

A Democracy Center Issue Brief

THE U.S. 'WAR ON COCA' IN BOLIVIA

**Book Excerpt by Coletta Youngers
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Introduction

No issue has more defined the U.S./Bolivia relationship in the past decade than the U.S. 'War on Coca'. The coca leaf has been used in ceremonies, consumed as a medicine, and traded as a valuable commodity by Andean civilizations for over 4,000 years. But the leaf is also the raw ingredient to manufacture cocaine, a drug that plagues communities and feeds violence on the streets of Brazil, Europe and the U.S.

Below is an excerpt on the coca issue from The Democracy Center's forthcoming book, Dignity and Defiance: Stories from Bolivia's Challenge to Globalization (University of California Press). The excerpt comes from a chapter dedicated to the coca issue. This particular piece was written by Coletta A. Youngers, a Senior Fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America and one of the U.S.' foremost experts on the 'War on Drugs'.

For release information about the book write us at book@democracyctr.org.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE U.S. 'WAR ON DRUGS' IN BOLIVIA

Coletta A. Youngers

In September 2006, Bolivian President Evo Morales stood before the United Nations General Assembly and held up a small coca leaf. The nation's first indigenous president declared, "This is the green coca leaf, it is not white like cocaine. It represents Andean culture." A leader of the Bolivian coca growers, Morales had been denied a U.S. visa to attend a U.N. Special Session on Drug Policy a decade earlier. As President, he had access to an international platform to defend the historic, religious and cultural uses of the coca leaf and to distinguish it from the illicit substance cocaine with which it had become indelibly linked. He also has had a historic opportunity to put an end to the U.S. 'war on drugs' in Bolivia.

Bolivians have paid a high price waging Washington's war. U.S.-backed coca eradication efforts have long been characterized by human rights violations in the Chapare coca-growing region. Although abuses have not reached the level of the executions and disappearances carried out by some of Bolivia's military dictators in past years, a disturbing pattern of killings, mistreatment, and abuse of the local population has prevailed. The primary victims are not drug traffickers, but poor farmers who support their families through the production of coca and other agricultural products. Coca crop eradication has plunged communities and families deeper into poverty, generating social unrest, violence and political instability. That discontent ultimately led to the creation of the political party, MAS (Movement Toward Socialism) that later elected the country's most visible coca grower leader to its highest office.

Garnering 54% of the vote in the December 2005 elections, Morales earned an unprecedented mandate for change. Well aware of the negative consequences and failures of past policy, his government adopted a radically different approach to the drug issue, best characterized by its slogan, "coca yes, cocaine no." Other coca grower leaders began directing the government agencies responsible for carrying out the new

policy, giving it greater credibility and legitimacy in Bolivia. The new strategy offered the possibility for the long-term success in limiting coca production that had eluded past governments by promoting economic development in poor rural areas and cooperative coca crop reduction.

THE U.S. 'WAR ON DRUGS'

The explosion of the crack-cocaine epidemic in the United States in the mid-1980s led the U.S. Congress to pass increasingly draconian legislation intended to thwart both illicit drug abuse and the violence and other social problems associated with the drug trade at home. U.S. officials placed blame on the foreign countries where illicit drugs were produced – primarily the Andean region of South America and Mexico. Policies were developed to decrease the supply of illicit drugs by eradicating the production of coca, curbing cocaine production in overseas laboratories, and seizing shipments en route.

For the past two decades, approximately two-thirds of federal funding for drug control programs has gone to programs to limit supply, with only one-third designated for treatment and education to reduce demand. The premise for the policy was that limiting supply would drive up the price of illicit substances and lead to decreased consumption. Both the premise and the policy would prove to be a failure.

The U.S. appetite for drugs was also cast in national security terms. In 1986, President Reagan first declared illicit drugs a national security threat. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush launched the Andean Initiative which led to a dramatic increase in U.S. involvement in the so-called 'source' countries of Bolivia, Colombia and Peru, where coca is grown. At the same time, the U.S. Congress designated the Defense Department as the single lead agency for the detection and monitoring of illicit drugs. Latin American militaries and police forces were provided with U.S. economic assistance, training, and intelligence and logistical support to carry out counterdrug initiatives.

The expanded role of the U.S. and Latin American security forces in domestic counterdrug efforts is commonly referred to as the militarization of U.S. drug policy. Since September 11, 2001, coca-grower leaders have been included on U.S. terrorist lists, targeted as 'narco-terrorists.' Within this policy framework, economic development and democratic institution-building were usually minimized.

Governments in the Andean region initially resisted the forced eradication at the heart of the U.S. approach – particularly the nascent civilian government in Bolivia, where the military had only recently returned to the barracks after decades of violent dictatorships. (Bolivia has notoriously suffered 182 military coups since gaining independence in 1825 – a regional record.) While U.S. officials considered coca farmers to be the first link in the chain leading to drug abuse in the United States, Bolivian and other Andean officials saw poor farmers who were trying to eke out a subsistence-level living. Forced coca eradication pitted government forces against one of the most vulnerable segments of the population, and conflict and violence was the result.

Despite this initial resistance, Washington used its political muscle to ensure compliance. In 1986, the U.S. Congress passed legislation mandating the president to "certify"

annually that major drug producing and transit countries were cooperating fully with U.S. anti-drug programs. Countries that were not certified faced a range of sanctions, including a cut-off in U.S. financial assistance, *no* votes on loans from multilateral development banks and discretionary trade sanctions.ⁱ In Bolivia's case, annual coca eradication targets had to be met so that it could receive U.S. certification.

Bolivia is particularly susceptible to such pressure. As one of the most impoverished countries in Latin America, it is heavily dependent on U.S. foreign aid and on aid from international lending institutions closely tied to the U.S. government. As a result, Bolivia has long followed Washington's marching orders on drug control policies. U.S. lawyers reportedly drafted the Bolivian "Law to Regulate Coca and Controlled Substances," commonly referred to as Law 1008, while the U.S. Embassy lobbied heavily for its approval by the Bolivian Congress in 1988. Ultimately, the U.S. government made approval of the law a condition for releasing U.S. aid.ⁱⁱ

Until the election of President Morales, Law 1008 provided the legal framework for repressive coca eradication efforts. The draconian statute, among other features, set up a special U.S.-funded team of anti-drug prosecutors and required that all Bolivians accused of a drug offense be held in jail, with no option for bail or release, until the process of trial was completed. Given that these trials often took years to complete, the effect was that those arrested were treated as guilty until proven innocent.

In May 1990, the Bolivian government also capitulated to U.S. pressure and signed a secret agreement that formalized a role for the Bolivian armed forces, including the army, in counterdrug operations. As it was a wildly unpopular move, the Paz Zamora government repeatedly denied the existence of the agreement. Despite the public outcry after news of the accord finally leaked out, the Bolivian armed forces had already gained a growing foothold in the drug war, with little if any oversight by civilian officials.

The Bolivian military and police forces dedicated to counterdrug efforts have been funded almost solely by Washington, creating even greater dependency and further skewing bilateral relations. The U.S. government has provided anti-drug forces with everything from uniforms to weapons and the cost of feeding the arrested, as well as the special U.S. bonuses paid directly to Law 1008 prosecutors. Critics complained that the country's judiciary was becoming directly subservient to the U.S. and that prosecutors were jailing innocent people by the thousands to satisfy U.S. officials. Because the U.S. government has held the purse strings and accounting has been far from transparent, the Bolivian government has been unable to calculate the budget for its counterdrug program. "We don't even know the cost of a basic anti-drug operation," complained one former Bolivian official, "as it is all paid for by the U.S. Embassy."ⁱⁱⁱ

Throughout the 1990s, the Chapare coca-growing region experienced cyclical patterns of dialogue and conflict. Wanting to avoid social unrest amongst the powerful coca-grower movement, successive governments offered economic compensation in exchange for voluntary eradication, even while forced coca eradication continued. However, such promises were rarely fulfilled and minimum eradication goals had to be met to keep the U.S. aid spigot open. Inevitably, as the annual deadline neared, periods of relative calm were followed by conflict and violence.

PLAN DIGNIDAD AND THE HIGH COST OF ERADICATION

The cycle was interrupted by the election of former dictator Hugo Banzer to the presidency in 1997, which eliminated dialogue and made conflict the norm. Banzer declared that Bolivia would achieve "zero coca" in five years and launched a massive eradication offensive as part of *Plan Dignidad*, or 'Plan Dignity.' Coca in the Chapare was the primary target of this initiative; the traditional growing zone of the Yungas was not. The armed forces were used for on-the-ground operations and approximately 5,000 troops were moved into the Chapare, greatly increasing tensions. Young military conscripts guarded by anti-drug police made their way across the region, pulling out coca plants as distraught families watched their primary source of cash income going up in fire and smoke.

Initially, the program produced impressive gains in decreasing coca production. By 2000, the government said it had almost met its goal of zero coca. The gains, however, proved to be short-lived. By 2001, coca production was on the rise and had increased by 23 percent in 2002.^{iv} The reason that the policy was not sustainable in the long-run was simple: eradication far outpaced the provision of economic alternatives. 'Alternative Development,' which was intended to offer coca-growers other cash crops, was one of *Plan Dignidad's* primary pillars and showed little success. Poor peasants had no choice but to replant coca – which they did at a rapid rate.

The economic, social, and political costs of the U.S.-backed 'war on drugs' in Bolivia, and *Plan Dignidad* in particular, were extremely high. Forced eradication efforts led to human rights violations including executions, illegal detentions, and torture. Massive sweeps of the coca-growing region, where hundreds might be detained at a time, led to arbitrary detentions where those arrested were presumed guilty until proven innocent. Though ultimately released, most detainees were never presented before judicial authorities or allowed to notify family members of their detention. Reports of mistreatment and even the torture of detainees became disturbingly common.

As coca production plummeted, so did the incomes and hence the health and nutrition standards of local residents. As income fell, families had less to spend on health care and children were taken out of school so they could work in order to supplement the household income. Though hard data is not available, local health care and education officials repeatedly complained of a surge in malnutrition-related illnesses and declining school attendance.^v Social discontent resulted in violent confrontations and blockades of highways that shut down regions of the country for months at a time. During these protests, food supplies rotted on trucks and commerce ceased, with a significant negative impact on the Bolivian economy.

Many lives were lost during these years. Dozens of coca growers were killed during eradication campaigns or during protests that turned violent. Police and military officials were also killed. In some cases, circumstances were murky; however, even clear-cut murders have not been investigated or sanctioned.

The killing of coca-grower Casimiro Huanca presents a particularly disturbing case. It began in December 2001 when a small protest took place in the town of Chimoré.^{vi} Coca growers had stacked boxes of fruit on the side of the road to protest lack of markets for alternative crops. At one point, soldiers followed coca growers, including Huanca, as they headed towards a union office. According to those present, Huanca was shot twice at close range. He bled to death from the wounds. His killer was identified as Juan Eladio Bora, a member of the Expeditionary Task Force (ETF), a paramilitary anti-drug force funded by the U.S. government. The Bolivian military tribunal determined that Bora acted in self-defense, despite the evidence indicating that neither Huanca nor any of his colleagues threatened him or other ETF members at any time.^{vii}

As in other cases, the U.S. Embassy defended the military's action. In a 2002 interview with U.S. Embassy officials, the "human rights" officer said that the shooting of Huanca could not be considered a human rights violation because he was shot in the groin. He even went so far as to accuse local human rights activists of his death, saying they did not get him adequate medical attention. What he didn't mention was the fact that the health facilities necessary to save him did not even exist in the region.^{viii}

Angry farmers, sometimes armed with machetes, have also posed a threat to the police and soldiers called out to quash protests. Between 1997 and 2004, 35 coca growers and 27 police and military personnel were killed; nearly 600 coca growers and 140 military and police were injured.^x Impunity became the norm for human rights violations attributed to members of the Bolivian security forces, as well as for farmers accused of killing soldiers or police.

Eventually Bolivians' patience with outspoken U.S. Ambassadors and repeated U.S. meddling in domestic politics wore thin. During the 2002 presidential elections, U.S. Ambassador Manuel Rocha spoke out directly against Morales, who was a candidate, warning that Bolivia would lose U.S. economic support and become an international pariah if the electorate "played footsie with coca growers,"^x Morales shot up in the polls and lost by only 1.5 percent of the vote. Morales' stunning presidential victory in 2005 was in part due to Washington's relentless – and ultimately unsuccessful – anti-drug crusade. The conflict, violence and economic hardship caused by coca eradication policies, among other issues, helped propel Morales into the national spotlight and generated popular support for his anti-U.S. rhetoric.

COCA YES, COCAINE NO

As a coca-grower himself, President Morales has had an unprecedented opportunity to put into place an anti-drug strategy that could win broad Bolivian support.^{xi} The new government's goal was to limit coca production that fuels the cocaine market, but avoid the conflict and violence that has characterized previous policy. Morales also made clear his intention to continue combating the illicit drug business, stating in his inaugural address, "we are convinced that drug trafficking is a disease afflicting humanity."^{xi}

The basis of Morales' plan was to carry out cooperative coca reduction and extend it into other coca producing areas previously unaffected by forced eradication. Based on an

agreement signed in October 2004 by then-President Carlos Mesa, the Morales government continued to allow each coca-growing family to maintain one *cato* of coca (1,600 square meters, or a little more than one-third of an acre). The agreement required that any coca grown beyond that be subject to eradication. In addition, coca farmers accepted eradication in the two major national parks in the region. Initially with a one-year mandate, the October 2004 agreement put an end to forced eradication. If cooperative coca eradication is going to have long-term success, it will require that effective monitoring systems be put in place.^{xiii}

In the Chapare, the strategy to limit coca production appears to be working and the lack of conflict and violence has contributed to an environment that is conducive to economic development. According to local journalist Juan Alanoca, "in economic terms, the situation has improved. People are now ensured that they will have some money from coca."^{xiv} This allows them greater flexibility to experiment with other agricultural products and seek out other income generating opportunities – key elements of a long-term coca reduction strategy (discussed in more detail later in this chapter). In its first year in office the Morales government met its goal of eliminating 5,000 hectares (12,350 acres) of coca but without the violence characteristic of previous administrations.

"Popular participation and cooperation has increased with this government," says Col. Miguel Vásquez, former director of the country's anti-drug police.^{xv} With that participation comes cooperative regulation that is far more effective than the heavy hand of unilateral, forced eradication and interdiction. However, the continued use of the Bolivian military in coca reduction efforts and U.S. pressure to meet eradication targets has led to violence in other coca growing regions. In September 2006, two coca growers were killed in a confrontation with members of a joint military-police eradication force in the Vandiola Yungas. The tragedy illustrates the difficulties the government faces in implementing its coca strategy in areas where coca has traditionally been grown and where farmers are largely dependent on the cultivation of coca as their principal crop.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

Despite skepticism and resistance to some aspects of the new government's approach, the U.S. government has continued its anti-drug programs in Bolivia and collaborates closely on drug interdiction efforts in particular. While tensions often run high and the uneasy truce could easily dissipate, both governments point out that a rupture in bilateral relations would not benefit either country.

The key to the potential success of the new government's approach on eradication will be its ability to prevent the replanting of destroyed crops, a problem which has thwarted long-term success in the past. To date, initial results are promising. In 2006, government efforts to work collaboratively with coca grower federations and individual communities to reduce cultivation met with success. Violence and conflict have, for the most part, been avoided, creating a climate more propitious for rural economic growth.

The future challenge, however, will be to provide economic opportunities to improve overall quality of life for those traditionally dependent on coca cultivation. To the extent

that there has been any success with drug crop eradication efforts, it has been in Asia and most notably, in Thailand, Pakistan and Vietnam. There, governments put into place comprehensive development programs to increase both the income levels and the standards of living of local farmers, which were then weaned from opium poppy production. In each of these cases, eradication efforts were carried out in collaboration with local communities and within a framework of respect for the rule of law and human rights. Development and law enforcement efforts were kept separate in order to assure the continued support of the local population. Adopting a similar approach is essential to efforts in Bolivia.

A PORTRAIT FROM THE BOLIVIAN DRUG WAR: A BABY TURNS ONE IN JAIL

Jim Shultz

If it hadn't been her mother's birthday that day, Lourdes Mamani probably wouldn't have spent 22 months in a Cochabamba jail. Her son Marcos wouldn't have spent his first birthday, on the 4th of July, in that same jail with her, courtesy of the U.S. 'war on drugs.'

On June 23, 1999, Lourdes was in her mother's kitchen baking her a cake when a distant cousin, Eduardo, showed up at the front door. He told them he had come to pick up two small, sealed opaque plastic bags, which Lourdes' older brother had stored in their father's small tool room. The bags were filled with *Q'owa*, he told her, a common plant burned like incense during the first-Friday-of-each-month rituals by the same name. She helped him carry the bags to a waiting taxi. He declined an invitation to join them for cake, and he left.

Two hours later there was another knock at her mother's door. This time it was two uniformed officers from the FELCN Bolivia's special anti-narcotics police. Her cousin, they told her, had been arrested with two bags of marijuana and had given the police a false name. The officers had traced the cousin back to the house where he picked up the bags and demanded that Lourdes or her mother come with them to the jail to identify him.

With a promise that they would drive her to the jail and promptly return her to her mother's house, Lourdes swept her baby into her arms and got into the backseat of the officers' car. At the jail she gave them the identification of her cousin that they asked for, but instead of being driven home Lourdes and Marcos were locked into a 10 x 15 foot concrete cell with a dozen other women and their children and infants.

"I've always accepted that I am poor, that I wear old clothes," she explained. "I never chose to do anything illegal to change that. Never in my life did I think I would be here."^{xxvi}

Note: The names in this portrait were changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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- ⁱ While Bolivia was never fully decertified, in 1994 and 1995 it was granted a national security waiver, which eliminated the sanctions to protect U.S. national security. The certification process was modified in 2002. See Coletta A. Youngers and Eileen Rosin, eds., *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2005), p. 372.
- ⁱⁱ Kathryn Ledebur, "Bolivia: Clear Consequences," in Coletta A. Youngers and Eileen Rosin, eds., *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2005), p. 151. and Theo Roncken, "El Enigma Boliviana: Bilateralizar la Agenda Bilateral," in Martin Jelsma and Theo Roncken, editors, *Democracias Bajo Fuego: Drogas y Poder en América Latina* (Montevideo, Uruguay: Ediciones de Brecha, no date), p. 305.
- ⁱⁱⁱ WOLA interview with former Bolivian government official, 1 October 2006.
- ^{iv} U.S. Department of State, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2002, Bolivia section.
- ^v WOLA interview with Godofredo Reinicke, former Human Rights Ombusman in the Chapare, 11 August 2005.
- ^{vi} Kathryn Ledebur, *Coca and Conflict in the Chapare*, published by the Washington Office on Latin America's Drug War Monitor series, July 2002, p. 13.
- ^{vii} Ledebur, pp. 164 and 170.
- ^{viii} AIN/WOLA meeting at the U.S. Embassy in La Paz, November 2002.
- ^{ix} Ledebur, p. 164 and written communication from Kathryn Ledebur, 11 August 2005.
- ^x AIN-WOLA interview with Phil Chicola, U.S. State Department, 15 July 2002.
- ^{xi} This section is based on Kathryn Ledebur and Coletta A. Youngers, *Crisis or Opportunity? Bolivian Drug Control Policy and the U.S. Response*, published by the Washington Office on Latin America and the Andean Information Network in June 2006.
- ^{xii} "Morales reitira a EE.UU. necesidad de alianza," *El Diario*, January 23, 2006.
- ^{xiii} Conzelman, Carol. "Yungas Coca Growers Seek Industrialization of Coca but Split on its Legalization." AIN Report. February 8, 2007.
- ^{xiv} AIN/WOLA interview with Juan Alanoca, Director of Radio Fides Chapare, 28 September 2006.
- ^{xv} AIN/WOLA interview with Col. Miguel Vásquez Viscarra, 4 October 2006.
- ^{xvi} Personal interviews by the author, Cochabamba, June-July 1999.