

Bolivia: Coca growers killed in action approved by Morales Administration

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✘ A conflict between Bolivian military and coca growers led to the death of 2 coca growers on the morning of Friday, September 29. The confrontation marks an unanticipated turn of events under the Morales administration.

Morales is a long time leader of a coca grower union in the Chapare region and enemy of violent eradication of the crop. Morales campaigned on negotiated eradication and legalization of coca, as opposed to the practices of the U.S. military in Bolivia as a part of the War on Drugs.

Historically, the US War on Drugs has involved the militarization of coca growing areas, purportedly to prevent the production of cocaine. Such operations involve forced eradication of crops which often resulted in egregious violations of human rights. The coca leaf is part of traditional indigenous culture in Bolivia, and while some of the leaf does become cocaine, much of it is consumed nationally in traditional and religious practices. In many ways, Morales' rise to power is based on his experience as the president of the Six Federations coca growers' union (an position which he still holds), and the symbolic nature of this role, as a challenge to 'Yanqui' imperialism and intervention. In a recent event in Santa Cruz Morales himself admitted that "the coca leaf made me president."

The unions and the MAS (Movement Toward Socialism), Morales' political party, were founded during pro-US presidencies in reaction to and as instruments of resistance against the War on Drugs. They focused their energies on protecting the coca grower's rights to produce the leaf in peace. Now, however, not only is the history of violent eradication repeating itself with Morales on other side of negotiating table, but the government's details of Friday's deaths are vague and surrounded in rhetoric. There is a frightening irony in the way that this operation was carried out by a former coca grower himself: with a lack of negotiated eradication, the use of military force and the familiar rhetoric of the War on Drugs.

The coca growers, Ramber Guzmán Zambrana (24 years old) and Celestino Ricaldis (23) were killed by Bolivian police and military eradication forces, the Fuerzas de Tarea Conjunta (FTC), on the morning of September 29 in Carrasco National Park in the Yungas de Vandiola. Both the farmers and the land where they planted coca fall outside of the Six Federations of unionized coca growers with which the government usually negotiates. So far, details of the event from coca growers and the military are contradictory, and human rights leaders in Bolivia are calling for a full investigation.

Kathryn Ledebur of the [Andean Information Network](#) (AIN) was in the area when the event

was reported. According to Ledebur, the tragedy highlights the need for dialogue and negotiated solutions between eradication officials and coca growers, instead of the use of the military. She cites the case as a continuation of violent conflicts between coca growers and eradication forces in remote areas, which has historically been under-investigated and led to impunity for soldiers who have killed farmers. Ledebur is concerned about the lack of clear detail regarding the circumstances of the situation, and emphasizes the need for concrete information besides that provided by the military after the event.

The AIN is concerned that the camp existed a month before the attack, and that the government is characterizing the coca growers as externally influenced and involved in trafficking. "This is not a problem of narco trafficking," Ledebur stated, "this is a problem of subsistence farmers trying to survive." The AIN is stressing the need for a full investigation, but is concerned about who will be able to lead it.

Contradictory Accounts

According to government reports, a military contingent was sent by the government to eradicate illegal coca crops in the national park. However, according to coca grower representative Nicanor Churata, the area is a traditional growing area, not a part of the zone where coca growing is prohibited (1). According to the government, the area is included in an agreement signed with former president Carlos Mesa, in which coca is not allowed to be grown in National Parks (2).

Part of the difficulty in clarifying events is due to the extreme remoteness of the area, which has no roads and is only accessible by foot or helicopter. Many landless subsistence farmers live in remote areas and grow coca as their only plausible cash crop due to the fact that it will not spoil while being transported to markets in the nearest towns.

Traditional uses of coca are widespread and transcend class. While miners and farmers chew coca as a source of energy (similar to coffee) and to suppress hunger, coca is also an excellent source of vitamins and is a popular tea. Even the US Embassy's website suggests using it to cure altitude sickness. However, according to the ministers of defense, Walker San Miguel and Alicia Muñoz, the remoteness of the area means that the coca grown in the area has no access to markets, and is therefore only being used in the production of cocaine, (3). This response is suspicious in its similarity to excuses used by former governments to explain past eradication conflicts that ended in similar violence. Defense ministers also claimed that the coca growers were armed by foreign narco traffickers, a claim denied by coca leader Nicanor Churata.

According to the military reports, between 8 and 9 am, the eradication contingent was ambushed by 200 coca growers armed with guns and dynamite, and the soldiers shot back in self defense, (4). However, according to Churata, growers had requested dialogue with the government for the last month, and when they were ignored, they decided guard the area to defend their crops. Churata states that the growers were armed only with sticks and stones, and that the army fired on them. His statement is corroborated by leader Emilio Caero.

The two coca growers were killed in the initial confrontation, which also left two soldiers Germán Carlos Chipana Quispe and Eleuterio Ramos, and once citizen, Calixto Policarpio Licona injured by gunfire. All three were later treated at a clinic in the city of Santa Cruz.

In response to the confrontation, the military took coca grower Romy Monzón Saire hostage, as well as two other men and a woman. Coca growers took two soldiers and nine policemen hostage. The coca growers sent a message to the military leaders requesting that troops be withdrawn until a dialogue could be arranged.

Hostage Exchange

At 7 pm that evening, Arsenio Ocampo, a human rights representative in Chimoré negotiated the release of the military and police hostages in exchange for the bodies of the two coca growers who were killed, as well as the four hostage coca growers. A forensic doctor who accompanied Ocampo examined the bodies and stated that the dead men were shot with large caliber bullets, not pellets, which brings the intent of the military operation into question, as pellets would have been a more appropriate tool for crowd control, as opposed to the more lethal bullets. The coca growers kept their hostages' guns, which they say they will return when one of the hostages taken by the military, who is currently in a hospital in Santa Cruz, is released.

Since the incident, the coca growers have been asking the government for help transporting the bodies of the two men who were killed to the town of Totorá, where their families were. Due to the decomposition of the bodies, and lack of response, the men were buried in one of the communities. A helicopter did come to transport two injured coca growers to a clinic, (5).

Marginalization and Lack of Recognition

Since the event, Morales has not shown any likelihood of real negotiation with the coca growers in the park, maintaining that they and their crops are illegal. As of October 2, the government proposed to dialogue with five groups of coca growers on Oct. 3 to discuss the confrontation, but also plans to continue with the eradication of 1,110 acres of coca and 1,750 illegal settlements in the National Park.

In a meeting on September 30, with the chief of state, the Vice-minister of Social defense, Felipe Cáceres, said that "Their hands won't tremble or flutter in making sure that the law rules in Carrasco National Park, a protected area, where coca cannot be grown or cocaine made." Cáceres also stated that the law would not be negotiated with the coca growers, who he called 'narcotraffickers' and their 'peons.' He emphasized the government perspective that the squatters and coca growers are illegal, and that the armed forces would continue to be used in eradication following the government's strategy in natural parks, where the policy is 'zero cocaine,' (6).

This is an abrupt change in vocabulary from the administration of a president who campaigned with the coca-positive slogan 'Coca Yes, Cocaine No.' As a candidate, Morales promised non-violent, negotiated eradication that, when possible, would be carried out by growers themselves. In the past few days however, "Zero Cocaine," and a macho dialogue have been his administration's main commentary on Friday's incident.

Morales met with the representatives of the Six Federations on October 3. At the meeting, Morales proposed the creation of a tax on legal coca plots. The revenue raised by the tax, which would be added to the national treasury, would ostensibly be a move against the government of the United States by showing the international community that the coca leaf is an important medium of support for the national treasury and not a resource favourable

to narcotrafficking. Morales also warned growers against planting more than the legal limit, a *cato* (40 square meters), which he said would de-legitimize the gains growers made in being allowed the legalization of the *cato* (7). These efforts at legitimizing coca production are motivated by the desire of the government and the coca unions to legalize the coca leaf, and officially differentiate it from cocaine. A 1952 report by the United Nations listed coca as an illegal drug.

The deaths in the national park were addressed at Morales' meeting with the Six Federations, but the discussion centered on protecting the legitimacy of "legal" coca production in comparison to non-unionized growers in places such as the park. The Six Federation union leaders, who are not affected by the continued eradication in national parks, resolved to "support the politics of the fight against narcotrafficking and the control of the government our friend Evo Morales over coca plantations," said coca leader Asterio Romero. "We will not permit more plantations in national parks and we will add ourselves to the eradication efforts made by the army and the police," (8).

The president of the permanent assembly of Human Rights, Guillermo Vilela, said that his institution would send a letter to defense minister Alicia Muñoz requesting clarification of the situation and that those responsible for the confrontation between the coca growers and the members of the FTC be found. Waldo Albarracín, Defender of the People, an office created to investigate human rights abuses, has said that he will request an investigation of the causes and circumstances of the deaths, but reportedly has taken no steps to investigate the situation himself. The Andean Information Network is forthcoming with a more detailed report of the deaths of the coca growers and the violations of human rights committed, (9).

Politics have provided citizens all over the world with too many examples of populist candidates who come to office only to turn on their most faithful followers. The government of Evo Morales does indeed need to convince the world that coca is a legitimate crop, with much more to offer than an illegal drug. However, military violence against citizens excused by anti-drug rhetoric is only the continuation of a failed US policy. It is not the creative and nonviolent approach that will bring peace to the region and convince the international community to decriminalize the leaf that put Morales in office in the first place.

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Notes

- (1) "Dirigencia cocalera dice que no inició el enfrentamiento." La Prensa. Sept. 30, 2006.
- (2) "Evo propone a campesinos pagar impuesto por el cato de coca." Navia, Roberto. Chimoré: EL DEBER. Oct. 3, 2006.
- (3) "El gobierno propicia el diálogo dentro de la la ley para solucionar conflicto en Parque Nacional Carrasco." Agencia Boliviana de Información (ABI). Oct. 1, 2006.
- (4) El primer choque armado por la coca ilegal deja dos muertos La Razón. Sept. 30, 2006.
- (5) "Evo advierte que no permitirá "mini Colombia" en el Parque." Los Tiempos. Oct. 1, 2006.
- (6) "FF.AA. y Policía intervendrán Parque Nacional Carrasco para expulsar a los narcotraficantes." Agencia Boliviana de Información (ABI). Sept. 30, 2006.
- (7) "Evo propone . . ."
- (8) " Sindicatos bolivianos deciden sumarse a erradicación de coca." Reuters America

Latina. Oct. 2, 2006.

Coca leaves photo Credit: Wikipedia.org

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