

September 2005

DRUG CONTROL

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



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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-970](#), a report to congressional requesters

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.

DRUG CONTROL

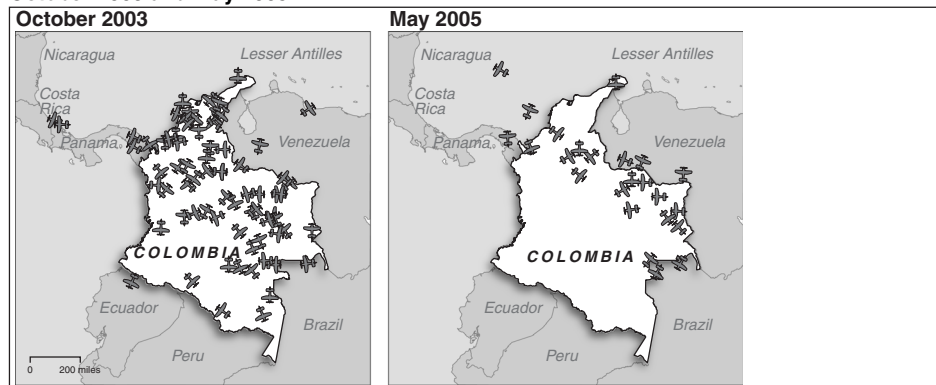
Air Bridge Denial Program in Colombia Has Implemented New Safeguards, but Its Effect on Drug Trafficking Is Not Clear

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).

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Abbreviations

ABD	Air Bridge Denial
JIATF-S	Joint Interagency Task Force-South
NAS	Narcotics Affairs Section, U.S. Embassy, Bogotá
State/INL	Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement

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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

September 6, 2005

The Honorable Tom Davis
Chairman, Committee on Government Reform
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mark E. Souder
Chairman, Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy,
and Human Resources
Committee on Government Reform
House of Representatives

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Chairman, Caucus on International Narcotics Control
United States Senate

Drug traffickers in South America often move illegal drugs by aircraft in and out of Colombia.¹ This is referred to as the “air bridge.” To reduce this drug trafficking, the United States began operating a program in the 1990s called Air Bridge Denial (ABD) in Colombia and Peru. The ABD program identified aircraft suspected of drug trafficking and forced them to land, using lethal force if necessary. However, the program was suspended in April 2001 after a legitimate civilian aircraft was shot down in Peru, killing two U.S. citizens. In August 2003, Colombia and the United States resumed ABD operations in Colombia after entering into a Letter of Agreement outlining each country’s responsibilities and safety measures to address concerns.²

The ABD program’s stated goal is to help Colombia stop the trafficking of illegal drugs—primarily cocaine—in its airspace by forcing suspicious aircraft to land safely so that law enforcement authorities can take control of the aircraft, arrest suspects, and seize drugs. Aircraft suspected of involvement in drug trafficking are usually first identified by relocatable

¹Almost all of the cocaine and nearly half of the heroin entering the United States are from Colombia.

²The United States determined in 2003 not to implement the ABD program in Peru.

over-the-horizon radar.³ Following this initial identification, a surveillance aircraft containing tracking equipment is sent to visually identify the source of the suspicious radar track,⁴ and, if it appears to be a drug trafficking aircraft, an aircraft equipped with weapons is sent to intercept or force the aircraft to land using the minimal force necessary. The Colombian Air Force operates the ABD program and provides crews for both the U.S.-owned surveillance aircraft and Colombia's interceptor aircraft. The program is overseen by the Department of State's (State) Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), which has a contract with a U.S. company, ARINC, to maintain the surveillance aircraft and provide safety monitors and operational and training support. In addition, the Department of Defense's (Defense) Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South) provides radar intelligence to the Colombian Air Force regarding suspicious tracks in and approaching Colombia, collects and analyzes data on the performance of the program, and helps ensure that the aircrews perform the required safety procedures.

At your request, we examined the status of the Colombian ABD program. Specifically, we examined (1) the changes made to the ABD program to address safety concerns raised after the Peru incident and whether these new safeguards were being followed and (2) the program's progress in attaining U.S. and Colombian objectives.

To address these objectives, we reviewed ABD program and budget documentation and met with cognizant U.S. officials at the Departments of State and Defense in Washington, D.C. We traveled to Colombia and met with officials from the Colombian government, Colombian Air Force, and the U.S. Embassy, as well as ARINC personnel operating the ABD program. We also visited an ABD air base in Apiay, Colombia, where many ABD missions originate, and visited the Colombian Air Force's ABD command center in Bogotá. In addition, we met with JIATF-South personnel in Key West, Florida, to discuss their role in the program. We performed our work

³This type of radar bounces a radio wave off the earth's ionosphere (from two locations in the United States and one in Puerto Rico) and can scan an area up to 1,800 miles wide. The radar can determine the location of an aircraft within a 7 to 10 mile radius, its speed, and general course of movement. However, the radar cannot detect an aircraft's altitude.

⁴Radar can identify the path of an aircraft, known as its track. Tracks are considered suspicious if the aircraft has not filed a flight plan or is flying at a low altitude. When the aircraft is visually located, certain characteristics make it suspicious, such as having blacked-out windows, a missing tail number, or flying at night without lights.

from January 2005 through August 2005 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Results in Brief

To avoid the problems that led to the accidental shoot down in Peru, the U.S. and Colombian governments established a number of safeguards, which we found were being implemented by the Colombians and U.S. safety monitors. Additionally, program managers perform periodic reviews and evaluations, including an annual recertification of the program. In April 2003, Colombia and the United States signed a Letter of Agreement that requires the program to operate under the following conditions:

- A set of procedures, developed by the U.S. and Colombian governments, must be followed during each ABD mission. All of the ABD participants we met with were knowledgeable about the procedures listed in the safety checklist and stated that the steps were followed.⁵ We viewed video recordings of previous ABD missions and observed the start of an ABD mission from the Colombian Air Force's ABD command center in Bogotá and noted that the checklist was followed in detail.
- Some personnel are exclusively assigned to ensure that operations are safe and deliberate. Three U.S. safety monitors supervise the implementation of the procedural checklist for each mission and can stop any mission in which they have safety concerns.
- All U.S. safety monitors must be fluent in Spanish and the Colombian pilots and mission directors are required to be proficient in English. They are tested annually by the State Department and ARINC. U.S. safety monitors are native Spanish speakers or were formerly trained by the U.S. military as linguists.
- A dedicated communication channel is reserved for the U.S. safety monitors, and an ABD mission will not proceed if communication among the monitors is lost. This has occurred three times since the restart of the program.

⁵In two ABD missions, the safety procedures were not correctly implemented. Since ABD missions that result in locating a suspicious aircraft are recorded and reviewed, U.S. program officials were made aware of the mistake and followed up with the aircrews.

In addition, in the Peru accident the pilot of the legitimate civilian aircraft was not aware that the ABD aircrew was calling him over the radio. The Letter of Agreement requires the Colombian government to inform civilian pilots about the ABD program—in particular, about the procedures used when intercepting an aircraft and the consequences of not complying.

Our analysis of available program 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.⁶ The Letter of Agreement's stated objective for the program—for the Colombian police to take control of suspicious aircraft—seldom happens. As of July 2005, out of about 390 suspicious aircraft tracks pursued, the Colombian Air Force located only 48; and the military or police took control of just 14 aircraft,⁷ arresting four suspects and impounding several aircraft. Only one resulted in a drug seizure. However, many of the aircraft pursued by the ABD program land in remote locations that are often controlled by insurgent groups, where, without sufficient time to prepare, the National Police cannot reach the scene to make arrests or seize drugs. Yet, the Colombian Air Force rarely involves the police besides notifying them when a suspicious aircraft track is first pursued and prior to firing at the aircraft. Furthermore, in recent months, many of the suspicious tracks have been along Colombia's border with Brazil and Venezuela⁸ where the ABD surveillance aircraft cannot reach them before they leave Colombian airspace or disappear from radar. Nevertheless, the number of suspicious aircraft tracks over Colombia has apparently declined from about 49 to 30 per month, but the track counts may not be consistent over time because they are partly 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—one of Colombia's goals for the program.

⁶Although State and Defense developed draft performance measures in early 2005, they lacked benchmarks and timeframes.

⁷Four of these aircraft were already on the ground when they were identified as suspicious.

⁸Much of this area is at least an hour flight from the closest ABD air base. The program's surveillance aircraft are located at three ABD air bases - in Apiay, approximately 60 miles south of Bogotá; in Barranquilla, near the coast of the Caribbean Sea; and in Cali, near the coast of the Pacific Ocean.

To help assess the ABD program's progress, we recommend that the Secretary of State establish performance measures for the program that include benchmarks and timeframes. To increase the program's law enforcement activities, we recommend that the Secretary of State encourage Colombia to seek ways to more actively involve the National Police in ABD missions. Finally, to enhance Colombia's ability to interdict suspicious aircraft, we recommend that the Secretary of State encourage Colombia to establish ABD air bases closer to the area of most current suspicious tracks. In commenting on a draft of this report, State found it to be an accurate assessment of the program. Additionally, State commented that they were in the process of establishing benchmarks and timeframes for performance measures implemented this year.

Background

After the Peru accident, a joint investigation by the United States and Peru reviewed the circumstances of the accident and made several conclusions.⁹ The investigation team was comprised of U.S. representatives from the Departments of State and Defense, as well as Peruvian officials from its Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.

According to U.S. officials, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe requested the restart of the ABD program to help combat drug trafficking. After initial discussions, the United States decided to assist Colombia in restarting a revised ABD program that would be managed by the Colombian Air Force and overseen by State/INL. In addition, U.S. officials said that Colombia had existing infrastructure that facilitated the program's restart, such as air bases and a national air command center.

Prior to the restart of Colombia's ABD program, a committee of representatives from the Departments of State, Defense, and Justice, as well as the Colombian government developed a Letter of Agreement outlining the program's goal, safety requirements, operational procedures, and each country's responsibilities. The Letter of Agreement, which was signed in April 2003, states that the program's goal is to increase the Colombian government's ability to stop aerial drug trafficking over Colombia. Colombia is required to provide personnel and interceptor aircraft, designate the areas where the program can operate in Colombia's

⁹Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Peru Investigation Report: The April 20, 2001 Peruvian Shootdown Accident*, (Washington, DC: 2001).

airspace, and manage the daily operations. The United States is primarily responsible for providing the program with surveillance aircraft, personnel, training, and funds to maintain and operate the equipment, while ensuring that the program is regularly reviewed. Finally, a U.S. Presidential determination was necessary to restart the program, and is required annually to allow U.S. employees and its agents to assist Colombia in the use of force against civilian aircraft reasonably suspected to be primarily engaged in illicit drug trafficking.¹⁰

Since 2002, the United States has provided \$68.4 million and surveillance aircraft for the ABD program (see table 1) and plans to provide an additional \$25.9 million in fiscal year 2006. State/INL provided \$57.2 million to support ARINC operations, including the U.S. personnel involved in the program and maintenance of the surveillance aircraft. State's Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) in the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá provided \$11.2 million for training, aircraft operations, logistics support, and construction at ABD air bases. At no cost to State, the department also transferred five U.S.-owned Cessna Citation surveillance aircraft used in the prior ABD programs, which are equipped with tracking systems. Also, Defense gave Colombia two additional surveillance aircraft, which have yet to be used for surveillance. The fiscal year 2006 request for approximately \$26 million for the program is planned to continue existing operations and construct additional infrastructure. U.S. and Colombian officials said they do not intend for Colombia to fully finance the program in the near future.

¹⁰The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1995 (P. L. 103-337, Sec. 1012) as amended, provides civil immunity for U.S. employees and agents assisting a foreign country in interdicting drug trafficking aircraft where, among other things the President determines that drug trafficking threatens the national security of that country. The President is required to provide an annual report regarding the procedures used to interdict aircraft to the Congress.

Table 1: U.S. Support for the ABD Program, Fiscal Years 2002–2006

Dollars in millions

Department of State office	Fiscal years					Total
	2002	2003	2004	2005 (estimated)	2006 (proposed)	
INL ^a	\$9.0	\$15.6	\$14.0	\$18.6	\$21.0	\$78.2
NAS	3.6	1.9	1.1	4.6	4.9	16.1
Total	\$12.6	\$17.5	\$15.1	\$23.2	\$25.9	\$94.3

Source: State/INL.

^aIn 2003, State/INL began paying ARINC to maintain the surveillance aircraft, supply personnel to monitor operations, and provide other operational support.

Note: Funds from other NAS country accounts were used to support the ABD program and these amounts are included above.

United States and Colombia Implemented New Safety Requirements

In response to the findings of the Peru investigation and other determinations, the United States and Colombia developed new safeguards for the renewed ABD program which were implemented consistently in the interdiction missions we observed. The program also undergoes multiple evaluations to ensure that all elements of the Letter of Agreement are followed.

New Safety Requirements Developed for ABD Program

The renewed ABD program has new safeguards in place, which were prompted by the review of the Peru accident. The investigation of the Peru incident found that crewmembers did not fully perform some procedures, neglected the safety of the mission, had limited foreign language skills, and were talking on a congested communication system. In response, safeguards were developed to reinforce and clarify procedures, bolster safety monitoring, enhance language skills of ABD personnel, and improve communication channels. Another factor of the accident—the civilian pilot’s unawareness of the ABD program’s procedures—was addressed by teaching civilian pilots about the program.

In the Letter of Agreement for the renewed program, U.S. and Colombian officials require ABD personnel to follow specific procedures summarized in a safety checklist to ensure safe operations and clarify the roles of the United States and Colombia (see app. I). According to the Peru investigative report, the aircrews involved in the accident did not fully execute the program’s procedures, particularly aircraft identification. Also,

the documentation of ABD procedures had become less specific over time. The procedural checklist for the renewed program lists the specific steps that must be taken to execute an ABD mission, including visually identifying the suspicious aircraft; calling to the aircraft over the radio; and, if necessary, requesting permission from the Commander of the Colombian Air Force to fire at the aircraft. In particular, the list provides the exact wording for crewmembers to use when confirming the completion of checklist steps to avoid confusion among the participants. While at the Colombian Air Force's ABD command center in Bogotá, we observed ABD personnel following the checklist during the start of an ABD mission.

While, at the time of the accident, the program did not have U.S. personnel dedicated to monitoring safety, three U.S. personnel are now responsible for safety and implementation of safeguards for each mission. The Peru investigation concluded that the interceptor crewmembers were focused on forcing aircraft to land and not on the overall safety of the mission. Under the renewed program, the three U.S. safety monitors are located at the Colombian Air Force's command center in Bogotá; at JIATF-South in Key West, Florida; and onboard the surveillance aircraft. The safety monitor onboard the aircraft observes the completion of checklist procedures and alerts the U.S. monitors on the ground when each procedure is accomplished. If any of the three monitors objects to an action taken during the mission, the monitor immediately stops the mission. For example, if a monitor objects to the firing of warning shots because he is not confident that the suspicious aircraft is involved in drug trafficking, he will immediately pull all U.S. resources out of the mission, including the surveillance aircraft and U.S. personnel. However, if the problem is resolved, the mission can resume. As of June 2005, the U.S. monitors had objected to actions in ten missions, two of which were due to incorrect implementation of the checklist.

The Letter of Agreement with Colombia requires all U.S. safety monitors to be fluent in Spanish and the Colombian crewmembers, besides the weapons controllers, to be proficient in English because language barriers among the aircrew members contributed to the Peru accident. The aircrews involved in the Peru accident had flown on previous operational missions together and had some foreign language skills; however, they were not proficient enough to communicate clearly during the high stress of an interception. For example, one of the crewmembers in the Peru incident obtained the suspicious aircraft's tail number so that ground personnel could determine the owners of the aircraft. However, other participants in the mission did not understand the message, and never

learned that the plane was a legitimate civilian aircraft. Under the renewed program, the U.S. safety monitors are native Spanish speakers or were formerly trained as linguists with the U.S. military. Annually, ARINC tests the U.S. monitors fluency in Spanish and the NAS tests the Colombians' proficiency in English.

Additionally, the renewed ABD program has incorporated improved communications systems and procedures to ensure the communications mishaps that contributed to the Peru accident do not reoccur. An ABD interception requires the coordination of many individuals, including ground personnel in the ABD command center in Bogotá and JIATF-South in Key West, Florida, and aircrews in the surveillance and interceptor aircraft. During the Peru accident, the aircrews were talking simultaneously over the same radio channels and were not able to hear each other clearly. For example, the crew of the suspicious aircraft called the closest air control tower when they saw the interceptor aircraft following them, but the control tower did not receive the call because it was too far away. Although the ABD aircrews were monitoring the tower's radio frequency, they did not hear the call because other communication was occurring at the same time. For the new program, a satellite radio channel is dedicated to the U.S. monitors, and the Colombian crewmembers communicate on various radio channels. A satellite phone is also available if radio communication is impaired. The U.S. monitors must suspend the mission if communication among them is lost, which has happened three times.

Although not a finding of the Peru investigation, the Letter of Agreement with Colombia recognizes that a community of civilian pilots unaware of the ABD program can threaten the safety of the program's operations. Pilots who do not know how to respond to an ABD interception may put themselves and the ABD aircrews at undue risk. The pilot of the suspicious aircraft in Peru was unaware that he was being called over the radio by the ABD aircrew. The Letter of Agreement with Colombia requires the Colombian government to inform the public of the program's operating procedures, which the government does through publicly posted notices and required training courses for pilots and air traffic controllers. The government also teaches the civilian pilots how to respond to an ABD interception, as well as the consequences of not complying with the Colombian Air Force's commands.

Program Regularly Reviewed

The program managers that we interviewed said that the program's operations are reviewed and evaluated regularly by the program managers and cognizant U.S. agency officials. For example:

- The United States recertifies the program once a year, a process that serves as the basis for the President's annual decision on whether to continue supporting the program. The program was first certified in May 2003 before it could restart and again in July 2004 by a team of representatives from the Departments of State, Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, and Transportation. The 2004 certification team ensured that the major components of the Letter of Agreement—operational procedures, training requirements, logistics support, and information to civilian pilots—were in place by reviewing official documents, performing interviews, and observing training and operational exercises.
- The crew of the surveillance aircraft records a video of each ABD mission once the suspicious aircraft is located. Both Colombian and U.S. program managers review the video to determine if the checklist was followed. We reviewed recordings of some ABD missions and observed the implementation of the safety procedures.
- U.S. and Colombian managers of the program meet every six months to plan for the future and discuss Colombia's needs for the program. After the U.S. managers consider Colombia's needs, they determine whether to fund the requests for such items as repaving runways at ABD operating locations.

In addition, the Congress requires an annual report from the President on the program's resources and procedures used to intercept drug trafficking aircraft. The report certifies that the procedures agreed to in the Letter of Agreement were followed in the interception of aircraft engaged in illegal drug trafficking during the preceding year.

Available ABD Program Data Shows Mixed Results, but the Program Lacks Well-Defined Performance Measures

Our analysis of available data—the number of suspicious tracks and law enforcement activities—indicates that the ABD program’s progress to date is mixed. The Colombian Air Force surveillance aircraft pursued less than half of the almost 900 suspicious tracks identified since October 2003¹¹ and few were located. But the number of suspicious tracks appears to have declined, although the consistency of the suspicious track data is unknown. The program’s primary objective—to safely force suspicious aircraft to land so law enforcement authorities can gain control of it—has not happened very often. In addition, the location of most suspicious tracks has changed, making them more difficult to locate and intercept.

State/INL does not have clear performance measures that can be used to help assess the ABD program’s progress toward eliminating aerial drug trafficking in Colombia. State/INL officials told us that they began developing measures in early 2005, but they do not contain benchmarks or timeframes. These same officials said they will meet with Defense shortly to review data related to these measures for the first time.

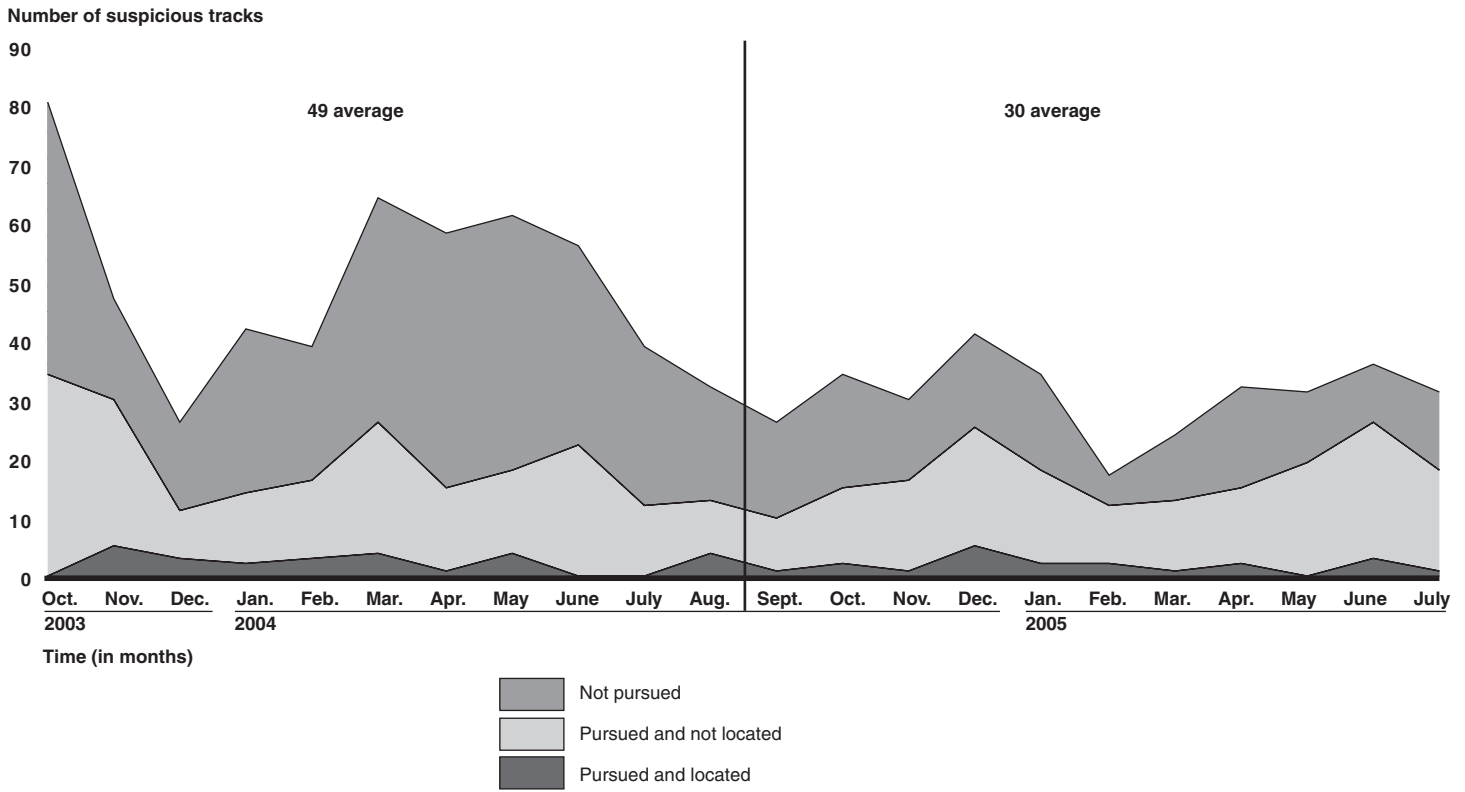
ABD Program Located Few Aircraft

Since October 2003, the Colombians pursued about 390 out of approximately 880 suspicious tracks, and located 48 of them (see fig. 1).¹² Tracks are often difficult to locate because the relocatable over-the-horizon radar does not provide the suspicious aircraft track’s altitude or the exact location. Furthermore, according to Colombian Air Force officials, drug traffickers use hundreds of clandestine airstrips in Colombia. Often the airstrips are camouflaged and suspicious aircraft are hidden from view. Therefore, when surveillance aircraft do not interdict suspicious aircraft in the air, they are unlikely to find them once they land and disappear from radar.

¹¹Complete data for September 2003, the first full month of the program, was not available.

¹²During October 2003 through March 2004, NAS did not document the number of aircraft located. We counted the number of aircraft located as those fired on or involved in a law enforcement activity. Beginning in April 2004, NAS began documenting the number of aircraft located.

Figure 1: Suspicious Tracks Identified, Pursued, and Located by the ABD Program, October 2003–July 2005



Source: GAO analysis of State/INL data.

Recently, the Colombian Air Force asked the United States to permanently increase the number of flight hours (from 180 to 300 per month) for the surveillance aircraft to spend more time training and locating clandestine airstrips. According to U.S. and Colombian officials, once these airstrips are located, the ABD aircrews can focus on them when searching for a suspicious aircraft in the area. To date, based on our review of ABD documents, identification of clandestine airstrips has not assisted in locating any suspicious aircraft. Some State/INL officials are skeptical that more flying time, which would increase maintenance and fuel costs, would produce greater results for the program.

Suspicious Tracks Reduced, but Accuracy of Count Unknown

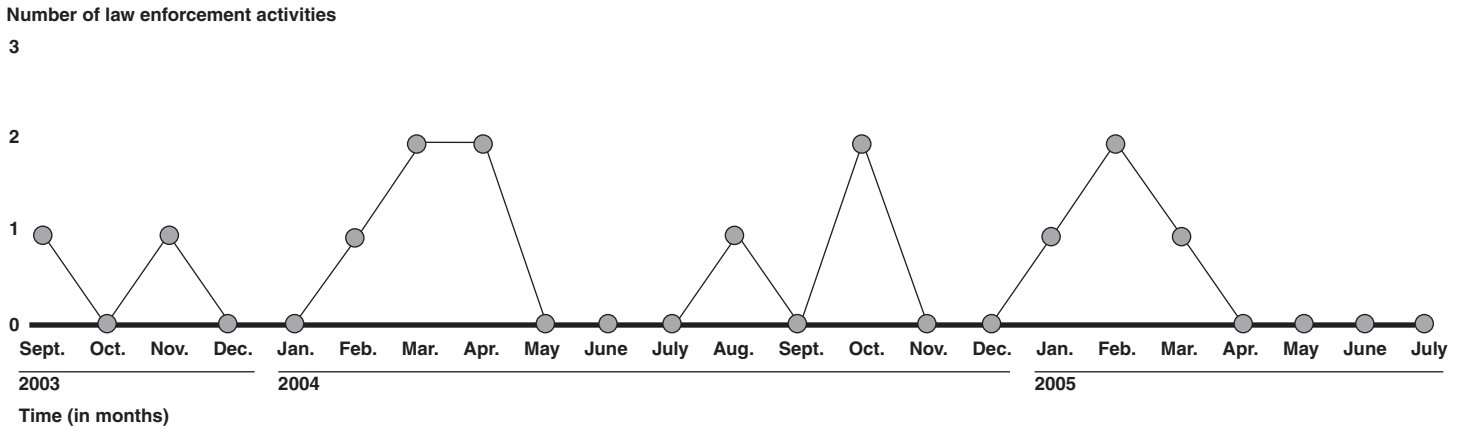
The number of suspicious aircraft tracks over Colombia has apparently declined from approximately 49 to 30 a month, a decrease of about 40 percent, between the first 11 months of the program and the last 11 months (see fig. 1). According to U.S. and Colombian officials, the reduction in tracks indicates that the program is deterring drug traffickers from transporting drugs by air, and is allowing the Colombian government to meet its goal of regaining control of its airspace, but performance measures with benchmarks and timeframes linking the reduction of suspicious tracks to the overall goal have not been developed. Moreover, the accuracy of the suspicious track data over time is suspect due to the nature of the process, which relies on some subjective criteria. The process for determining whether a track is suspicious or legitimate is partly based on the judgment of JIATF-South and Colombian Air Force personnel, who screen thousands of tracks every month looking for suspicious movements. For example, personnel consider whether the aircraft has inexplicably deviated from its planned flight path or the aircraft's altitude is unusually low. However, no definitive criteria exist for such factors, which can therefore be interpreted differently among operators.

ABD Missions Lack Involvement of Law Enforcement Personnel

The National Police seldom take control of suspicious aircraft, arrest individuals suspected of drug trafficking, or seize drugs. Since October 2003, law enforcement was involved in 14 instances (see fig. 2), arresting four suspects and impounding several aircraft. However, in four of these instances, the aircraft was already on the ground. Only one ABD mission resulted in a drug seizure—0.6 metric tons (about 1,300 pounds) of cocaine.¹³ Because State/INL has not established performance measures regarding law enforcement activities, determining whether the objectives of the ABD program are being met is difficult. However, State/INL officials said they would like law enforcement authorities to more often take control of suspicious aircraft, which may contain drugs, weapons, or cash that goes unaccounted for if the military or police do not arrive.

¹³By way of comparison, U.S. interdiction efforts seized or disrupted 196 metric tons (approximately 432,000 pounds) of cocaine in 2004, according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Figure 2: Law Enforcement Activities by Month since Inception of ABD Program, October 2003–July 2005



Source: GAO analysis of State/INL data.

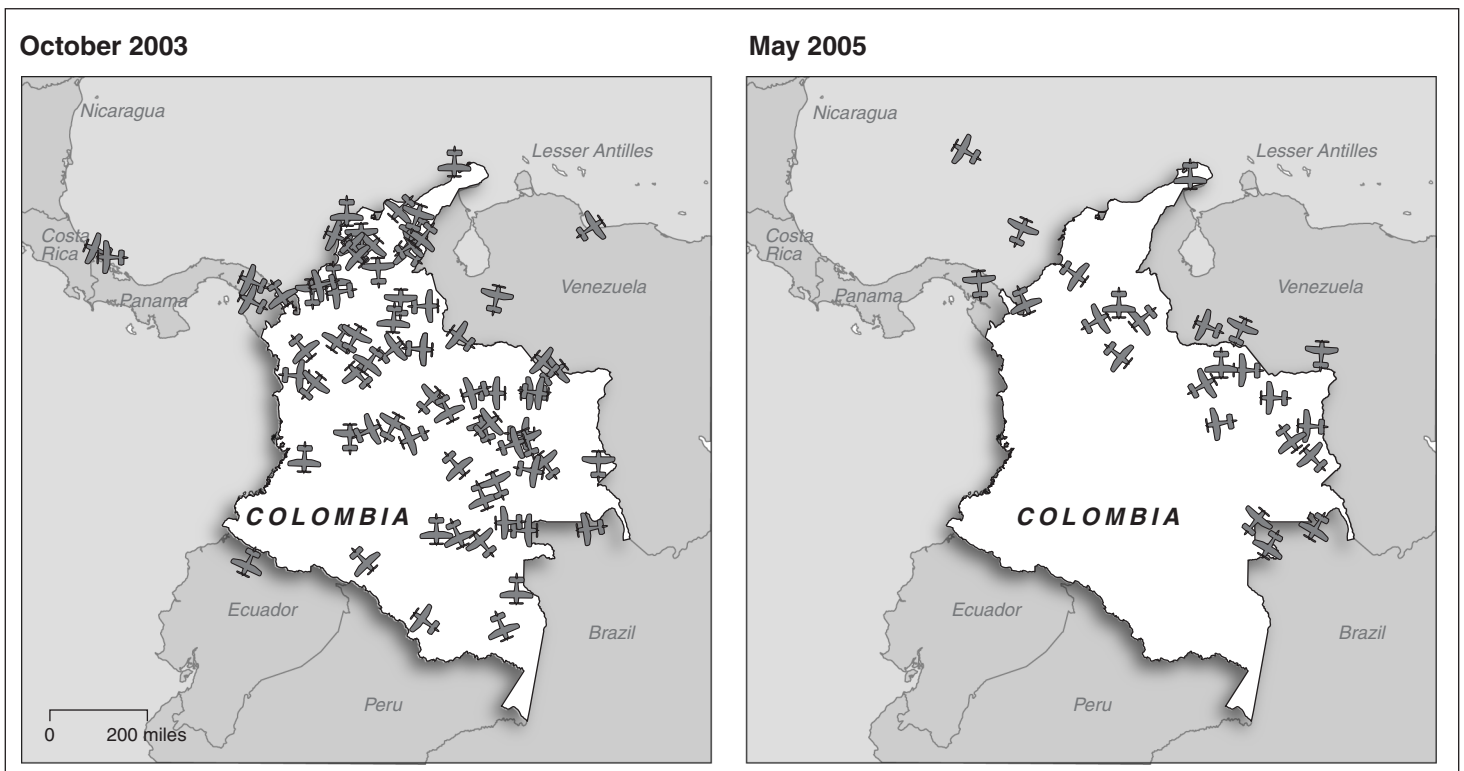
As steps on the procedural checklist, ABD personnel contact the Colombian National Police in Bogotá at the start of an interdiction mission and prior to firing at the aircraft. But, besides these calls, the Colombian Air Force usually does not involve the police in ABD missions. Further, the police face various challenges in reaching the locations where suspicious aircraft land—often in remote areas of Colombia that are not accessible by road. The police cannot travel to some locations without additional resources, including security and transportation, according to INL officials.¹⁴ But, according to U.S. officials, greater planning and coordination between the Colombian Air Force and National Police could enable law enforcement to more frequently take control of suspicious aircraft. For example, in the February 2005 ABD mission that yielded 1,300 pounds of cocaine, one armed Colombian Navy helicopter provided cover for another Navy helicopter to land and seize as much cocaine from the aircraft as it could carry, while the Colombian Army and National Police arrived later and confiscated the remaining cocaine.

¹⁴Insurgent groups have some degree of control over 40 percent of Colombia's territory and can pose a threat to the police.

Changes in Suspicious Tracks Locations Limit Interdiction Capability

In recent months, the majority of suspicious tracks are concentrated along Colombia's borders (see fig. 3), making it more difficult for surveillance and interceptor aircraft to reach the aircraft before it lands or leaves Colombian airspace. Once a suspicious aircraft lands, surveillance aircraft often have difficulty locating it.

Figure 3: 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).

From November 2003 to July 2005, 141 suspicious tracks were not pursued by surveillance aircraft because they were near borders or too far away. In particular, suspicious tracks along Colombia's southeastern border with Brazil and Venezuela are at least an hour flight from the closest ABD air base in Apiay, leaving surveillance and interceptor aircraft little time to find and intercept a suspicious aircraft before having to refuel (see fig. 4). For example, one ABD interceptor aircraft, the A-37B Dragonfly, takes 50

minutes to fly to Caruru (about 250 miles) in southeastern Colombia, but it can remain in that area for only 10 minutes before leaving to refuel.¹⁵ ABD program managers and safety monitors said it usually takes about 25 minutes to complete an ABD mission when all resources are in place, from visually locating the aircraft to forcing it to land. However, some ABD missions have lasted as long as six or seven hours and utilized multiple surveillance and interceptor aircraft.

¹⁵Caruru is an area where numerous suspicious aircraft have been located.

Figure 4: Distance a Typical Interceptor Aircraft Can Travel from the Main Air Base in Apiay



Sources: Colombian Air Force (data); GAO (presentation); Map Resources (map).

Conclusions

The United States agreed to help Colombia restart the ABD program at the request of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe. U.S. funding provided for the program through fiscal year 2005 totals over \$68 million; almost \$26 million is proposed for 2006. We found the results of the ABD program mixed.

A primary U.S. concern regarding the program—the safety of the ABD aircrews and innocent civilians—is addressed in detail in the Letter of Agreement between the United States and Colombia. However, the

agreement does not include performance measures with benchmarks and timeframes to help with assessing results. Although State has begun developing such measures, assessing the program's effectiveness and determining whether additional resources might contribute to increased results is difficult.

Although the number of suspicious aircraft tracks has apparently declined—from about 49 to 30 per month, the Colombian Air Force seldom locates the suspicious aircraft. Moreover, drug traffickers do not face a great risk of being arrested even if they are detected. Out of about 390 suspicious tracks pursued since the start of the program, the Colombian Air Force located 48; law enforcement or military authorities went to the scene of 14, including four that were already on the ground. Besides calling the Colombian National Police during a mission, as required by the procedural checklist, the Colombian Air Force rarely involves the police. Without sufficient notice, the police cannot respond quickly and safely to suspicious aircraft on the ground because much of Colombia is not controlled by the government. Moreover, many of the suspicious aircraft tracks detected in recent months are along Colombia's border regions with Brazil and Venezuela where ABD aircraft are often too far away to threaten the trafficking mission.

Recommendations for Executive Action

First, to help in assessing whether the ABD program is making progress toward meeting its overall goal of reducing illegal drug trafficking in Colombia's airspace, we recommend that the Secretary of State work with Colombia to define performance measures with benchmarks and timeframes. These performance measures, as well as results, should be included in the annual report to the Congress regarding the ABD program. Second, because the police are seldom involved in ABD missions, we recommend that the Secretary of State encourage Colombia to seek ways to more actively involve the National Police. Finally, because many of the suspicious aircraft tracks are difficult for Colombia to locate and interdict given the current location of its ABD air bases, we recommend that the Secretary of State encourage Colombia to establish ABD air bases closer to the current activity of suspicious aircraft tracks.

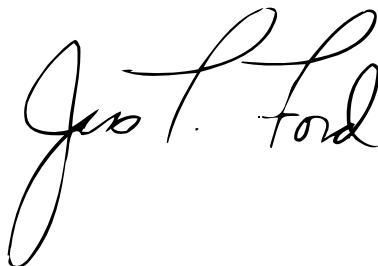
Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

State provided written comments on a draft of this report (see appendix III). Overall, it found the report to be an accurate assessment of the intent and execution of the program and noted that it is developing benchmarks

and timeframes for its performance measures. Defense did not provide written comments. However, neither department commented on our recommendations. In addition, State and Defense officials provided technical comments and updates that we incorporated throughout the report, as appropriate.

As agreed with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies of this report to interested congressional committees and the Secretaries of State and Defense. We will also make copies available to others upon request. In addition, this report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this report, please call me at (202) 512-4268 or FordJ@gao.gov. Key contributors to this report were Al Huntington, Hynek Kalkus, Summer Pachman, and Kerry Lipsitz. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jess T. Ford". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jess" and last name "Ford" clearly legible, and "T." as a middle initial.

Jess T. Ford, Director
International Affairs and Trade

ABD Safety Checklist

ABD event #	Checklist Steps	Key actions /required information	Amplifying information	Involved personnel				
				J/ATF South	USG air asset (air mission commander)	Air safety monitor or if none the USG tracker M/C	Ground safety monitor	CO 1
Detect and declare	1.	ATOI declared unidentified assumed suspect (UAS)	Time: Location: Detected by: Air track number	I	N or NA	N or NA	RR	RR
Tracker/interceptor response	2.	Tracker/interceptor will respond	<input type="checkbox"/> Tracker <input type="checkbox"/> Interceptor <input type="checkbox"/> No	RR	N	N	I or RR	N
<i>Note: If necessary, this step may be completed out of sequence.</i>	3.	Ground safety monitor reports search and rescue forces and CNP notified	<input type="checkbox"/> SAR <input type="checkbox"/> CNP	RR	N	N	I	N
<i>Note: If one of the air assets reports airborne proceed to step 5.</i>	4.	COL air asset reports airborne	<input type="checkbox"/> Tracker <input type="checkbox"/> Interceptor	RR	RR	I or RR	I or RR	N
Visual identification	5.	Air asset visually identifies the UAS and passes amplifying information	<input type="checkbox"/> Tracker <input type="checkbox"/> Interceptor	RR	I or N	I or N	I or RR	N
Remarks:								
Phase I: Interception	6.	"COL has requested and approved Phase I"	<input type="checkbox"/> Requested <input type="checkbox"/> Approved	RR	N	RR	I	N
	7.	"UAS is responding, continue to monitor until landing. Phase I complete." OR "UAS is NOT responding, proceed to Step 8. Phase I complete."	<input type="checkbox"/> Responding <input type="checkbox"/> Not Responding	RR	I or N	I or RR	I or RR	N
Phase II: Use of warning shots	8.	"COL has requested and approved Phase II"	<input type="checkbox"/> Requested <input type="checkbox"/> Approved	RR	I or N	I or RR	I or RR	N
	9.	"Phase II warning calls have been made in English and Spanish and the suspect aircraft is responding" OR "Phase II warning calls have been made in English and Spanish and the suspect aircraft is NOT responding."	<input type="checkbox"/> Responding <input type="checkbox"/> Not Responding	RR	I or N	I or N	I or N	N

An ABD mission begins when relocatable over-the-horizon radar or other intelligence sources provide information about a suspicious flight to personnel at the ABD command center, who then consider various questions to determine whether the track is involved in illegal drug trafficking activities.

Once a track is determined to be suspicious (checklist step 1), a surveillance aircraft, with a crew of Colombian Air Force personnel and one U.S. government contractor, tries to visually locate it (step 5). The length of time it takes to find the suspicious aircraft can vary.

Once located, the ABD aircrews try to determine its identity and order it to land in English and Spanish over the radio or through the use of visual signals (step 7). If the suspicious aircraft continually fails to respond, an ABD aircrew member gives a verbal warning that deadly force will be used (step 9).

**Appendix I
ABD Safety Checklist**

Warning shots	10.	"Warning shots fired, suspect aircraft responding, continue to monitor until landing. Phase II complete."	<input type="checkbox"/> Responding	RR	I or N	I or RR	I or RR	N	An interceptor aircraft called to the scene, with a Colombian Air Force crew, fires warning shots and direct shots if the suspect fails to follow orders (steps 10 and 14).	
		<u>OR</u> "Warning shots fired, suspect aircraft NOT responding, proceed to Step 10. Phase II complete."	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Responding							
Remarks:										
ABD Event # Page 2	X	Key Actions /Required Information	Amplifying Information	J/ATF South	USG air asset (air mission commander)	Air safety monitor or if none the USG tracker MC	Ground safety monitor	CO 1	All use of force by the interceptor is pre-approved by the Commander of the Colombian Air Force.	
Phase III: Firing of Weapons at Suspect Aircraft in the Air	11.	"COL has requested and approved Phase III."	<input type="checkbox"/> Requested	RR	I or N	I or RR	I or RR	N		
			<input type="checkbox"/> Approved							
	12.	COL Search and Rescue Forces have been launched	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	RR	N	N	I	N		
		<input type="checkbox"/> No								
	13.	"Warning of deadly force has been made on all appropriate ATC and Guard frequencies and ..." "Suspect aircraft responding to deadly force warnings, continue to monitor until landing. Phase III complete." <u>OR</u> "Suspect aircraft NOT responding to deadly force warnings, proceed to Step 13."	<input type="checkbox"/> Responding	RR	I or N	I or RR	I or RR	N	Abbreviations: ATOI-A track of interest COL-Colombia CNP-Colombian National Police I-Initiates action N-Noted, but no action required RR-Response required SAR-Search and rescue UAS-Unidentified assumed suspect USG-U.S. government	
			<input type="checkbox"/> Not Responding							
Remarks:										
Disabling Fire	14.	"Shots fired. Phase III complete."		RR	N	I or RR	I or RR	N		
Remarks:										
Post Disabling Fire	15.	Continue to relay status, provide assistance to crash site personnel, and if able visually records crash site.		RR	I or N	I or RR	RR	N		
Remarks:										

Source: State/INL (data); GAO (presentation).

Scope and Methodology

To review the changes made to the ABD program to address safety concerns and to determine whether these safeguards were followed, we reviewed ABD program documentation provided by the Department of State's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (State/INL) and the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) at the U.S. Embassy, Bogotá, and the Department of Defense's Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South). We also discussed the new safeguards with knowledgeable U.S. officials at State and Defense in Washington, D.C.; Bogotá, Colombia; and Key West, Florida; officials from the Colombian government and Colombian Air Force in Bogotá; and ARINC contractors located in Bogotá and an ABD air base in Apiay, Colombia. We also interviewed officials involved in the negotiation of the agreement between the United States and Colombia prior to restarting the program.

To evaluate the program's progress in attaining U.S. and Colombian objectives, we examined data regarding law enforcement activities; suspicious tracks; aircraft pursued, located, and fired at. This data was documented by NAS in reports prepared monthly for State/INL containing the number of missions flown that month and their results. However, complete data for August and September 2003 was unavailable, and the data for October 2003 to March 2004 did not include the number of tracks pursued and identified. By using an event log prepared by NAS with narratives of ABD missions beginning in August 2003, we extrapolated some of the data and corroborated all law enforcement activities and aircraft fired on. We also compared the number of suspicious tracks recorded by NAS with JIATF-South's count. The numbers reported were not the same for most months. We used the NAS count of suspicious tracks because it is more inclusive of tracks detected by Colombia and does not include tracks that were later determined to be friendly aircraft. We interviewed cognizant officials at State/INL, NAS, and JIATF-South about the data. Further, we discussed the numbers of suspicious tracks with the Colombian Air Force. Based on our ability to corroborate most of the data with multiple sources, we determined that it was sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

We traveled to Colombia in April 2005 and met with NAS officials and other cognizant U.S. Embassy, Bogotá, officials, and with ARINC managers at their offices at the Government of Colombia's Ministry of Defense in Bogotá. We also visited an ABD air base in Apiay where we met with ARINC contractors serving as monitors onboard the surveillance aircraft. Additionally, we visited the Colombian Air Force's ABD command center in Bogotá where we interviewed both ARINC contractors and Colombian Air

Appendix II
Scope and Methodology

Force officials. We witnessed the start of an ABD mission at the command center and reviewed video recordings of previous ABD missions at the U.S. Embassy.

Comments from the Department of State

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



United States Department of State

Assistant Secretary and Chief Financial Officer

Washington, D.C. 20520

AUG 23 2005

Ms. Jacquelyn Williams-Bridgers
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Ms. Williams-Bridgers:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "DRUG CONTROL: Air Bridge Denial Program in Colombia Has Implemented New Safeguards, But Its Affect on Drug Trafficking Is Not Clear," GAO Job Code 320384.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Al Matano, Deputy Director, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, at (202) 647-7812.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Kaplan".

Sid Kaplan (Acting)

cc: GAO – Addison Ricks
INL – Nancy Powell (Acting)
State/OIG – Mark Duda

Department of State Comments on GAO Report
DRUG CONTROL: Airbridge Denial Program in Colombia Has
Implemented New Safeguards, But Its Affect
on Drug Trafficking Is Not Clear
(GAO-05-970, GAO Code 320384)

The Department of State appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on the draft Report “DRUG CONTROL: Airbridge Denial Program in Colombia Has Implemented New Safeguards, But Its Affect On Drug Trafficking Is Not Clear.” This program is an important part of Colombia’s National Security Strategy and is a key component of Colombia’s effort to secure its national airspace against the aerial trafficking of drugs and related contraband. The Department is committed to executing its security assistance programs and its other programs in support of Colombia in a coherent manner that complies with United States law and helps the United States Government achieve its foreign policy goals.

The report represents a generally accurate assessment of intent and execution of the program. However, there are several issues that we would like to address, which have implications for the overall framework and tone of the report:

See comment 1.

1) The draft report states that the Department has not established performance measures. It notes in the beginning, and as a major conclusion, that the program’s progress cannot be readily assessed because performance measures with benchmarks and timeframes do not exist. In fact, performance indicators were established in April 2004, but bilateral implementation of the full-range of measures did not occur until this year and benchmarks and timeframes are being developed.

See comment 2.

2) Page 2: More emphasis needs to be placed in the text to highlight that the Government of Colombia is the implementer of this program, and the USG provides safety oversight. This is a principal division of labor between the two governments, and drives the policy actions in terms of USG participation and support of the ABD program.

See comment 3.
Paragraph is now on
page 13.

3) Page 14: First paragraph, last sentence beginning with “However...”
This comment points out that the sorting criteria is subjective, therefore the accuracy of calling a track suspect is itself suspect. In fact, the sorting criteria has been used successfully over many years in both this program and as a standard for all non-lethal programs in the region. It could be said that this is the summation of years of “best practices” implementation by experienced operators, thereby overcoming the negative label of being subjective. Determination of whether a track is to be declared “Unidentified, Assumed Suspect” is just a step in a lengthy investigation sequence of events. The whole safety checklist is comprised of steps that further investigate the suspect aircraft. **Recommendation:** end paragraph without the last sentence by deleting the sentence beginning with “However...”

See comment 4.

4) Recommend that the sorting criteria be attached as an appendix to the report, to demonstrate the thoroughness of the process used to screen suspect aircraft.

See comment 5.

5) Missing: There is no discussion in the report about the lack of comprehensive USG intelligence to support Colombian ABD efforts. This should be included as a classified annex to the report.

The following are GAO's comments on the Department of State's letter dated August 23, 2005.

GAO Comments

1. State officials provided us draft performance measures for the ABD program that they told us were developed in April 2005 with representatives from Defense and the Colombian government.
2. We recognized the U.S. role of program oversight and the Colombian government's role of operating and managing the program throughout the report.
3. We made no substantive changes. This section addressed only the initial identification of a suspect track. Our analysis found that three of the six criteria used to determine if a track is suspicious were subjective. The checklist and other steps taken to further identify suspect aircraft are discussed elsewhere in the report.
4. We gave examples of the criteria used to determine if an aircraft is suspected of drug trafficking.
5. A discussion of U.S. government intelligence support to the ABD program was not within the scope of our report.

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