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Coca Is Difficult to Root Out in Colombia

Acreage has increased despite record levels of aerial spraying under a U.S. eradication plan.

By Chris Kraul, Times Staff Writer

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PENSILVANIA, Colombia — Julian, a peasant farmer in this mountainous region of Colombia, wants to stop growing coca but says leftist guerrillas won't let him. If they catch you pulling up any coca plants, he says, they give you 12 hours to leave your land or they kill you.

Under Washington's multibillion-dollar "Plan Colombia," much of the drug-fighting money has gone to pay for the eradication of 1.8 million acres of coca, which is used in the production of cocaine.

But the pressure faced by Julian, who was afraid to give his last name, is just one factor making Colombia's coca industry difficult to combat with a single-minded focus on aerial spraying.

Other key factors are the lack of economic alternatives for poor farmers such as Julian; the Colombian government's weak presence in rural areas; and the lethal networks that control the coca market, many of them run by guerrillas or right-wing paramilitary militias that use drug profits to finance their mayhem.

The stubbornness of the problem was made clear in June when the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime released its annual survey of Colombian coca cultivation. It showed that coca acreage last year increased 8% from 2004 despite record levels of aerial fumigation and manual eradication, largely financed by the United States.

In fact, ever-increasing levels of fumigation are pushing coca farming to more remote areas inhabited by farmers such as Julian. In the U.N.'s latest satellite-based survey, 44% of the coca fields detected did not register in the 2004 study.

"That suggests a high mobility of coca cultivation in Colombia," said Sandro Calvani, head of the U.N. drugs office in Bogota, the Colombian capital.

Experts say guerrillas began making inroads here after the spraying of the vast industrialized plantations in Colombia's seven Amazon basin provinces. The traffickers target smaller farms, the experts say, because they figure the coca plants are less detectable when mixed among subsistence crops.

"Under the pressure of fumigation, coca plantations aren't halting, they are dispersing," said John Walsh, a drug policy expert with the Washington Office on Latin America and a critic of Plan Colombia. "Fumigation does nothing to address the economic reasons for people persisting in planting coca."

The war on drugs has not been without success. The cultivation of poppies used to make heroin is down by half, and the anecdotal evidence in the U.S. market reflects a scarcer drug. Coca cultivation measured by acreage in Colombia is also down by nearly half since Plan Colombia began six years ago, according to survey figures.

But the statistic is undercut by new U.N. findings that the average coca plant is 40% more productive than previously thought. That may account for the fact that cocaine prices have not risen appreciably nor purity fallen in the U.S. drug market since 2000, which would be the expected result from reducing cultivation by half.

Colombia is by far the largest supplier of U.S. cocaine, accounting for 70% of shipments. Bolivia and Peru together supply 30%, according to U.N. estimates.

Calvani is not opposed to spraying, but he used the survey's findings as a basis to renew a call for more international aid to Colombia's farmers, saying the war on coca will never be won with just the stick of eradication. The carrot of large-scale economic assistance such as crop substitution programs for poor farmers is also needed.

"We need a change in tactics toward sustainable instruments and greater assistance to farmers," Calvani said. The \$80 million being spent this year on such initiatives, most of it provided by the United States, is only a fraction of what's needed, he said.

Calvani said opium eradication efforts in Southeast Asia over the last 20 years were "colossally" successful, thanks in part to massive farmer aid programs largely financed by the European Union. A sustainable equivalent in Colombia would cost more than \$400 million a year, he estimated.

Similar European aid has not been forthcoming to Colombia, he said, except for small-scale programs such as those funded by the Italian Embassy and the French supermarket chain Carrefour, which guarantees a market for honey, beans and other alternative crops.

Julian said he would gladly take advantage of a crop-substitution program to replant coffee if one were available. But none has materialized in Pueblo Nuevo, his remote hamlet about 15 miles from Pensilvania.

Such a program would have to be coupled with a government-sponsored manual eradication program, for which the guerrillas don't hold the farmers responsible, Julian said, because they see it as being beyond the peasants' control.

Julian said that 40 or 50 neighboring farmers had been shot dead in recent years for a variety of reasons, including reprisals for trying to bypass the guerrilla monopoly of the market for coca paste, the crudely refined form in which the drug is delivered to designated middlemen by farmers. One elected official in this town, who asked not to be identified, said the advent of coca farming in Pensilvania over the last five years had brought only "widows, death and blood in the street."

"Farmers are now trying to shake loose from coca because they know where it leads," he said.

Julian had never seen a coca plant, much less grown one, until five years ago, when members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia offered him free seeds.

In 2001, coca plants were rare here in Caldas, Colombia's leading coffee-growing province. But coffee prices then were so depressed that Julian spent more money producing the beans than he earned selling them. So he and many of his neighbors planted thousands of coca bushes, enticed by promises of easy profits.

But the guerrillas controlled the market by prohibiting sales to any middleman except their designated agents, who enforce their monopoly at gunpoint. They also have cornered the market for chemicals that Julian and other farmers use to produce coca paste from raw leaves.

"Typically in the new areas where coca is cultivated, the rules are much tougher. Unlike in the Amazon basin, where there is a free market in which farmers can sell to the highest bidder, the guerrillas oblige a captive market," said Ricardo Vargas, director of Accion Andina, a drug policy think tank in Bogota.

Julian says he regrets his decision; coca has brought only bloodshed and sadness to him and his neighbors and little of the promised cash. Making matters worse, Julian's farm and others in his valley were sprayed in July by Plan Colombia pilots, who missed most of his coca plants but killed the beans and papaya trees that fed him and his family.

Pensilvania is eager to help start alternative crops of cocoa and citrus, but there is no money, the unnamed local official said. "It's a trap from which they can't escape," the official said of the farmers.

Julian doesn't dare uproot the plants.

"The guerrillas pay low prices, but you have no choice," he said. "If you try to sell to someone else, they kill you."