New Coca-leaf Energy Drink Hits Market

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With a clever play on words, Bolivia's cocaleros (coca growers) launched a product to compete with the world's most famous soft drink. The risky venture began on April 14 when the first 30,000 bottles of Coca Colla hit the shelves. The new energy drink's primary ingredient is coca leaf, the "sacred leaf" of the ancient peoples, including the Colla, of the South American highlands. The coca leaf is grown in the eastern valleys and plains of Bolivia's Chapare region, one of the rainiest areas on earth. That is where President Evo Morales began his union and political activities, and it is also where most of the illegal coca is grown that the Morales government is trying to eradicate because illegal flights depart from there carrying out the coca cargo that laboratories elsewhere convert into cocaine.

Coca Colla is an initiative of campesinos of the Organización Social para la Industrialización de la Coca (Ospicoca). Although there are few similarities between Coca Colla and the famous syrup created in 1885 by John Stith Pemberton the Atlanta, Georgia, pharmacist who was trying to create a medical elixir to relieve headaches but ended up inventing Coca-Cola the bottle does have a red and white label and the liquid is dark, almost black.

The drink went on sale in April, but it was announced on Dec. 31, 2009, at an event attended by leaders of Ospicoca a 9,000-member organization, including producers and professionals as well as Vice Minister of Coca Jerónimo Meneses and Vice Minister of Rural Development Víctor Hugo Vázquez, giving the event official government blessing.

Efforts to market coca-leaf products increases

Vázquez said that, although the idea of producing an energy drink made from coca leaves came from the private sector, the government was promoting the project "because we are interested in industrializing the sacred leaf. " Initially, the plan was to create a joint venture. Dozens of small industries already use coca leaf to make teas, syrups, sweets, tooth paste, creams, cosmetics, liquor, agricultural fertilizer, and even cakes. An Italian restaurant in La Paz caused a stir with its sale of "coca spaghetti á la Cosa Nostra," with pasta made from a mixture of wheat flour and coca leaf.

Ospicoca president Víctor Ledezma Fuentes said that the priority of the organization, like that of the government, is to promote coca-leaf industrialization to show the world its many uses and erase the stigma of drug trafficking. "Coca is ours, coca is a Bolivian product produced mostly in Collasuyu," the Inca Empire area east of the Peruvian city of Cusco, said Ledezma in explaining the beverage's name and its similarity to Coca-Cola.

In June, another 100,000 bottles of Coca Colla will be distributed, and by the end of the year Ospicoca aims to have closed a deal with the government to produce 20,000 bottles a day. At that point, the bottling plant might move from Santa Cruz, a department full of drug traffickers but hostile to legal growers, to the tropical department of Cochabamba, friendly territory where President Morales' rise to prominence began.
Vázquez said the energy drink’s target consumers are "long-distance transport-truck drivers, because it is affordable [10 Bolivian pesos, US$1.40] and it keeps them awake and more alert on their long drives."

The Brazilian daily O Estado de São Paulo summarized why the sacred leaf is spoken of with such pride. "Bolivia is the world's third-largest coca-leaf producer, surpassed only by Colombia and Peru. The country is systematically pressured to reduce cultivation, which puts Evo Morales in a difficult spot. He must reconcile the international pressure that, in exchange for nothing, attempts to discourage production of the primary ingredient in cocaine with the internal pressure from cocaleros, who do not want to give up cultivating a plant that has been an essential part of Bolivian identity for 3,000 years."

Before the Spanish conquest of the Americas, coca was part of the Andean peoples' rituals, and after colonization it became part of the economy. The practice of acullicu (chewing coca leaf to extract the energizing substance) allowed miners to stay on their feet in the deep mineshafts, and its long-lasting effects enabled workers to endure the long shifts. Various authors note that not even protests from the powerful Catholic Church succeeded in having consumption of the "diabolical leaf" banned.

**Balancing coca’s legal uses with fighting illegal cultivation**

The issue now Coca Colla and the various industrialization projects, before areas planted and legal consumption of the leaf is constantly debated at all levels. The crux of the controversy, however, is more about legal consumption than the quantity of coca legally consumed. The differences could be settled once results are released of the Estudio Integral de la Hoja de Coca and the national survey regarding legal use and consumption of the product, both begun in 2009 with financing from the European Union (EU). It will then be possible to determine precisely how many hectares of land will be used for coca cultivation.

Since September 2008, when the government expelled the US ambassador and the permanent mission of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), accusing them of interfering in Bolivia's internal political affairs and promoting a coup (see NotiSur, 2008-08-22, 2008-09-19), the White House has withheld all aid for fighting organized crime and drug-trafficking mafias in Bolivia. Many programs have subsequently been carried out with EU economic support.

Despite all the pressure, the government wants to expand the area for legal coca cultivation. The rationale is simple. Illegal coca growers are pursued because they sell coca leaf to traffickers who then turn it into cocaine, but planting for domestic consumption and for industrialization is promoted because that is the best way to control what is produced.

Nationwide, 20,000 hectares are planted with coca. In the second half of the 20th century, when Bolivia had 5 million inhabitants, a legal limit of 12,000 ha was set. The government proposes eradicating the extra 8,000 ha, which are illegal, to immediately authorize replanting the same number of hectares, but legally and thus with controllable production.

"Today we are 10 million people, our needs have doubled, but, in addition, we want to industrialize our surplus," said Vázquez.

Last March, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) asked the government to encourage Bolivians to abandon the age-old tradition of chewing coca leaf. Morales, an Indian, campesino,
and Bolivian who chews coca leaf daily, responded harshly and sarcastically. "Let the INCB experts come here to chew coca leaf and they will be healthier and more intelligent. It will also teach them to respect and understand social and cultural diversity in the world."

In reprisal for Bolivia’s expulsion of the ambassador and the DEA, the US sought to isolate Bolivia, cutting it out of Andean Trade Partnership and Drug Eradication Agreement (ATPDEA) benefits. This dealt a death blow to the Bolivian textile industry, which, without the tariff benefits, cannot compete in the US market (NotiSur, Oct. 31, 2008). In late 2009, the White House renewed the agreement with Colombia and Peru, its two unconditional allies in the region, and again punished Bolivia (NotiSur, Feb. 5, 2010).

"It is the political retaliation of a powerful government that does not accept that a small country defends its sovereignty and expels an ambassador and an agency that meddles in our internal affairs. They conditioned the resumption of ATPDEA trade preferences to Bolivia on the DEA's return, but the DEA will not return to Bolivia. We do not accept conditions or impositions," said President Morales. And he went further: "An excluded black person can exclude an Indian. We Indians and blacks have been the most marginalized throughout human history. If he [Obama] wants to continue excluding us, let him do so. It doesn't matter. He most likely wants to scare, intimidate, and frighten us, and that arrogance will end up costing his own, the historically excluded in the US. Obama is the same as Bush, a sad and poor figure."

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