

WORLD & NATION

Colombian bishop faults plan to stop cocaine trade

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The Colombian bishop in the country's largest coca-growing region opposes a U.S.-backed plan of military aid and crop destruction to stem the cocaine trade.

"The time has come to change strategy," Bishop Fabio Morales Grisales of Mocoa-Sibundoy told Catholic News Service in a July 27 telephone interview.

More effective tactics include U.S. intervention to stop the flow of cocaine-processing chemicals into Colombia and to stem the demand for cocaine in the United States, he said.

"If you have buyers, you have producers," said Bishop Morales.

The bishop was criticizing Plan Colombia, a U.S.-backed effort to stop the drug trade through U.S.-supplied weapons for the Colombian military and massive crop-killing fumigations of coca-growing regions.

Colombia's biggest coca-growing region is the Putumayo province where the bishop's diocese is located. The province is along the southern border with Ecuador.

Bishop Morales was interviewed after the U.S. House of Representatives on July 24 approved \$676 million to fight the drug trade. Last year the U.S. government committed \$1.3 billion to Plan Colombia.

The church and other social institutions have an important role in educating poor small farmers not to succumb to "easy money" by producing coca leaves, said Bishop Morales.

"We have to educate the small farmers in Christian values, that cocaine is a scourge, and that you can't use bad means to support yourself," the bishop said.



Reuters/CNS

A U.S.-trained "jungle commando," a member of the Colombia National Police, crouches in an illegal coca field during an anti-drug operation in southern Colombia in September. Last year the United States committed \$1.3 billion to Colombia's program to eradicate coca and the cocaine trade.

His diocese is organizing small church communities to promote awareness of the values of social peace and human dignity, he said.

But the struggle is difficult because growing coca leaves, the raw ingredient for cocaine, provides small farmers with much more money than growing other crops, he said.

"No product can compete with coca," he said.

Drug traffickers also make it easy by going to the farmer's house to buy the product, he said.

This occurs in an area where the transportation system is so poor that small farmers often cannot take their traditional crops to urban markets, he added.

Complicating the situation is that different coca-growing regions are controlled either by guerrillas or govern-

ment-supported paramilitary groups creating a monopoly, he said.

"The small farmers have to sell to the one that dominates that area," he said.

Experts studying the Colombian drug trade have said that drug cartels hire guerrilla or paramilitary groups as their security forces and to do a lot of their ground work.

Bishop Morales said that U.S. military aid will not solve the problem.

"The church is against the traffic of arms even if done by governments," he said.

"We need a negotiated political solution with the guerrillas" rather than more armed conflict, he said.

"The paramilitary groups are a product of the guerrillas. If the guerrilla fighting ends, the paramilitary groups would cease, or it would be easier to stop them,"

the bishop said.

In a July 11 open letter addressed to the people of the United States, Bishop Morales called the drug trafficking a "death trade" and an "ethical and moral evil" needing to be stopped.

But he called the coca-eradication program a failed policy where "the remedy has become worse than the disease."

The letter said that, "far from being the cause of the difficulties of the region, the illegal crops are rather a symptom and expression of the social gaps and historical problems of this territory, which has always been abandoned by the state."

It said the program is dangerous to people, animals and the environment. All it has done is move the cultivation to another area.

"We should not be impressed by the statistics on the number of acres that have been fumigated without mentioning the new ones being cultivated," it said.

"People are left without means of subsistence because the aerial spraying levels everything, making the innocent pay for the wrongdoings of others," it said.

The \$900 offered by the government to small farmers to sustain them for one year while they stop growing coca leaves and shift to a traditional crop is "ridiculous" and "unrealistic," it said.

The letter said that the large amounts of money destined for fumigation should be used for bigger subsidies to small farmers, to protect the environment and to provide basic services such as health, education, roads, electricity and water systems.

On July 27, a Colombian judge ordered the suspension of aerial spraying with the herbicide glyphosate after widespread complaints of human skin rashes and its destruction of other cash crops.

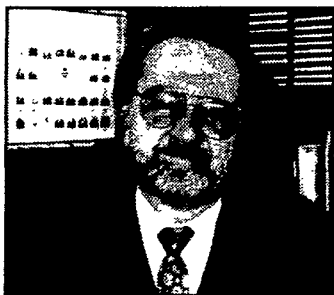
An Ecuadorian bishop along the Colombian border also criticized Plan Colombia in a July 13 open letter to the U.S. Congress.

Plan Colombia provides U.S. aid to Colombia's neighbors because of the spillover effect of drug trafficking.

"May all investment in this war cease and the government of the United States use all of its influence to propitiate peace through all means possible," said the letter by Bishop Gonzalo Lopez Maranon, head of the Apostolic Vicariate of San Miguel de Sucumbios, Ecuador.

The United States should "support the alternative and fair development of the Amazon region in a credible manner, as the best — and possibly only — way of beating the rebel forces and organized drug trade," Bishop Lopez said.

Thoughts to Consider



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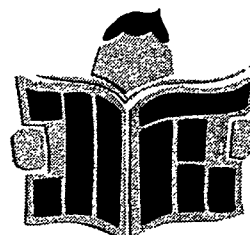
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