

LESSONS LEARNED AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF PLAN COLOMBIA AND COCA PRODUCTION

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Illegal drug production is a difficult problem that fuels lawlessness and insurgency across the world. Many places in the world (including the U.S.) suffer from illicit crop production. For many experts, though, Colombia provides the best example of a country with long-standing illicit drug production and long-term programs in place to eliminate drug production activity. The U.S. government has invested heavily in Colombia to defeat drug production, trafficking and the illegally armed groups that support and benefit from the activity.

While every operational environment is unique, the findings on illicit crop production in Colombia can be extrapolated to identify some general trends and causes of drug production incentives across the world — from Afghanistan to Mexico. Understanding these general motivations and incentives can help operational commanders make wise decisions concerning how to deal with illicit crops, drug production and the peasant-farmers who grow them.

The chain of illegal drug production starts with those who grow the illicit crops; in Colombia's case that is the campesinos, or peasants.

The Peasants

Throughout the 1980s – 2000s, the Colombian peasants were a key component in successful industrial-level cocaine production in Colombia. Cocaine is a highly profitable and lucrative business — but it is dependent on a large pool of manpower to grow, gather and refine the coca leaves into cocaine. The coca bush is, in many ways, an ideal crop for the trade in illegal narcotics. The *agronomics* of coca make it a hard crop to compete with, proven by years of unsuccessful crop substitution efforts.¹

The coca plant is a hardy and highly adaptive species. It is normally found in the Andean highlands, but grows quite well in a variety of climatic and soil conditions; it can be grown effectively on hillsides, underneath forest canopies and in sandy soils. This makes coca a crop that is ideal for subsistence farmers — the peasants — whose land is of poor quality. Additionally, drug traffickers often arrange to pick up the coca leaves (or refined coca products)



CASH CROP Top, A Colombian coca plant reaches a height of 7-10 feet and can be grown in a variety of climate and soil conditions. Bottom, The coca plant has small flowers that mature into red berries but it's the leaf that contains the alkaloid chemical compounds known as cocaine. UN photos

at their source, alleviating the need for farmers to take a perishable foodstuff over precipitous terrain to market.²

Growing coca is also much more profitable compared to a normal crop. Field hands harvesting coca can expect to make more than double what they would in harvesting licit crops. A farmer growing coca could expect to make 10-20 times (conservative estimate) per hectare than what he would with other crops. A coca crop can be grown and harvested two or more times per year.³ This means that, unlike a licit crop such as sugarcane, coca's multiple harvests can provide year-round, full-time employment.⁴

Additionally, coca production provides a substantial number of jobs.⁵ In 1981, it was estimated that in Colombia alone, coca production provided more than 500,000 jobs. This includes land owners/farmers, field hands, pisadores (leaf stompers), refiners, transporters, security and administrative services (lawyers, accountants). Indirect "employees" could also be said to include the politicians, military officers and policemen who drug traffickers bribe; the licit businesses drug traffickers invest in and use to launder money.

Assessing "Plan Colombia"

In 2000-2002 timeframe (just before Colombian President Alvaro Uribe was inaugurated), cultivation of coca reached its peak of approximately 163,000 hectares.⁶ Murders, kidnappings and terrorist attacks were at an all-time or near all-time high. More pertinent to the peasant, 131 small municipality mayors exercised power away from their districts. Because violence and insurgency had driven away the government, democracy and the protections of the state did not exist for the average Colombian peasant.⁷

President Uribe inherited and then aggressively expanded, Plan Colombia. Plan Colombia was a multi-year campaign that attempted to leverage all the assets of the Colombian and U.S. governments to eliminate illegally armed groups (guerrilla insurgents and the paramilitaries), drug production and trafficking. It actively focused on the peasantry and the coca it grew; the Colombian government assessed those results in its annual Coca Surveys.

In the 2003 report, the government assessed each department and its production of coca relative to the geography, agronomics and economic conditions of the peasantry. It identified that the production of coca was directly congruent with the level of poverty of the peasantry in the department in question.⁸ In areas where



SURVEY SAYS In 2003 the Colombian government's annual coca survey identified the Southeastern Departments of Caqueta, Putamaya, Meta, Guaviare and Vaupes as the primary producers of coca.

poverty was low, the survey noted a low-level of illicit crop production, with crops like coffee being grown instead.

Additionally, as in most agriculture, the physical characteristics of a given province dictated whether a harvest of coca could be grown at all. The coca shrub grew best on slight hillsides where the soil was well drained. Coca also relied on being produced in remote areas along drug-trafficking routes. All these characteristics

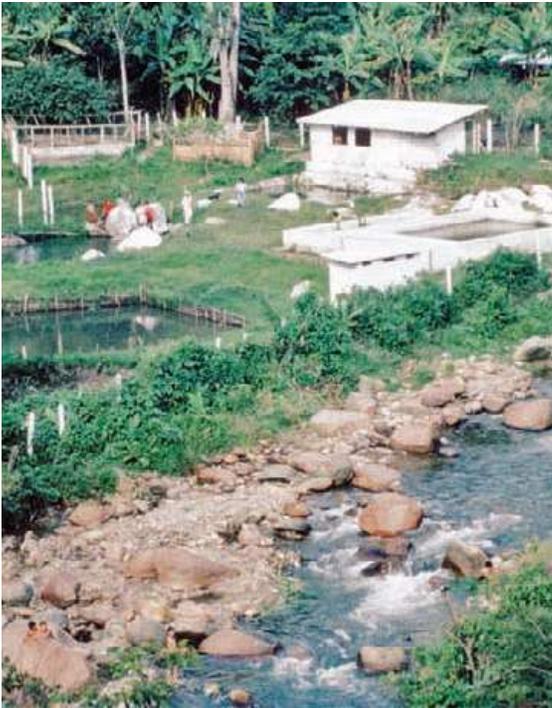
allowed the Colombian government to focus its efforts on the poorest and most remote departments where the physical features promoted the cultivation of coca. This made the Southeast of Colombia the most suitable agronomically and geo-politically. Satellite

and aerial imagery confirmed the southeastern departments of Caqueta, Putamaya, Meta, Guaviare and Vaupes as the primary producers of coca.

The Colombian government's 2003 Coca Survey found that the level of coca production made a significant decline from Plan Colombia's start in 2001 — an overall decline of 38 percent.⁹ Most of the fall was attributed to an aggressive aerial-spraying campaign in Caqueta and

Putamaya. Manual eradication and forest-management programs accounted for a much smaller proportion of eradication.¹⁰ The spraying program was (and remains today) extremely controversial. Many peasant advocates and non-governmental organizations maintain that the aerial spraying has caused health and environmental problems.¹¹ The U.S. and the Colombian government counter that they have sponsored numerous studies that show no long-term adverse impacts. Non-governmental organizations representing the peasants' interests also accuse the aerial spraying of being too indeterminate, damaging licit subsistence and market crops.

Although not mentioned in the 2003 report, the decline in coca production could also be linked to the rising level of violence.¹² As the Colombian government went into previously uncontested areas and attempted to reestablish local government and military/police



TAKING ACTION Alternative-crop programs give farmers who formerly grew coca other options. *Left:* A project encouraging the establishment of fish ponds. *Right:* A technician from the UN Drug Control Programme gives advice on coffee cultivation to farmers. *UN Photos*

presence, the violent confrontation between the Colombian government and the illegally armed groups was reflected in the level of murders, kidnappings and terrorist incidents — all of which spiked in 2002. As the violence rose, the swirl of chaos surrounding the peasants was reflected in the rise of internally displaced persons. New internally displaced person numbers within Colombia went from 317,000 in 2000, to 363,000 in 2001 and peaked with 420,000 in 2002.

Encouraged by the fall in coca production, though, Plan Colombia continued in spite of these other negative trends. As the decade progressed, more positives began to catch up to the reduction of illicit crop production, reestablishment of government presence and the lessening violence. The 2004 U.S. Agency for International Development report touted that Plan Colombia had established 33 justice houses, infrastructure projects were completed in eight different departments and anti-corruption units were established in 19 different government organizations with 75 civilian oversight commissions.

The same report showed that in 2003 internally displaced persons fell from the previous years' high to 215,000 personnel. Unemployment also fell precipitously, adding to the licit economy's ability to support peasants forced out of coca production.

By 2007, positive trends continued in the areas of violence reduction and establishment of the rule of law.¹³ The 2009 Coca Survey also had much good news on the status of the Colombian peasant and rural Southeastern Colombia. While coca production had actually started to increase in 2005/2006 (attributed to funding decreases in the alternative crop programs), by 2009 the production of coca had flattened out to approximately the levels of 2003 (lowest recorded levels).

Yet, in spite of the sustained high-level of effort, significant amounts of coca continued to be produced.

The 2009 Coca Survey went to extraordinary lengths to identify the reasons behind this disturbing fact. It conducted thorough statistical sampling (if flawed because of the security challenges in combat-zone poll taking) to paint a picture regarding the economic motivations of the peasant.

First, the 2009 Coca Survey noted the lower-level of coca production and the fact that manual eradication had now begun to be a significant means of coca eradication. Manual eradication provided a significant source of non-narcotic jobs to the peasantry.

More significantly, the survey went to great lengths to assess the coca peasant and his crop production methods. The survey showed that progressively over the years, as a general trend, the coca field size had shrunk and dispersed as a means to avoid aerial detection and eradication.¹⁴ The survey also explored the vast array of fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides peasants utilized to promote and protect their illicit crops. The survey also found that 61 percent of the farmers decided to refine the coca leaves into either the coca paste or further refine it into the cocaine base utilizing "kitchens" on their own land. The reason: refinement (as opposed to simply selling the unprocessed leaves) was exponentially more profitable for the small farmer.

The survey showed that while profitability was a significant factor in deciding whether to grow coca, farmers were also affected by the easy accessibility of coca products to follow-on markets; the fact that buyers would pick-up and transport the product; the fact the farmer had better information on coca pricing compared to licit crops. In short, the survey indicated a coca-farming community that was savvy and educated in how to produce and package their crops to maximize profit.¹⁵ This logic is borne out in first-hand surveys of the peasantry as well.¹⁶

Conclusion

While serving as a staff officer in Afghanistan and as a brigade adviser in Colombia, I saw how illicit crop production and its role in funding lawlessness and insurgency was a challenging and frustrating problem for tactical-level commanders. Recent after-action reports indicate this remains the case in Afghanistan. Plan Colombia and its results can provide a wealth of insights and lessons learned for combat leaders.

What lessons can we learn from Plan Colombia to combat drug production?

- **Provide assistance to the peasant-farmer.** Good governance programs such as agricultural advice/assistance, establishing agricultural cooperatives and alternative crop production lead to lower drug production. Leaders can facilitate the Government of Islamic

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Republic of Afghanistan and the U.S. interagency (such USAID) to establish these programs in their AO.

- **Improve transportation infrastructure.** Being able to reliably get their product to market improves the chances of farmers growing licit crops. U.S. and GIRoA assistance in building and accessing roads and / or facilitating transportation can help incentivize farmers away from illicit crops.

- **Focus on specific areas.** Just as Colombia concentrated efforts (based on the agronomics and geo-politics) in the Southeastern portion of the country, in Afghanistan provincial-level commanders can analyze and focus on specific areas of their AO for countering illicit crops.

- **Improve government presence and good governance.** Increased and effective government presence (such as schools, the judiciary and police forces) leads to lower drug production. This has been

and needs to be a continuous effort on the part of the US and GIRoA.

- **Kinetic Operations are important, but non-lethal operations are at least equally important.** Targeting and lethally interdicting the criminal/insurgent leadership and infrastructure is important, as is establishing a security presence. Peasant-farmers grow crops, however, because of market advantages. Most farmers, though, know the harmful effects of their crops. Commanders should leverage information operations to actively sway and influence farmers to stop growing their destructive produce.

In the case of Colombia, the best news is that—through a comprehensive counter-narcotics strategy—the Colombian Government has disrupted many illegally armed groups and re-established itself and the rule of law in many previously

contested areas. Once it accomplished this first, very difficult step, it quickly filled the vacuum by establishing good governance and assisting farmers in those areas to wean them away from illicit crop production. If that can be done in places such as Afghanistan, US forces and the GIRoA will have an opportunity to defeat the political and criminal insurgencies that plague their areas of responsibility. *SW*

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