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A-Section

Bolivia's coca: A staple crop and seed of U.S. disapproval

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In this remote corner of the Andes, three hours from Bolivia's capital city, Adela Mamani Poma earns $5 a day growing one of the world's most controversial crops.

Mamani, 35, grows coca - which is the raw material for cocaine and a staple of Bolivian life, chewed as a stimulant and appetite suppressant, to combat altitude sickness and to commemorate weddings and other social gatherings.

After preparing breakfast for her three children, Mamani walks an hour to the coca field where she works for 10 hours. She fills a waist-high sack of coca leaves, which her family will sell at the wholesale Villa Fatima market for slightly more than $8.

"For us, coca is medicine and food," Mamani says. "It's good to fight cocaine production, but not to fight a war against coca."

In September the White House included Bolivia on the "majors" list - an annual list of the world's major drug transit or illicit-drug-producing countries. For the third year in a row, it named Bolivia, along with Burma and Venezuela, as a country that has "failed demonstrably" in its counternarcotics efforts.

The United States says that Bolivia - the world's third-largest producer of coca, after Colombia and Peru - produces too much excess coca, which is often processed into cocaine and sold in South America and Europe. Critics say the decision is political, intended to punish Bolivia for its lack of cooperation in the U.S.-led war on drugs, specifically President Evo Morales's decision to kick out the Drug Enforcement Administration in 2008.

"Washington is saying that if you're not fighting the war on drugs the way we want you to, we'll punish you," says Sdenka Silva Ballon, a sociologist and founder of the Museo de la Coca in La Paz. "If Bolivia had invited DEA agents back, then the U.S. would probably be pleased with its efforts."

The United States began targeting Bolivia in 2008, after Morales accused Ambassador Philip Goldberg of conspiring against him and expelled him. Morales subsequently kicked out the DEA on charges of espionage. Shortly after the United States included Bolivia on the "failed demonstrably" list, it announced that the country would no longer be eligible for benefits under the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA), which gives trade preferences to countries that cooperate with drug enforcement.

Despite frosty diplomatic relations, the United States continues to subsidize Bolivia's anti-narcotics efforts. The State Department's Narcotics Affairs Section administers $22.5 million in support of Bolivia's anti-trafficking police, and last year the United States Agency for International Development funded $60 million in health and agricultural programs.

Coca cultivation is legal in Bolivia, to a point. The Bolivian government allows coca farmers, known as cocaleros,

to grow as much as 49,000 acres in the Yungas and Chapare regions. Bolivia's counternarcotics forces and cocaleros, tasked with self-regulation through a system called "social control," eradicate the rest. To the United States, these efforts are inadequate: Last year Bolivians destroyed about 16,000 acres of what the U.S. estimates to be 37,000 acres of excess coca - plants that can create 45 metric tons of cocaine.

"The president determined that Bolivia is not complying with its international obligations, and therefore not making a sufficient effort," says Joseph Manso, director of the Office of Americas Program in the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

Critics say that the United States uses flawed methodology to characterize Bolivia's anti-narcotics efforts, since U.S. and U.N. estimates of coca production rarely match up. Last year, Bolivian coca production was up either 1 percent or 9.4 percent, depending on the survey, but in past years the numbers have been even more uneven. Neither Peru nor Colombia - which grows more coca than Bolivia, but has a cozier relationship with Washington - is on the list of countries that have "failed demonstrably."

"I think Bolivians are missing a key point," Manso says. "If you look at the U.S. and U.N. numbers from 2000 until now, they both show a steady upward trend and a more than doubling of coca planting in Bolivia."

Coca is an issue that has long defined U.S.-Bolivian relations, and which Morales, a cocalero and head of the coca growers' federation, uses to galvanize his base. "Evo's electoral stronghold was the cocaleros and other groups with the same school of thought: the have-nots neglected by the government masses," says CÃ©sar Guedes, representative of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime in Bolivia. "There's a thin line where the government has to be careful: keep the culture of coca without the support and endorsement of cocaine. It takes work for the government to make that message clear."

Morales came to power aiming to develop a legal, global market for coca. Under his "Coca Yes, Cocaine No" policy, his administration committed $5 million to industrialize coca, working with scientists to find alternative uses for the plant and building factories that will process coca into flour, syrups and other products.

But the market is crippled by a 1961 U.N. anti-drug convention that bans the export of any products that contain cocaine alkaloids. "In some ways, Morales overreached," says Vanda Felbab-Brown, a counternarcotics expert and fellow at the Brookings Institution. "He wanted to show that coca is okay. He devoted a lot of his counternarcotics focus on getting coca removed from the U.N.'s list of controlled substances. I don't see that happening anytime soon."

Bolivia is spending $20 million on its own counternarcotics efforts, an investment that, if spent elsewhere, could help improve life in one of South America's poorest countries. Cocalero Adela Mamani Poma would like a hospital in the region and a better education for her children.

"My concern is that Bolivia is a victim of the circumstances," Guedes says. "The whole international demand for cocaine fuels this problem. Of the three countries [Colombia, Bolivia, Peru], Bolivia has the least means to confront the problem. It has to distract resources, people, technical means that it could put towards roads and hospitals into fighting narco-trafficking."

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