

Conflict Flares in the Bolivian Tropics

Citing the ban on poppy cultivation imposed in Afghanistan by the now-vanquished Taliban regime, a high UNDCP official stated that the ban had been an unprecedented success in its time, in terms of drugs control, but it was also a major disaster in humanitarian terms. The same holds true for Bolivia. An impressive reduction of the coca-cultivated area has been achieved within the framework of Plan *Dignidad*, but this 'success' has exacted a heavy toll in terms of the impoverishment and criminalisation of the Bolivian coca leaf-growing peasantry, or *cocaleros*, as they are known.

Jorge Quiroga, Bolivia's current President, is the architect of Plan *Dignidad*, the anti-drugs strategy designed in 1998 to eradicate the country's entire production of illegal coca. A striking contrast is observable before and after the strategy's implementation. Bolivia was the second largest source of cocaine in the whole world when Plan *Dignidad* came into effect. In 2000, Bolivia's coca crops and its cocaine production potential reached their lowest levels since the U.S. government began measuring these levels in 1985. The Bolivian government holds that over 90% of the country's illicit coca crops have already been destroyed. According to a recent study that the German Technical Co-operation Agency GTZ* carried out on the case of Bolivia within the framework of development and drugs in Latin America, the accelerated reduction of coca plantations has been made possible thanks to mass-scale police and military interventions in the Chapare region, day-to-day violations of human rights, numerous dead and wounded, the destruction of a negotiation basis with peasant associations and the fact that the compensation promised to the peasants for destroying their crops on a voluntary basis has never been paid. All of these factors have generated a polarisation of the conflict.

However, the "success" of the Bolivian model is a fallacy, considering the obvious failure to eradicate coca in the Andean region as a whole. Colombia's current cultivated area is three times larger than the Bolivian cultivated area ever was during its peak.

The sudden reduction of coca growing without also taking effective alternative development measures amounts to a political time bomb, especially in the middle of Bolivia's current economic and social crises. The drug policy imposed by the U.S. on Bolivia has the Chapare region steeped in a most harrowing conflict. In the past months, the forced eradication of coca plantations has given rise to continuous

Bolivia's main problems

- The accelerated eradication of coca fields has led to the impoverishment and criminalisation of the *cocaleros*.
- Mass-scale police and military interventions in the Chapare perpetrating human rights violations.
- The failure of alternative development programmes.
- The polarisation of the conflict.

Recommendations for change

- The government should approach the problem of coca production delinking it from the US anti-drugs policy;
- Demilitarise the coca-growing regions;
- Redesign alternative development programmes creating new consumer markets and outlets;
- Alternative development should imply participation of the peasantry and their vision of how to make the best use of the region's natural resources;
- Forced eradication should be separated from alternative development.

social protest, strikes and road blockages carried out by *cocaleros* and other workers in the region, which the government, the army and the police repress using force. Some 36.000 *cocalero* families with no other means of survival are requesting to be permitted to keep their coca *k'ato* (a 40m X 40m plot). The government's intolerant attitude to this petition is blatantly expressed in the declaration made by the Bolivian Minister of Justice and Human Rights, in the sense that the government's priority is, regardless of complying with human rights, to eradicate all coca fields in order to reach the 'zero coca' objective contemplated in Plan *Dignidad*.

On October 18 2001, when a National Assembly of Coca Growers decided to protest against the Plan by imposing a roadblock, President Quiroga announced that he would rule the Chapare with an iron hand. In effect, the army and the police violently repressed the march scheduled on November 6. The conflict has continued to escalate from then on, reaching the levels of unparalleled violence recently witnessed in the town of Sacaba.

Failure of the alternative development programmes

In 1988, Bolivia issued Law 1008 pertaining to the 'Regime dealing with coca and controlled substances'. This law to combat drug trafficking and the production of coca leaf was drafted with the help of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Bolivian Congress ratified it without delay.

Law 1008 has been heavily criticised for its unconstitutional provisions, for the velocity with which the Congress in Bolivia approved it, without taking time out to fully examine it, for the draconian nature of some of its measures and for the fact that its application facilitates the violation of human rights – as has already proved to be the case. Bolivian rule of law makes allowance for the legal cultivation of coca leaves in areas specified as 'traditional', namely in the Yungas, for domestic use (coca leaves for tea and for chewing purposes). According to Law 1008, however, a good quantity of the coca crop in the Chapare region was considered 'excess and transition coca' and was programmed to be gradually phased out. In its place, the peasants in the region were meant to receive compensation in cash and assistance by way of crop substitution and alternative development programmes. Unfortunately, the positive aspects also entailed in Law 1008 – which contemplates community participation and integration – were not carried out. The possibility of including these was totally excluded in the subsequent implementation of Plan *Dignidad*, a strategy whose chief objective has been the accelerated eradication of coca cultivation regardless of the social costs.

On December 6, 2001, the day that state security forces assassinated trade union leader Casimiro Huanca, the *cocaleros* were in the middle of a protest march, for which they had brought with them rotten pineapples and bananas, the product of the last harvest that had just been lost due to the lack of market outlets. It is no coincidence, but rather a very telling sign, that the circumstances surrounding the murder of the trade union leader can directly be traced to the failure of alternative development programmes.

While the government expects the peasants to comply with the eradication requirement for the region stipulated in Law 1008 and Plan *Dignidad*, it is unwilling to acknowledge the failure of the alternative subsistence strategy to benefit the peasantry, as Law 1008 also contemplates. The reality of alternative development programmes in their current form does not offer any type of solution for the peasant economy; these programmes are simply not designed to meet the needs of this marginalised population. Furthermore, many such programmes do not take into account the vision of the peasants on how tropical resources should be used, nor make allowances for the integral management of such resources. Instead, they promote monocrops, intensive cattle breeding and dependency on markets that do not offer any export guarantees.

Alternative development has to do with infrastructure, annual harvests, product exports and social and environmental considerations. Total eradication as a precondition to receive alternative development aid has left many families without any means of subsistence while they wait for alternative crops to become viable.

Until now, no economically, ecologically and socially viable crop has been found, capable of competing with the coca leaf and thus decreasing total economic dependency on it. The tropical fruits cultivated to replace coca have not had any outlets in an over-saturated market; they also cannot compete globally. The costs for transportation, storage and technical assistance are higher than the potential income generated with tropical products. Pineapple, passion fruit, black pepper and oranges have not yielded the benefits promised to more than a handful of families. What will happen to the majority of the peasant families now left without work, without an income and partly without land, due to the lack of real alternatives to growing coca? Faced with the obvious failure of alternative development in the Chapare, this is one of the questions that the GTZ study quoted earlier raises.

The *Cocalero* Movement

To the failure of alternative development programmes can be added the fact that the government is unwilling to work with peasant associations, a refusal which has also prevented any of these programmes to have any sort of positive result. Instead of co-operating with existing federations, the government has now created parallel associations of producers that have no real hold in the Chapare, thus affecting the political organisation of the *cocalero* movement, which ultimately seems to have been Plan *Dignidad's* true objective.

Why, when there is so little coca left in Bolivia, has the government been so intent on eradicating the few hectares left over, reaching the extreme levels of repression witnessed during recent months?

There is no doubt that the political ambitions of President Quiroga are involved, since it is very much to his interest to have reached his "zero coca" goal when the next elections on August 6 2002 take place, so that it may be said that Bolivia no longer forms part of the world coca-cocaine circuit. Nevertheless there is an obstacle to this: the *cocalero* movement. Weakening this movement, which is a dampener for the interests of those currently in power, has gradually revealed itself to be part of the government's hidden agenda. Thus the *cocalero* federations and trade unions have been excluded, in order to minimise their profile and their participation in the country's economic and social activity. This is the reason for the violent and unjustified repression that has met their protests.

On the other hand, even assuming that this government, or any other government, manages to achieve the 'zero coca' goal, how much longer might such a scenario last, given the economic situation of the Chapare and Bolivia as a whole? As long as the *cocalero* movement remains strong and crop substitution programmes continue failing, there will always be the risk of coca being planted again within a year, blotting out the whole eradication effort and the international image that the government hopes to promote through eradication. In fact, according to the latest figures on cultivated coca for January 2002, the Chapare had 7000 hectares of coca, indicating that much of the coca eradicated in recent months has already been replanted.

The *cocalero* movement is also a stumbling block for the U.S. Thus it is no surprise that U.S. anti-narcotic strategy indirectly promotes debilitating these associations, with the purpose of transforming the Chapare into an agro-entrepreneurial zone in which rural day labourers alone work under isolated conditions.

In this desolate panorama, the *cocalero* leader Evo Morales has declared his intentions of creating a subversive army to respond to the growing repression. This threat can only be interpreted as a cry of frustration and impotence raised against the national and inter-

national policy currently implemented in the Bolivian tropics. Simultaneously, it expresses the sense of uncertainty and concern of the region's inhabitants. An armed resistance, however, would not favour the *cocalero* movement at all. On the contrary, it would only serve to justify the harsh actions undertaken against the movement.

All in all, the question arises here, why is drug trafficking in Bolivia barely visible? The intelligence organisms active in the area behave as if they knew absolutely nothing about it. The most interesting aspect is that, once in a while, a scandal breaks out, such as the one taking place some years ago around the 'narco-plane', in which people reputed to have had ties with the drug trafficking for some time were implicated. The invisibility of Bolivia's narco-trafficking helps to promote more than one pre-established goal, and one of these goals is the express intention to maintain the anti-drug struggle focused on the weakest link of the drug-dealing chain, that of the cultivators of coca leaf.

In the middle of the Chapare crisis, Quiroga's government just received an additional USD 86 million from the U.S. Congress, destined for the continuation of the anti-drugs policy applied until now. Talks between the government and the *cocalero* associations were frozen due to pressure exerted by the U.S. Embassy, which did not deem it appropriate to discontinue forced eradication during four days, while the talks took place. U.S. Ambassador Manuel Rocha threatened with reducing economic assistance if Bolivia did not comply with all the commitments in Plan *Dignidad*. The government then ratified the forced eradication of crops and it was to no avail that the *cocaleros* withdrew most of their conditions, including their demand for the *k'ato*.

The seriousness of the situation in the Bolivian tropics did not prevent the fact that in the beginning of January, the government issued Decree 26415, strictly forbidding sale of the coca in its natural state in Chapare, thus suddenly criminalising an activity that had been carried out legally until then. The peasants reacted immediately to this measure. This market flow is vital for thousands of *cocalero* families depending exclusively on this type of crop for their livelihood. The repression then meted out by the army and the police left huge material damage in its wake, as well as numerous dead and wounded – also among those in uniform – thus aggravating the tense social climate that already exists in the region.

The Bolivian government should assume a firmer, more autonomous stand, in response to the continuous demands that the U.S. government imposes regarding the drugs issue. The Bolivian government's anti-drugs policy is not consistent with the needs of its people, or with the country's economic, social and political circumstances. Unfortunately, while the tropic remains militarised there will be very few opportunities of finding solutions to the present day conflict. Development and military occupation are two realities that are just not compatible. The Bolivian government should understand that, by repressing legitimate forms of protest, it runs the risk of increasing support for illegitimate forms. The 'zero coca' objective promoted by President Quiroga and the U.S. Embassy in La Paz hides a human drama of unforeseeable dimensions.

* *Drugs and Development in Latin America*, GTZ, Germany September 2001 <http://www.gtz.de/drogen>

For more information about the situation in the Chapare, visit the websites of the Bolivian Information and Documentation Centre (CEDIB) (<http://www.cedib.org/>) and the Andean Information Network (RAI) (<http://www.scbbs-bo.com/ain/>)

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