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U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration Says Costa Rica a World Leader in Marijuana Seizures, But Use Increases, Starting Age Lowers

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Pot goes by different local, popular names throughout Latin América—hierba, mari jane, marimba, monte, pasto, yerba, among others—and the joint is also known by a variety of appellatives—including churro, faso, joint, leno, pito, porro.

Within this regional idiomatic variety, Costa Rica, where mecha is smoked in puros, stands out, according to a recent US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) report, as one of the countries worldwide that last year destroyed the highest number of marijuana plants.

As he announced the good news, Costa Rican Security Minister Mario Zamora stressed that this Central American nation would keep up its incessant effort in this regard (NotiCen, June 21, 2012).

Crop removal challenging
But the problem shows a couple worrisome sides to the country’s security and health authorities. One is that large, illegal marijuana plantations are usually hard to find, since growers pick mountain spots, usually on the Cordillera de Talamanca, often inside indigenous territory, where they displace the population from certain areas and, in some cases, recruit local cooperation.

The mountain range, which stretches through southern Costa Rica into neighboring Panama, contains some of the highest peaks in Costa Rica—including Cerro Chirripó and Cerro Kamuk, reaching 3,820 and 3,554 meters above sea level, respectively.

Four of this country’s eight minority indigenous peoples—the Bribri, Brunka, Guaymí, and Térite—in all, less than 2% of the nation’s 4.3 million people, are settled in the Talamanca region in southern Costa Rica, bordering Panama, one of the areas hardest hit by poverty and exclusion. The critical social situation is appealing to marijuana growers and traffickers who target the local communities in benefit of their illegal trade, according to government officials.

Another issue is that the number of marijuana users is increasing, and smokers’ starting age goes as young as 12, ranging up to 35 years, according to official estimates.

During an April 4 press conference, the security minister said that "Costa Rica stood out in 2011 as one of the nations, worldwide, that detected and destroyed the most marijuana plantations in its territory. We almost reached 3 million marijuana plants in 2011. We won’t relent as the country continues a never-ending task (NotiCen, April 12, 2012)."

According to official data, from January through April this year alone, more than 260,000 plants were destroyed by the Policía de Control de Drogas (PCD).
Hours later, local television Channel 7 reported that "according to a DEA report...in 2011 Costa Rica proved to be the top marijuana seizer in the world." The country's "work in the struggle against trafficking and selling other drugs is also recognized."

**New growing methods compound efforts at eradication**

Besides going after open-air plantations, operations by the PCD, Fuerza Pública (FP), and Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ) have begun focusing on hydroponic marijuana as well. This method, which uses water with added nutrients instead of soil, allows pot to be grown indoors, in reduced spaces such as rooms, backyards, and garages.

Official data show that, since 2003—when hydroponic marijuana was first detected in Costa Rica—through April of this year, 22 such installations were dismantled—12 by the PCD, 10 by OIJ agents.

National Anti-drug Commissioner Mauricio Boraschi says that hydroponic marijuana is sold at a higher price than soil-grown marijuana, thus a joint of the new variety sells for around 4,000 colones (US$8), while a common variety cigarette costs about 1,500 colones (US$3).

Regarding traditional marijuana plantations in sectors of southern Costa Rica, the local daily newspaper La Nación warned, in its editorial titled "Forced cooperation with the narco," that illegal growers take advantage of the poverty in communities there. "Costa Rica faces, on [a lesser] scale, a phenomenon common to South American countries where drug-trafficking takes advantage of... indigenous populations settled in economically depressed areas to promote drug crops, while in our country, plantations are of marijuana and limited to the Talamanca region as well as protected areas in the south," it said.

"In Colombia and Perú, to give two examples, communities in remote areas grow coca leaf, much more lucrative and dangerous, in vast mountain areas," and, in general, "in South America, major international cartels and armed groups take part in the business aimed at users in Europe and North America," added the national daily.

"In Costa Rica, it is about local crime, devoted to growing enough [marijuana] to mainly satisfy internal demand," the paper said. "So much for differences, because the principle is the same. Traffickers take advantage of the destitution and the difficult access to regions where indigenous peoples live to induce them to enter the business."

**Some product comes from abroad**

But not all the pot smoked in Costa Rica is grown in the country. Important amounts are smuggled in via the Caribbean into the eastern province of Limón, which has some of the highest poverty rates nationwide. In this case, it is mostly the "high-red" variety, which smokers find to have a more powerful effect than the local product.

Another dimension of the problem lies in the increasing number of smokers, which skyrocketed more than threefold in a four-year span, according to figures in a study by the Ministerio de Salud's Instituto sobre Alcoholismo y Farmacodependencia (IAFA).

The study—V Encuesta Nacional de Hogares sobre Consumo de Drogas en Costa Rica 2010—shows an increase in use and an earlier age in smokers. "Data at IAFA’s disposal show monthly marijuana consumption rose threefold, from 0.6% in 2006 to 2% in 2010. Men continue to be ahead, with three
times more consumption than women, although the increase was significant for both sexes," IAFA reported in a communiqué released June 25.

In the study, IAFA warned that increased use is coupled with "initiation in consumption at increasingly early ages," which in turn "shows widespread use among young Costa Ricans in the 12-35 age group."

"This could be linked to more market availability of the substance, with several varieties and qualities of cannabis, and possibly specialized producers and sellers. This, added to the rising trend of youth-cultural movements where cannabis is a part of the lifestyle, as well as discourses highlighting benefits from use, encourage increasing social tolerance to the substance," the IAFA study added.

In the communiqué, the institute said that "the starting experiences in using cannabis occurring at increasingly early ages implies a major health hazard for people who use it excessively."

-- End --