

Business

Colombia's illicit coca economy helps communities thrive

Colombia is the world's largest producer of addictive stimulant

PATIA: In the mountains and jungles of southwestern Colombia, peasants, migrants and women carrying babies toil doggedly in the coca fields despite the dangers posed by guerrillas and drug traffickers—and despite the government's anti-drug campaign.

These plantations are known as "San Coca"—Saint Coca—due to the locals' devotion to growing the plant, which provides the active ingredient in cocaine, and their understanding of all it provides to them in the face of the risks.

Colombia is still the world's largest producer of the addictive stimulant, even though successive governments in Bogota have worked to combat the trade.

"Coca (plantations) were born as a response to institutional abandonment... and have allowed everyone in these areas to achieve a minimum of dignity," said Azael Cabrera, the leader of Agropatia, an organization representing 12 rural communities and townships.

"Forget about the state—it doesn't exist here." For community leader Reinaldo Bolanos, "we don't see ourselves as belonging to this State, as for the State, either we don't exist or we are a burden."

For decades, the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were effectively in charge in Cauca until the historic 2016 peace agreement between the government and the leftist rebels.

In theory, the fighters left the area under disarmament plans, and the peasants expected the state to step into the void, but they never did.

So three years later, dissident guerrillas that opted out of the peace deal moved back in—with new weapons but the same ideology. With no state presence or support, the peasants were left vulnerable and turned to planting coca after suffering losses with other crops including yuca, corn, coffee and sugar cane.

And so the "coca economy" was born: a network of activities around the cultivation and processing of coca leaves which are then used to make cocaine, with rebels serving as the middlemen between the farmers and the traffickers. The work puts food on the tables of locals, but there is a problem—the government does not distinguish between the coca growers and the drug traffickers.

Respect for those with guns

Despite a half-century battle by authorities against the drug trade, the white powder continues to flow freely into the United States and Europe.

During that period, 10 Colombian governments failed to put a dent in the illegal trade, despite millions of dollars in anti-narcotics support from Washington.

In Cauca, the guerrillas reign once again—they are part of the dissident Carlos Patino Front, and billboards and posters bear the face of Patino, a rebel killed in 2013. Military interventions in the area are "less intense" than in other zones, Defense Minister Diego Molano admits, because of the danger posed to security forces.

"But that doesn't mean we're going to let these groups continue with this criminal dynamic," Molano added. Nevertheless, the trade—which is lucrative because coca can be harvested four times a year, as opposed to just two for coffee—has grown considerably. In 2010, there were 5,900 hectares (14,580 acres) of coca plantations in Cauca, according to the United Nations. A decade later, that number had nearly tripled to 16,544 hectares.

"The army never came here after the Havana deal. Once again, this area is screwed by illegal armed groups," said Bolanos. "We've learned to respect whoever has weapons." Cabrera chimes in: "The peasants have no authority over the rebels—we can't tell them to leave, we have no choice but to let them come. But that doesn't make us guerrillas or drug traffickers."

Family business

Entire families, old women, single mothers with their children, impoverished former city residents and even Venezuelan migrants who walked for months to reach Cauca can be found picking coca leaves in the plantations. "Students who don't have classes or are on holidays also come to the fields to pick and so contribute to their studies and to putting food on the table at home," said community leader Abel Solarte.

While still a minor, Karen Palacios moved from the capital Bogota to Cauca with her partner, a native of the region. Now 20, she learned to pick leaves before the couple broke up, leaving her as the single mother of two-year-old Dana.

"I used to take her to the plantations and would set up a tent or a hammock so she could sleep while I worked," said Palacios. At one point, she was able to put Dana in day care, but then the coronavirus pandemic swept through Colombia, and the center closed, meaning Palacios again must bring her daughter into

the fields. And since the family shoe business succumbed to the ravages of the pandemic, Palacios's father, stepmother and brother all joined her in Cauca as coca leaf pickers. Numerous single mothers like Palacios work in the fields.

"Many of us don't have a husband and we have our children, and if we go picking, we can get them food and clothing," said Dora Meneses, spokeswoman for a group of 60 pickers.

The boom

According to United Nations estimates, between 2016 and 2018, more than 200,000 families—amounting to just over a million people, or two percent of Colombia's population—were working on coca plantations. Part of the boom was fueled by one of the peace conditions that included cash payouts for those who agreed to destroy their coca crops.

Experts believe the peasants took this as an incentive to plant more, to earn more from their destruction.

Almost 100,000 families agreed to destroy their crops in return for the compensation and an end to legal proceedings against them, according to official figures. But in the Patia townships, the business continues to thrive.

Yeison Enriquez fled Venezuela with his wife and three children as their country spiraled into economic meltdown. He went from viewing coca as an illegal crop to defending the "source of work" that his brother also migrated to Colombia to do. "We can't count on this opportunity in the city. In the countryside, there is always work and if they eradicate the coca, I think I will have to migrate once again," said Enriquez.

In 2017, plantations across Colombia reached a record level of 171,000 hectares.

In 2020, the country managed to reduce the size of its coca plantations to 143,000 hectares but without reducing the amount of cocaine produced — 1,228 tons—which the UN says was due to a better crop yield. Since the arrival of right-wing President Ivan Duque in 2018, Colombia has increased its eradication of coca crops and the confiscation of drugs — 549 tons in the last 18 months alone.

And controversially, it is preparing to restart aerial glyphosate spraying to eradicate coca crops, which had been suspended since 2015 due to its harmful effects on human health and the environment. It is also a major threat to the peasants' livelihoods. "We don't want to sink into misery. We're organizing resistance—to march, to protest, to strike," said Solarte.

Staving off poverty

Antonio Tamayo, 40, a plantation leader, moved to Cauca from Antioquia, 700 kilometers (435 miles) away, after the coca crops there were destroyed.

In the same farm where the leaves are grown, they are shredded and then processed with lime, cement, gasoline and ammonium sulphate to produce the paste that forms the base ingredient for cocaine.

Every week, he says, "intermediaries" for the traffickers collect the hard, whitish paste to take it to clandestine neighboring laboratories where "chemists" transform it into pure cocaine.

The peasants keep out of the most lucrative part of the business—the making and selling of cocaine—but complain that the government lumps them into the same category as the cartels.

"We're classified as drug traffickers ... but others are making the money," said Cabrera. What the coca pickers earn is just enough to stave off poverty. A seasoned worker can earn up to \$37 a day—more than four and a half times the minimum wage.

Prosperity on the horizon

The "San Coca" lands are crisscrossed by dirt roads that can turn into quagmires when heavy rains fall. Despite this, the traffic is incessant. The trucks authorized by guerrillas pass one after another loaded with fuel, ice cream, bread, clothes and more.

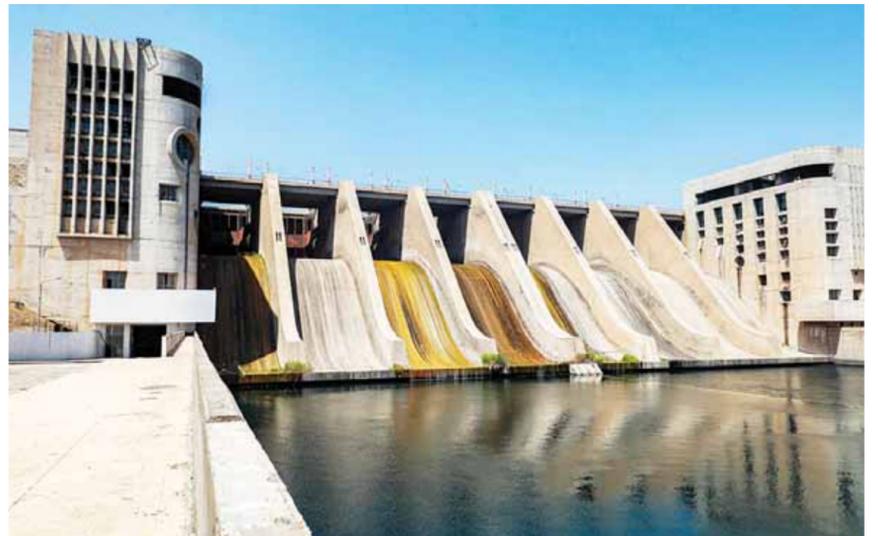
The local "coca economy" has created a community of consumers that pay handsomely for things they used to produce on their own land.

And in urban areas, the coca bonanza has fueled a construction boom, Bolanos says. Roads are being improved and schools are getting more supplies.

"The big difference with coca is that it provides us with the ability to feed ourselves and also allows us to cover what the government doesn't," said Bolanos.

But in this mountainous region, everyone fears the return of aerial crop spraying—they recall communities left in ruins, people displaced, homes abandoned, and the death of much of the plant life.

Airplanes first sprayed the herbicide in 1984 before returning in the 1990s and then again in 2008. "Aerial spraying is practically murder for these towns," said Bolanos. — AFP



SADD AL FURAT, Syria : This picture taken on July 26, 2021 shows a view of the closed sluice gates at the 1973 Tabqa Dam along the Euphrates river in Raqqa province in eastern Syria. — AFP

'Desert': Drying Euphrates threatens disaster in Syria

SADD AL FURAT, Syria: Syria's longest river used to flow by his olive grove, but today Khaled al-Khamees says it has receded into the distance, parching his trees and leaving his family with hardly a drop to drink. "It's as if we were in the desert," said the 50-year-old farmer, standing on what last year was the Euphrates riverbed.

"We're thinking of leaving because there's no water left to drink or irrigate the trees." Aid groups and engineers are warning of a looming humanitarian disaster in northeast Syria, where waning river flow is compounding woes after a decade of war.

They say plummeting water levels at hydroelectric dams since January are threatening water and power cutoffs for up to five million Syrians, in the middle of a coronavirus pandemic and economic crisis.

As drought grips the Mediterranean region, many in the Kurdish-held area are accusing neighbour and arch foe Turkey of weaponising water by tightening the tap upstream, though a Turkish source denied this. Outside the village of Rumayleh where Khamees lives, black irrigation hoses lay in dusty coils after the river receded so far it became too expensive to operate the water pumps.

Instead, much closer to the water's edge, Khamees and neighbours were busy planting corn and beans in soil just last year submerged under the current. The father of 12 said he had not seen the river so far away from the village in decades. "The women have to walk seven kilometres (four miles) just to get a bucket of water for their children to drink," he said.

'Alarming'

Reputed to have once flown through the biblical Garden of Eden, the Euphrates runs for almost 2,800 kilometres (1,700 miles) across Turkey, Syria and Iraq. In times of rain, it gushes into northern Syria through the Turkish border, and flows diagonally across the war-torn country towards Iraq.

Along its way, it irrigates swathes of land in Syria's breadbasket, and runs through three hydroelectric dams that provide power and drinking water to millions. But over the past eight months the river has contracted to a sliver, sucking precious water out of reservoirs and increasing the risk of dam turbines grinding to a halt.

At the Tishrin Dam, the first into which the river falls inside Syria, director Hammoud al-Hadiyyeen described an "alarming" drop in water levels not seen since the dam's completion in 1999.

"It's a humanitarian catastrophe," he said. Since January, the water level has plummeted by five metres, and now hovers just dozens of centimetres above "dead level" when turbines are supposed to completely stop producing electricity.

Across northeast Syria, already power generation has fallen by 70 percent since last year, the head of the energy authority Welat Darwish says.

Two out of three of all potable water stations along the river are pumping less water or have stopped working, humanitarian groups say.

'Water weapon'?

Almost 90 percent of the Euphrates flow comes from Turkey, the United Nations says. To ensure Syria's fair share, Turkey in 1987 agreed to allow an annual average of 500 cubic metres per second of water across its border. But that has dropped to as low as 200 in recent months, engineers claim.

Inside Syria, the Euphrates flows mostly along territory controlled by semi-autonomous Kurdish authorities, whose US-backed fighters have over the years wrested its dams and towns from the Islamic State group.

Turkey however regards those Kurdish fighters as linked to its outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and has grabbed land from them during Syria's war. Syria's Kurds have accused Ankara of holding back more water than necessary in its dams, and Damascus in June urged Turkey to increase the flow immediately.

But a Turkish diplomatic source told AFP Turkey had "never reduced the amount of water it releases from its trans-boundary rivers for political or other purposes". "Our region is facing one of the worst

drought periods due to climate change," and rainfall in southern Turkey was "the lowest in the last 30 years", this source said.

Analyst Nicholas Heras said Turkey did hold leverage over Syria and Iraq with the huge Ataturk Dam just 80 kilometres from the Syrian border, but it was debatable whether Ankara wanted to use it.

That would mean "international complications for Ankara, both with the United States and Russia", a key Damascus ally across the table in Syria peace talks. "The easier, and more frequently utilised, water weapon that Ankara uses is the Alouk plant" that it seized from the Kurds in 2019, Heras said.

Fresh water supply from the station on another river has been disrupted at least 24 times since 2019, affecting 460,000 people, the United Nations says.

'Drought is coming'

But Syria analyst Fabrice Balanche said the drought did serve Ankara's long-term goal of "asphyxiating northeast Syria economically".

"In periods of drought, Turkey helps itself and leaves the rest for the Kurds, in defiance and in full knowledge of the consequences," he said.

Wim Zwijsen, of the PAX peace organisation, said Turkey was struggling to provide enough water for "megalomaniac" agricultural projects set up in the 1990s, a challenge now complicated by climate change. "The big picture is drought is coming," he said. "We already see a rapid decline in healthy vegetation growth on satellite analysis" in both Syria and Turkey.

A UN climate change report this month found human influence had almost definitely increased the frequency of simultaneous heatwaves and droughts worldwide. These dry spells are to become longer and more severe around the Mediterranean, the United Nations has warned, with Syria most at risk, according to the 2019 Global Crisis Risk Index.

Downstream from the Tishrin Dam, the Euphrates pools in the depths of Lake Assad. But today Syria's largest fresh water reservoir too has withdrawn inwards. On its banks, men with tar-stained hands worked to repair generators exhausted from pumping water across much further distances than in previous years. Agricultural worker Hussein Saleh, 56, was desperate. "We can no longer afford the hoses or the generators," said the father of 12. "The olive trees are thirsty and the animals are hungry."

At home, in the village of Twihiniyyeh, power cuts had increased from nine to 19 hours a day, he said. At the country's largest dam of Tabqa to the south, veteran engineer Khaled Shaheen was worried. "We're trying to diminish how much water we send through," he said. But "if it continues like this, we could stop electricity production for all except... bakeries, flour mills and hospitals."

'Short on food'

Meanwhile, among five million people depending on the Euphrates for drinking water, more and more families are ingesting liquid that is unsafe.

Those cut off from the network instead pay for deliveries from private water trucks. But these tankers most often draw water directly from the river — where wastewater concentration is high due to low flow — and these supplies are not filtered.

Waterborne disease outbreaks are on the rise, and contaminated ice has caused diarrhoea in displacement camps, according to the NES Forum, an NGO coordination body for the region.

Marwa Daoudy, a Syrian scholar of environmental security, said the decreasing flow of the Euphrates was "very alarming". "These levels threaten whole rural communities in the Euphrates Basin whose livelihood depends on agriculture and irrigation," she said.

Aid groups say drought conditions have already destroyed large swathes of rain-fed crops in Syria, a country where 60 percent of people already struggle to put food on the table.

In some communities, animals have started to die, the NES Forum has said. The United Nations says barley production could drop by 1.2 million tonnes this year, making animal feed more scarce.

Balanche said Syria was likely facing a years-long drought not seen since one from 2005 to 2010, before the civil war. "The northeast, but also all of Syria, will be short on food, and will need to import massive quantities of cereals."

Downstream in Iraq, seven million more people risked losing access to water from the river, the Norwegian Refugee Council's Karl Schembri said.

"Climate doesn't look at borders," he said. — AFP



PATIA: People work in the production of coca base at a makeshift laboratory in the mountains of El Patia municipality, Cauca department, Colombia. — AFP