ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

INTER-AMERICAN DRUG ABUSE CONTROL COMMISSION

cicad

REPORT ON THE EVALUATION
OF THE
INTER-AMERICAN DRUG CONTROL TELECOMMUNICATIONS NETWORK
(RETCOD)

I.   INTRODUCTION

During the Thirtieth Regular Session of the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), the Commission considered the Report by the Executive Secretariat on the Inter-American Drug Control Telecommunications Network (RETCOD). The central question of the presentation was whether to continue the project, and if so, how to best complete its designed implementation. The Commission heard expressions of RETCOD's utility, and agreed that the question should be reviewed at the next CICAD regular session using an objective means of evaluating the project.

Based on the recommendation of the Commission, an objective evaluation was carried out by representatives from countries that currently do not participate in the RETCOD network. This report discusses the background of the project, the methodology employed during the evaluation, the findings and conclusions of the evaluation, and recommendations for the future implementation and project activities.

II.   RETCOD BACKGROUND AND PROJECT OBJECTIVE

RETCOD was initiated in 1996 in response to a request made by member states that CICAD develop a mechanism that would permit international and interagency exchange of information between chemical control authorities in a direct, rapid and secure fashion.

During the initiation of the project, the underlying goal of the network was to reduce the flow of precursor chemicals that are diverted for illicit use. However, following the first months of operation of the project, participating agencies determined that RETCOD was useful for activities beyond the immediate scope of precursor and essential chemical control, so the objective of the network was expanded to encompass a broader array of drug control activities.

Nine countries currently participate in RETCOD, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela. The network is organized into two categories: a computer component and a radio component. The computer component provides authorities with e-mail access through standard Internet connection (by telephone or local area network and Internet Service Providers). In remote areas, where telephone lines and standard Internet service are unavailable, the radio component of the project allows email connectivity through a computer specially interfaced with a high frequency (HF) radio. The radios also are equipped with encrypted handsets for secure voice communications. All sites, both those with radios and those with computers, are capable of securing their messages using encryption software.

The purpose of both the computers and the radios is to strengthen, facilitate and promote information exchange, and as a result, enhance cooperation in counterdrug activities. To promote such cooperation, the network provides an inexpensive means

for the direct and real-time exchange of tactical and operational information in a secure environment.

III.   EVALUATION PROCESS

Two primary activities were carried out to conduct the evaluation of the RETCOD project. First, official site visits were conducted with various agencies in three of the nine participating countries (Bolivia, Chile and Peru). These countries were selected due to their shared border areas and their reported use of the network on both an operational and an administrative level. The evaluation team was composed of Dr. Raquel Magri, Secretary General of the Presidential Board Against Drugs of Uruguay, and Staff Sergeant (ret.) Ron Madden, from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Logistical and administrative support was provided by the RETCOD project coordinator, Ms. Jennifer Toland.

In addition to the site visits that were conducted, a questionnaire was sent to all participating countries soliciting information on their use of the network. The questionnaire also sought input from countries and participating agencies on the results that RETCOD had achieved in each country, the comparative costs of using RETCOD and other means of communication, and suggestions for improving the network's capacity.

IV.   CONCLUSIONS

A.   Project Strong Points

1.   Based on conversations with participating countries, information provided in the questionnaires, and the results of the on-site visits, RETCOD is fulfilling its objective in seven of the nine participating countries. Of the two countries that claimed that RETCOD has not met its objective, one country reported positive use of the network and its equipment, but cited the need for more radios and new computers to replace the ones installed in 1996 that are now obsolete.

2.   Participating agencies in all 3 of the countries visited agreed that RETCOD is a useful international and interagency communications tool for chemical control and counter-drug activities, both on an operational and administrative level.

3.   Each agency visited agreed that RETCOD had a highly positive impact and enhanced their control efforts. Countries responding through the questionnaires also reported that RETCOD contributed to the successful completion of chemical seizures and criminal investigations. At the same time, given the complexity of counter-drug activities, it is difficult to quantify impact or to directly attribute these impacts to RETCOD alone.

4. Countries demonstrated a continued need for the equipment provided through RETCOD. First, email communication remains the most cost effective means of both domestic and international information exchange. Second, on an operational level, phone lines and Internet Service Providers are still not available in remote border areas. Radios are the only reliable form of communication.

5. All countries visited clearly expressed their strong desire and technical capacity to both send and receive information, particularly pre-export notifications.

6. Security of information is a priority for RETCOD countries on both an operational and an administrative level.

7. Successful operational activity between police agencies in Peru and Brazil and between Bolivia and neighboring countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Chile highlights that RETCOD is meeting its objective of facilitating international cooperation.

Project Weaknesses

1. Pre-export notifications of precursors and essential chemicals sent from one country to another via RETCOD do not always arrive at the proper agency.

   One reason for this cross in communication is failure by country agencies to submit updated email addresses. A second reason is that exporting countries may not know what agency in other RETCOD countries should receive pre-export notifications. For example, the National Customs Service in one of the countries visited is the agency responsible for both sending and receiving pre-export notifications. However, because pre-export notifications are handled by other agencies in other countries, Customs from this country did not receive any information from neighboring countries.

2. The computers in many countries, which were purchased as long ago as the early part of 1996, are now technologically obsolete and require replacement.

3. Coordination of encryption key management by participating agencies is a complication that has resulted in decreased use of encryption software.

4. Financially, CICAD cannot support RETCOD without investment by participating countries, such as the contribution of existing resources or equipment (computers and/or radios), payment of Internet expenses, and access to telephone lines. Equally important is the continued political will of the countries to support CICAD with implementation efforts.

5. Continuous rotation of personnel involved in RETCOD has complicated the technical sustainability of the network, as time and financial resources are lost

when individuals trained on specialized software and/or equipment are transferred away from a RETCOD site.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. RETCOD has proven to be a useful and viable tool and should be continued.

2. Communication via RETCOD should be direct, quick and secure, without passing through a central control point.

3. Equipment in need of repair should be addressed on a priority basis. In order for repairs to be carried out in a timely manner, countries should immediately notify CICAD when equipment is broken.

4. In demonstration of their commitment to and investment in RETCOD, participating countries should cover the expense of equipment repairs under US$500. For repairs where the total cost is over $500, countries should cover the first $500 and CICAD will pay for the remaining balance over $500. For repairs to be covered by CICAD, countries should immediately present three repair estimates to the Executive Secretariat.

5. Based on input provided by participating agencies, the RETCOD Participant Directory should be updated to include a more comprehensive description of the activities carried out by each participating agency, including which agencies are responsible for sending and receiving pre-export notifications. Updated email addresses, telephone numbers and contact information should be routinely sent to the Executive Secretariat of CICAD. The Executive Secretariat will then compile this information and distribute it to participating RETCOD countries and agencies.

6. All future purchases should be accompanied by an express agreement between CICAD and participating RETCOD countries that states that countries receiving equipment will provide the necessary resources to support the equipment, such as access to telephone lines, monthly Internet access (for non-radio sites) and a reliable power source.

7. For countries or agencies that reported that rotation or transfer of personnel is a problem, a transitional plan should be developed that outlines the responsibilities of participating in the network, training on the use of the equipment, and introduces new personnel to counterparts in other countries and agencies.

8. The current RETCOD implementation plan, developed in February 2000 at the first international RETCOD users meeting, held in Lima, Peru, should be reviewed and reconsidered. A new implementation plan should be developed that rationalizes the needs of participating countries and considers increased

country investment, such as the incorporation of existing equipment (computers and radios).

9. Equipment installed in countries that no longer desire to participate in RETCOD should be redeployed to other sites where it will receive maximum use.