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**Justice Department clears CIA in cocaine epidemic**

WASHINGTON — An internal Justice Department report found the department and CIA blameless in the crack cocaine epidemic that spread from inner cities to the rest of the United States in the 1980s, its author said on Thursday.

The report from the Justice Department's independent watchdog found no evidence to support allegations that CIA employees or agents colluded with allies of Nicaraguan (b)(3) rebels to finance their (b)(6) operations by bringing cocaine into the United States.

A 1996 series of articles in the *San Jose (Calif.) Mercury News* claimed a California drug ring funneled profits to the Nicaraguan Contra rebels for the better part of a decade. The series traced the drugs to traffickers who were also leaders of a CIA-run guerrilla army in Nicaragua during the 1980s.

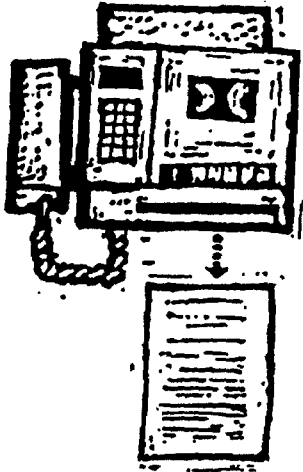
"After interviewing more than 200 people and reviewing more than 40,000 pages of documents, we did not substantiate the main allegations suggested by the *San Jose Mercury News* articles," Michael Bromwich, the Justice Department inspector general, said in a statement.

A CIA inspector general report reached the same conclusion in January.

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