

Report suggests CIA covered up details related to missionary death: Multiple planes shot down

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A top-ranking Republican says he will seek a new federal inquiry into an alleged CIA cover-up in the 2001 military attack on a small plane in Peru that killed an American missionary and her infant child.

Representative Peter Hoekstra (R., Mich.), the ranking Republican on the House Select Committee on Intelligence, said the attack that killed Veronica and Charity Bowers can be traced to a reckless CIA-sponsored drug interception program that had already downed numerous other planes.

Hoekstra also said the CIA may be responsible for a widespread cover-up designed to hide embarrassing details about the Bowers's deaths and similar incidents in the skies over Peru between 1995 and 2001.

A new report from CIA inspector general John Helgerson accuses the agency of running a reckless air interception program aimed at illegal drugs and ignoring regulations and procedures designed to protect innocent air travelers.

That type of disregard for procedure might have led to the unnecessary downing of several private planes during the six-year life of the Narcotics Airbridge Denial Program, culminating with the Bowers tragedy, Hoekstra said.

"To say these deaths did not have to happen is an understatement," said Hoekstra, who also represents the Bowers's hometown of Muskegon.

"The CIA knew about repeated serious issues with this program but took no corrective action, which could have prevented this needless tragedy. Making matters worse, the inspector general found continuous efforts to cover the matter up and potentially block a criminal investigation."

The CIA has admitted that proper procedures were not followed during the April 20, 2001, attack on the missionary plane carrying the Bowers family, according to Hoekstra.

The attack, by a Peruvian air force jet, resulted in the death of Veronica "Roni" Bowers, 35, and the Bowers's seven-month-old daughter, Charity. Her husband, Jim Bowers, the Bowers's young son, Cory, and pilot Kevin Donaldson survived.

The couple had been working in Peru with the Pennsylvania-based Association of Baptists for World Evangelism when the attack occurred. Jim Bowers, who has remarried and was recently working as a missionary in Africa, could not be reached for comment.

CIA officials claimed that the tragedy was an isolated incident and that its air interception program had been operating smoothly and legally to that point. Hoekstra, however, said the report suggests that approximately ten other private planes were shot down over Peru in the years prior to the Bowers tragedy.

In many of those incidents, strict federal procedures for identifying, following and trying to make contact with suspect planes were routinely ignored, and at least some of those planes may have been shot down without cause, Hoekstra said.

"[The CIA] told us this was the first time that anything happened out of the ordinary, that all guidelines in the past had been meticulously followed, and that was a lie," Hoekstra said. "Every shutdown prior to this, they never followed the rules as meticulously as they should have."

The two Peruvian pilots who shot down the Bowers plane spent ten months in prison in their native country but were never charged with a crime. The U.S. Justice Department also declined to bring any criminal charges following an investigation.

Hoekstra, who was chair of the Intelligence Committee during the initial investigation of the tragedy, said he now realizes that CIA officials who testified before his committee, and answered his personal questions, may have been lying or concealing part of the truth.

Hoekstra said he will call for a new federal inquiry into the now-defunct drug interception program, the Bowers incident and the alleged CIA cover-up. "We cannot have an intelligence community that covers up what it does and then lies to

Congress,” Hoekstra said.

A statement issued by the CIA indicated that the agency is taking the inspector general’s report seriously. “As soon as Director [Michael] Hayden got the Inspector General’s report in late August, he read it and recognized the seriousness of the matter,” the CIA statement said. *-Steve Gunn, Religion News Service*