

US government skirts Congress' cap on personnel in Colombia August 18, 2001
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BODY:

Hundreds of foreign nationals are involved in US-led anti-drug efforts in Colombia, an apparent bid by the Bush administration to skirt Congress' efforts to limit US military involvement there, the Los Angeles Times reported Saturday.

The Times said the US State Department had directed a private contractor in Colombia to hire foreign pilots to fight the drug war, an order that helps to circumvent attempts by Congress to keep the United States from slipping further into Colombia's bloody civil war.

It said more than 400 civilians were currently working for private contractors under the US anti-drug program. Last year, Congress limited to 300 the number of civilian contract workers participating in US-financed drug-eradication efforts in Colombia.

But the State Department has opted to count only US citizens toward that limit.

"This seems to be a loophole around the cap, a way to get around them," one concerned legislator, Democrat Janice Schakowsky, told the Los Angeles Times.

"Most members of Congress interpreted the cap to mean we will limit to a total of 300 personnel, no matter what their nationality is," she said.

One outside contractor, DynCorp, has hired as many as 50 pilots from Guatemala, Peru, Colombia and other countries to transport Colombian army forces into cocaine-growing zones, the Times said.

The pilots fly the most dangerous anti-drug missions. They are also hired to reduce the risk that an American would be shot down and killed in the drug war, according to US Embassy officials.

State Department officials told the Times that they were not required to inform Congress about the hirings.

For the past 37 years, Colombia has been locked in a bloody civil war which has pitted leftist rebels against right-wing paramilitaries, with both sides fighting to protect the coca crops that are their primary source of revenue.

