

U.N. says Colombian coca plantation down

The Miami Herald
May. 08, 2007

BOGOTA, Colombia --

The amount of Colombian land devoted to growing coca, the raw material in cocaine, fell by nearly 10 percent last year on record eradication attempts, the United Nations estimates.

The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime calculated Colombia had 190,300 acres of coca plantations in 2006, or 300 square miles, down from 212,500 acres the previous year, a source familiar with the data said on Tuesday. The source requested anonymity because the figures will not be officially released until June.

Last year, Colombia's drug police, with U.S. backing, used planes to fumigate 424,000 acres of coca and opium poppies, and manually eradicated an additional 42,100 acres of coca. In 2005, authorities fumigated almost 345,900 acres.

The U.S. has spent more than \$4 billion in Colombia over the past six years to combat both a long-running insurgency and the world's largest cocaine industry, a business that helps fund a five-decade armed conflict between leftist rebels and far-right paramilitaries.

While the data is good news for the Colombian government struggling with a scandal linking its congressional backers with drug-funded paramilitaries, the numbers may not be enough to appease critics.

Some Democrats - newly in charge of Congress - are criticizing the heavy military focus of Plan Colombia, which directs about 80 percent of U.S. aid to military projects and only 20 percent to social projects designed to wean farmers off growing coca.

Working in conjunction with Colombian authorities, the U.N. collects its coca estimates using satellite imagery, with spot verification by overhead flights.

The U.S. will release its own figures later this month or June.

Report of a decline comes after the White House drug czar told U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley in a January letter that the price of cocaine was falling on U.S. streets while purity was rising. Both purity and price are used by analysts as indicators of the availability of cocaine.