



Bullets in Lieu of Dialogue: Coca Eradication in Peru's Central Jungle

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Introduction

Peru's government began forced eradication of coca crops, the raw material for cocaine, on November 1st in a corner of the central jungle that had been off limits to eradication for decades.

The eradication brigades, known as Corah, and police backup made their initial move in Satipo, in the Junín department, which forms part of a Belgium-sized jungle region known as the VRAEM, for the Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro river valleys.



Figure 1 Coca farmer shot by National Police on Nov. 1 in Pauriali

The decision marks a major change for Peru's government, which has not eradicated in the VRAEM since early in the 1990s to avoid an uprising by coca-growing farmers and provoking armed attacks by remnants over the once-powerful Shining Path guerrillas. The VRAEM, covering districts in four departments, has been under a state of emergency since mid-2003, in order, according to the Peruvian government to provide more leeway to security forces fighting drug trafficking and Shining Path remnants.

President Martín Vizcarra announced in July that the state would start eradication in the

VRAEM, where more than half of Peru's coca is cultivated. He said the government could no longer turn a blind eye to the largest source of coca in the country. According to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, Peru had 52,100 hectares of coca under cultivation in 2018.

te's anti-drug agency, DEVIDA, later assured farmers and the national press that eradication would only occur in indigenous community territories and at their request in order to protect them from threats from drug trafficking, and



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signed an agreement on October 24 with the VRAEM coca grower umbrella union, known as FEPAVRAE, stating: “In this sense the executive specifies and reiterates that the action (is) to eradicate illegal coca in the territories of native communities located in the Mazamari, Pangoa, [and] Río Tambo district in response to the petitions and requests they sent to the Executive.”¹

Despite the agreement and repeated promises, 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.² Gunfire from the forced injured four farmers. Rúben Leiva, who was part of the group resisting eradication, said the government action was excessive.



Figure 2- Zavala during August 2019 delegation to Bolivia with other Central Jungle leaders

“We have an abusive government. They hit hard at the coca growers hard ... They shot at us with tear gas, with high caliber weapons, that’s why we have to protest. We will have a long-term strike and blockades starting November 5th,” he said. Although growers signed an agreement late November 1st with the regional police commander to suspend eradication until dialogue occurred, the security forces began to rip out the plants in nearby Pangoa coca growing communities on November third.

While a reaction had been expected, several decisions adopted by the state in recent weeks exacerbated tensions. The eradication started in the Mazamari district, despite organized farmers’ groups repeated requests for dialogue and agreed to gradual coca crop reduction. Mazamari has a negligible amount of coca, but it is the most accessible district from the provincial capital, Satipo. The state had also stressed that it was moving into the zone at the request of Ashaninka native

¹ “Acta de la reunión entre el Ejecutivo, Autoridades, Organizaciones Sociales del VRAEM. 1, paragraph 2. 24 Oct. 2019. Available on request.

² [Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials](https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/useofforceandfirearms.aspx), Adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, Havana, Cuba, 27 August to 7 September 1990. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/useofforceandfirearms.aspx>



communities, which feared land grabs to plant coca. Mazamari's small amount of coca is not on recognized Ashaninka territory.

Premier Vicente Zeballos, who was in a different part of the VRAEM on October 24th, told farmers that the state was interested in "gradual reduction" of coca crops, and that DEVIDA had been talking to farmers throughout the VRAEM for months prior to the start of eradication to find common ground.

Perú - Junín - Mazamari - Pangoa



Necessity drives coca cultivation

Among concerns expressed by farmers are the changing economic conditions in Satipo and other areas throughout the Peruvian Amazon where coca grows or can be grown. For the past few decades, farmers, including former coca growers, have been planting coffee and cacao as cash crops.

For the past decade, small farmers in central jungle primarily grew coffee. Yusbel Almonacid Santos, explains that until ten years ago the price was high, with one kilo selling for between 8 to 9 Soles (\$2.40 - \$2.70 US dollars). "People were excited about coffee; it was the



grano del oro (the golden bean). But, in 2010 a fungus - coffee leaf rust - destroyed most of the plants in the region. In 2015 farmers took advantage of loans offered by the state-run Agrarian

Bank to replant their land. But soon after the price of coffee crashed to a low of 2 soles (around \$0.60) in October 2018. Today it is around five soles per kilo (\$1.50).

Producing coffee is labor intensive and expensive; Once harvested the coffee has to be cleaned, peeled, dried and transported to the market. Almonacid explained that as a result ‘it creates more work than profit.’ He estimates that he actually loses money growing coffee. more than what he earns back. Other crops either do not grow on the steep hillsides, or have a low price making them economically unviable.

Agricultural union leader Marianne Zavala explains that “it’s no use if the price is only 5 soles - it’s just to pay the people who harvest it, but for the farmer nothing is left...In fact, harvesting the coffee can actually leave you in debt because you have to pay the workers and so a lot of people last year didn’t even bother with the harvest... they did not harvest’.



Figure 3-Farmer protests coca eradication Pauriali, Nov.1
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The central jungle suffers from high levels of poverty.³ Carlos Chavarria, an agricultural union leader said that malnutrition and anemia are common in the farming communities. Alejandro Cortez, a coffee grower highlighted the dire situation. He said that he had been unable to replace his torn pants and worn rubber boots because of a lack of income. Alejandro introduced his children who had swollen stomachs “... Look at the food my kids are eating - just soup, I can’t afford anything better than that.”

With loans to pay back, and children to feed, people are turning to coca leaf cultivation as an alternative. Zavala explained the importance of coca: “When coffee rust killed the plants, the people with a little coca could survive. Those who didn’t, they had to abandon their land. They went elsewhere - our salvation was coca.’ She went on to say ‘coca

is like a small savings account for us. It pays enough make ends meet.”

Carlos Tiese Quispe, mayor of the Llaylla district, backs coca cultivation. “I have to support the farmers, the price of coffee is less than 5 soles, pineapple prices are low, bananas are low - there

³ <https://www.sineace.gob.pe/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PERFIL-JUNI%CC%81N.pdf>



is nothing to sustain the farmer to allow him to get on.... if the farmers have a hectare or half a hectare of coca, it's because they have needs; with the cash they make from coca they can be buy food, there is nothing else.' Alejandro agreed, "I have to feed my kids somehow," he said.

Peru's National Coffee Board (*Junta Nacional del Cafe*—JNC) has been warning most of the year that low prices could force farmers who switched to coffee to return to coca. This is heard not only in Satipo, but throughout coca-growing valleys where crop substitution and development programs, combined with eradication, have significantly reduce coca crops. Tomás Cordova, head of the JNC, told Reuters last February that farmers would be turning back to coca if conditions with coffee and other crops did not improve.⁴

Satipo and the VRAEM

While DEVIDA and other agencies have talked about economic conditions in Satipo and other parts of the VRAEM, they were not part of the strategy when the Interior Ministry announced that the goal is eradication of 750 hectares of coca this year. The principal areas, include Alto Anapati, in the Pangoa district, as well as in the Mazamari and Río Tambo districts.

The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) stated in its most recent report that Satipo has approximately 3,6000 hectares of coca under cultivation. Coca crops, which had been declining in recent years, have been returning because of the problems with coffee and other crops.

Of the districts originally targeted for eradication, the UNODC listed 81 hectares in Mazamari, 303 hectares in Pangoa and 967 in Río Tambo.

The Peruvian government has stated that there would be no eradication in in Vizcatán del Ene, another district in Satipo that is more remote and where the Shining Path remnants could play a role. The district is home to 2,242 hectares of coca, according to the UNODC.

The initial effort in Mazamari and, most likely in other zones in Satipo, will serve as a test case for the administration as it implements a strategy for the VRAEM emergency zone.

The emergency zone has varied in size and scope, with the number of districts under the emergency today, 34, the lowest in years. The 34 districts are spread out over four regions in Ayacucho, Cusco, Huancavelica and Junín.

The VRAEM has been the largest source of coca in Peru this decade, averaging 19,747 hectares of coca under cultivation since 2010, according to the UNODC. The largest amount, 21,646 hectares, was recorded in the 2018 UNODC report. Not all of the districts under the state of emergency are coca-growing regions and not all of them have Shining Path presence. The

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-peru-drugs/coffee-farmers-in-peru-abandon-crops-to-grow-coca-group-idUSKCN1QE2ON>



VRAEM has also become an important source of cocaine and cocaine paste, with authorities routinely

The targeted districts in Satipo have been part of the coca-growing belt in the central jungle for decades. They were also extremely hard hit by the Shining Path during the internal armed conflict, 1980-1992, particularly in the final few years. The districts are home to a fair number of indigenous people. The Ashaninkas are the largest indigenous population in the zone, followed by Nomatsiguenga, mainly in Pangoa. The Truth Commission, which looked at political violence in the country between 1980 and 2000, reported that of the estimated 55,000 Ashaninkas in the central jungle at the time of the conflicts, around 10,000 were forcibly displaced, 6,000 were killed and 5,000 were held as virtual slaves by the Shining Path.

Political will

Interior Minister Morán said the districts in Satipo were chosen for the initial eradication because they presented conditions deemed appropriate. Zavala explained the coca grower view, “They chose us because we’re the poorest, and the weakest, even though we have very little coca.”

He said the first issue was the threat of political violence, which has declined in the target zone. He said that while Shining Path remnants remained active in some parts of the VRAEM, they have been cornered and have suffered important losses. These include the arrest of a military commander in early July in the Huancavelica region and the death of another in early August. The military claimed that Juan Carlos Badajoz, killed in Ayacucho, was a member of the outlawed group’s “central committee.”

“The presence of Shining Path has declined operationally in the VRAEM, so the political decision was made to intervene in areas that are not as “hot,” including Mazamari, Rio Tambo and Alto Anapati,” said the minister.

He said the most important element, however, is political will. He said that the eradication brigades (Corah) had not entered the VRAEM because previous government opted against it.

“In the VRAEM, the only thing needed is political will to eradicate there,” he said.

The decision will require the government to readjust its strategy for Corah, which has seen its area of operation increase in the past two years. Corah was primarily focused on the Upper Huallaga Valley, principally the Huánuco, San Martín and Ucayali regions. Its full name is the Special Project for Control and Reduction of Coca Crops in the Upper Huallaga (*Proyecto Especial Control y Reducción del Cultivo de Coca en el Alto Huallaga—Corah*).

They dispatched Corah in 2018 to eradicate coca in Putumayo province in the Loreto region on the border with Colombia. The province has been under a state of emergency on and off since mid-2018 and National Police and Armed Forces launched the fourth phase of its Armageddon. Operation in October. Another province in Loreto, Mariscal Ramón Castilla, also on the border with Colombia, was added to the state of emergency in August.



Corah eradicated 6,181 hectares of coca there in the first 10 months of the year. The amount eradicated represents a significant increase in coca under cultivation. The UNODC's latest report include 1,376 hectares in the Putumayo.

Eradication brigades entered San Gabán, in the southeastern Puno state in April. They immediately met resistance and killed two coca farmers. An agreement was reached after two weeks, with local organizations allowing for coca eradication in the buffer zone of the Bahuaja Sonene National Park. Corah reported 5,620 hectares eradicated in San Gabán and surrounding districts through October which would also reflect a substantial increase. The UNODC reported 1,296 hectares in San Gabán in its report.

Morán said that the government cannot wait any longer to go into the VRAEM. "I do not want to respond for previous governments, but this government is committed to doing its job. The VRAEM is the principal coca-growing area in the country and the second area is San Gabán in



Figure 4-Farmer hold eradicated coca and tear gas casing in Pauriali, Nov. 1.

Puno. The Interior Minister announced November 2nd that more than 22,00 hectares of coca had been eradicated between February 16th, when this year's campaign began, and the end of October. The coca was eradicated in four areas, in Loreto and Ucayali departments, and in two border zones, including the Pichis-Palcazú-Pachitea valley between Huánuco and Pasco, and the San Gabán zone, which is primarily in Puno but also includes a small chunk of Cusco. The goal for the year is to eradicate 25,000 hectares.⁵

The Bolivian coca control model?

The decision to move into Satipo with a traditional forced eradication also appears to end the possibility of using a model

⁵ "CORAH ERRADICÓ MÁS DE 22,000 HECTÁREAS DE HOJA DE COCA EN LO QUE VA DEL AÑO." Press Release Peruvian Ministry of the Interior. 2 Nov. 2019.



neighboring Bolivia.

similar to that in place in

At a national meeting in Mazamari on October 30th 2019, coca-growing farmers met to discuss the threat of imminent eradication. Delegates included representatives from the central jungle and other coca growing regions, including Alto Huallaga, the broader VRAEM. There was also a large contingent of leaders from Ashaninka indigenous communities - who DEVIDA argues are victims of coca expansion on their lands and pressure from drug traffickers.

Farmers expressed their rage at the threat of eradication. Mayor Carlos Quispe said “a lot of farmers tell me, with tears in their eyes - look I have half a hectare of coca - they are going to eradicate it. That means my kids are going to have drop out of college. Is that OK? It is not”

Union leader Zavala spoke of her concern about what eradication would mean for her community. “I am worried, because they (the security forces) want to come to my zone - and I know we will no longer live in peace. There will be insecurity, and if they pull up our plants then what will our kids eat? What are we going to do? Me as a woman, as a mother, I am concerned because when the police enter, they beat people up, they even kill people. And that really is very worrying.”

Many delegates said that they felt they had been ‘abandoned’ by the state which had left them to fend for themselves. The debate focused on Peru’s commitment to the free market, which farmers believe drives down prices for the products they grow, like pineapples, cacao and citrus fruit. Leaders also faulted DEVIDA for failing to offer them realistic economic alternatives to coca.

“DEVIDA - they spend 80 percent of the money they get on salaries and cars for themselves. By the time it gets to us all we receive is a sack of fertilizer and a machete - that’s not development!” He went on to emphasize the lack of trust coca growers have in the institution: “DEVIDA divide us - that’s its job. They won’t be happy that we are having this meeting,” said Almonacid, the coffee farmer.

Delegates came up with proposals for coca control, drawing inspiration from the Bolivian model.⁶ With leadership from veteran union leader Serafin Lujan, delegates agreed that they would limit the amount of coca to one hectare or even half a hectare of coca per union member, and that they would enter into negotiations with the state to gradually reduce this amount. For its part the state would be expected to invest in rural communities - through the expansion of infrastructure and to offer assistance to support small producers through establishing processing plants for their products and opening out new markets.

Union leader Rúben Leiva said: “We asked the government to offer us alternatives to forced eradication we want to implement Bolivia’s model. We want gradual coca reduction

⁶ See Farthing, L. and K. Ledebur (2015). *Habeas Coca: Bolivia's Community Coca Control*. New York, Open Society Foundations; Grisaffi, T; Farthing, L; Ledebur, K (2017) "Integrated development with coca in the Plurinational State of Bolivia: shifting the focus from eradication to poverty alleviation." *Bulletin on Narcotics LXI*: 131-157.



alongside integrated development with community coca control.⁷ That's what we want – we're willing to do that. We would like to negotiate with the government about this - we just hope that they will talk to us.”

Zavala, a union leader who took part in a delegation that travelled to Bolivia in August 2019 to meet with coca growers and government officials there, said she was impressed by how in Bolivia the government collaborates with coca grower unions to promote integrated development - allowing farmers to diversify their production while still allowing them a small amount of coca to guarantee subsistence.

“Here we have a small amount of coca, maybe a quarter of a hectare, half a hectare at most.

We could do a pilot project of the Bolivian model here.... I know it would work well; we are willing to do this - what we need is a commitment from the government that they will work with us,” she said.

⁷ Social control refers to community policing of the limits placed on coca.