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LADB Staff

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Coca Eradication and Production Up

by LADB Staff
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US-financed eradication of coca crops has reached new levels, even as US reports show that production has increased regionally. Some drug-control officials say they are having record-breaking success with the eradication of coca in the region and reducing total drug availability, but critics are saying that the eradication is driving even more cultivation and causing farmers to destroy environmentally sensitive areas as they fail to significantly reduce supplies of cocaine from the region.

UN official: Cocaine prices will go up

A top UN anti-drug official predicted cocaine prices in the US and Europe will rise next year, reflecting the fruits of a six-year, US-funded effort to eradicate drug production in Colombia. Last year was a record-breaking year in the fight against drugs in Colombia. Government authorities said they destroyed more than 137,000 hectares of coca, the plant used to make cocaine; nearly 150 tons of cocaine were seized; and 1,098 clandestine cocaine-making factories were discovered and burned down.

"Considering Colombia supplies 80% of the world cocaine market, we think prices are going to rise starting in 2006," said Sandro Calvani, director of the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime in Colombia. Calvani said a pound of cocaine in a city like Washington, DC, costs around US$25,000. A rise in cocaine prices would contradict critics of US drug policies who point out that, despite the notable progress in the expensive fight against drug production in Colombia, the cost for the drug on city streets remains unchanged, a sign that there is no shortage.

Yet, prices have dropped since 1999, points out Adam Isacson, a Colombia expert with the Center for International Policy (CIP) in Washington, DC. Even if prices did go up, it would take time before they reached 1999-2000 levels. "Prices are unnaturally low," says Isacson, saying that they rose after the breakdown of the peace process in 2002, "forcing people to unload their stocks. I don't see prices going much higher than they were in the late 1990s." He points to US State Department figures that show total cultivation in Colombia before eradication programs began used to be around 80,000 to 100,000 ha, while now the number is about 140,000 ha.

UN official Calvani says the stable cocaine prices are a result of drug traffickers who have been willing to absorb the higher costs of production the result of increased seizures and less crops without passing those increases on to the consumer. Also, he said drug traffickers have for years been storing cocaine so they can maintain prices and supplies in the US and Europe, the main consumers of cocaine, even during periods when production is down. "These warehouses allow them to have enough to satisfy the market for two years," Calvani said. "So when the availability drops in Santa Marta or Barranquilla [Colombia], there is no lack of cocaine the next week in New York."
Sometimes the reports, using different systems to estimate the area under cultivation, contradict each other. For example, the UN drug agency said that, in 2003, almost 86,000 ha were used to grow coca in Colombia, while the White House drug office's estimate was 113,847 ha. Accurate estimates of illicit crops are notoriously difficult to make, even with satellite imaging. Growers are increasingly planting in shade or mixing crops to evade detection and eradication efforts. Any drop is mostly the result of the billions of dollars the US has poured into Colombia since 2000 to reduce production.

A key part of the Plan Colombia aid package goes to aerial fumigation, with crop dusters flying over fields of coca and spraying them with herbicides. Calvani said illegal armed groups involved in drug trafficking in Colombia might begin pressuring rural peasants to grow more coca in the face of increased fumigation.

White House report shows fumigation not working Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has vowed to press ahead with US-financed fumigation of drug-producing crops, even as a new White House report found that a massive aerial-spraying offensive last year failed to dent the area of coca under cultivation in Colombia.

Critics of Washington's effort to crush drug production in Colombia say the report indicates the Colombian and US governments are losing the war on drugs, which has cost more than US$3 billion in US aid since 2000.

"The US government's own data provides stark evidence that the drug war is failing to achieve its most basic objectives," said John Walsh, of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a think tank critical of US drug policies in Colombia. A report by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) said that, despite the record-setting aerial-eradication offensive, about 114,000 ha of coca remained in Colombia at the end of 2004 slightly more than the amount that was left in 2003 after spraying.

Walsh also pointed out that prices of cocaine and heroin have been steadily dropping over the years on US streets, indicating availability of the drugs has not diminished. Campesinos grow most of the coca in Colombia, convert it to coca paste, and sell it to Colombian rebels, paramilitaries, or other groups that traffic in drugs, who then purify it into cocaine and export it.

Isacson said the White House report released on March 25 demonstrates that the campesinos most of whom live in poverty and who have few alternate means of employment are constantly replanting coca after their crops are sprayed by the crop dusters. "The inescapable conclusion we can draw from this data is that our fumigation program is not discouraging Colombian peasants from growing coca," Isacson said.

Uribe, in an interview with local RCN radio, said he was undeterred by the ONDCP. "Our intention is to continue seizing the drugs and to continue with the fumigation," Uribe said. Last year, 136,552 ha of coca were fumigated, the White House report said. Uribe said that he was waiting for the UN to release its own report on coca production in coming months.
The White House ONDCP said that while the area under coca cultivation remained "statistically unchanged" over the previous year, the fumigation diminished the potential production of cocaine by 7% in 2004 to 430 metric tons, because newly planted fields produce less cocaine than mature coca. As the US struggles with massive budget deficits, an expensive war in Iraq, and tax cuts that have reduced budget revenue, countries like Peru and Bolivia may be seeing reductions in the amount of eradication financing they receive this coming year. Colombia's funding, however, remains at levels comparable to previous years.

**Campesinos, rain forest paying the price**

Campesino groups complain that the fumigation kills legitimate crops and sometimes leaves stronger strains of coca alive. They also state that the fumigant, a variant of Monsanto corporation's Round-Up weed killer known as glyphosate, causes soil contamination along with health effects on people exposed to the spray. Increased eradication has led to increased planting, and one victim has been the Andean rain forest.

The Associated Press has reported that large-scale coca production was moving for the first time into the extensive jungles of Choco department, in northwest Colombia, with campesinos felling chunks of virgin rain forest to plant millions of coca seedlings. The US State Department estimates that 2.4 million ha of Andean tropical rain forest have been eliminated for coca production in the past 20 years.

Soil depletion, exhaustion of nutrients, and the extinction of species of flora and fauna are among some of the secondary effects of illicit coca cultivation say State Department reports. They add that chemicals used in processing coca lead to environmental pollution, particularly in riparian areas.

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