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## Latin America’s Drug Problem

MICHAEL SHIFTER

At a 1990 antidrug summit of Andean leaders in Cartagena, Colombia, Peruvian President Alan García asked then-President George H. W. Bush a disconcerting question: “Where’s the beef?” With that takeoff on a popular television commercial, García exposed the limitations of a US antidrug proposal that emphasized law enforcement and security and gave relatively short shrift to social development programs. García viewed development initiatives as essential to wean farmers away from coca in significant producer countries like Peru.

Today, García has returned to Peru’s presidency in a remarkable political comeback and is still dealing with a President Bush—this time with George W.—and with the stubbornly vexing drug problem. García is notably less antagonistic toward Washington than he was during his first term (he has enthusiastically embraced a free trade agreement with the United States) and is keen to obtain as much antidrug aid as possible (Peru received some \$107 million in 2006). But the signs of continuing irritation over an issue that sharply divides the United States and Latin America are unmistakable. To highlight a point that was no doubt unwelcome for Washington, García remarked at a December 2006 press briefing that the coca leaf has multiple uses, including in salads, herbal teas, and even coca liqueur cocktails.

García’s position echoes one famously advanced by Bolivia’s president Evo Morales, who long headed (indeed, still heads) that country’s politically active coca growers’ union. Morales has frequently drawn a distinction between the myriad traditional uses of coca, which should be recognized and even celebrated, and the production and trafficking of cocaine, which should be sanctioned and punished.

In fact, just hours after García’s press briefing on the subject in Lima, Morales delivered a speech in Chimore, a coca-growing town in central Bolivia, indicating that his government would accept a proposal to expand legal coca production from the current 29,700 to some 49,400 acres. US officials, of course, view this distinction with considerable skepticism. From their perspective, coca production inexorably leads to cocaine trafficking.

Beyond a US drug policy that appears frozen on its three essential, longstanding pillars—extradition, eradication, and interdiction—the problems associated with the consumption, production, and trafficking of drugs in Latin America and the Caribbean have become increasingly far-reaching and deleterious. Over the past decade, the drug phenomenon has become regionwide, no longer restricted to the producing Andes. Few places in the hemisphere manage to escape its baneful effects. Indeed, overwhelming evidence points to a direct relationship between drugs and the criminal violence that has skyrocketed in country after country. In Mexico and Brazil, Latin America’s two largest countries, the incoming administrations of Presidents Felipe Calderón and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva face no more daunting challenge.

Moreover, the astronomical revenues generated by the drug trade—the United Nations has estimated its total global value at \$400 billion—fuel the rampant corruption that eats away at already fragile institutions. Precarious governance structures, such as the justice system, are both cause and consequence of the enormous drug problem. The negative consequences for the region’s economic performance, which badly lags that of many other areas of the world, are similarly troubling.

It is by no means clear how best to stem and reverse the spreading deterioration. The coca-versus-cocaine distinction has merit, but hardly constitutes a clear-cut and comprehensive solution to such a deep-seated problem. US policy has

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registered several undeniable short-term gains in reducing coca production, extraditing criminals, and interdicting drug traffic. New banking regulations have been imposed in an attempt to control the flow of illegal funds. Trade preferences for Andean products put in place in 1991, and extended for six months at the end of 2006, have helped provide legal employment. Still, the overall data are disappointing at best. The level of resources spent by the US government to combat drug trafficking in Latin America has increased nearly tenfold over the past 25 years (amounting to more than \$6.5 billion since 2000), yet drug prices have fallen and the drug market remains remarkably robust.

All Latin American governments and leaders are frustrated by the corrosive drug problem—and by Washington's response to it, which is widely criticized as unilateral, rigid, and largely ineffective. Latin Americans are particularly bitter about the perceived hypocrisy of the United States, given its notorious drug-consuming habits.

Unfortunately, it is unrealistic to expect much change in US drug policy. Washington officials, now distracted by Iraq and the war on terror, are loath to think creatively about such a politically risky issue lest they be seen as “soft on drugs.” Although US policy continues to produce scant progress and considerable ill will among distrustful hemispheric neighbors, a serious reevaluation seems unlikely any time soon.

Quite apart from what Washington does or does not do, however, the problem in Latin America is acute and is metastasizing in ominous ways, negatively affecting the region's outlook in a range of critical spheres. Beyond the understandable bemoaning of the shortcomings of US drug policy, it is vital that the region's leadership devote the resources and political attention necessary to devise viable solutions. While there is no more urgent priority for the region's well-being, Latin America's institutional capacity to handle the drug-related crisis remains woefully inadequate.

## HIGH ANXIETY IN THE ANDES

In the popular imagination, the drug issue in Latin America is inextricably tied to the Andean region and, in particular, Colombia. Colombia produces over 90 percent of the cocaine consumed in

the United States from its approximately 144,000 hectares of coca fields.

Moreover, of all the Andean countries—indeed in all of Latin America—Colombia is most in sync with the anti-narcotics approach advocated by Washington. Over the years there have been differences and disagreements on a variety of questions, particularly related to the sensitive issue of extradition. But, beginning with the administration of Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002), when the multiyear antidrug aid package known as Plan Colombia was backed by the Clinton administration and approved by the US Congress, Washington and Bogotá have converged on drug policy. Since Plan Colombia was launched in 2000, the United States has provided Colombia with over \$4 billion in mostly antidrug, military, and police assistance. Outside of the Middle East, Colombia is the largest recipient of US security aid.

Just a few years ago the country was commonly depicted as a “failed state.” Today that characterization is inapt. US aid has certainly helped stem the deteriorating conditions in Colombia and enabled the government to reassert its authority. Particularly during the first years of the Alvaro

Uribe administration, which began in 2002, the reductions in killings and kidnappings were impressive by any measure, contributing to greater confidence and optimism among most Colombians. Thanks in part to more military equipment and training, the state improved its capacity to protect Colombian citizens.

At the same time, however, it is hard to make the case that Plan Colombia has succeeded in reducing the drug problem—in Colombia, the wider region, or the United States. The results are particularly dismal when viewed in relation to the huge cost invested in the antidrug effort. Even the focal point of eradication programs in the Putumayo region of southern Colombia has witnessed meager gains overall. Current policy instruments are simply unable to match the power of market forces; coca may be effectively eradicated in one area, only to pop up in another. This so-called balloon effect can be seen within Colombia and the Andean region as a whole. Even when one country registers a success, it is often offset by a neighbor's setbacks.

The Colombian experience since the early 1980s suggests that any economic benefits that might be

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derived from the drug trade are significantly outweighed by its negative, often devastating consequences. The human toll in terms of deaths attributable to the drug problem—at all levels of Colombian society—has been incalculable. The country's three principal armed groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the paramilitary forces, are substantially involved in the drug business—including thousands of militants who have been recently demobilized. The revelations in late 2006 of the deep infiltration by paramilitary groups into Colombia's political system have triggered a growing scandal and illustrate the magnitude and gravity of the problem. Corruption affecting the public sector and private organizations is profound. The gains made in enhancing state authority risk reversal unless serious steps are taken to contain the spreading crisis and to clean up Colombia's sullied politics.

While each of Colombia's neighbors has felt the effects of that country's battle with illegal armed groups, Ecuador has been the most vulnerable to Colombia's eradication efforts, particularly the fumigation of coca crops. The border between the two nations is extremely porous, and there have been spillover effects—refugees and violence—from the implementation of Plan Colombia. There is also a serious dispute about the health and environmental impact of the glyphosate used in spraying the coca.

Ecuador's new president, Rafael Correa, has taken a particularly adamant stand against crop fumigation, a position that has broad appeal among Ecuadorans who believe their country has been unnecessarily dragged into the Colombian conflict, with little compensation for their contribution and sacrifice. Indeed, Correa, reflecting Ecuadoran public opinion and invoking the principle of sovereignty, has made it clear that he will not renew the lease with the United States for its anti-narcotics base in the coastal town of Manta when it expires in 2009. Although its coca production is negligible, Ecuador serves as a key transit point—a record 45 metric tons of cocaine were seized at the border in 2005—and thus suffers consequences reflected in institutional corruption and associated violence.

Venezuela, too, is not a drug-producing nation, yet it is hardly immune to the wider problem. The government of Hugo Chávez denied charges made in December 2006 by the US ambassador in Cara-

cas, William Brownfield, that over the past decade drug trafficking through Venezuela has grown tenfold. Mirroring wider distrust and antagonism in the bilateral relationship, there has been virtually no cooperation between the Venezuelan and US governments on the drug problem since early August 2005, when Chávez accused US drug-enforcement agents of espionage. In recent years common crime has jumped considerably; Venezuela now has the highest rate of killings by guns in all of Latin America. Although the skyrocketing level of crime is not entirely drug-related, some of the violence can be traced to the widespread availability of drugs and the growing presence of organized trafficking operations.

Along with Colombia, Bolivia and Peru are the main coca-producing countries in Latin America. Both have extensive, ongoing cooperation programs with the United States focused on eradication and interdiction. In Bolivia, the first year of the Morales government has seen stepped-up cocaine interdiction efforts and

implementation of a cooperative coca reduction approach in the Chapare region. The armed forces still play a front-line enforcement role criticized by some rights groups. Moreover, the successes in the Chapare will be hard to repeat in other coca-growing areas such as La Paz Yungas. For political reasons, Morales has to move cautiously and remain sensitive to the coca growers who represent a pillar of his political base. Despite some predictable friction with the United States regarding Morales's coca-versus-cocaine distinction (along with his alliance with US adversary Chávez), an eventual accommodation on drug policy between Washington and La Paz remains a possibility.

Peru's acute and pervasive crime problem can be attributed in some measure to the production, trafficking, and consumption of illegal drugs. In 2006, Ollanta Humala, a former military official, campaigned for president on a law-and-order platform, winning the first round and garnering nearly 48 percent of the vote in the second. Sensing hardening public opinion and wanting to send a message, García in one of his first acts as president pushed for the death penalty for those convicted of terrorism. García framed his proposal as a response to the resurgence of the Shining Path movement. Although it no longer poses a strategic threat to the Peruvian state, the group continues to be active and

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problematic, as evidenced by its brutal ambush and murder of five police officers and three civilians in Ayacucho in December 2006—and it is buttressed by links to drug trafficking and production. The sentencing of Peru's former national security chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, to life in prison for massive corruption during the 1990s, closely tied to drug trafficking operations, underscores the corrosive impact of drugs on governance and institutions.

## HUGE STAKES IN MEXICO

Although the commonly invoked term “Colombianization” may distort more than it clarifies given the particularity of each situation, there is little question that Mexico's drug-related problems of violence and corruption have acquired greater urgency and now rank as top priorities on the country's political and public policy agendas. It is notable that, shortly after Calderón assumed the presidency on December 1, he undertook a bold offensive against drug traffickers in his home state of Michoacán. The president dispatched nearly 7,000 federal forces to deal with feuding gangs responsible for some 500 murders in 2006 alone. More than 2,000 Mexicans were killed in drug-related incidents nationwide last year, a big jump from 2005. Whether or not Calderón's move will prove effective, it was a clear measure of his decisiveness and his responsiveness to Mexico's increasingly intolerant attitudes toward unchecked drug-related violence. This approach contrasts sharply with the perceived inaction of the preceding Vicente Fox administration on this potent issue.

Most Mexican specialists who track drug-related security challenges are far from sanguine about conditions improving, at least in the short term. They point to the growing strength, proliferation, and fragmentation of the country's myriad drug traffickers, making them much harder to contain, along with the insufficient resources and instruments at the disposal of the Mexican government to deal effectively with the problem. In addition, there are serious reservations over whether Mexico's military or police forces should take the lead in combating the well-armed drug traffickers. While many argue that this is properly a police function and that mobilizing the military carries risks for abuse, others maintain that the police are thoroughly corrupt, unreliable, and ill-equipped to handle increasingly violent traffickers. In 2001, Mexico's attorney general fired more than 1,400 federal officers for their involvement in the drug trade. In either case, the state's limited capacity—in both resources and insti-

tutions—is striking. As in Colombia and elsewhere, despite the admirable and often tremendously courageous efforts of judges, prosecutors, mayors, law enforcement officials, and journalists, the drug problem tends to penetrate and debase Mexico's public and private institutions.

The connections between Mexico's drug-related difficulties and the United States are many and profound. For starters, Mexico is the transit route for roughly 70 percent to 90 percent of the illegal drugs entering the United States. Without America's strong appetite for illegal drugs it is doubtful Mexico would be forced to wage such a battle. In addition, traffickers can easily obtain weapons such as AK-47s, most of which are smuggled from the United States. Along the US-Mexico border, the kidnapping trade, closely tied to the drug trade, is flourishing. Officials maintain that Americans now have the same chance of getting abducted on the US side as in notoriously dangerous Mexican border towns like Nuevo Laredo. But the United States, lax in controlling the illegal arms trade, cannot afford to scold Mexico for not doing its part in addressing its public safety problem. Nor can the United States afford to adopt hard-line and symbolically offensive measures aimed at controlling immigration, such as constructing a wall along the border. Such unwarranted and counterproductive responses erode the good will and mutual confidence that are essential to tackling a grave and shared challenge.

## CENTRAL AMERICA'S STRUGGLES

Perhaps even more dramatic than the Mexican case are the experiences of the Central American and Caribbean countries, many of which have weak states and are struggling to deal with severe strains that often stem from the drug trade. In Central America, the civil wars have ended, but the problem of physical insecurity—aggravated by the availability of arms—persists, and may even be more acute than before. The politically motivated violence that wracked Central America in the 1980s has been replaced by burgeoning criminality at many levels, including transnational and local, much of it a product of illegal drug trafficking.

Guatemala, Central America's largest country, reached a peace agreement with guerrillas a decade ago, but its government today is woefully ill-equipped to keep rampant criminality in check. Much of the violence reportedly derives from what are often referred to as “dark forces” or “parallel powers” that have transnational connections, are sometimes linked with the country's security

services, and are often involved in the drug trade. Large cocaine and heroin deliveries enter Guatemalan ports via speedboats and fishing vessels, then are broken down into smaller shipments and sent over land to the United States via Mexico. Traffickers are often paid in drugs, which then enter the domestic market and contribute to the rise in common crime, a related but distinct phenomenon afflicting the country. Polls show that public opinion in Guatemala, as elsewhere, is decidedly in favor of tougher measures—"zero tolerance" platforms are popular—to deal severely with violent criminals.

Guatemala has some of the gangs or "maras" (the term comes from *marabunta*, a plague of ants that devours everything in its path) that are estimated to have roughly 100,000 members in Central America alone. But the influence of these groups is most pronounced and troubling in El Salvador. The homicide rate there has soared, increasing by 25 percent between 2004 and 2005 alone, making it among the highest in the world. Here, too, public security forces have been unable to deal with the spreading problem. El Salvador's gangs are heavily involved in the drug trade, acting as enforcers and dealers within established distribution networks, creating their own inroads and supply chains, and using profits and addiction to recruit new members.

The mara problem, particularly in El Salvador, is closely tied to the immigrant experience in the United States, where young Salvadoran males first became involved with gangs and then were deported. In Honduras, too, the maras and pervasive insecurity pose one of the most difficult tests for the new government of Manuel Zelaya. In Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, the gang problem and drug-related violence are less severe, but all three countries serve as transit points for drug shipments to the United States, a fact that poses a significant threat to democratic governance.

The small states of the Caribbean are especially vulnerable to being overwhelmed by drug-related activities. Just as the "balloon effect" functions when law enforcement agencies try to eradicate coca production, traffickers frequently switch their routes to avoid authorities when interdiction efforts are concentrated in a particular area such as Central America. Given access to technology and ample financial resources, drug traffickers are remarkably

mobile and adaptive, representing as such the dark side of globalization. Caribbean islands, particularly the Bahamas, Jamaica, Cuba, and Hispaniola, are often used to traffic drugs to the United States and Europe. Money laundering and the inevitable, attendant corruption are also widespread in a number of Caribbean countries, where weak governmental authorities have difficulty exercising effective control. Some Caribbean nations—Jamaica, for example—have also witnessed high levels of criminal violence, some of which is drug-related, along with considerable drug consumption.

For US policy, and particularly the Miami-based US Southern Command, Central America and the Caribbean's burgeoning mara problem and patterns of drug trafficking are of utmost concern. Unfortunately, few instruments and resources are available to help bolster structures of governance and repair the frayed institutional and social fabric in these countries.

The emphasis, instead, is on law enforcement, with support for police and military forces. Police forces, however, typically lack professional training and are

seldom capable of dealing with such potent—often well-funded, well-organized, and well-armed—illegal forces. And, in view of Central America's recent history with civil conflict and human rights violations, relying on the armed forces carries enormous risks of backsliding.

## LULA'S CHALLENGE

Brazil's institutional capacity and resources far exceed those of the smaller Central American and Caribbean states. Yet, in looking ahead to Lula's second term as president, one of the most troubling factors—and a potential source of instability—is the rampant insecurity in the country's major cities, where homicide is the leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds. The drug trade fuels much of this violence. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, gang warfare is the norm. Some have characterized daily life in the city's *favelas* (shantytowns), where 17 percent of Rio's citizens live, as resembling a civil war. Most of the violence, studies show, can be tied to either obtaining or using drugs. São Paulo has also witnessed high levels of violence, largely as a result of the introduction of crack and powder cocaine. Drug dealing and drug use now account for approximately 20 percent of the city's murders. The First

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Command of the Capital (PCC) has evolved into a particularly formidable and brutal criminal organization, in part sustained by drug trafficking, that operates out of São Paulo's prisons.

In recent years, drug consumption in Brazil has increased substantially. Brazil is currently the second-largest consumer of cocaine in the world, after the United States (together, the two countries account for roughly half of the cocaine consumed globally). Consumption patterns affect all socio-economic levels. At the same time, Brazil remains a major transit country for drugs shipped chiefly to Europe. Some 90 tons of cocaine enter Brazil each year, and approximately 40 tons—15 percent of total South American cocaine exports—are sent abroad. São Paulo has become a particularly significant export center and a hub for complex transnational drug trafficking and money-laundering networks.

Like other Latin American leaders, Lula is under enormous pressure to adopt tough measures to contain the spreading criminality. Apart from the public health dimensions of the crisis, the drain on already strapped institutions, and the corruption effect, there is a risk that deepening insecurity could dampen tourism and foreign investment rates. This, in turn, would jeopardize the prospect for economic growth and redistribution of resources, a central goal of the Lula government. In his first term Lula showed little reluctance to call on the armed forces, when necessary, to quell unrest and keep order in major urban centers. Lula's success in his second term—critical for broader, regional progress and the standing of Latin America as a whole—will hinge on his ability to get the drug problem under better control.

Even beyond Brazil, the effects of the drug trade are increasingly unmistakable in Southern Cone countries. As the market responds to shifts and pressures, for example, Argentina has started to play a more important role in the production and transshipment of cocaine—much of it directed to Europe, as the US market becomes saturated. From 1999 to 2003, just eight laboratories were found in Argentina, whereas twelve were discovered in 2004 alone. The consumption of “paco” (cocaine base paste) in cities like Buenos Aires and Montevideo has exploded in recent years. Chile, too, has seen an increase in cocaine and marijuana consumption and has also been the source of precursor chemicals used in Peru and Bolivia. For new and fragile democratic governments like Paraguay's, the impact of the drug problem—connected to an array of other illicit activities—is of particular concern.

## BETWEEN RESIGNATION AND ALARM

In assessing the drug problem with its multiple manifestations throughout Latin America, there is a temptation to conclude either that it is a fact of life one must accept or that it is bringing the region to utter chaos and collapse. Yet it is important to resist both complacency and panic in trying to fashion effective, sustainable solutions. Whatever the arguments in its favor, decriminalization or legalization is not politically feasible. Unfortunately, the policy menu is limited, particularly in view of scarce resources and often shaky institutions.

No other issue affects so many Latin American citizens in so many ways. Crime, corruption, and unemployment consistently emerge in polls as priority concerns for most in the region. None of these would be eliminated, but all could be alleviated, if the drug problem were dealt with more effectively. Local and national governments, external donors, and international institutions should tackle the issue directly, but they should also strengthen governance structures and seek to reduce social exclusion and poverty. To be sure, many initiatives of considerable merit have long been in place, and some gains—for example, in the Andes—have been registered. But with violence mounting in Mexico and Brazil, and a real risk of deterioration spreading across much of the region, dealing with the drug crisis clearly requires a sharper focus and more imaginative approaches.

A productive starting point would be to recognize that the drug question is not just a Colombian, Andean, Latin American, US, or European problem. It is fundamentally, and increasingly, global in character. Collective, multilateral responses must be fashioned. To its credit, the anti-drug-abuse commission of the regional Organization of American States has devised a technically sound and professional evaluation system to track the problem throughout the hemisphere. But the political will to convert this system into high-level, effective policy coordination has been notably lacking.

Hemispheric leaders need to lend a greater sense of urgency to the problem. For more than 15 years no regional summits involving heads of state have been held specifically focused on the drug question. It would be wise to heed the suggestion made in July 2006 by Alan García's foreign minister, José Antonio García Belaúnde, to once again convene such a gathering and give the issue heightened and more vigorous political attention. ■