GAO
Accountability·Integrity·Reliability

Highlights

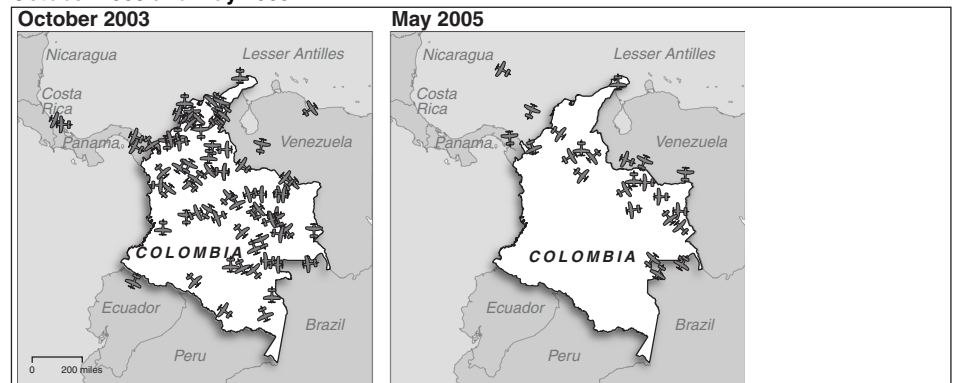Highlights of GAO-05-970, a report to congressional requesters

DRUG CONTROL

Air Bridge Denial Program in Colombia Has Implemented New Safeguards, but Its Effect on Drug Trafficking Is Not Clear

Why GAO Did This Study

In the 1990s, the United States operated a program in Colombia and Peru called Air Bridge Denial (ABD). The ABD program targeted drug traffickers that transport illicit drugs through the air by forcing down suspicious aircraft, using lethal force if necessary. The program was suspended in April 2001 when a legitimate civilian aircraft was shot down in Peru and two U.S. citizens were killed. The program was restarted in Colombia in August 2003 after additional safeguards were established. To date, the United States has provided about $68 million in support and plans to provide about $26 million in fiscal year 2006. We examined whether the ABD program's new safeguards were being implemented and its progress in attaining U.S. and Colombian objectives.

What GAO Recommends

We recommend that the Secretary of State establish performance measures for the ABD program that include benchmarks and timeframes. We also recommend that the Secretary of State encourage Colombia to (1) seek ways to more actively involve the police in ABD missions and (2) establish ABD air bases closer to the areas with the most suspicious tracks. State found the report to be an accurate assessment of the program, and stated that it is developing benchmarks and timeframes for its performance measures.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-970.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4268 or FordJ@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The United States and Colombia developed additional safeguards for the renewed ABD program to avoid the problems that led to the accidental shoot down in Peru. The safety measures aim to reinforce and clarify procedures, bolster safety monitoring, enhance language skills of ABD personnel, and improve communication channels. We found the safeguards were being implemented by the Colombians and U.S. safety monitors. In addition, the program managers perform periodic reviews and evaluations, including an annual recertification of the program, and have made efforts to improve civilian pilots' awareness of the ABD program's procedures.

Our analysis of available data indicates that the ABD program's results are mixed, but the program's progress cannot be readily assessed because performance measures with benchmarks and timeframes do not exist. The stated objective for the program—for the Colombian National Police to take control of suspicious aircraft—seldom happens. During October 2003 through July 2005, the Colombian Air Force located only 48 aircraft out of about 390 suspicious tracks pursued; and the military or police took control of just 14 aircraft—four were already on the ground. Only one resulted in a drug seizure. However, many of the suspicious aircraft land in remote locations controlled by insurgent groups that require time to enter safely. Yet, the air force rarely involves the police besides calling them at the start of a mission and before firing at the suspicious aircraft. In addition, many of the suspicious tracks are near border areas with Brazil and Venezuela, which is too far from an ABD air base for aircraft to intercept without refueling. Nevertheless, the number of suspicious tracks has apparently declined from 49 to 30 per month, but the track counts may not be consistent over time because they are based on subjective criteria, such as whether an aircraft has inexplicably deviated from its planned flight path. According to U.S. and Colombian officials, the reduction in suspicious tracks indicates that Colombia is deterring traffickers and regaining control of its airspace.

Suspicious Tracks Detected Over Colombia Became Concentrated Along Its Borders, October 2003 and May 2005

Sources: JIATF-South (data); GAO (presentation); Map Resources (map); Nova Development (clip art).