

Cocaine flows over Brazil-Bolivia border

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PUERTO SUAREZ, Bolivia --

The view into Brazil from this Bolivian border city is of an Amazon jungle paradise: an endless green horizon broken only by a patch of urban skyline reflected in a shimmering lagoon.

But in the tranquility, authorities see an increasingly sophisticated cocaine trade positioned to supply Brazil's megacities to the east and Europe beyond.

The gateway for that trade is an imposing tangle of swamps, rivers, and rainforest along the 2,130-mile Brazil-Bolivia border, a daunting frontier neither country guards especially closely.

Bolivia has only one border officer for every 13 miles. On the Brazilian side, the sparse 100 border posts are manned by a patchwork of local and national officers.

Chemicals used to turn Bolivian coca leaf into cocaine flow easily from Brazil, and processed coca paste slips back just as easily, officials say.

"We have noticed a growth in the traffic of cocaine, and principally cocaine paste, over the last two years," Marcio Paulo Buzanelli, director of the Brazilian Intelligence Agency, told The Associated Press. "One indication of this are the seizures in the Brazilian states that border Bolivia."

Cocaine seizures climbed by 14 percent last year to 1.7 tons in Brazil's Mato Grosso do Sul state, home to Corumba - just in view of Bolivia's Puerto Suarez - and more than tripled to 0.7 tons in Rondonia state.

The busts pale in comparison to seizures along larger smuggling routes in the Caribbean, and Bolivia remains a distant third among cocaine producing nations behind Colombia and Peru. Only a tiny percentage of Bolivian cocaine is thought to reach the U.S., the world's largest consumer of the drug.

But officials say the seizures show that Bolivia's growing coca crop, and more sophisticated drug production, are feeding an expanding cocaine market in Brazil and Europe.

Most Bolivian drug labs are still humble operations where workers in rubber boots stomp on coca leaves to make a white paste, which is then shipped to Brazil for further refining into cocaine.

But police last month uncovered a vast laboratory in Bolivia's Santa Cruz state they say was capable of producing 243 pounds of refined cocaine a day through "Colombian technology," said Col. Rene Sanabria, who directs Bolivia's Special Anti-Drug Force.

The site had an electric generator, microwave ovens to dry the cocaine powder, showers for the workers and hands-on direction from the world's largest cocaine producer: Six of the eight arrested workers were Colombian.

Another cocaine factory busted recently in Santa Cruz replaced the rubber boots of the coca steppers with machines and had a hidden airstrip to deliver the paste to Brazil, he said. "Now they use electric mulchers to reduce the time it takes to make the drug and obtain a higher percentage of the alkaloid."

Cocaine once largely passed through Brazil on its way from the Andes to Spain and other European destinations, where use is increasing. But some estimates say Brazil now consumes half the flow itself.

Police in Brazil seized 17.4 tons of cocaine in 2005, more than twice the 7.2 tons seized just a year before, according to the U.S. Embassy in Brazil. Buzanelli estimates that more than 60 percent of Brazil's cocaine comes from Bolivia.

In wealthy districts of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, dealers sell it through dial-up delivery services, while slum dealers cut the cocaine so severely with talcum powder or other mixers that a gram can costs \$2, Buzanelli said.

Bolivian coca production is still well below its mid-1990s peak but has rebounded to an estimated 65,500 acres in 2005, from an estimated 36,000 acres in 2000.

Studies so far are inconclusive, but many analysts expect the crop to continue expanding under President Evo Morales, who was elected by a landslide after promoting the cultural importance of the coca leaf, which has been chewed for millennia as a mild stimulant here.

While Morales has vowed to crack down on cocaine producers, he proposed nearly doubling the legal production limit for the coca leaf to 49,420 acres.

Bolivian anti-drug patrols - backed by \$54.7 million in U.S. aid for training, sport utility vehicles and helicopters - seized 15.4 tons of cocaine paste and cocaine last year, 23 percent more than the year before Morales took office. And Brazil has tightened controls on sulfuric acid, ether and other precursor chemicals for cocaine.

Buzanelli says the Bolivian government sees cocaine as Brazil's problem.

"Bolivia produces coca, and cocaine production is a problem of the countries that consume the drug," he said.
