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As Drug Debate Rages, Dealer to Be Sentenced

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SAN DIEGO—Legendary Los Angeles drug dealer “Freeway” Ricky Ross is set to be sentenced to federal prison today amid renewed speculation about the international roots of L.A.’s crack cocaine epidemic.

For more than a decade, there has been a heated debate about how crack became the devastating drug of choice in America’s inner cities, and why the U.S. government was not able to stem the flow of cocaine from Latin America. Some critics charged that the United States was reluctant to control the drug because its military allies were profiting from the drug trade.

This week, the San Jose Mercury News added to the debate with a series of articles asserting that a San Francisco Bay Area drug ring sold tons of cocaine to Ross and leaders of other Los Angeles drug gangs during the 1980s and funneled the profits to Nicaraguan Contras. The Contras were mobilized and financed by the Central Intelligence Agency during the 1980s in an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Nicaragua’s socialist government.

Repeated attempts to prosecute the Bay Area drug ring’s kingpin were thwarted by the CIA, possibly to cover up ties between the traffickers and Contra leaders, the Mercury News suggested. The newspaper said federal agencies had largely stonewalled the requests it made for documents under the Freedom of Information Act.

In Ross’ San Diego trial, which ended with a conviction earlier this year, the federal government’s star witness was a Nicaraguan citizen and convicted drug smuggler-turned-government informant named Oscar Danilo Blandon, who lives in San Diego and Miami. Under the toughened laws for drug dealers, Ross faces a possible sentence of life in prison without parole.

Blandon testified that he got into the drug trade to raise money for the Contras

and that when he joined with Ross to dominate the Los Angeles cocaine market he was working under the supervision of the Contras' military commander, Col. Enrique Bermudez, who was later assassinated.

Ross' attorney, Alan Fenster, sought to question Blandon about his ties with the CIA but U.S. District Judge Marilyn Huff granted a request from prosecutors to block all questions involving the intelligence agency.

"There is no question that the CIA was involved with Blandon, and now the government wants to cover up its trail," Fenster said Thursday. "This is the most outrageous conduct imaginable. There has been outrageous stuff before about the Contras, but this is over the edge."

Assistant U.S. Atty. L.J. O'Neale, the lead prosecutor, said he objected to questions about the CIA because Blandon had no ties to the agency "and injecting a false issue would only inflame the truth-seeking process."

Further, he said, defense lawyer Fenster had not followed a procedure outlined by federal law requiring attorneys to announce before trial whether they plan to ask about national security matters and then to prove to the judge that such questions are relevant.

Ross, 36, widely considered to be the first crack-dealing millionaire to rise from the streets of South-Central Los Angeles during the 1980s, was quick to see a broader conspiracy in the possibility that Blandon was connected to the CIA. He said he did not know of Blandon's Contra connections until recently.

"Basically, I was selling drugs for the U.S. government," Ross said Thursday in a telephone interview from the Metropolitan Correctional Center in San Diego. "They exploited me and they made me exploit my community."

Richard Millett, a Latin America scholar at Southern Illinois University, said allegations of a CIA-sponsored, Contra-managed cocaine pipeline from Latin America to the U.S. have "come up over and over" in recent years without resolving key questions of evidence.

The unanswerable questions, he added, "are going to drive you nuts forever."

"Did some people involved with the Contras deal drugs?" Millet asked. "The answer is yes. Did some officials in the U.S. government know about it? Undoubtedly. Did they sponsor or encourage it? That's an infinitely more difficult question. To say that if they knew about it, they must have sponsored it—that'll get you an F in freshman logic."

CIA spokesman Rick Oborn noted that congressional committees have investigated allegations of CIA involvement with the drug trade and found no credible evidence to support them.

"As far as the agency supporting or condoning drug operations, that's ludicrous," he said.

In 1987 an operative for the Colombian cocaine cartel said that the Nicaraguan Contras made about \$10 million by being the smuggling link between Colombia and the streets of Los Angeles and other American cities.

The money-skimming trial of seven Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies in 1990 was briefly interrupted by suggestions of a shadowy link between the CIA and drug-dealing Contras.

Defense attorney Harland Braun, who was representing one of the deputies, filed court documents contending that his client had searched the Southern California home of a CIA agent and uncovered evidence that drug money was being used to fund the Nicaraguan rebels.

U.S. District Judge Edward Rafeedie chastised Braun, ruling that the issue was irrelevant to the deputies' alleged misdeeds, and it was never raised again.

During Ross' trial, Blandon testified that Contra chief Bermudez, in a meeting in Honduras, told him to start smuggling cocaine so the profits could support the Contras. At the time, the rebels were hard-pressed for cash because the U.S. Congress had declined to finance the Contras' efforts to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

When defense attorney Fenster sought to ask Blandon if Bermudez was employed by the U.S. government, prosecutors objected and Huff sustained the objection.

Blandon testified that Bermudez, in explaining why it was morally justified to sell deadly drugs to fund a fight for freedom, invoked the aphorism about the ends justifying the means.

With Blandon as the wholesaler and Ross as the distributor, a tidal wave of the powerfully addictive rock cocaine known as crack swept into South-Central Los Angeles and other low-income neighborhoods in the mid-1980s.

At its height, the distribution network established by Ross, a high school dropout with a genius for street-level organization, was peddling 500,000 cocaine nuggets

daily.

Ross said that in the days of their partnership he knew Blandon only by his first name. He was steered to Blandon by a drug-addicted teacher at Dorsey High School, he said. "He was like my hero," Ross said of Blandon.

Both Blandon and Ross served prison terms for drug offenses. Ross was imprisoned in his native Texas; Blandon served 28 months of a life sentence and was released after agreeing to provide evidence against others in the drug trade.

In 1995 Blandon helped authorities set up a sting to snare Ross. On March 2 of that year Ross and three other men were arrested in National City near the U.S.-Mexico border after allegedly making a down payment to buy 100 kilograms of cocaine from Blandon.

Ross has asserted that Blandon importuned him to resume their drug partnership and that he was initially resistant. Blandon, on the other hand, said that Ross contacted him when he got out of prison in Texas and proposed a deal involving the sale of stolen American cars in Mexico.

Ross is especially angry at the prospect of facing a lifetime behind bars while the man who made millions off him is permitted to walk free. During the trial, testimony indicated Blandon had been paid \$166,000 by the Drug Enforcement Administration for assistance in nabbing Ross and others.

"Anybody who's really fighting the war [against drugs] wouldn't believe in letting the general go and keeping the soldiers," Ross said.

He added that the experience has made him view his fate in starker racial terms than he is accustomed to, concluding that their disparate punishments can be explained only by his black skin.

"I was more expendable than he was," Ross said. "If that's not racism, what else is?"

To defense attorney Fenster, the government's opposition to letting Blandon answer questions about the CIA is damning proof of the agency's culpability.

The answer to the larger question of whether the CIA knew about cocaine smuggling by the Contras, according to professor Millett, rests with "men who don't like to talk about these things." Plausible deniability is the first rule of covert action, he said.