

MASS-army ^{asat}
(R12)

United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

RELEASED IN FULL

AUG 2 1996

Dear Mr. Chairman:

We would like to provide our perspective on the proposed sale of Blackhawk helicopters to the Colombian Army. Ambassador Frechette has asked us to let you know that he fully shares these views.

The Army wants the Blackhawks for a variety of missions, including counterinsurgency, its own counternarcotics operations, support to police units engaged in eradication and interdiction, search and rescue, movement of supplies, medical evacuation, and humanitarian assistance. The Army does not intend to use them solely for counternarcotics purposes, and we have not sought such assurances. Strict use conditions likely would compel the Army to buy elsewhere. The Army strongly prefers Blackhawks, but will buy Russian, French or Canadian helicopters if necessary.

While both the Army and the Colombian National Police (CNP) want Blackhawks, only the Army has been able to come up with funding to purchase them. It has \$107 million available but is obligated to spend or lose that money by the end of 1996. The USG is unable to donate Blackhawks to the police as none have been declared excess to U.S. military needs, but in early June we provided the CNP with six additional UH-1H helicopters. CNP Commanding General Serrano supports this Blackhawk sale to the Army.

We hope to build on the success of "Operation Conquest," a combined operation in Guaviare Department which has shown that Army-police cooperation has the potential to significantly disrupt coca growing and narco-trafficking. However, that operation has also demonstrated the Army's most critical weakness, insufficient air mobility.

Colombian forces are combatting well-armed drug traffickers as well as guerrillas, whose interests and territory often coincide. For drug enforcement and coca eradication to have any chance of success, the Army must support the CNP by securing areas taken over by traffickers and terrorists alike.

The Honorable
Benjamin Gilman, Chairman,
Committee on International Relations,
House of Representatives.

Ambassador Frechette wants you to know that he has personal experience of the threat that the Army and CNP are confronting daily. In early 1995, the CNP helicopter in which he was riding en route to examine coca eradication efforts was hit by groundfire. This is a war-like military challenge, one the CNP cannot cope with alone.

Blackhawks are utility helicopters, not attack helicopters. They are needed to put more manpower in the field, where the Army and the CNP often encounter heavily armed narcotics traffickers. Like the CNP's utility helicopters, the Army would probably equip the Blackhawks with door-mounted machine guns to defend against groundfire. Such armament is appropriate and necessary to carry out their mission. The twin-engine Blackhawk has a heavy lift capability that makes it ideal for use in high altitude operations and search and rescue in support of the CNP, which has lost five UH-1H helicopters and two T-65 Turbo-Thrush eradication spray planes to ground fire.

There is no contradiction between our cut-off of most non-counternarcotics assistance to Colombia and this proposed cash sale. Decertification was meant to encourage greater counternarcotics efforts by the political leadership, not to deny assistance to the police and the military, which have been cooperating with us. As part of our certification process, we are pressing for greater military support for CNP anti-drug efforts, and these Blackhawks would allow the Army the means to provide that support. Recognizing that the Colombian Army has uses for the Blackhawks other than counternarcotics and the need to be vigilant about protecting human rights, allowing the sale is, on balance, in the U.S. national interest.

We hope that this information is helpful to you in your consideration of the proposed sale. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



Barbara Larkin
Assistant Secretary
Legislative Affairs