



Bullets in Lieu of Dialogue: Coca Eradication in Peru's Central Jungle

November 4, 2019

Kathryn Ledebur, Andean Information Network
Thomas Grisaffi, University of Reading

Introduction

Peru's government began forced eradication of coca crops, the raw material for cocaine, on November 1st in a corner of the central jungle that had been off limits to eradication for decades.

The eradication brigades, known as Corah¹, along with police backup made their initial move in Satipo province in Junín department, which forms part of a Belgium-sized jungle region known as the VRAEM, an acronym which stands for the Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro river valleys.



The decision marks a major change for Peru's government, which has not eradicated coca in the VRAEM since early in the 1990s to avoid an uprising by coca-growing farmers and provoking armed attacks by remnants of the once-powerful Shining Path guerrillas. The VRAEM, covering districts in four departments, has been under a state of emergency since mid-2003, in order, according to the Peruvian government, to provide more leeway to security forces fighting drug trafficking and Shining Path remnants.

President Martín Vizcarra announced in July 2019 that the state would resume eradication in the VRAEM, where more than half of Peru's coca is cultivated. He announced that the government could no longer turn a blind eye to the largest source of coca in the country. According to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, Peru had 52,100 hectares of coca under cultivation in

2018.

¹ Corah stands for *Proyecto Especial Control y Reducción del Cultivo de Coca en el Alto Huallaga* (Special Project for Control and Reduction of Coca Crops in the Upper Huallaga).



Andean Information Network  Red Andina de Información

Coca farmer shot by National Police on Nov. 1 in Paucali



University of
Reading

Rúben Vargas,

executive director of the state's anti-drug agency, DEVIDA, later assured farmers and the national press that eradication would only occur in indigenous community territories and at their request in order to protect them from drug trafficking threats. He signed an agreement on October 24 with the VRAEM umbrella coca grower union, known as FEPAVRAE, stating: "The executive reiterates that the action (is) to eradicate illegal coca in the territories of native communities located in the Mazamari, Pangoa, [and] Río Tambo district in response to the petitions and requests they sent to the Executive."²

Despite the agreement and repeated promises, eradication began in an area outside the indigenous territory at dawn on November 1st, targeting farms with small plots of coca. Coca growers and other farmers armed with sticks and rocks faced off against the security forces, who fired bullets in response, a clear use of disproportional force and a violation of international human rights law.³ Gunfire from the security forces injured four farmers. Rúben Leiva, who was part of the group resisting eradication, denounced the government's action as excessive.



Union leader Marianna Zavala during August 2019 delegation to Bolivia with other Central Jungle leaders

"We have an abusive government. They hit hard at the coca growers... They shot at us with tear gas, with high caliber weapons, that's why we have to protest. We will have a long-term strike and blockades starting November 5th," he said. Although growers signed an agreement late November 1st with the regional police commander to suspend eradication until dialogue occurred, the security forces began to rip out the plants in nearby Pangoa coca growing communities on November 3rd.

The eradication started in the Mazamari district, the most accessible region from the provincial capital, Satipo. Mazamari has a negligible amount of coca but was targeted despite organized farmers' groups repeated requests for dialogue and commitment to gradual coca crop reduction. The state stressed that it was moving into the zone at the request of Ashaninka native

² "Acta de la reunión entre el Ejecutivo, Autoridades, Organizaciones Sociales del VRAEM. 1, paragraph 2. 24 Oct. 2019. Available on request.

³ [Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials](https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/useofforceandfirearms.aspx), Adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, Havana, Cuba, 27 August to 7 September 1990. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/useofforceandfirearms.aspx>



Andean Information Network Red Andina de Información



University of
Reading

communities, which feared land grabs to plant coca. However Mazamari's small amount of coca is not on recognized Ashaninka territory.

Despite the government's moves, Premier Vicente Zaballos, who was in a different part of the VRAEM on October 24th, told farmers that the state is interested in "gradual reduction" of coca crops, and emphasized that DEVIDA had been in discussions with farmers throughout the VRAEM for months prior to the start of eradication in an effort to find common ground.

Perú - Junín - Mazamari - Pangoa



Necessity drives coca cultivation

Coca farmers express concern over the changing economic conditions in Satipo and other parts of the Peruvian Amazon where coca grows or can be grown. For the past few decades, farmers, including former coca growers, have been planting coffee and cacao as cash crops.



For the past decade, many of these small farmers in the central jungle primarily grew coffee. Local farmer, Yusbel Almonacid Santos, explains that until ten years ago the price was high, with one kilo selling for between 8 to 9 Soles (\$2.40 - \$2.70 US dollars). “People were excited about coffee; it was the *grano del oro*’ (the golden bean).” But, in 2010 a fungus - coffee

leaf rust - destroyed most of the region’s plants. In 2015 farmers took advantage of loans offered by the state-run Agrarian Bank to replant after the price of coffee crashed to a low of 2 soles (approximately US \$0.60) in October 2018. Today’s price is about five soles per kilo (\$1.50).

Producing coffee is labor intensive and therefore expensive. Once harvested the coffee must be cleaned, peeled, dried and transported to market. Almonacid explained that as a result “coffee creates more work than profit.” Other crops either do not grow well on the steep hillsides or have such a low price that they are not economically viable.

Agricultural union leader Marianne Zavala explains that, “It’s no use if the price is only 5 soles – that’s just enough to pay the people who harvest it, but for the farmer nothing is left...In fact, harvesting the coffee can actually leave you in debt because you have to pay the workers.



Last year a lot of people didn’t even bother to harvest.”

The central jungle suffers from high levels of poverty.⁴ Carlos Chavarria, an agricultural union leader reported that malnutrition and anemia are common. Alejandro Cortez, a coffee grower, said that he had been unable to replace his torn pants and worn rubber boots because of a lack of income. Alejandro introduced his children who had swollen stomachs “.... Look at the food my kids are eating - just soup, I can’t afford anything better than that.”

With loans to pay back, and children to feed, people are turning to coca leaf cultivation as an alternative. Zavala explained the importance of coca: “When coffee rust killed the plants, the

Farmer protests coca eradication Pauriali, Nov.1 1

people with a little coca could survive. Those who didn’t, had to abandon their land. They went elsewhere - our salvation was coca.’ She went on to say ‘coca

⁴ <https://www.sineace.gob.pe/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PERFIL-JUNI%CC%81N.pdf>



Andean Information Network  Red Andina de Información



University of
Reading

is like a small savings

account for us. It pays enough make ends meet.”

Carlos Tisce Quispe, mayor of the Llaylla district in Satipo province, backs coca cultivation. “I have to support the farmers, the price of coffee is less than 5 soles, pineapple prices are low, bananas are low - there is nothing to sustain the farmer if the farmers have a hectare or half a hectare of coca, it’s because with the cash they make from coca they can be buy food, there is nothing else.’ Alejandro agreed, “We have to feed our kids somehow,” he said.

Tómas Cordova, head of Peru’s National Coffee Board (*Junta Nacional del Cafe*—JNC) told Reuters last February that farmers would turn back to coca if conditions with coffee and other crops did not improve.⁵ Not only in Satipo, but throughout coca-growing valleys where crop substitution and development programs, combined with eradication, have significantly reduced coca crops, farmers are talking about how coca is their only reliable source of income.

Satipo and the VRAEM

While DEVIDA and other agencies have described economic conditions in Satipo and other parts of the VRAEM, these were not included in the Interior Ministry’s strategy to eradicate 750 hectares of coca this year. The principal areas include Alto Anapati, in the Pangoa district, as well as in the Mazamari and Río Tambo districts in Satipo province.

In its most recent report, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) determined that Satipo has approximately 3,600 hectares of coca under cultivation. Of the districts targeted for eradication, the UNODC listed 81 hectares in Mazamari, 303 hectares in Pangoa and 967 in Río Tambo. The Peruvian government has confirmed that there would be no eradication in in Vizcatán del Ene, a more remote district of Satipo with 2,242 hectares of coca according to the UNODC, because remnants of Shining Path could still be present.

The VRAEM emergency zone has varied in size and scope, with the number of districts under the emergency today, 34, the lowest in years. The 34 districts are spread out over four regions in Ayacucho, Cusco, Huancavelica and Junín departments. The zone has been the largest source of coca in Peru this decade, averaging 19,747 hectares of coca under cultivation since 2010, according to the UNODC. The highest quantity, 21,646 hectares, was recorded in the UNODC’s 2018 report. However, not all of the districts under the state of emergency are coca-

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-peru-drugs/coffee-farmers-in-peru-abandon-crops-to-grow-coca-group-idUSKCN1QE2ON>



growing regions and not all of them have Shining Path presence. The VRAEM has also become an important source of cocaine and cocaine paste production.

The targeted districts in Satipo have been part of the coca-growing belt in the central jungle for decades. They were extremely hard hit by the Shining Path during the internal armed conflict, 1980-1992, particularly in the final few years. The districts are home to indigenous people with the Ashaninkas the largest indigenous population in the zone, followed by the Nomatsiguenga, who live mainly in Pangoa. Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which studied political violence in the country between 1980 and 2000, reported that of the estimated 55,000 Ashaninkas in the central jungle at the time of the conflicts, around 10,000 were forcibly displaced, 6,000 were killed and 5,000 were held as virtual slaves by the Shining Path.

Political will

Interior Minister Carlos Morán explained the districts in Satipo were chosen for eradication because they presented the most appropriate conditions. Coca grower Marianna Zavala believes that, "They chose us because we're the poorest and the weakest, even though we have very little coca." The initial effort in Mazamari and in other zones in Satipo, will most likely serve as a test case for the administration as it implements an eradication strategy in other parts of the VRAEM emergency zone.

Morán said the region was chosen as the threat of political violence has declined as Shining Path remnants have suffered important losses, unlike in other parts of the VRAEM where they remain active. "The presence of Shining Path has declined operationally in the VRAEM, so the political decision was made to intervene in areas that are not as "hot," including Mazamari, Rio Tambo and Alto Anapati," said the Minister.

He added that the most important element, however, is political will. He argued that the eradication brigades (Corah) had not entered the VRAEM because previous governments opted against it.

The decision to eradicate will require the government to readjust its strategy for Corah, which has seen its area of operation increase in the past two years. Corah was primarily focused on the Upper Huallaga Valley, principally the Huánuco, San Martín and Ucayali regions.

The government dispatched Corah in 2018 to eradicate coca in Putumayo province in the Loreto region on the border with Colombia. The province has been under a state of emergency on and off since mid-2018 and National Police and Armed Forces launched the fourth phase of its Armageddon Operation in October. Another province in Loreto, Mariscal Ramón Castilla, also on the border with Colombia, was added to the state of emergency in August.

Corah eradicated 6,181 hectares of coca there in the first 10 months of 2019. The amount eradicated represents a significant increase in coca under cultivation. The UNODC's latest report identified 1,376 hectares in the Putumayo after eradication was completed.



Eradication

brigades entered San Gabán, Peru’s second largest coca-growing region, in southeastern Puno department in April 2019. They immediately met resistance from ?? and killed two coca farmers. An agreement was reached after two weeks, with local organizations allowing for coca eradication in the buffer zone of the

Bahuaja Sonene National Park. Corah reported 5,620 hectares eradicated in San Gabán and surrounding districts through October which also reflects a substantial increase. The UNODC reported 1,296 hectares in San Gabán in its report.

Morán said that the government cannot wait any longer to go into the VRAEM. “I do not want to answer for previous governments, but this government is committed to doing its job,” he said. The Interior Minister announced November 2nd that more than 22,000 hectares of coca had been eradicated between February 16th, when this year’s campaign began, and the end of October. The coca was eradicated in four areas, in Loreto and Ucayali departments, and in two border zones, including the Pichis-Palcazú-Pachitea valley between Huánuco and Pasco, and the

San Gabán zone, which is primarily in Puno but also includes a small chunk of Cusco. The goal for the year is to eradicate 25,000 hectares.⁶



The Bolivian coca control model?

The decision to move into Satipo with traditional forced eradication also appears to end the possibility of using a model similar to that in place in neighboring Bolivia.

At a national meeting in Mazamari on October 30, 2019, coca-growing farmers met to discuss the threat of imminent

6 “
Pre

COCA EN LO QUE VA DEL AÑO.”



eradication. Delegates included representatives from the central jungle and other coca growing regions, including Alto Huallaga and from the broader VRAEM. There was also a large contingent of leaders from Ashaninka indigenous communities - who DEVIDA argues are victims of coca expansion on their lands and pressure from drug traffickers.

Farmers expressed their rage at

the threat of eradication. Mayor Carlos Quispe said “a lot of farmers tell me, with tears in their eyes - look I have half a hectare of coca - they are going to eradicate it. That means my kids are going to have drop out of college. Is that OK? It is not”

Union leader Marianna Zavala said, “I’m worried, because they (the security forces) want to come to my zone - and I know we will no longer live in peace. There will be insecurity, and if they pull up our plants then what will our kids eat? What are we going to do? Me as a woman, as a mother, I am concerned because when the police enter, they beat people up, they even kill people.”

Many delegates said that they felt they had been ‘abandoned’ by the state. The debate focused on Peru’s commitment to the free market, which farmers believe drives down prices for the products they grow, like pineapples, cacao and citrus fruit. Leaders also faulted DEVIDA for failing to offer them realistic economic alternatives to coca.

“DEVIDA - they spend 80 percent of the money they get on salaries and cars for themselves. By the time it gets to us all we receive is a sack of fertilizer and a machete - that’s not development!” He went on to emphasize the lack of trust coca growers have in the institution: “DEVIDA divide us - that’s its job. They won’t be happy that we are having this meeting,” said Yusbel Almonacid, the coffee farmer.

Delegates came up with proposals for coca control, drawing inspiration from the Bolivian model.⁷ With leadership from veteran union leader Serafin Lujan, delegates agreed to limit the amount of coca to one hectare or even half a hectare of coca per union member, and said that they would enter into negotiations with the state to gradually reduce this amount. For its part the state would be expected to invest in rural communities - through the expansion of infrastructure and by offering assistance to support small producers through processing plants for their products and opening up new markets.

Union leader Rúben Leiva said: “We asked the government to offer us alternatives to forced eradication. We want to implement Bolivia’s model. We want gradual coca reduction alongside integrated development with community coca control.⁸ That’s what we want – we’re willing to

⁷ See Farthing, L. and K. Ledebur (2015). *Habeas Coca: Bolivia's Community Coca Control*. New York, Open Society Foundations; Grisaffi, T; Farthing, L; Ledebur, K (2017) "Integrated development with coca in the Plurinational State of Bolivia: shifting the focus from eradication to poverty alleviation." *Bulletin on Narcotics LXI*: 131-157.

⁸ Social control refers to community policing of the limits placed on coca.



Andean Information Network Red Andina de Información



University of
Reading

do that. We want to negotiate with the government about this - we just hope that they will talk to us.”



Zavala, a union leader who took part in a delegation that travelled to Bolivia in August 2019 to meet with coca growers and government officials there, said she was impressed by how in Bolivia the government collaborates with coca grower unions to promote integrated development - allowing farmers to diversify their production while still permitting them a small amount of coca to guarantee subsistence.

“Here we have a small amount of coca, maybe a quarter of a hectare, half a hectare at most. We could do a pilot project of the Bolivian model here.... I know it would work well; we are willing to do this - what we need is a commitment from the government that they will work with us,” she said.