

DEA overseas review barely mentions corruption scandals

AP apnews.com/article/dea-corruption-drugs-fentanyl-cocaine-mexico-colombia-10be9ba84b73752683a8492a62f732f2

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FILE - Drug Enforcement Administration Administrator Anne Milgram speaks during a news conference at the Department of Justice in Washington, Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2021. After nearly two years and at least \$1.4 million spent, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration on Friday, March 24, 2023, released an external review of its overseas operations that gave short shrift to recent corruption scandals and offered a series of recommendations that critics dismissed as overly vague. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta, File)



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FILE - Jose Irizarry, a once-standout DEA agent sentenced to more than 12 years in federal prison for conspiring to launder money with a Colombian cartel, speaks during an interview the night before going to a federal detention center, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022. Irizarry says that DEA agents have come to accept that there's nothing they can do to make a dent in the flow of illegal cocaine and opioids into the United States that has driven more than 100,000 overdose deaths a year. "The drug war is a game," he said. "It was a very fun game that we were playing." (AP Photo/Carlos Giusti, File)

NEW YORK (AP) — After nearly two years and at least \$1.4 million spent, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration on Friday released an external review of its overseas operations that barely mentions recent corruption scandals and offers recommendations that critics dismissed as overly vague.

Much of the [50-page report](#) outlines the DEA's sprawling, 69-country "foreign footprint," while lauding its efforts to plug gaping holes in the oversight of undercover money laundering operations and special vetted units overseas.

"This report is stunningly vague in its actual evaluation of known problems at the DEA and remedies to fix them," said Sen. Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee. "This speaks to the agency's broader effort to evade oversight. The agency has attempted to dodge my oversight inquiries but I intend to push forward."

The external probe was announced in 2021 following reporting by The Associated Press on the crimes of José Irizarry, a disgraced former DEA agent now serving a 12-year federal prison sentence after confessing to laundering money for Colombian drug cartels and skimming millions from seizures and informants to fund an international joyride of fine dining, parties and prostitutes.

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Irizarry told the AP last year that DEA agents have come to accept that there's nothing they can do to make a dent in the flow of illegal cocaine and opioids into the United States that has driven more than 100,000 overdose deaths a year.

"The drug war is a game," Irizarry said. "It was a very fun game that we were playing."

Irizarry's case got one paragraph in the external review. An ongoing federal grand jury inquiry into some of his jet-setting former DEA colleagues was mentioned in a footnote. Also, Irizarry's lawyer told AP he offered to make his client available for an interview for the review but was never contacted.

"Interviews and documents demonstrated that the DEA has already largely implemented the recommendations from the DOJ OIG to enhance the oversight of compliance risks arising out of the agency's foreign operations," the review concluded, referring to the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Inspector General.

The probe found fault with the bureaucracy it said bogs down the assignment of agents to foreign divisions and recommended putting incentives in place to attract "top talent to hard-to-fill offices." It also blamed the "corrupting influence" of cartels for instances of "individual misconduct by DEA personnel."

"DEA also could do more to ensure supervisors are effectively evaluated and ultimately held accountable for compliance-related issues," the review found.

Other recommendations included more regular audits of foreign offices and vetted police units, and stricter controls on expenses.

The external review was conducted by former DEA administrator Jack Lawn and Boyd Johnson, a former federal prosecutor who handled international drug cases. Public records show the no-bid contract was awarded to the law firm WilmerHale, where Johnson works, at a cost of \$1.4 million. Johnson did not respond to emails seeking comment.

The report made little mention of the turmoil that has roiled DEA operations in Mexico, where law enforcement cooperation collapsed amid the tenure of a regional director who was quietly ousted from his post for having improper contact with lawyers for narcotraffickers.

AP reported earlier this year that Nicholas Palmeri served just 14 months in the post and retired before an Office of Inspector General report found he sought government reimbursement to pay for his own birthday party.

“For a report that cost the government over \$1.4 million, it does not seem to recommend the types of changes that would actually prevent another Irizarry or other misconduct,” said Bonnie Klapper, a former federal prosecutor in New York. “While the report is very thorough in laying out DEA’s role and responsibilities, it mentions only a very few examples of misconduct, and its recommendations don’t go far enough.”

Palmeri arrived to Mexico in the wake of one of the biggest setbacks in recent years in the U.S.-led drug war: the botched arrest of former Mexican Defense Secretary Salvador Cienfuegos. The retired general was nabbed on a sealed U.S. drug warrant upon arrival at the Los Angeles airport in 2020 only to be released a few weeks later under pressure from Mexico’s leftist president, who retaliated by disbanding an elite police unit that was a key DEA ally.

Neither the Cienfuegos incident nor the arrest of another prominent U.S. ally in Mexico — ex-security chief Genaro Garcia Luna — are mentioned in the report.

“The report’s key takeaway about improving information sharing and breaking down internal silos couldn’t be more commendable,” said John Feeley, a retired U.S. diplomat who worked alongside the DEA in numerous postings overseas. “But the biggest silo that needs to be dismantled from an operations perspective is the DEA’s failure to communicate to front offices and ambassadors when it’s investigating senior officials of host nations.”

DEA Administrator Anne Milgram, who has declined repeated interview requests, said in a statement that the agency would implement all 17 of the report’s recommendations.

“DEA is committed to meeting the challenges presented by today’s global drug threats and ensuring that our work is conducted at the highest level possible,” she said.

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