Breeding Narco Pilots In Bolivia

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying excerpts discuss the growing need for narco pilots in South America. They also shed light on the routes these pilots generally follow and the steps the Bolivian government is taking to thwart aerial drug shipments.

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According to Bolivian news source *Los Tiempos*, there is a big need for narco pilots to transport shipments from Peru to other countries such as Paraguay and Brazil. The passage also points out that there is no shortage of young men who aspire to do this type of work, as they are paid "$15,000-20,000 for each trip they successfully complete." Furthermore, if one wishes to study at a flight school in Bolivia, dozens of private pilot training programs are ready to accept students.

Once in a program, aspiring narco pilots can complete their training in as little as three to four months given that they are flying small planes that do not require extensive training. While attending flight school may cost around $4,200, a new pilot is able to make that money back by performing a single drug run. As the first passage discusses, other factors that facilitate the training of narco pilots is that little to no information about the student is required to apply to a program and the minimum age is 17.

According to Paraguayan news source *Exito Noticias*, the link between Bolivian pilots transporting cocaine shipments from Peru to other countries in the region such as Paraguay and Brazil are apparent. A clear example of this phenomenon is the frequency with which Bolivian private pilots are arrested and convicted in these countries. Many of the planes that are caught flying in Brazil, Paraguay or Peru claim they are conducting agricultural activities.

In the final passage, Bolivian government minister Carlos Romero claims that the recruitment of young men to transfer drugs to neighboring countries is a new phenomenon but acknowledges that it is necessary for the Bolivian government to increase controls over their airspace. To do this, the Bolivian government tested 13 radar systems to detect planes in 2018. Then in July 2019, they approved a new law that will require all aircraft operating within the country to install flight identification devices (GPS) so that aircraft can be tracked by radar control systems. Additionally, the government is looking to install an interoperability platform to "have more control in detecting when aircraft deviate from their flight plants." **End OE Watch Commentary (Fiegel)**

> *"Many young men between the ages of 17 and 20 aspire to be narco pilots as they can earn $15,000-20,000 for each trip they successfully complete. And in Bolivia, finding a flight school that offers short courses is easy. In Santa Cruz, Bolivia, there are more than 10 schools and in Beni, there are at least three."*

Source: "Pilotos cobran entre us $15 mil y 20 mil por vuelo con carga de droga (Pilots Charge between $15,000-20,000 to Fly Drug Laden Planes)," *Los Tiempos*, 8 July 2018. https://www.lostiempos.com/actualidad/pais/20180708/pilotos-cobran-us-15-mil-20-mil-vuelo-carga-droga

Many young men between the ages of 17 and 20 aspire to be narco pilots as they can earn $15,000-20,000 for each trip, they successfully complete. And in Bolivia, finding a flight school that offers short courses is easy. In Santa Cruz, Bolivia, there are more than 10 schools and in Beni, there are at least 3. Omar Durán, an aeronautical expert, asserts that 7 out of every 10 pilots trained at private aviation schools in Bolivia work for DTOs. This may be because requisites to enter into programs are quite basic and generally include the following: student must be 17 years of age or older, complete a criminal background and medical check, possess a high school degree and in some cases, schools may request approval from the Directorate of Civil Aeronautics (DGAC).

Source: "Aprehenden a un piloto boliviano y a 11 individuos por narcotráfico en Paraguay (Authorities Arrest Bolivian Pilot and Eleven Other Individuals for Drug Trafficking in Paraguay)," *Exito Noticias*, 28 August 2019. https://www.exitonoticias.com.bo/articulo/seguridad/aprehenden-piloto-boliviano-11-personas-transportar-droga/20190521132502027524.html

A clear example that Bolivian pilots are flying cocaine shipments from Peru to countries such as Brazil and Paraguay are evident given the number of Bolivian pilots arrested in these countries with drug laden Cessna planes. In one recent case, intelligence gathered by Bolivian authorities led to the dismantling of a criminal organization operating out of Bolivia. This same group would then transfer 300kg shipments of cocaine to Brazil.

Source: "Corren 90 dias de plazo para instalación de GPS en avionetas; comenzara control con radares (Government Allows 90 Day Window for Aircraft to Install GPS; Plans to Use Radars to Control Flights)," *La Razon*, 9 July 2019. http://www.la-razon.com/nacional/seguridad_nacional/Gobierno-instalacion-obligatoria-gps-avionetas-bolivia_0_3180881906.html

In July 2019, the Bolivian government approved a law which requires all aircraft operating in national airspace to use a GPS monitoring system. By doing this, the hope is that radar control systems within Bolivia will be able to track illicit flights. At this time, radar systems are active and running in airports located in La Paz, Santa Cruz and Tarija. In addition to radars and GPS systems, the Bolivian government is also looking to install an interoperability platform that would be run by entities to include the Air Force, the General Directorate of Civil Aeronautics (DGAC) and the Special Operations Force to Combat Drug Trafficking (FELCN). By installing the proposed platform, the entities will have more control in detecting when aircraft deviate from their flight plants. It will also allow them advanced monitoring capabilities if a situation of this nature arises.