

January 27, 2011

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

We write to ask the Obama administration to withdraw its objection to Bolivia's proposed amendment to the 1961 United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. Bolivia's amendment would remove the requirement in Article 49 that Bolivia and other Andean countries ban their people from chewing coca leaves for religious, social, medicinal and nutritional purposes. Coca chewing is central to the cultural identity of millions of indigenous Andean people, and has been for many centuries. Rejecting Bolivia's amendment conflicts with the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states: "indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions."¹ Just last month, President Obama announced the U.S. government's support for the UN indigenous rights declaration.²

The U.S. objection registered with the United Nations on January 19, 2011, must be withdrawn by the end of this same month, or the action could block the Bolivia's proposed amendment and exacerbate the injury to indigenous peoples that originated in the 1961 Convention.³

The United Nations based the inclusion of this coca chewing ban in the 1961 Single Convention on a 1950 report, which was founded not on scientific research but on interviews with non-indigenous Bolivians and Peruvians about their views on how coca chewing affected indigenous people. At the time, some indigenous people continued to live in a system of de facto slavery because of their "race."⁴ Since the establishment of the Single Convention, the 1950 report has been thoroughly debunked by numerous scientific studies which show the chewing of the coca leaf in its natural state to be a benign practice, with medical, nutritional and social benefits.⁵

Bolivia proposed the amendment to the 1961 Convention almost two years ago. The amendment would merely remove the language requiring sovereign countries to ban coca chewing within their own borders; it would not legalize the coca leaf internationally nor would it remove the requirement that countries cooperate to prevent and penalize the complex process of converting the natural coca leaf into concentrated cocaine.

The wording of the U.S. objection filed with the United Nations on January 19 confuses the issue by failing to recognize that Bolivia's amendment **is about removing the requirement to ban coca chewing in countries where it is already practiced, and is not about a broader legalization of the coca leaf.** The Obama administration must act immediately to withdraw this erroneous objection, and thereby help to right an historic wrong that has stigmatized and harmed indigenous Andean peoples for over 50 years.

Sincerely,

[SIGNATURES ATTACHED]

cc:

U.S. Department of State

James Steinberg, Deputy Secretary

Maria Otero, Under Secretary, Democracy and Global Affairs

Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary, Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

Arturo Valenzuela, Assistant Secretary, Western Hemisphere Affairs

William Brownfield, International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs

Susan Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Executive Office of the President

R. Gil Kerlikowske, Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy

Dan Restrepo, Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs, National Security Council

¹ Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Adopted by General Assembly Resolution 61/295 on 13 September 2007, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/en/drip.html>

² "U.S. Supports UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," 16 December 2010, U.S. Department of State, <http://geneva.usmission.gov/2010/12/17/u-s-supports-united-nations-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples>

³ "The U.S. Moves to Block Bolivia's Request to Eliminate UN Ban on Coca Leaf Chewing," TNI/WOLA Press Release, 18 January 2011, http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=viewp&id=1221&Itemid=8

⁴ Report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Coca Leaf, May 1950, <http://www.ungassondrugs.org/images/stories/cocainquiry-e.pdf>

⁵ For example, see: W. Carter and M. Mamani, *Coca en Bolivia* (Librería Editorial Juventud, 1986); M. Léons and H. Sanabria, eds., *Coca, Cocaine, and the Bolivian Reality* (State University of New York Press, 1997); E. Mayer, *The Articulated Peasant: Household Economies in The Andes* (Westview Press, 2001); J. Weil, "Beyond the Mystique of Cocaine: Coca in Andean Cultural Perspective," in N. Etkin, ed., *Plants in Indigenous Medicine and Diet: Bio-Behavioral Approaches* (Redgrave, 1986); C. Allen, *The Hold Life Has: Coca and Cultural Identity in an Andean Community* (Smithsonian Books, 2002, 2nd ed.); R. Burchard, "Coca Chewing and Diet," *Current Anthropology*, 33:1, February 1992; J.A. Duke, D. Aulik and T. Plowman, "Nutritional Value of Coca," *Botanical Museum Leaflets*, 24:113-119, Harvard University, 1975.