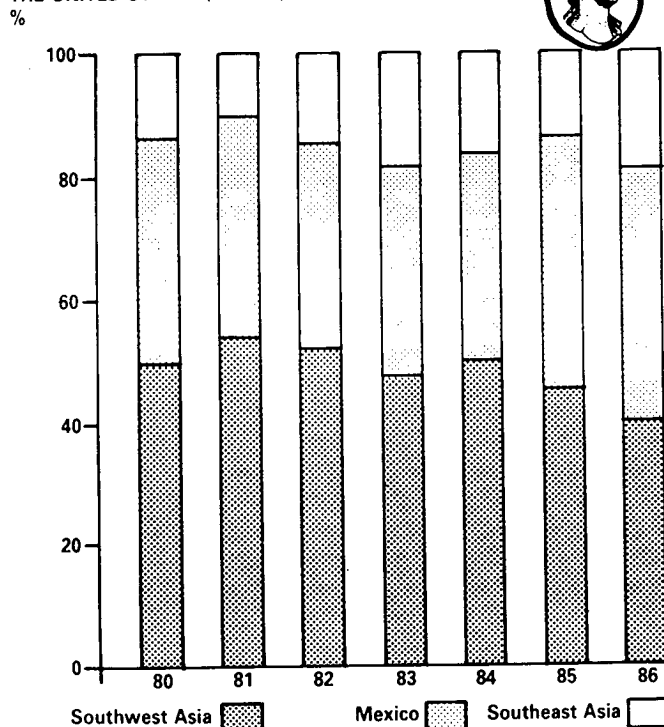
One serious problem encountered by US officials in recent years seems to be the fear that Mexican reports of eradication claims are sometimes less than accurate. Eradication claims are based on visual observation by pilots and navigators or on calculations based on the amount of herbicides used during the spray missions. Calculations based on herbicide consumption tend to overstate the number of hectares eradicated unless allowances are made for those instances when pilots spray fields more than once to ensure total destruction. Estimates of eradication by PGR helicopters are based on visual observation and estimates of eradication by new Turbo Thrush aircraft, piloted by US contract instructor pilots, are based on herbicide consumption. Not surprisingly, the accuracy of all estimates has been debated; some US officials believe the visual estimates are too low and that PGR personnel understate eradication by the Turbo Thrushes because of a disagreement between Mexico City and Washington about the appropriateness of that aircraft for use in Mexico.

The difficulty in estimating the extent of eradication accomplished in Mexico has been compounded by the Mexican army's claims of manual crop eradication. The army reportedly devoted over 25,000 troops to manual eradication campaigns and published impressive claims of its efforts: in 1986 it reportedly destroyed more than 6,000 hectares of opium poppy and 8,439 tons of marijuana. These claims exceeded the US State Department's estimate of total cultivation of these narcotics in 1986.

Statistical data concerning the narcotics eradication programme are not encouraging. The availability of Mexican heroin and marijuana in the United States has increased in recent years despite increased programme funding and heightened eradication. The traditional growing areas in Mexico's tri-state region of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua remain the major source of illegal narcotics from Mexico. Cultivators have changed their growing patterns in response to aerial spraying, making eradication more difficult.

The amount of Mexican heroin available for consumption in the United States has fallen dramatically from its

**SOURCES OF HEROIN AVAILABLE IN  
THE UNITED STATES (1980-86)**



Note: The percentages for 1986 are for January through June of that year.  
Source: DEA Heroin Signature Analysis Program.

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peak in the mid-1970s due to the joint eradication programme and unfavourable weather. In December 1978, NNICC stated that successful opium eradication campaigns in Mexico reduced the flow of Mexican heroin to the United States from 6.5 tons in 1975 to about 3 tons in 1977, while the flow of heroin from Southeast Asia increased from one to two tons in the same period. Because the production and distribution of illicit narcotics is illegal, there is of course little reliable information upon which to base estimates of the quantities of drugs involved. The available statistics are reflective of the quantities of drugs which were seized and not those which were consumed.

Cultivation and production in Mexico have increased as farmers have become more sophisticated, fragmenting and/or concealing their fields and using irrigation. The State Department emphasises the impact of Mexico's deteriorating economy on the expansion of illegal cultivation. The Department also notes that the spread of cultivation beyond traditional growing areas caused the PGR to disperse its air fleet and support services over a much larger geographical area and that the increasingly complex logistics have contributed to reductions in performance.

Table 1 shows Mexico's growing share of the US heroin market in relation to the other major supply regions of Southeast and Southwest Asia during the period 1980-85. Based on data available for the first six months of the year, NNICC estimates that 41% of the US supply of heroin in 1986, or 2.8 metric tons, originated in Mexico. The percentage of heroin attributable to specific regions is determined by heroin signature analysis, which identifies and quantifies selected heroin characteristics. Using this data, heroin samples can be classified according to their manufacturing process and geographical source.

### Marijuana supplier

It has been estimated that Mexico supplied about 37% of the US supply of marijuana in 1977, but only 3% in 1981 due to the successful eradication scheme implemented that year. In 1984, Mexico re-emerged as a prominent supplier of marijuana and by 1986 it had passed Colombia as the major foreign supplier, to provide 37% of all imported marijuana, or 30% of the total US supply. The Department of State estimated that 4,000 to 6,000 metric tons of Mexican marijuana were exported to the United States in 1986. These estimates are thought to have been reasonably accurate, since they were based on in-country reports rather than on seizures, as is the case with some other estimates.

In addition to the 83 aircraft permanently assigned to the eradication programme, the United States has provided fixed-wing Turbo Thrush aircraft on an experimental basis to increase eradication results. The United States Government retained title to the aircraft. Turbo Thrush testing began in 1983, and Department of State officials believed the planes were a success. According to official reports, Turbo Thrushes eradicated 517 of the 3,405 hectares of opium poppy and marijuana destroyed

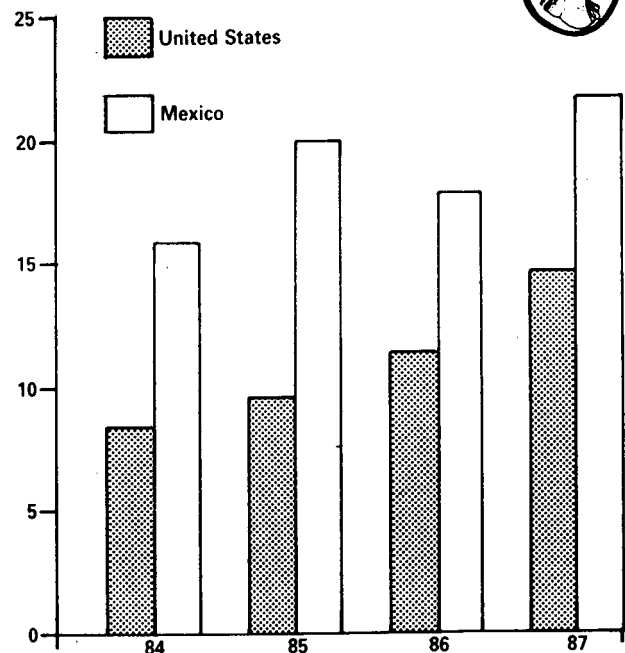
| Country/indicator                                | Quantity (metric tons) | Total supply (%) |
|--|------------------------|------------------|
| Mexico   | 3,000-4,000            | 30               |
| Colombia   | 2,200-3,900            | 26               |
| Jamaica  | 1,100-1,700            | 12               |
| Belize   | 500-500                | 4                |
| Domestic (US)                                    | 2,100-2,100            | 18               |
| Other  | 800-1,200              | 9                |
| Gross marijuana available                        | 9,700-13,400           | 100              |
| Less US seizures, seizures in transit and losses | 3,000-4,000            |                  |
| Net marijuana available                          | 6,700-9,400            |                  |

Table 2: Probable sources of marijuana available in the United States during 1986.

between June 1986 and January 1987, for example.

Nonetheless, the PGR disputed the appropriateness of the Turbo Thrushes for the eradication programme in Mexico. One recurring point of contention was a lack of pilots qualified to fly the Turbo Thrushes, which consequently had to be flown by US instructor pilots under contract to the State Department. In addition, the PGR contended that because of their speed the Turbo Thrushes oversprayed illegal fields and sprayed legitimate crops, were unable to spray marijuana fields to ensure destruction of the entire plant, and were unsafe in mountainous growing areas. Then one of the Turbo Thrushes flew into a mountainside in the tri-state area, killing both the PGR navigator and the US pilot. The crash abruptly terminated all discussions on the aircraft's

FUNDING FOR THE JOINT AERIAL ERADICATION PROGRAM  
US\$ million



Notes: Expenditures were calculated by NAU using the following conversion rates: 1984, 167.77 pesos=\$1; 1985, 256.96 pesos=\$1; 1986, 611.35 pesos=\$1; and 1987, 1,100 pesos=\$1.

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prospective future rôle in Mexico.

One of the most significant trends in the heroin market during the 1980s has been the emergence of Mexican 'black tar', a crudely processed, highly potent form of heroin. While the purity of most heroin on the street ranged from nearly 4% to more than 6% over the 1980 to 1986 period, purities of 60% to 70% for 'black tar' were common. The demand for the drug reflects its low price as well as its high purity. 'Black tar' is growing in availability and has been especially common in the Western United States. Some drug experts believe the drug may be a significant factor in the increased number of heroin-related hospital emergencies noted in the United States in recent years.

The heroin consumed in the United States comes from the opium poppy, cultivated primarily in Mexico, Southeast Asia (Burma, Laos, and Thailand), and Southwest Asia (primarily Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan). These three areas yielded approximately 1,500 metric tons of opium in 1985. Of this amount, about 60 metric tons were used to produce the nearly 6 metric tons of heroin available in the United States that year. In 1986, total estimated opium production was increased for these three areas, with estimates ranging from 1,680 to 2,815 metric tons. Most Asian heroin is smuggled into the United States by commercial air passengers and air cargo. Mexican heroin is typically smuggled across the US-Mexico border in vehicles or by pedestrians.

Chemical analysis of heroin has revealed that of the samples analysed in the first six months of 1986, Mexican heroin accounted for 41%, Southwest Asian heroin for 40%, and Southeast Asian heroin for 19%. Comparing these figures with earlier years shows that the amount of

heroin supplied by Mexico was higher than at any time during the 1980s. In other words, under President de la Madrid, the problem became steadily more intractable.

Marijuana continues meanwhile, to be readily available in most areas of the United States, with a trend towards increased potency levels. In 1986, approximately 82% of the marijuana was smuggled in from foreign countries, with Mexico (30%) and Colombia (26%) remaining, as in earlier years, the principal sources. In 1982, 6% of the US supply came from Mexico and 57% from Colombia.

US Federal law enforcement agencies report that traffickers often smuggle marijuana in huge quantities, and they frequently employ non-commercial marine vessels. Mexican marijuana, however, typically enters the United States in overland vehicles, with smaller loads than marine vessels.

### US domestic supplies

Cultivation *within* the United States accounted for an estimated 18% of the marijuana available in 1986. Despite Federal assistance to the states with measures to help eradicate marijuana, domestic supplies in the United States still increased between 1980 and 1986. Cultivation takes place in all 50 states of the Union. To avoid detection, US marijuana growers are moving their operations indoors and are growing smaller and more scattered plots out of doors.

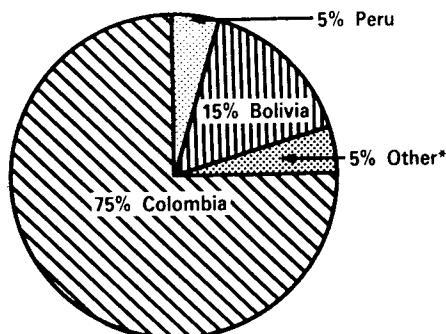
With the drug problem in the United States clearly a high-profile issue in this year's presidential election campaign, the prospect of more vigorous drug enforcement legislation emerging from Congress in 1989 is rated higher than at any time since the beginning of this decade. However, many years of struggling with this problem, essentially to no avail, have left Washington experts baffled and demoralised. The extent of official discouragement was clarified on 29 April this year, when Dr Otis R Bowen, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, told President Reagan and his fellow Cabinet Officers that he could no longer accept the Administration's optimistic accounts of progress being allegedly made in the war on drugs. Speaking at a meeting of the National Drug Policy Board, Dr Bowen said:

'Generally speaking, Mr President, I prefer optimism to pessimism, as you do. But today, I don't know how I can honestly be very optimistic about the war on drugs.'

Dr Bowen then took the highly unusual step of instructing the Department of Health and Human Services to release the full text of his remarks at the private White House meeting. It reflected this respected official's desperation at the dimensions of the problem, and of course a certain element of pre-election issue-shuffling. However, Dr Bowen's reputation stands high among drug problem experts, and they evidently believe that much more support is needed at the highest levels in future administrations, if the United States is to turn the tide in this losing battle. On this issue, above all others, the quality of the future relationship between the United States and Mexico will increasingly depend.●

### PROBABLE SOURCES OF COCAINE AVAILABLE IN THE UNITED STATES: 1985-86

Cocaine is derived from the coca plant, which is grown mainly in the highlands of Peru and Bolivia. Colombia is the primary location for laboratories that convert coca base and paste into cocaine hydrochloride powder. However, cocaine-processing laboratories are spreading in other South American countries, and they are also being found in the United States; 23 labs were seized in the United States in 1986.●



\*Note: Including Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador.