

NSA COLLECTS ALL PHONE CALLS FROM ONE OF WORLD'S MOST SECRETIVE TAX HAVENS, BUT DOESN'T TRACK THAT

In its report on how the NSA collects every cell phone conversation that takes place in the Bahamas, The Intercept focuses on the use of such intercepts for drug investigations (indeed, one of the other countries targeted in the MYSTIC program is Mexico, which clearly has a DEA angle).

But one memo indicates that SOMALGET data is covertly acquired under the auspices of “lawful intercepts” made through Drug Enforcement Administration “accesses”— legal wiretaps of foreign phone networks that the DEA requests as part of international law enforcement cooperation.

When U.S. drug agents need to tap a phone of a suspected drug kingpin in another country, they call up their counterparts and ask them set up an intercept. To facilitate those taps, many nations – including the Bahamas – have hired contractors who install and maintain so-called lawful intercept equipment on their telecommunications.

Perhaps the most telling part of the article, however, is that NSA/DEA don't appear to be using this facility to track money launderers.

If the U.S. government wanted to make a case for surveillance in the Bahamas, it could point to the country's status as a leading haven for tax cheats, corporate

shell games, and a wide array of black-market traffickers. The State Department considers the Bahamas both a “major drug-transit country” and a “major money laundering country” (a designation it shares with more than 60 other nations, including the U.S.). According to the International Monetary Fund, as of 2011 the Bahamas was home to 271 banks and trust companies with active licenses. At the time, the Bahamian banks held \$595 billion in U.S. assets.

They’re tracking pot, but not bothering to track the dollars that drive the pot.

So aside from the hubris of stealing off of the cell phone calls from Bahama, this is also a testament to the US’ misplaced priorities, its inability to understand how its coddling of tax havens serve to drive the drug trade.