

Peru's coca control strategy: Mixed messages and ambiguous data

Introduction:

Peru's government continues to tout the success of its anti-drug strategy, highlighting the amount of drugs seized and coca crops eradicated during the previous year, as it ramps up its 2020 campaign.

The Interior Ministry reported that police officers seized 63 tons of drugs in 2019,

well above the goal of 37 tons for the year. Eradication brigades (Corah) also beat their target, destroying 25,525 hectares of coca, from which cocaine is produced, in the 11 months through the end of 2019. The target for the year, as with the two previous years, was eradicating 25,000 hectares.



Corah. Coca eradication in San Gabán

A government-wide strategy to address coca cultivation and drug trafficking in key areas around the country complements eradication and interdiction, primarily in a Belgium-sized stretch of jungle known as the VRAEM, an acronym for the valleys formed by Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro rivers. The anti-drug agency, Devida, is in charge of the strategy, promising to provide coca-growing

farmers, their representative federations and regional authorities with resources and programs to boost licit economies through "alternative development," including new crops, such as coffee and cacao, and, most recently, aquaculture.¹ The VRAEM Plan alone includes slightly more than \$500 million in investment between 2018 and 2021.²

¹ <https://www.devida.gob.pe/-/vraem-piscicultores-de-pichari-promovidos-por-devida-inician-cosecha-de-peces-amazonicos>

² <https://andina.pe/Agencia/noticia-gobierno-invierte-s-1695-millones-para-financiar-proyectos-el-vraem-683763.aspx>

The ministry's numbers, as well as those included in the U.S. government's annual narcotics report, however, reveal a much more complex picture. Coca is spreading to new areas, replanting of eradicated areas is still strong, and the government is misleading coca growers who are unaware of strategies purportedly designed to foster licit economies in major coca-growing valleys. Coca farmers who have worked with Devida and other agencies on alternative development argue that they have basically been abandoned, with authorities failing to respond to needs as coffee prices crash and cacao is constrained by market pressures, including new technical rules that restrict exports to the European Union.

Their criticism of state policy and agencies, particularly Devida, has been increasing since April 2019 when eradication began in Puno, in the southeast of the country, and later in November in a western corner of the VRAEM. Leaders of organized coca growers, who have been working with the state on solutions, have singled out Devida for doublespeak concerning eradication, alternative development and improving livelihoods. They were especially incensed in early November when Director Vargas travelled to Washington to meet with Trump administration officials a week after forced eradication began in the VRAEM. They perceived the entry of CORAH in their territory as a strategy to gain U.S. approval and increased funding at their expense.³

Added to this daunting picture, for the first time in years the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) did not publish its annual survey of coca under cultivation in 2019. This was done at the request of Peruvian authorities, complicating a comparative analysis with previous years and with the two other coca-growing countries, Bolivia and Colombia.

The numbers:

The government reported it forcibly eradicated coca in eight corridors or *ejes* in 2019. The most significant amounts were in two areas where the security forces launched major efforts during the year and where coca crops spiraled, based on the UNODC's previous data. Of the different corridors targeted last year, three were under a state of emergency that continued as of April 2020, allowing the armed forces to work with the national police to maintain order and, in these cases, fight illegal activities, with little oversight or transparency.



Coca farmers killed by National Police on Nov. 1 in San Gabán

The eradication in 2019 also included the state's first effort to enter the zone formed by the valleys of the Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro rivers. Known as the VRAEM, it is the country's principal coca-cultivating zone with 21,646 hectares, or 43 percent of national total, of coca under cultivation, according to the UNODC. A large section of the VRAEM has been under a state of emergency since mid-2003, ostensibly to fight the last remnants of the Shining Path, or

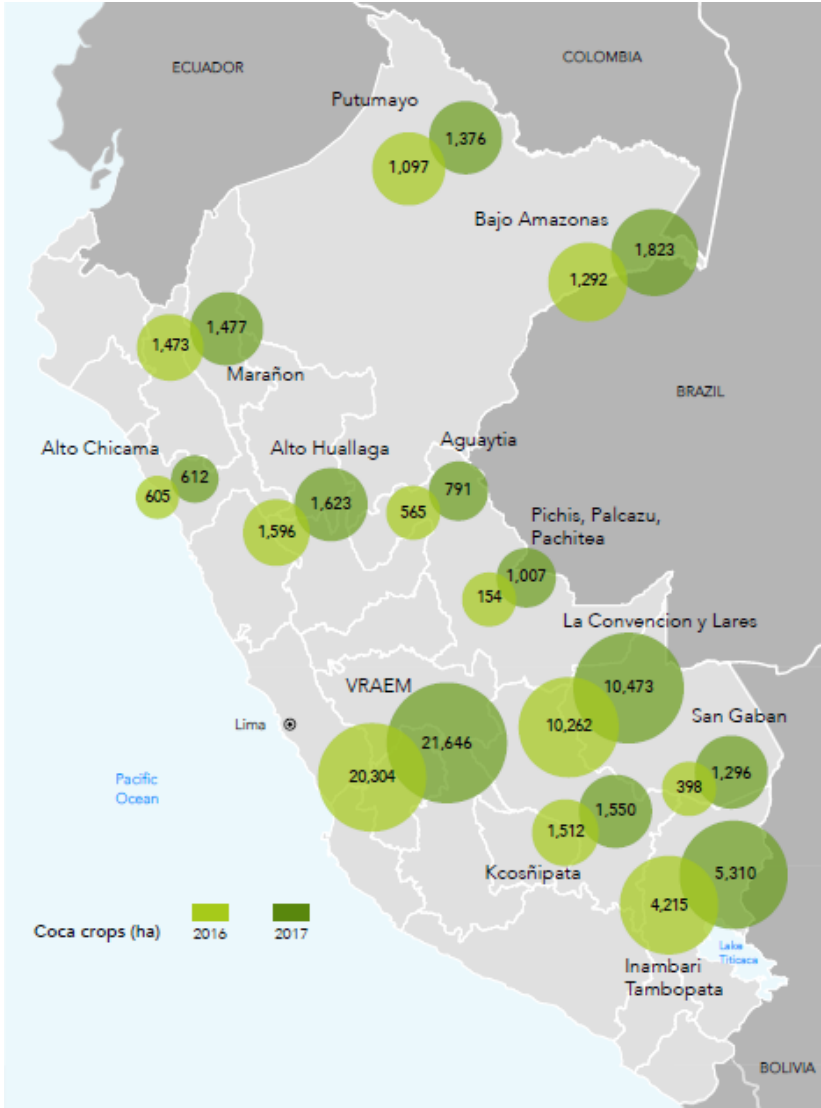
³ AIN interview, 9 Nov. 2019.

the Militarized Communist Party of Peru, as they now call themselves. The emergency zone covers 33 districts of the 69 districts in four regions, Ayacucho, Cusco, Huancavelica and Junín, which form the VRAEM. Eradication began in November 2019 in the Junín region’s Satipo province. The Interior Ministry reported 129.47 hectares eradicated in four areas in Satipo. The original goal was 700 hectares. The

largest amount of coca eradicated last year was in the San Gabán corridor, which includes Puno’s Carabaya province and Cusco’s Quispicanchi province in southeastern Peru. Corah reported eliminating 7,079 hectares of coca there, with 5,591.60 hectares destroyed in Carabaya’s Ayapata district, and 1,487.40 hectares eliminated in Quispicanchi’s Camanti district.

San Gabán, according to the UNODC’s report for 2017, had 1,296 hectares of coca under cultivation.

Coca Production Zones in Peru



UNODC, Coca Crop Monitoring Report 2017

The Peruvian government launched the eradication effort in San Gabán in April 2019, with Corah brigades entering the zone at night to set up camp without prior notification. Local farmers met them with

resistance and at least two coca growers were killed. After a tense standoff that lasted nearly two weeks, coca growers and local elected authorities reached an agreement that allowed for eradication of

coca crops infringing on the buffer zone of the Bahuaja-Sonene National Park.⁴

Similar violent clashes occurred in two earlier anti-coca operations in San Gabán, first in 2004 and again in 2015. Security forces shot and killed three coca growers in the October 2004 protests.

The second area combines two corridors in the northern Loreto region that borders Colombia. A total of 7,784.54 hectares were

eradicated in the Caballococha (1,109.20 hectares) and Pebas (6,675.34 hectares) zones in the Mariscal Ramón Castilla province. Ramón Castilla and neighboring Putumayo province were put under a state of emergency in August 2019 to fight drug trafficking, terrorism and other illicit activities. The zones had a combined 3,199 hectares of coca under cultivation in the most recent UNODC report. The full list of eradication in 2019 included:⁵

Corridor	Regions	Amount eradicated (hectares)	UNODC 2017 (hectares)
Aguaytía	Ucayali	4,041.98	791
Alto Anapati	Junín	13.30	--
Caballococha	Loreto	1,109.20	1,823
Ciudad Constitución	Huánuco/Pasco	3,640.59	1,007
Mazamari	Junín	116.17	--
Pebas	Loreto	6,675.34	1,376
Pucallpa	Ucayali	2,850.73	1,623
San Gabán	Puno/Cusco	7,079.00	1,296

Source: Corah

The Peruvian government, while reporting on the amount of coca eradicated, did not report on the amount of coca under cultivation. Without viable alternatives, farmers quickly replant in the same area or migrate further into the jungle.

The U.S. government, in its International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) which was released on March 2nd, praised Peru’s efforts, but the report presented an increase in coca under cultivation for 2018. Based on the report, Peru saw the largest increase in coca under cultivation of the three producing countries. Colombia’s coca cultivation came in at

208,000 hectares, down 1,000 hectares from 2017, while Bolivia saw an increase of 1,900 hectares. Peru, however, saw an increase 2,300 hectares, coming in at 52,100 hectares, up from 49,800 hectares in the previous year’s report. The U.S. report might lowball the amount of coca under cultivation when comparing the amounts Corah claimed to have eradicated in places like Loreto and the amount of coca the U.N. claimed existed in its most recent report. There are also indications that Corah may exaggerate the amount of coca reduced, raising a series of red flags concerning transparency and monitoring.

⁴ <https://elcomercio.pe/peru/puno/puno-acuerdan-erradicar-cultivos-coca-parque-nacional-bahuaja-sonene-noticia-629389-noticia/>

⁵ <https://mail.corahperu.org/index.php/estadisticas/#top>

The U.S. report also stated that Peru’s “potential pure cocaine” capacity increased to 509 metric tons, up from 486 tons for the previous year.⁶

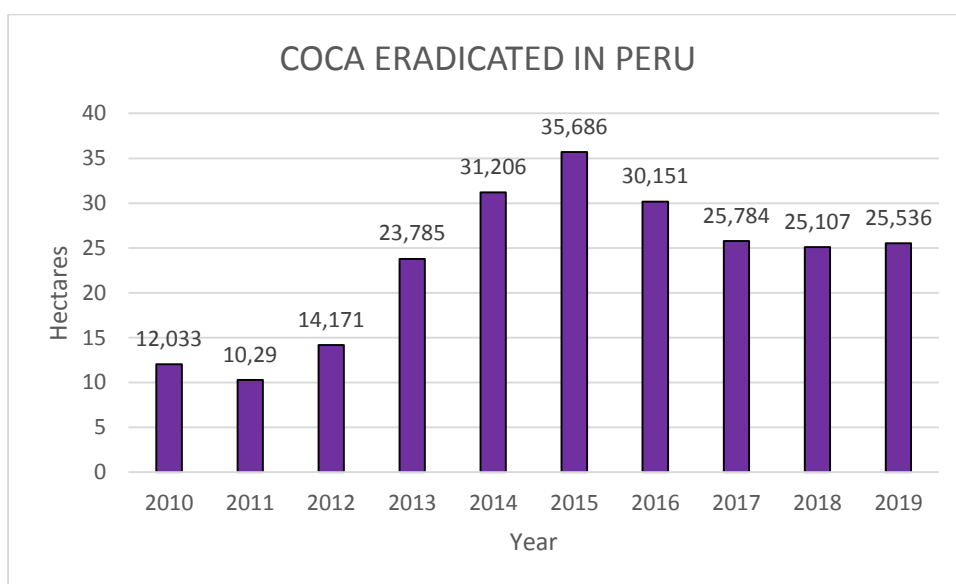
Trends:

Increasing coca:

The amount of coca under cultivation in Peru has increased in the past few years, according to UNODC and U.S. government statistics. The UNODC calculated 49,900 hectares in 2017, up from 40,300 hectares in 2015 and 43,900 in 2016, while the

INSCR went from 44,000 hectares in 2016 to 49,800 in 2017 and 52,100 hectares in 2018.

The increase comes despite the government claims that it has surpassed eradication targets for more than a decade. The government plan for the coming years is eradication of a minimum of 25,000 hectares annually. Peru has eradicated more than 25,000 hectares annually since 2014.⁷



Andean Information Network, Source: Corah

Several factors contribute to sustained eradication coinciding with an increase in the amount of coca under cultivation.

Coca cultivation has continued to spread in the country, with the northern border seeing the most pronounced increase in the final years of the previous decade. This is a complicated area for a number of reasons, including allegations that Colombians have moved into the zone to cultivate coca. The Peruvian government suspects that members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels who have not demobilized are also taking advantage of the remote area.

Coca also returned to San Gabán, where it had fallen to 398 hectares in 2016, according to the UNODC, and the Pichis-Palcazú-Pachitea valleys (Ciudad Constitución), where it was down to 154 hectares in 2016. These two areas had been important coca-growing regions in the 1990s and halfway through the 2000s. Corah carried out sustained eradication, but coca cultivation expanded to other regions. Replanting is also an important source of coca, despite legislation criminalizing it. Legislative Decree 1241, from September 2015, made it illegal to replant coca on land that had already been

⁶ <https://www.state.gov/2020-incsr-volume-i-drug-and-chemical-control-as-submitted-to-congress/>

⁷ <https://mail.corahperu.org/index.php/estadisticas/#top>

eradicated.⁸ The main areas for replanting in 2019 were the Aguaytía and Pucallpa corridors, where forced eradication has been going on for decades. The amount eradicated in Aguaytía in 2019 was among the lowest in years, topping 7,000 hectares annually in 2017 and 2018.

Emergency zones:

A troubling trend – and not only for controlling coca cultivation – is the state’s

increasing use of “emergencies” to deal with political or social problems. The emergencies allow the armed forces to maintain order alongside the national police. They also suspend constitutional and, in some cases, eliminate checks and balances to facilitate investment.

As of March 2020, the government had in place emergencies in the following areas:



While declaring an emergency zone is legal and often used for natural disasters to speed up response, it is also being used for social control. The increasing use of the mechanism points to a creeping criminalization of protests and reliance on the armed forces instead of the police to address protests.

Path, a violent subversive group. While significantly reduced as a threat, the remnants still create problems. In early March 2020, for example, they ambushed a police patrol in Ayacucho’s Huanta province, killing two of their former members who had become informants for the security forces.⁹

Each of the emergencies included has their own particularities. The emergency covering the four regions that form the VRAEM has been in place since June 2003 as a response to remnants of the Shining

The emergency to fight terrorism overlaps some coca-growing zones, creating problems for the state as well as coca growers. There is a tendency in Peru to associate anything related to the

⁸ <https://busquedas.elperuano.pe/normaslegales/decreto-legislativo-que-fortalece-la-lucha-contra-el-trafico-decreto-legislativo-n-1241-1292707-11/>

⁹ <https://elcomercio.pe/peru/vraem/traicion-y-muerte-en-el-vraem-como-se-produjo-la-emboscada-contra-la-policia-y-sus-colaboradores-sendero-luminoso-ayacucho-noticia/>

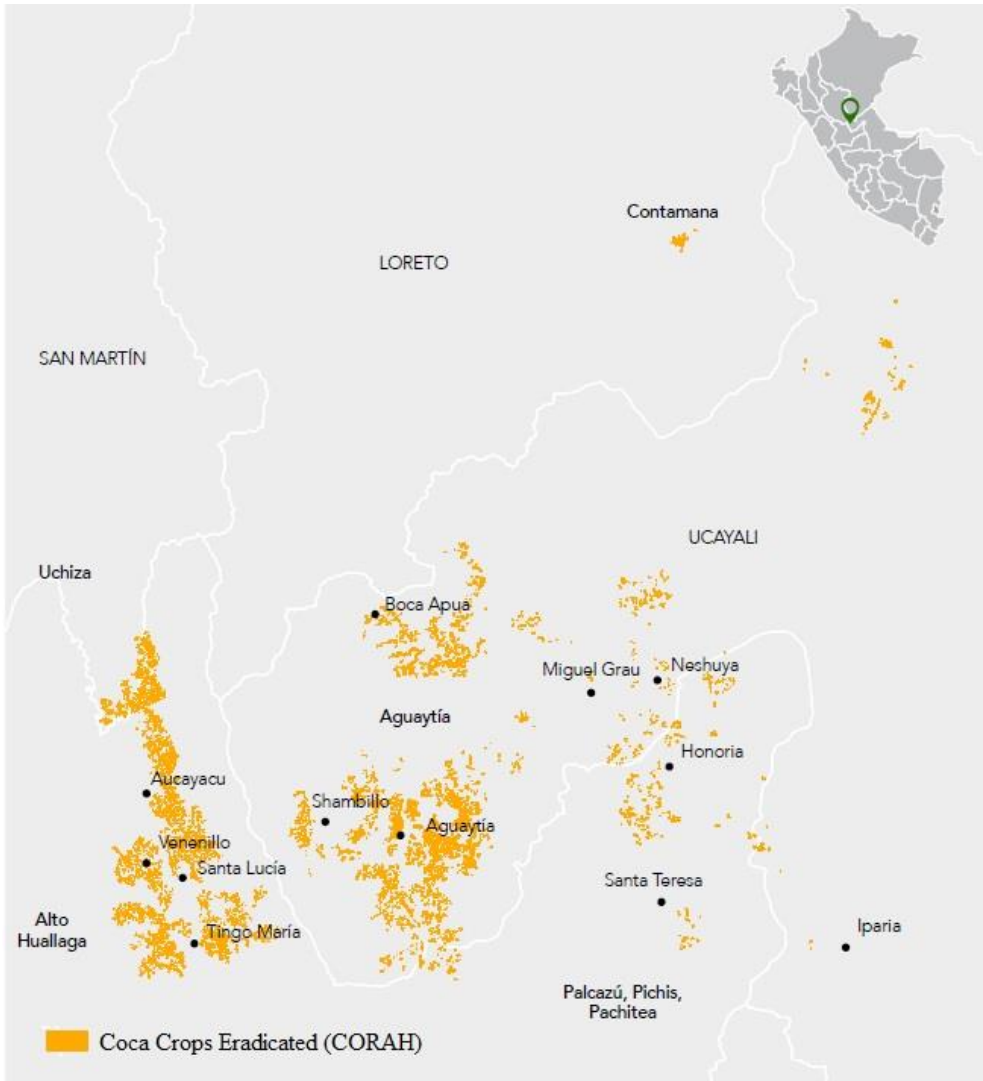
VRAEM to terrorism. The state does not help by using the term “drug-terrorist” (narco-terrorist) to describe the Shining Path, drug traffickers and, at times, coca growers.

The other zones involving drug trafficking are more apparent. The emergency in Huánuco and Pasco covers part of an area known as Pichis-Palcazú-Pachitea. Coca crops have increased there in recent years, after virtually disappearing in the 2000s, but that is not the primary concern. The major reason for the emergency is the presence of illegal airstrips used to fly cocaine made in Peru to Bolivia, which has become a major transshipment country for Peruvian

cocaine. The U.S. government’s 2020 INCSR claims that Peruvian authorities estimate that 41 percent of the country’s cocaine is smuggled through Bolivia.

Peru destroyed 86 clandestine runways in 2019, the vast majority of these along the Huánuco/Pasco border.

The emergency in Loreto is similar. In addition to eradication, the state has also state-launched repeated operations to target drug traffickers. The most recent, in March 2020, eliminated coca crops, cocaine-processing laboratories, and a clandestine airstrip. Security forces arrested three Peruvians and two Colombians



UNODC, Coca Crop Monitoring Report 2017

Misrepresented strategies:

Other areas of concern involve the government's stated reasons for eradication, which are presented to the Peruvian public to justify its actions and promises of alternative development and "licit" economies as part of the campaign to eliminate coca.

For coca farmers and farmers in general, however, the justification is often just an excuse, and alternative development is a poorly planned afterthought.

In 2019, Peruvian government two cases in terms of environmental protection and

indigenous rights, basically portraying coca growers as violators. The reality turned out to be quite different.

In the case of the San Gabán corridor, in Puno's Carabaya province, the government announced that it needed to eradicate in the zone because coca crops had encroached on the buffer zone of the Bahuaja-Sonene National Park.¹⁰ Local authorities signed an agreement with Corah to allow for eradication in the buffer zone. It was part of the deal that lowered tensions in the wake of protests after two coca growers were killed.



San Gabán, Peru, April 19. Huachos.com,

Coca growers and media reports on environmental degradation, however, say that illegal mining¹¹ and not coca is the biggest problem facing the national park

and its buffer zone. In addition, coca crops in the buffer zone have been estimated between 500 hectares and 1,000 hectares, a

¹⁰

<https://busquedas.elperuano.pe/download/url/aprueban-la-nueva-delimitacion-de-la-zona-de-amortiguamiento-resolucion-n-240-2017-sernanp-1612657-1>

¹¹ <https://es.mongabay.com/2018/05/peru-bahuaja-sonene-mineria-ilegal-narcotrafico-2/>

huge difference from the nearly 5,600 hectares eliminated in the Ayapata district

Coca growers argue that the claim about coca in the buffer zone was simply a ruse to mask forced eradication.

Farmers complained that Corah eliminated crops on their land in the past and promised alternative development initiatives failed to materialize. The situation is repeating itself nearly a year after the last eradication campaign. According to sources in San Gabán, many coca farmers have replanted coca, and sought to generate income from crops at higher altitudes, such as potatoes and coffee which failed due to climate change, disease and falling agricultural prices. “We didn’t have any way to feed our kids and the government never followed through. We’re still waiting and scrambling, and planting coca, what else can we do?”¹²

The Peruvian government deemed eradication in Satipo, which is part of the VRAEM emergency zone, necessary because coca crops were encroaching on territory of Ashaninka indigenous communities. The Shining Path viciously attacked and subjugated the Ashaninkas in the 1980s and early 1990s. As a result the indigenous groups were careful to keep outsiders from moving into their territory, although they now rent land to coca-growing families for badly-needed income.

Ashaninka leaders did ask the Interior Minister and the country’s anti-drug agency, Devida, to help them remove coca crops from their lands.¹³ This was the stated reason for the start of eradication on November 1, 2019. The Interior Minister pledged to target only coca on Ashaninka land and claimed that the campaign would eradicate 700 hectares in 2019 and a similar amount in 2020.



¹² AIN interview, 12 March 2020.

¹³ <https://andina.pe/agencia/noticia-devida-anuncia-erradicacion-coca-mazamari-pangoa-y-rio-tambo-767130.aspx>

Interior Minister Carlos Morán told foreign reporters the following prior to eradication in Satipo:

The VRAEM zone is the principal zone for drugs in the country, and it will now be included in eradication. ... This is a zone that is under a state of emergency, which is why the participation of the Armed Forces is necessary. The Armed Forces have logistics and infrastructure necessary to support the police.

I don't want to speak for previous governments, but this administration is committed to doing its job. The VRAEM is the main coca-growing area in the country.

We know that there will be responses from organized coca growers, but no one is above the law. Illegal crops need to be reduced and, if we know that the large majority of these crops go to maceration pits, the State has the obligation to respond. We cannot remain indifferent."

The eradication campaign targeted four districts, only two of which, Pangoa and Mazamari, have coca on indigenous land. Coca growers say it that CORAH eradicated coca on their not Ashaninka lands. It unclear how much coca in the Pangoa district is on indigenous land, with the UNODC 2018 report including several different numbers for the district.¹⁴

¹⁴ See pages 77, 103 and 106, which have conflicting numbers concerning coca under cultivation and native communities in Pangoa. https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Peru/Peru_Monitoreo_de_Cultivos_de_Coca_2017_web.pdf

Coca eradicated in Satipo

District	Coca eradicated	Coca on Indigenous I Land
Coviriali	0.14 hectares	--
Llaylla	11.89 hectares	--
Mazamari	0.55 hectares	1 hectare
Pangoa	116.91	868 hectares

Despite the agreement, eradication began at dawn on November 1st by targeting farms with small plots of coca outside the indigenous territory. Coca growers and other farmers met eradication with opposition and faced off with the security forces. The farmers were armed with sticks and rocks. Security officers fired bullets in response, a clear use of disproportional force and a violation of international human rights law.¹⁵

Recently-elected Congressman Carlos Chavarria, who is from Pichanaki in Junín, explained the difficulties small farmers face in the region: “We get along with the Ashaninka in our region, but the Peruvian government lacks an agricultural policy that focuses on small farmers. They sign export and import agreements with other countries, while we scrape to make a living. The price of coffee has collapsed.”

Pangoa Union leader Javier Rojas said a coffee blight has further complicated economic conditions for farmers. “The price has fallen to 6 soles (\$1.80). We can't live on that. Many of us took out loans for the harvest, and we can't pay them back. We may lose our land. Even the meager price Enaco pays us for coca is better. It's not enough, but it's something and we want to sell it legally to them.”¹⁶

¹⁵ For more information see: <http://ain-bolivia.org/wp-content/uploads/Bullets-in-Lieu-of-Dialogue-Peru.pdf>

¹⁶ AIN interview 21 March 2020.

Coca growers:

Peru's coca growers face a difficult situation, because coca cultivation is, technically, not illegal and there is a state-owned company, ENACO, in charge of purchasing coca.

Coca growers continue to negotiate and sign agreements with the state, but the government rarely, if ever, complies with what it promises. The state also keeps coca growers in the dark about plans, including a new study on the legal use of coca, a survey for which should have been finished in August 2019,¹⁷ and a plan to create a new registry of growers for at least two coca-growing regions.

At the same time, coca growers who want to sell to ENACO, have to deal with bureaucracy and inexplicable price structures, which include an 18-percent tax, that further chew into earnings. The government has been pledging to reform ENACO for years. ENACO is a money-losing enterprise. Losses in 2019 were 2.9 million soles (\$878,000) compared to \$484,000 the previous year.

ENACO purchased 1,405 metric tons of coca in 2019, with 62 percent purchased in Cusco, 25 percent in Ayacucho, 7 percent in La Libertad, 4 percent in Puno and 2 percent in Huánuco. In terms of its sales, 88 percent of coca was sold as leaves (raw material), 8 percent was sold for production of legal cocaine and 4 percent was sold for production of herbal infusions.



Andean Information Network, Coca Market in Sacaba, Bolivia.

¹⁷ <http://m.inei.gob.pe/prensa/noticias/inei-recogera-informacion-sobre-el-consumo-tradicional-de-hoja-de-coca-en-los-hogares-11661/>

The state continues to negotiate with coca growers and sign agreements that are rarely met. There is a long litany of alternative development strategies, plans for sustainable development, and promises of infrastructure that have never materialized, and have primarily been conditioned on prior forced coca eradication. Devida most recent plan is an over-arching strategy for the VRAEM¹⁸ launched in 2018 and with stipulation for forced eradication. VRAEM farmer organizations were outraged at the announcement of forced coca eradication, which had not happened in the zone since the early 1990s, and repelled Corah when it entered into their territory. A number of projects within the plan have started, including replication in February 2020 of a fish-farming model for Amazon species used in neighboring Bolivia.

Coca farmers are not averse to reducing the amount of coca under cultivation, but they want to be included in the plans developed by the state that have an impact on their family and community economy well-being. They want to make sure they can cover their basic needs and not face abuses by the security forces

Coca has long been the source of liquidity for families, harvesting and selling coca leaves three, and sometimes even four, times a year to have cash on hand while waiting for other crops to come to harvest.

A negotiated strategy followed by the state and coca growers and their representative organizations might allow Peru to start reducing coca crops in a steady and sustainable way.



Andean Information Network, Peruvian Delegation in the visit to integrated development project in Bolivia

In July 2018, CONPACCP, the largest coca-growing umbrella organization in Peru, sent a letter to Peruvian President Martín Vizcarra requesting the replication of the community coca control model¹⁹ implemented with farmer support in Bolivia until November 2019. They also requested assistance from Evo Morales, Bolivia's

former president and a coca grower, and the European Union. EU cooperation had been crucial in Bolivia, as a counterweight to U.S. pressure and a replacement for diminishing funds, but with a more inclusive, pragmatic focus. Their integrated development policy only allows coca eradication when sustainable livelihoods

¹⁸ <http://www.pcm.gob.pe/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/DS-N%C2%B0-102-2018-PCM.pdf>

¹⁹ For more information see <http://ain-bolivia.org/wp-content/uploads/Bolivia-Report-Habeas-Coca-US-07-06-2015-corr1-1-1.pdf>

And <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.440/>

are in place for families, who must play a key role in the planning, implementation and evaluation of these long-term projects.²⁰ This represents a significant departure from the U.S. model of alternative development conditioned on prior forced eradication.

In 2019, three delegations from Peru's coca-growing regions – two from the VRAEM and Puno and a third that included representatives from the central jungle, Upper Huallaga and Puno, spent a week to ten days in Bolivia. Each group

met with farmers, observed state-led projects to promote alternative crops and other sources of income. The Peruvian farmers viewed a negotiated crop reduction mission and established ongoing contacts to facilitate information and technical exchanges.

The delegates from the central jungle region (northern VRAEM, but not directly affiliated with FEPAVRAE) shared their experiences at a community meeting in Mazamari, in Satipo, on October 30, 2019. Two-hundred coca growers met to discuss the impending threat of crop eradication.



Andean Information Network, Cochabamba Tropics, Bolivia

The visits to Bolivia provided leaders in Peru's coca grower's organizations a solid understanding of the community control and integrated development with coca. They have developed a clear policy proposal for the Peruvian government. After an initial promising encounter in February 2019, they are still waiting as the clock ticks down on Vizcarra's final 16 months in office, and Devida selectively applies benefits and plays one group of growers against others. Within this context

and with the lack of clarity on coca production figures and broken promises, and exacerbated by the coronavirus epidemic, the hope for policy reform remains murky. Farmers hope for increased oversight from new members of congress from their regions, and a new administration, focused on meeting the needs of rural farm families in coca growing regions, and throughout Peru.

²⁰ General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union. "Council Conclusions on Alternative Development." 15 Nov 2018.