

## Colombia's Low-Tech Coca Assault

Uprooting Bushes by Hand Preferred Over U.S.-Funded Aerial Spraying

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EL MIRADOR, Colombia -- The latest shift in Colombia's war on drugs is evident on a green hilltop in this town, as weather-beaten men in gray jumpsuits -- government-paid eradicators -- use hoes and muscle to rip out bushes of coca. Policemen carrying M-16 assault rifles and land-mine detectors stand sentry, while a radio operator listens in on the crackling conversation between two Marxist guerrilla units.

The operation here in the southern state of Caqueta is tedious, hard and dangerous, since destroying coca is a financial blow to the guerrillas, who draw much of their funding from the crop that is used to make cocaine. But Colombian officials say uprooting by hand is the future -- a strategy at odds with U.S. reliance on aerial fumigation.

Three years ago, almost all coca eradication efforts in Colombia were carried out through aerial spraying. By last year, however, more than 100,000 acres of the crop were destroyed by hand, accounting for almost 25 percent of the coca eradicated. The Defense Ministry said it is designing a plan to uproot 172,000 acres by hand this year.

"We are convinced of the advantages of manual eradication over spraying, and that's why we want to give more importance to manual eradication," Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said in an interview, echoing the views of other officials.

Aerial spraying by crop dusters was sold as a great elixir that would curtail Colombia's coca crop, delivering a lasting blow to the cocaine trade. But after seven years and more than \$5 billion in funding from the United States, [CIA](#) monitoring of coca shows that this country has as much of the crop as it did in 2001, the first full year of aerial spraying under what is known as Plan Colombia.

U.S. officials say new mapping techniques have allowed them to survey more ground in Colombia than before, making such comparisons unfair. They say a sharp drop in violence during [President Álvaro Uribe's](#) five-year tenure shows that the program is undercutting funding for violent groups. And they say that other measurements -- more cocaine labs have been destroyed, and more than 500 drug traffickers have been extradited to the United States since 2002 -- prove that the cocaine trade has been hit hard.

"The cultivation number, as an isolated measure, can be leading some people to believe it's not working," John P. Walters, the White House drug policy chief, said by telephone from Washington. "A more difficult but more important number is how much they are able to produce. It looks like that's down."

Although U.S. officials have not publicly criticized manual eradication, they have repeatedly emphasized their commitment to aerial fumigation. Officials here in Colombia, meanwhile, from Vice President Francisco Santos to officers in the National Police, which

carries out anti-drug operations, are publicly taking a stand that contradicts that of the Bush administration.

"We feel that we're on a stationary bicycle," said Santos the defense minister, referring to the results of the spraying program. "We've advanced very slowly. So we have to change our tactics."

The reasons for the shift are manifold:

Coca, once found primarily in Colombia's south, is now cultivated nationwide. Aerial spraying has prompted farmers to abandon large plots for smaller, more isolated ones in regions where legal crops are often grown next to coca. Crop dusters invariably hit the legitimate crops, too, angering farming communities. Fumigation has also hurt relations with neighboring [Ecuador](#), which says the spray from planes is wafting into its territory and damaging farms.

In addition, U.S. and [U.N.](#) data show that Colombia, [Bolivia](#) and [Peru](#) together continue producing more than enough cocaine to meet world demand. Colombia is the only U.S. ally to fumigate drug crops on a large scale.

"The strategy doesn't work; fumigating doesn't eradicate," El Tiempo, the country's largest newspaper, said recently in an editorial. "Instead of clamoring for help on a program that seems more inappropriate every day, the government should take advantage of this moment to redirect and rethink its anti-drug collaboration with the United States. Fumigation should be suspended and only used in extraordinary cases."

In interviews, government officials say one of the chief benefits of manual eradication is that it destroys the entire coca bush, root and all. By contrast, farmers whose crops are sprayed often quickly cut them back to the root in order to regrow the bush. Farmers also cover coca leaves with substances that limit the effectiveness of the herbicide spray, glyphosate.

Santos, the defense minister, said it is possible that in coming years 75 percent of the coca removed will be eradicated manually.

Officials also said that with Colombia planning to spend more to build a state presence in lawless regions, it makes sense to eradicate on the ground, instead of from the air. "When you're in a plane, it's 140 knots and you're gone," said Col. José Ángel Mendoza, who commands police operations here in Caqueta state. "When you're on land, you're with the people."

Vice President Santos, though, said the idea is to develop a strategy in which coca farmers are eradicating in exchange for assistance cultivating legal crops. Without such alternatives, said [John Walsh](#), senior associate for drug policy at the advocacy group Washington Office on Latin America, the gains achieved by manual eradication will be reversed with new plantings.

The involvement of coca farmers in eradication may not yield fast results, he said, but "it should mean more durable results and, just as importantly, could foster a positive relationship between communities and different levels of government."

The development of the new strategy comes as Democrats in the [U.S. Congress](#), concerned about human rights in Colombia as well as the effectiveness of aerial fumigation, have cut aid to the country by 10 percent. The spraying program would be hit hard by a House plan to slash military funding to [Colombia](#) by \$150 million, though the Senate may restore some of the funds when it votes this month.

Walters, the U.S. drug policy chief, said cutting aerial spraying would be shortsighted. He said the strategy has weakened the rebels, while helping to push thousands of paramilitary fighters into a government demobilization program. A classified study released by the [White House](#) said that profits from drug-related activities collected by the largest rebel group here -- the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or [FARC](#) -- fell by a third between 2003 and 2005 and are now \$60 million to \$115 million a year.

For now, the Colombians are funding the manual eradication, though officials said they want the Bush administration to show greater flexibility with anti-drug funds.

It has not been easy, or cheap, particularly in lives lost. About 40 policemen and eradicators have been killed in the past year -- a fact that weighed heavily on the team working the coca fields in El Mirador.

"This is a guerrilla zone, so the danger is always there," said Anselmo Calderon, 39, one of the men who's been uprooting coca in El Mirador. "It's no secret the guerrillas sustain themselves with this, so we can become a military target."

The job takes time. Calderon and dozens of other men were assigned to clean one plot after another over eight consecutive weeks. Their work is dependent on a police unit, which ensures that muddy trails aren't mined or that booby traps haven't been planted deep under the coca bushes that are to be uprooted.

On a recent day, success was measured by the horizon, said one police officer, José Luis Merchan. He pointed out the other hilltops, all of them scraped clean of coca plants.

"What were coca fields have been turned into cattle pasture," he said. "But it gets harder all the time. People put the plots higher, in more mountainous areas, harder for the police."