

BAHAMIAN DRUG WAR QUESTIONED IN U.S

Orlando Sentinel - November 6, 1988

By Jim Leusner of The Sentinel Staff

NASSAU, BAHAMAS -- To hear some people tell it, Bahamian Prime Minister Lynden Pindling is carrying on a rich tradition in his island country.

A modern-day pirate and privateer is how some U.S. authorities describe him -- albeit more sophisticated than the British pirates who raided Spanish ships in the 1700s or the rumrunners who ferried Jamaican spirits to the United States during Prohibition.

This time, U.S. authorities suspect, the prime minister himself is among many ranking Bahamians who have collected their own private tariff on the drug booty shipped between Colombia and the United States.

To all that, Pindling said in a recent 1 1/2-hour interview with The Orlando Sentinel: "I told them from day one that it was B.S."

Pindling's comments, made in his modest, oak-paneled office in downtown Nassau, were a continuation of his war of words against U.S. authorities that escalated when the prime minister released a 247-page rebuttal to bribery allegations made against him in Orlando and Jacksonville courtrooms. Even as his report was being sent to U.S. authorities in September, a federal grand jury in Jacksonville was investigating the connection between Colombia's ruthless Medellin cocaine cartel and Pindling's government.

Since the release of his report, Pindling told the Sentinel, his ambassador to the United States has met with U.S. Attorney General Richard Thornburgh to complain about Pindling's treatment by federal prosecutors.

Thornburgh, Pindling said, promised to look into his allegation that former U.S. Attorney Robert Merkle knowingly allowed witnesses in two Florida trials to fabricate testimony that the prime minister accepted bribes from drug smugglers.

Though Merkle has scoffed at the allegations, a Justice Department official has said that an internal review of Pindling's charges is under way. The official would speak only if not identified, because the investigation is ongoing.

Thornburgh spokesman Loye Miller said, however, that the attorney general never discussed the matter with the Bahamian ambassador during their meeting.

Pindling said in the Oct. 28 interview that the United States is trying to destroy him by making him a scapegoat for its failed war on drugs. He complained that the United States has treated him like a "banana republic dictator" and has shown no respect for his black-majority government. His nation gained independence from Great Britain in 1973.

"Our number-one priority is getting the Bahamian government out from under this cloud they created," said Pindling, an immensely popular politician who has been re-elected four times since taking office in 1967.

In moments of anger, he has even considered throwing American authorities out of his country. "All those crazy thoughts go through everybody's mind. Those stupid ideas do come up, but who would it hurt? It would not help one bit. It would aggravate the drug problem."

A DELICATE BALANCE

More than Pindling's reputation is at stake as the United States presses the issue. For the Bahamas, it's the possibility of future economic sanctions, which would disrupt its economy. Three million tourists, largely from the United States, will provide more than 75 percent of its gross national product this year. In March, the State Department staved off an attempt in Congress to "certify" the Bahamas as a country that is not cooperating in the fight against drugs. Such a vote could have led to economic sanctions. After the vote, some senators expressed deep distrust of Pindling and promised that the issue would not die.

For the United States, the Bahamas are a strategic choke point through which 30 to 60 percent of the cocaine and marijuana destined for the U.S. mainland passes. And with growing deficits and slashed budgets on the horizon, U.S. officials hope to withdraw their presence and eventually turn over most of the drug-fighting duties to the Bahamians.

Bahamian Attorney General Paul Adderley calls patrolling the country's 80,000 square miles of territorial waters "a law enforcement nightmare."

The 700 islands stretching 760 miles from the coast of South Florida to Cuba and Haiti have 73 airstrips and 110 harbors that cater to drug-laden airplanes and boats needing a refueling or relay point for entry into the United States.

On any given day, the United States has as many as 11 helicopters, two radar airplanes, six fast patrol boats and as many as seven U.S. Coast Guard cutters in the Bahamas, U.S. Ambassador Carol Boyd Hallett said. A radar-balloon station on Grand Bahama Island is complete, and two others are being built or planned to track drug aircraft.

About 120 U.S. Customs, Drug Enforcement Administration and military officers also work closely with Bahamian authorities on patrols and investigations.

In all, the United States will pour about \$150 million into drug-fighting operations in the Bahamas this year, Hallett said. She called cooperation between the two countries "excellent."

"We are making a difference," she said. "We're definitely having an impact."

Last year, Bahamian and U.S. law enforcement officials jointly seized 23,126 pounds of cocaine -- about 6 ½ times the amount seized in 1984. Marijuana seizures were 178,103 pounds, twice the amount seized in 1985.

The Bahamian Defense Force Base on Nassau's New Providence Island is crowded with seized yachts and cabin cruisers. The airport is jammed with 26 drug planes seized during the past year. Its prison is overflowing with 1,600 inmates, most of them drug smugglers or people who commit crimes to support drug habits.

"We're not going to stop cocaine coming through the Bahamas," said DEA attache John Pulley. "Hopefully, we're going to squeeze it and make it go somewhere else."

And Pindling's government is asking for more planes, helicopters and men.

Adderley has asked the United States for seven decommissioned Coast Guard boats to be manned by Bahamian authorities. He also has asked for the U.S. Navy to be permanently enlisted in the drug war, virtually offering an invitation for the American military to invade his country.

Contrary to popular belief in the United States, the Bahamians are working hard against drugs, said Bernard Bonamy, commissioner of the Royal Bahamas Police Force.

An example, he said, is the special 270-man drug unit that should be fully staffed within two or three years. They also have created an anti-corruption unit that prosecuted three policemen so far this year. Tighter drug penalties also went into effect earlier this year, with mandatory sentences of five years to life in prison for possessing 10 pounds of marijuana, 2 pounds of cocaine or 20 grams of heroin.

"We're doing everything we can," Pindling said. "We're doing more than you are."

THE CASE AGAINST 'THE MAN'

But no matter how hard Pindling's government works to combat the drug problem, he is still haunted by sworn statements from convicted drug smugglers in the United States and criticism from skeptical congressmen.

Pindling's chief accuser is convicted marijuana smuggler Bill Baron of Eustis. Baron testified earlier this year in federal court in Orlando that he paid \$4 million or more to Bahamian officials -- including at least \$700,000 to Pindling -- in the early 1980s.

Baron, now serving a 15-year sentence, said the chief conduit for the bribes was Nassau lawyer Nigel Bowe, wanted in the United States on cocaine- trafficking charges.

A second accuser is Gorman Bannister, son of a well-known Pindling business associate, Everette Bannister. He testified in Jacksonville that his father relayed drug payments to Pindling from Colombian drug boss Carlos Lehder for protection in the early 1980s.

Another person who surfaced with allegations against Pindling is Thomas Maillis, a former DEA and CIA informant who said he obtained photographs of Pindling with naked women at Lehder's former island headquarters of Norman's Cay. In one photo, Maillis said, Pindling is sitting at a table with a pound of white powder before him.

Maillis, now a fugitive, said he gave the photos to the DEA and later the CIA. The photos have since disappeared, according to U.S. investigators and a recent book, *The Cocaine Wars*.

Pindling, 58, the son of a policeman, has called all of his accusers liars and said they fabricated the stories to gain favors or lighter prison sentences from American authorities.

Pindling also said in his interview with the Sentinel that Maillis, who was deported from the Bahamas and arrested on cocaine charges in the United States in 1983, has written letters asking Pindling for permission to return to the Bahamas. In return, Pindling said, Maillis offered him information about U.S. investigations, but he refused it.

Although Bahamian Attorney General Adderley said he believes that Baron, Lehder and other smugglers made payments to some Bahamian officials, he told the Sentinel that accounts of Baron making payments to Pindling are "incredible."

Adderley said his office tried to prosecute six corrupt people identified by a Bahamian investigative panel in 1984. Among them were Everette Bannister, then-Assistant Police Commissioner Howard Smith and Agriculture Minister George Smith. None was convicted.

Evidence from the panel's investigation, Adderley said, was largely hearsay and not admissible in court. Many U.S. informants, he said, either refused to testify or could not identify the accused in court. Even so, some U.S. authorities are not impressed with "The Man," as Pindling is affectionately known in his country.

"Where there is smoke, there is fire," said one high-ranking U.S. drug enforcement official in Washington, who insisted on anonymity because of the sensitive nature of relations between the two countries. Pindling's lavish lifestyle, the official said, "indicates he has another source of income -- which he has never explained in a satisfactory way to us."

Pindling said the millions he has made since becoming prime minister are the result of legitimate investments and loans. Never, he said, has he taken bribes from anyone.

He and Adderley challenged U.S. authorities to provide the evidence against Pindling or anyone else in the Bahamian government.

"It's never, ever shared," Adderley said. "It has nothing to do with Mr. Pindling. Either they put up or shut up. And in most cases, they do neither."

Bonamy complained that, although he has an excellent relationship with DEA officials in his country, he hears too many excuses from federal agents in the United States when he requests evidence for Bahamian investigations. He said that DEA supervisors often say that release of the information could jeopardize ongoing U.S. investigations.

The Bahamians also point to other examples of the United States ignoring their willingness to fight the drug problem:

-- The United States has not responded to several requests by Adderley to interview Baron and other convicted smugglers who say they have knowledge of corruption involving top government officials.

-- The U.S. Senate has not ratified a new treaty calling for closer legal cooperation in tracking and freezing assets of drug smugglers in the United States and Bahamas.

-- The Justice Department still has not approved an updated extradition treaty that the Bahamians have signed.

State Department officials, including Hallett, said the delays are caused by bureaucratic red tape, a hostile Congress and the Justice Department.

A MISSING LINK?

One of the primary stumbling blocks between the two countries is the pending extradition of Nigel Bowe, wanted in two cocaine-trafficking indictments in Florida since 1985.

Justice and State department officials question the zeal with which Adderley's prosecutors have pursued Bowe's extradition. U.S. authorities believe that Bowe holds the key to additional evidence that could implicate Pindling in drug corruption, he said.

"If the Bahamas really wants to show genuine signs of cooperation, I can think of no other action that would hold greater, positive symbolism than the extradition of Nigel Bowe," Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., told Congress during the March debate on Bahamian drug enforcement efforts.

In a report made public Sept. 30, Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., said there is "plenty of credible evidence" that Pindling helped drug traffickers.

"Senators should ask themselves how a prime minister who may be indicted for accepting bribes from drug traffickers," he said, ". . . can be trusted with sensitive U.S. information."