Chemical Warfare in Colombia

The Costs of Coca Fumigation

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1
Putumayo Under Fire

Colombia, the only country in the world to permit the aerial spraying of drug-producing crops, has become the main battlefield in the first chemical war of the twenty-first century. Since the announcement of Plan Colombia in 2000, the Colombian and United States governments have been combating the cultivation of *coca*, the plant from which cocaine is extracted, by drenching the soil of southern Colombia, particularly the *departamento* (department) of Putumayo, with herbicides. The aerial spraying, or *fumigación* (fumigation), as it is known in Colombia, is having a catastrophic impact on the local population and the environment, as will be shown in some detail in this book.

Fumigation is so harmful that it would never be permitted in the European Union or the United States, as government officials have confirmed to the authors. Applied in chaotic and violent Colombia, where large areas of the country lie outside the rule of law, its impact is much more severe, and it is far harder for social movements to show the world what is going on. The Colombian authorities behave in ways that would not be permissible in most other parts of the world: they refuse to divulge the exact chemical formula of the mix of herbicides that is being sprayed, they infringe their own environmental legislation, and they suppress protest.

Despite the social cost, the fumigation policy is not eradicating coca. As is evident from Table 1, peasant families (for whom coca is the only crop that brings a decent income) have

responded to the onslaught by planting more of the illicit drug, aware that they will lose part of their crop. This clearly exacerbates the environmental damage by forcing the families to move into new and often more fragile ecosystems, and it means that, unless the authorities are prepared to invest ever more heavily in fumigation, it will fail to permanently reduce coca production. Even though in 2002 and 2003 the amount of coca that survived the heavy fumigation appears to have declined (the figures are, at best, informed guesses), the authorities were denied even this satisfaction in 2004: despite an all-time record in the extent of the area sprayed (136,555 hectares), the amount of coca that survived increased compared with the previous year, albeit by a tiny amount.

Table 1: Coca Cultivation in Colombia 1999–2004 (in hectares)

	Total area cultivated with coca	Fumigated area	Area of coca to survive
1999	165,746	43,246	122,500
2000	183,571	47,371	136,200
2001	254,051	84,251	169,800
2002	267,145	122,695	144,450
2003	246,667	132,817	113,850
2004	250,555	136,555	114,000

Source: Center for International Policy press briefing, March 30, 2005, based on White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, '2004 Coca and Opium poppy Estimates for Colombia and the Andes', March 25, 2005; http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/news/press05/032505.html

Colombia is not alone in failing to win the 'war on drugs'. Even greater reverses were registered in the UK, where a report leaked to the *Guardian* from the Prime Minister's strategy unit revealed that 'despite interventions at every point in the supply chain, cocaine and heroin consumption has been rising, prices falling and drugs have continued to reach users.'[1] Prices for the

two drugs had halved in real terms between 1995 and 2005, reflecting their ready availability. It was estimated that in 2005 there were 250,000 cocaine users in the UK, who spent an average of £5,500 a year each. The total UK cocaine market had a value of some £1.4 billion, with a gram of the narcotic fetching about £60. Crack, at £105 a gram, attracted 140,000 customers in a market worth an additional £1 billion.[2]

The application of poisons in large quantities and in heavy concentrations in Colombia today is reminiscent of Vietnam in the 1960s. Between 1962 and 1971 some 20 million gallons of the herbicide Agent Orange were sprayed on the Vietnamese countryside to remove what the US government called 'unwanted plant life and leaves which otherwise provided cover for enemy forces'.[3] According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (the US federal government body responsible for providing benefits for the 25 million veterans of US wars), there is a 'positive association' between the spraying of Agent Orange and Hodgkin's disease, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, soft-tissue sarcoma and other potentially lethal illnesses.[4]

Agent Orange (so-called after the orange band that was used to mark the drums in which it was stored) was a mix of two herbicides – 2,4,D and 2,4,5,T – both of which were developed in the 1940s as weedkillers. For years the US public was assured that, although these weedkillers destroyed vegetation, they were harmless to humans. But one of them (2,4,5,T) contained dioxin, and finally, two decades after Agent Orange was applied in such quantities in Vietnam, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the main government body responsible for environmental matters in the United States, admitted that despite 'a large body of research and data collection, there are numerous questions and uncertainties regarding scientific data on and analysis of dioxin risk'.[5] More recently, it has become more explicit, stating baldly that dioxin is 'likely to present a cancer hazard to humans'.[6]

In 2005 came the news that Vietnamese citizens were suing the US chemical companies (including Monsanto) for the health problems they say they have suffered after being poisoned by Agent Orange. In the lawsuit, filed in March, it was alleged that up to four million Vietnamese had suffered persistent respiratory and reproductive problems as a result of the contamination. They are seeking compensation that could run to billions of dollars. Jonathan Moore, a lawyer for the Vietnamese plaintiffs, said: 'The companies...knew Agent Orange contained high levels of dioxin and did not care because...they figured the only people getting sprayed were the enemy.'[7]

Even before the Vietnam War, the US had been given to denying that chemicals useful to the military could be lethally dangerous to local populations. In the immediate post-war years, the military employed DDT (the insecticide dichloro-diphenyltrichloroethane), considered at that time to be a 'miraculous invention', on its bases in the Pacific islands to decontaminate ships and kill malarial mosquitoes in the lagoons. By the late 1950s it was clear that the DDT was doing horrific damage, killing many animals and plants, destroying the coral reefs in the lagoons on some islands, and affecting the health of the local communities. In 1962 scientists finally admitted that the insecticide was entering human and animal food chains and that, as a result, some bird species had been brought to the brink of extinction. However, it took another decade before the EPA banned DDT, and it was only in 1975 that it finally admitted that DDT was a 'potential human cancer agent'.[8]

History is repeating itself in Colombia, where the US is once again denying the damage its chemical weapons are causing. One of the main battlefields in today's war is Putumayo, one of the southernmost departments, on the frontier with Ecuador. Consisting largely of jungle-covered mountains, it is a lightly populated region of the Andes, where hardy coca bushes grow

three or four feet high and yield abundant lime-green leaves, from which coca base (*pasta básica*) is extracted. For many years Colombia was not a big coca producer, but imported coca base from neighbouring Bolivia and Peru.[9] It then processed the base into cocaine and sent the finished product to the US and Europe, using speedboats, containers, planes and human carriers known as 'mules'. But in the 1990s the Colombian authorities cracked down on the Cali and Medellín cartels, disrupting the supply lines of coca from the neighbouring countries. The new players – the so-called baby cartels – preferred not to be dependent on imports but to encourage local production of coca, which was easy to do, as the intensification of the armed conflict meant that large areas of the country lay outside the control of the state.

As a result, Colombia became the world's largest coca-producing nation, cultivating three or four times as much as Peru or Bolivia. Within Colombia, Putumayo became the main producing area. By 1999 it was estimated to have just over 58,000 hectares under coca cultivation, out of a total for the country of about 160,000 hectares.[10] Putumayo had more than twice as much coca as the department with the next largest crop (Guaviare, with about 28,000 hectares).

Cocaine production is a two-step process. First the coca leaves – which look very much like common privet – are sprinkled with cement, then pulverised and put to soak for hours in barrels with kerosene and water. The cement, which is alkaline, enables the cocaine alkaloid present in the leaf to be extracted into the kerosene. The kerosene, containing the cocaine alkaloids (which are water-insoluble), separates from the water and the leaves. It is put in a bucket with sulphuric acid into which sodium bicarbonate is slowly added. This causes precipitation, with the release of a kind of scum. When this scum has been dried out, it is known as coca base and contains about 50% cocaine. This fairly simple process is routinely carried out by the peasant families themselves. Coca base is

much more potent than the coca leaves – it takes 300–400 kilos of leaves to produce 1 kilo of base – and, unlike the leaves, the base does not readily decompose. This means that, apart from the coca leaves destined for sale in local markets for indigenous use, almost all coca is sold to the middlemen in the form of base. Coca bushes can be harvested three times a year, and each time one hectare of coca yields about 2.2 kilos of base. In a somewhat more complicated and dangerous procedure, some of the middlemen then process this base with more chemicals to produce *cristal*, which is their name for the finished cocaine. They often use household equipment, including washing machines and microwave ovens, to dry out the *cristal*.

The drug production process itself is harmful to the environment. Three prominent Colombians, outspoken critics of US drug policy, have been quick to stress that their disapproval of fumigation does not mean that they deny the extreme harm caused by coca cultivation. In a recent booklet, they pointed out that the relentless expansion of coca cultivation had led to the destruction of much valuable forest: 'The indiscriminate felling of forests causes the loss of biodiversity, not only in the plant world but also as a result of breaking the chains of transformation and the life cycles that link together so many organisms, such as micro-organisms in the soil, birds and insects (which have a pollinating function), reptiles, small mammals and carnivores, among others.'[11]

Their criticisms have been echoed in the United States, where a small group of judges and other members of the public have for some time been calling for the government to set up a Federal Commission to re-examine the government's drug policy. In a recent report, published by the Schaffer Library of Drug Policy, they wrote:

> The coca fields are planted along the contours of the land with little terracing and the fields are kept bare of plants except for the coca or poppy plants. These methods, in combination with the steep

slopes, serve to strip away topsoil with every strong wind and heavy rain, very quickly making the fields infertile not only for further cultivation but for jungle plant life as well. Recent observers over-flying the jungle describe it as a patchwork quilt of green broken by patches of gray desolation. In addition to causing soil infertility, the topsoil runoff fills waterways and rivers with sediment, changing their courses, causing flooding, and killing fish and aquatic plant life by lowering the oxygen content of the water and smothering the river bottoms. Locals who used to depend on the large fish in the rivers for food, no longer find any fish large enough to eat.[12]

What is driving the expansion of coca cultivation – and is thus ultimately responsible for the damage caused – is the voracious demand for cocaine from the world's rich countries. Even though consumers in the US and Europe pay a lot for their cocaine, peasant families do not receive much of the money. PLANTE (the National Plan for Alternative Development), the Colombian government's agency in charge of the alternative crop programme, calculates that, out of every $1,000 that a buyer spends on cocaine in a rich country, the Colombian peasant cultivating the coca bushes receives only $6. Even so, peasant farmers get a larger income from coca than from any of the other crops they cultivate.

Far from alleviating the damage, official policies are making it worse. Together with the Colombian government the US authorities have declared a pitiless 'war on drugs', which has not only exacerbated the environmental damage, by encouraging peasant families to cultivate more coca to compensate for losses, but has also intensified Colombia's internal conflict by robbing families of their livelihoods and leaving them with little option but join the left-wing guerrillas, particularly the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia).

The damage this war is causing in Putumayo is visible to any visitor. One day the guerrillas of the left may be in control of a

town or village in the department. The next day it may be the army or their allies, the paramilitary death squads. On some mornings Colombian troops are in great evidence, stopping traffic at roadblocks, but on other mornings they are nowhere to be seen. For days the sky is quiet but then, with no warning, the air hums with the passage of a light spray-plane – escorted by an armed helicopter to fight off possible guerrilla attacks from the ground – flying low to discharge its load of poison. People are always on edge: there are constant casualties in this fast-moving conflict, as the tides of war ebb and flow.

The violence and the suffering were evident to Hugh O'Shaughnessy during visits to Putumayo in June 2001 and August 2003:

'During my first trip, I felt as if I was visiting a war zone. People told me that 134 people had been killed in the town of Puerto Asís alone in 2000 in clashes between the *paracos*, as the paramilitaries are known, and the FARC guerrillas. I travelled along the main road that runs from Puerto Asís, through the oil town of Orito, to the border with Ecuador. It was a scene of wreckage. The asphalt was repeatedly stained with crude oil, which had spilled out from the gashes in the pipeline caused by FARC's bombs. The oil had flowed into the surrounding jungle, polluting the tropical vegetation and casting a dirty film over ponds and watercourses. Every few miles I came across a team, clad in yellow jackets for visibility, sent in by the state oil company, Ecopetrol, to repair the line. Now and then we encountered by the side of the roads the blackened carcasses of heavy lorries hijacked and burnt by the guerrillas. In the fields along the way many crops had been blighted by the aerial spraying, not just coca bushes but also fields of maize and other staple foods. In Orito they told me that 40 people had been killed in 2000 in the fighting.

'Two hours from the Ecuadorean frontier, just north of the Guamuez river, lies the tiny reserve of Santa Rosa, set aside for