



Bolivian Drug Control Policy

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One of the most important and contentious issues in U.S.-Bolivian relations is drug control policy. The Morales government's framework – **"coca yes, cocaine no"** – seeks to distinguish clearly between coca, a plant long used by indigenous peoples for health, religious and cultural purposes, and cocaine, an illicit drug. A fundamental pillar of the policy is continuing cooperative coca reduction in the Chapare coca growing region and extending it into areas previously unaffected by forced eradication. While this has led to significant differences with U.S. government officials and unsubstantiated fears of an explosion in coca production, the new approach may prove to be more successful in containing coca production.

Past efforts at forced coca eradication have failed to yield long-term results; new planting quickly erased short-term gains. As a coca grower himself, President Morales has **an unprecedented opportunity to devise a drug control strategy that enjoys widespread social and political support within the country** and that could achieve lasting results by avoiding replanting. Moreover, the new strategy redefines the approach to coca while maintaining **a firm line on drug trafficking by increasing interdiction of cocaine and other drugs at all stages of production**. This is particularly important given the apparent surge in cocaine production in Peru, much of which is shipped through Bolivia.

Despite differences in approach, U.S.-Bolivian counter-drug collaboration has continued with positive results. **In 2006, interdiction of illicit drugs increased significantly and the Bolivian government met its target of eliminating 5,000 hectares of coca**, the raw material for cocaine. Formidable obstacles remain, as the government moves into areas of the country where there is greater resistance to negotiated crop reductions. In addition, for the policy to be successful in the long-term, alternative income sources need to be in place to offset the income generated by coca. However, particularly in light of past policy failure, the Bolivian government should be given the flexibility and support required from the international community to implement alternative coca control strategies.

Coca crop reduction

A highly contentious issue in Bolivia, forced eradication of coca plants fueled the political instability which led to a succession of five presidents over the past five years and sparked protests, violent confrontations, and human rights violations. Eradication far outpaced the provision of alternative development assistance, causing significant economic hardship for local families. In response, in October 2004 the government of President Carlos Mesa signed an agreement with Chapare coca growers allowing each family to maintain one *cato* of coca (1,600 square meters); any coca grown beyond that is subject to eradication. The Morales government has continued this policy of permitting limited coca production and utilizing cooperative – instead of forced – eradication.

In 2006, the new approach appeared to work in the Chapare, and the government successfully met its coca reduction target. The lack of violence and the economic security provided by the *cato* allowance has led to overall economic improvement. Farmers have greater flexibility to experiment with other agricultural products and seek out other income generating opportunities. The UN reported an increase in legal alternative crops in the

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Chapare in 2006. Progress in implementing cooperative coca reduction in areas where eradication has not been carried out is slowly getting underway, but will not likely yield such immediate, positive results. This includes both the Isiboro Secure Park in the Chapare and areas adjacent to the La Paz Yungas, a traditional coca growing region. In these regions, the potential for setbacks and lack of compliance remains high.

Over the first few months of 2007, U.S. officials repeatedly warned of soaring coca cultivation in Bolivia in 2006. However, on April 25, the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) released its estimates of coca and cocaine cultivation in Bolivia, reporting that **coca cultivation in 2006 was “statistically unchanged as compared to the 2005 estimate” and that “(c)ocaine potential production remained unchanged...from 2005 to 2006.”** In contrast, ONDCP later reported a 9 percent increase in coca production in Colombia and a 17 to 25 percent increase in Peru. Data released by the United Nations in June showed an 8 percent increase in coca production in Bolivia. Although they cited an 18% increase in potential cocaine production, this 94 metric ton estimate was still below the U.S. calculation of 115 metric tons. The dramatic difference in coca and cocaine production estimates for Andean countries presented by the U.S. government and the UN illustrate the inherent uncertainties in and unreliability of the statistics, and the need to evaluate long-term regional trends rather than short-term eradication targets.

“Zero drug trafficking”

More common ground with Washington has been found with the Morales administration’s emphasis on “zero drug trafficking.” Both Bolivian and U.S. authorities point to a significant increase in interdiction efforts since the Morales government came into office. In 2006, the Bolivian anti-drug police significantly increased counter-drug operations and seized approximately 26 percent more cocaine base and cocaine hydrochloride. Marijuana seizures increased by more than 240 percent. The Bolivian government has also stepped up activities with neighboring countries to stem the flow of precursor chemicals and limit money laundering. Officials in charge of interdiction operations dismiss speculation that the increased seizures are primarily the result of increased drug production in Bolivia. Rather, they point to steadily improving operational capacity, continued international support, and improved cooperation with local communities, which results in better intelligence. Local officials also point to the new coca strategy as key to their efforts, as communities want to distinguish between coca growers and drug traffickers and are more likely to report on drug trafficking activity.

The need for a balanced assessment

The next key moment in U.S.-Bolivian relations will occur in mid-September, when the Bush administration issues its determination on anti-drug cooperation. Given the data released by the ONDCP on Bolivia in 2006, there are no grounds to justify U.S. steps to penalize the Bolivian government regarding drug control actions. Rather, it should be a moment to reflect honestly on the positive attributes and potential pitfalls of the Bolivian government’s new approach and on how to best obtain the progress in containing the flow of illicit drugs that has remained so elusive to date.

For additional information, see:

“Crisis or Opportunity? Bolivian Drug Control Policy and the U.S. Response” June 2006 <http://www.wola.org/publications/AIN-WOLA%20Drug%20Policy%20Memo%20FINAL%20brief.pdf>

“Update on Drug Policy in Bolivia” November 2006

<http://www.wola.org/publications/Drug%20Policy%20in%20Bolivia%20Nov%202006.pdf>

“ONDCP Reports No Increase in Coca Cultivation in Bolivia in 2006” May 2007

<http://www.wola.org/media/AIN%20WOLA%20Memo%20May%202007%20Bolivia%20coca%20ONDCP.pdf>

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