

# LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR

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## FEATURED Q&A

# Why Is Coca Cultivation on the Rise in Colombia?



Cultivation of coca, which is used to produce cocaine, has increased over the past two years in Colombia. // File Photo: Sten Porse via Creative Commons.

**Q** The U.S. State Department's annual International Narcotics Control Strategy Report released in March said Colombia is the world's top producer of cocaine and that the cultivation of coca has increased by record amounts for the past two years. What is the reason for the increase in coca cultivation and cocaine production in the country? How will cocaine eradication strategies change as the government and the FARC rebel group implement their peace agreement? What will cooperation with the United States against drugs look like during the Trump administration? How are policies toward coca cultivation and drug trafficking in neighboring Bolivia and Peru likely to affect Colombia's role in illicit drug production and trafficking?

**A** Adam Isaacson, senior associate for the regional security policy program at the Washington Office on Latin America: "Colombia has a bumper crop of coca. The U.S. government estimate of 188,000 hectares planted in 2016 is the fourth increase in a row, and is 141 percent more than in 2012 (78,000 hectares). I see seven reasons why this is happening. Colombia halted aerial herbicide spraying, citing health concerns, in 2015, and did not replace it with a new strategy. It slowed forced manual eradication, too, due to costs and dangers. But until this year, it has not increased investment in governance and alternative development. Meanwhile, the price of gold dropped, making illicit mining a less enticing alternative to coca. The dollar rose, making farm-gate prices appear greater in pesos. Word spread that farmers with coca would receive benefits under the FARC

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#### Death Toll Rises to 72 in Peru Flooding

Heavy rains are expected to continue for another two weeks in Peru, where floods and mudslides have washed out roads, isolated communities and damaged homes.

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Authorities are investigating companies following allegations that they bribed food sanitation inspectors.

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### POLITICAL

#### Three Convicted in Plot to Kill Honduran President

The three men had plotted to assassinate President Juan Orlando Hernández in 2014 in his home town of Gracias, 124 miles west of Tegucigalpa, according to security forces.

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Hernández // File Photo: Honduran Government.

**POLITICAL NEWS**

## Death Toll Rises to 72 in Peru Flooding

The death toll has risen to 72 amid flooding and mudslides triggered by a series of storms that have caused rivers to overflow in Peru, authorities said Saturday, the Associated Press reported. The rains, which have affected half the country, have overwhelmed drainage systems in cities along the country's coastline, and water service has been out in Lima for a week, the AP reported. On the outskirts of



The heavy rains have flooded homes across Peru, including in the city of Piura. // Photo: Agencia Andina.

the capital, police had to rescue people from across a flooded road by sending them one-by-one through choppy waters while holding on to a rope. Some residents in the neighborhood were forced to leave their homes carrying just a single bag with their belongings. In Peru's Lambayeque region, 22 inmates at a juvenile detention center escaped amid the natural disaster. In the city of Trujillo, the heavy rains flooded a cemetery, unearthing bones, which then floated through the streets. In all, 811 cities in the country have declared an emergency, and the government has deployed the military to help police keep order. The presidents of Chile, Venezuela and Bolivia have offered to send assistance. Peru's government also acknowledged that prices for basic goods have climbed. "The prices for lemons have gone up, as well as for potatoes and cooking oil," Sara Arevalo told the AP as she shopped in a market in northern Lima. Authorities have blamed the storms and flooding on the El Niño weather pattern, which has caused a warming of surface waters in the Pacific Ocean.

## Colombia's FARC Hands Over First Weapons to U.N.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, rebels on Friday handed over their first 140 weapons to United Nations observers under the historic peace accord that they signed last year with Colombia's government, the Associated Press reported. Under the peace deal, the rebels were to have handed over 30 percent of their weapons by March 1. However, delays in establishing the 26 camps where FARC members are gathered led to delays in setting up the containers used for storing the arms. President Juan Manuel Santos said the rebels turning in the weapons will "assure a stable peace."

## Three Convicted in Plot to Assassinate Honduran President

A Honduran court on Saturday convicted three people in connection with a 2014 plot to assassinate the Central American country's president, Juan Orlando Hernández, Reuters reported. Two Hondurans, Victor Flores and José Contreras, and a Mexican, Jesús Estrada, are to be sentenced on April 24. U.S. and Honduran authorities foiled the plot, the wire service reported.

**BUSINESS NEWS**

## Brazil Investigating Meat Companies Over Bribery Claims

Brazilian authorities are investigating some of the world's largest meat companies over allegations that some may have bribed food-sanitation inspectors to allow the companies to keep rotten meat on the market, The Wall Street Journal reported Friday. Among the

**NEWS BRIEFS**

## Two Guards Killed in Guatemala Youth Prison Riot

Two guards were killed Sunday during a riot at a prison for juveniles in Guatemala City, BBC News reported. At least five others were injured in the riot at the Etapa II prison. Members of the 18th Street Gang started the unrest, said officials. The incident happened two weeks after 40 girls died in a fire following an escape attempt at a youth shelter near Guatemala City.

## Brazil Yellow Fever Outbreak Has Killed at Least 137: Officials

Brazil's Health Ministry said Thursday that 424 people have been infected by yellow fever and 137 have died in what is the country's largest outbreak of the mosquito-borne disease in years, the Associated Press reported. A report from the Health Ministry said more than 900 cases are under investigation. The vast majority of confirmed cases have been in Minas Gerais state.

## Holders of Puerto Rico's COFINA Bonds Seek Ruling

The holders of Puerto Rico's so-called "COFINA" bonds said that approximately \$3.5 billion of the commonwealth's general obligation (G.O.) debt is invalid, because it exceeds constitutional debt limits, Reuters reported Sunday. The allegation has added pressure to the bitter litigation battle between the G.O. and COFINA, as both sides claim legal rights to payment. The COFINA group, whose bonds are backed by sales tax revenue, have asked a federal judge to block the G.O. group's effort to prevent Puerto Rico's government from paying COFINA debt over G.O. debt. The G.O. group's lawsuit says that its debt must be paid before other debt obligations, because it is guaranteed by the island's constitution.

dozens of firms under investigation are JBS and BRF, both of which have operations outside of Brazil. The companies have said they follow all health regulations. Some of the spoiled meat was exported to Europe, the Associated Press reported. Brazilian President Michel Temer told dozens of ambassadors on Sunday



Temer // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

that the Agriculture Ministry would release a complete list of countries that may have received rotten meat, as well as the names of the meat companies responsible. Temer said only 33 of the 11,000 inspectors at the Agriculture Ministry are being investigated for taking bribes in exchange for overlooking that certain meatpackers were using chemicals to improve the appearance and smell of the meat. Temer said the government would be putting together a task force to expedite the investigation into the scandal. His office also reiterated in a statement that countries that import Brazilian meats are permitted to inspect meatpacking plants. According to officials, Brazil exports meat to approximately 150 countries. They said that of the 4,800 meatpacking facilities subject to federal inspection in Brazil, 21 are under investigation. Federal police also said that the two-year investigation had determined that part of the money that JBS and BRF had allegedly paid to inspectors had been channeled to major political parties, including Temer's PMDB.

## Mexico Suggests Companies Should Boycott Wall Project

Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray has called on Mexican companies to think twice before bidding on contracts to help build U.S.

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peace accords, creating a perverse incentive to plant. And in the middle of peace talks, the government was less willing to use force to confront coca growers. Today, the Colombian government has a plan for new investment and voluntary eradication in the stateless areas of the countryside where coca is grown. The November 2016 peace accord commits former FARC members to help carry out this plan. The U.S. government should support Colombia's new effort with patience, avoiding an aggressive push to resume policies, like fumigation, that did not solve the problem before. While waiting to

Trends in those two countries won't have as much impact on Colombia's coca boom as the seven factors discussed above."

**A** Barry McCaffrey, president of BR McCaffrey Associates, retired U.S. Army four-star general and former director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy: "Colombia is such a magnificent country of incredible physical riches. The courage and patriotic pride of its people during the years of brutal civil war are inspirational. The Colombian armed forces and national police are the most respected institutions by the Colombian people. The security forces faced down the lawless elements of the FARC and ELN and the BACRIM with incredible bravery. Both President Uribe and President Santos are national heroes. Now Colombia has a treaty and the shooting has largely stopped. However, in my judgment, the U.S. State Department report on the massive increase in the cultivation of coca over the past two years portends the coming failure of the rule of law in Colombia. Colombia will become a narco-state. The end of aerial coca crop spraying under the false guise of environmental sensitivity was a signal to the narcs that Colombia wanted peace even at the cost of violating international and Colombian law. The simply astronomical profits to be made from cocaine will fuel the gradual destruction of the

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**“Colombia has a bumper crop of coca.”**

— Adam Isacson

see if this can work, though, we must closely monitor the Colombian government's effort. We must verify it is getting the resources, inter-agency coordination and high priority that bringing governance to coca-growing zones requires. Coca cultivation in Peru and Bolivia has been stable in recent years, ranging around 50,000 hectares in Peru and 35,000 in Bolivia, including legal coca.

President Donald Trump's proposed border wall, urging them to put their country ahead of their businesses' bottom lines, the Financial Times reported Sunday. Approximately 700 companies have registered interest for tenders for the wall, which the United States has requested have an "aesthetically pleasing" U.S. side. The tender also said it would have a "Buy American" preference for construction materials. "It is pertinent for any companies that see an economic opportunity in this to examine their conscience because we're not talking about economics here, but a profoundly

unfriendly act between two nations and we think this is a responsibility that falls to us all," said Videgaray. Ecovelocity, a Mexico-based lighting provider, is among the Mexican companies most eager to participate in the tender, though it acknowledges that its chances of being winning the bidding process are slim, given that Trump has in the past criticized Mexico and China, saying they provide cheap labor and manufactured goods that take away from U.S. industry. Cementos de Chihuahua, another Mexican company, has also said it would participate in the tender.

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rule of law. The FARC and ELN will not in the end disarm. They cannot achieve domination of the Colombian people through the ballot box. They will attempt to achieve their goals through corruption and the demobilization of the army and police. Sadly, I think this treaty will end badly."

**A**manda Mattingly, senior director for Latin America at The Arkin Group: "Coca cultivation in Colombia has been climbing steadily over the last several years, increasing by approximately 18 percent in 2016, because primarily, Colombian farmers do not have a legal alternative that is as lucrative as the illegal coca plant. In addition to fundamental economic drivers, the Colombian government's shift in strategy away from aerial eradication for health and environmental reasons in favor of enhanced interdiction efforts seems to have played a role as well. Also, some Colombian farmers may have returned to coca growing with the hope of now being included in a crop substitution program established in the peace accords between the Colombian government and the FARC. More coca means more cocaine, which is finding its way back into the United States. But it's not for a lack of cooperation between Colombia and the United States. Counter-narcotics coordination, including training and intelligence sharing, has been

strong and robust since the inception of 'Plan Colombia' in 2000, and last year, the Obama administration requested funding from Congress for ongoing support to Colombia in the post-peace process period.

**“ Colombian farmers do not have a legal alternative that is as lucrative as the illegal coca plant.”**

— Amanda Mattingly

Resources would help the Colombian government meet the significant demands it faces in pursuing its counter-narcotics strategy, enhancing its presence in the formerly FARC-controlled areas of the country and creating viable economic opportunities for the people, including coca growers. However, newly proposed budget cuts to the State Department by the Trump administration could significantly affect U.S. efforts to support Colombia going forward. Unfortunately, the reality is that Colombia's coca cultivation and cocaine production is likely to increase further under this scenario."

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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