

White House will resume program to shoot down drug planes

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By Tim Johnson

WASHINGTON _ The Bush administration will revive a policy to help Peru and Colombia shoot down suspected narcotics planes in the Andean region within six months but is edging the CIA out of any involvement.

The shoot-down program was suspended a year ago after a CIA spotter aircraft helped Peruvian warplanes mistakenly pursue and fire on a U.S. missionary plane over the Amazon River, killing an American mother and her infant.

Renewal still needs final White House approval, and Congress must be formally notified.

But a senior State Department official this week said U.S. officials are designing "a very robust oversight program" to avert new tragedies once the program is renewed. He said the officials are addressing a wide range of shortcomings, including language and chain-of-command problems, that led Peruvian attack aircraft on April 20, 2001, to shoot down a single-engine U.S. hydroplane _ an action taken without visually signaling to the stunned American pilot, Kevin Donaldson, that his plane was considered suspicious.

The accident prompted some horrified U.S. legislators to demand that the U.S.-sponsored program be scrapped entirely.

Last October, the Senate Intelligence Committee said the program should only be renewed if it undergoes a "dramatic overhaul."

But heavy coca production in Peru and Colombia, the sources of nearly all the world's cocaine, has led other legislators to say the shoot-down policy should be revived _ with tighter safeguards.

"The amount of drugs moving through there has never been higher," said a former Pentagon official.

The U.S.-sponsored program began in 1994 and led Peru, and to a lesser extent Colombia, to shoot down or force down dozens of planes suspected of carrying narcotics.

The CIA will no longer take part in chasing suspicious aircraft, the State Department official said.

In the past, CIA contract employees flew Citation spotter aircraft equipped with radar to assist the air forces of Peru and Colombia in identifying and attacking small planes suspected of carrying cocaine.

"They are not going to fly the planes. They are not going to run the planes. They are not going to maintain the planes," he said.

While the CIA will still gather intelligence on drug trafficking, the Bush administration wants to make the air interdiction program more transparent and "not encumbered by a secrecy requirement," he said.

All U.S. employees and foreigners will be bilingual, he said, avoiding the communication failures that contributed to the fatal shoot-down.

The Bush administration will no longer use U.S. government aircraft to tail suspicious planes.

Instead, CIA-owned aircraft will be handed over to Peru and Colombia, the official said. A U.S. official will ride aboard those donated planes.

Even with tighter procedures, one minority House member said she will try to block the program.

"Resuming the shoot-down of civilian airplanes in the name of reducing the flow of drugs to the United States will lead to more tragedies like the death of American missionary Veronica Bowers and her infant daughter," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-III.

Leaders of the organization hit by the mistaken shoot-down, the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism of New Cumberland, Pa., said they had been briefed on the new security procedures.

"If they implement the same kind of guidelines but ensure that they work, then it's possible that our pilots would be safe," said Donald F. Davis, staff counsel for the group.

But the pilot whose legs were shot up in the shoot-down, and who continues to live in the Peruvian jungles near Iquitos, is scared to return to the Peruvian skies.

"Kevin's preference is that they not have a shoot-down policy, period. He doesn't want to fly in Peru," Davis said.