

# Cocaine, rebels haunt remote Peruvian jungle

One of the Shining Path's last footholds has become the most densely planted coca-growing belt in the world

BY TERRY WADE  
REUTERS, AYNÁ SAN FRANCISCO, PERU



Top: Special Police forces patrol as people wait outside a bank in Sivia, a town in the region of Ayacucho that is at the front line of the coca and cocaine trade in Ene and Apurimac River Valleys.

Above: Armed self-defense groups patrol a road in San Francisco, a town in Ayacucho.

Upper right: A pile of cacao fruit on a cacao farm in Sivia, in Ayacucho. Lower right: Doris Medina talks about her father, who was killed by rebels, during an interview on a coffee and coca farm near San Francisco.

PHOTOS: REUTERS

Peru's civil war is over but fighters from the Shining Path rebel group have joined the country's cocaine trade, turning a lawless bundle of valleys into a security problem for President Alan Garcia.

A civil war killed around 70,000 people in the 1980s and 1990s when Shining Path's Maoist guerrillas nearly toppled the Peruvian state and both sides committed rights atrocities.

The rebels mostly disbanded after the capture of their leader, Abimael Guzman, yet violence is escalating again in the rugged and volatile Ene and Apurimac River Valleys, known as the VRAE, in Peru's southern jungle.

It has become the most densely planted coca-growing belt in the world, according to the UN, and police say much of the cocaine leaving these fertile valleys is exported with help from a remnant band of Shining Path fighters.

Garcia, whose first term as president in the 1980s was haunted by the rise of the insurgency, has mobilized the army to try to eliminate one of Shining Path's last footholds and prevent its influence from spreading again.

So far, the military push has been marred by setbacks. Rebels working with cocaine smuggling gangs have killed 40 poorly equipped soldiers and police over the last year in the VRAE and shot down helicopters.

The army has suffered embarrassing ambushes, traffickers buy lenient treatment from judges and mayors in local towns defend growers of coca, the leaf used to make cocaine.

Garcia is unpopular in a region that has long felt ignored by the governing elites 650km away in Lima, the capital, on the other side of the Andes.

"Alan Garcia has never come here like a man and kept his word," said Doris Medina, 33, whose father was murdered by rebels at the height of the war.

"He has turned his back on the VRAE again," she says while walking through the small farm where her mother plants coca, the main ingredient for cocaine, as well as coffee.

Medina's father belonged to one of the peasant patrols that former president Alberto Fujimori set up in the 1990s to help a weak army stop the insurgents.

Medina credits Fujimori, who was later convicted of human rights crimes, for capturing Guzman and other Shining Path leaders, but holdouts from the war are still on the loose.

Colonel Elmer Mendoza of Peru's counter-terrorism police said that as the army tries to round up 300 to 600 rebels in the VRAE, its hands have been tied by human rights protections passed after Fujimori left office to limit the use of deadly force.

Small farmers here say the government has demonized them.

"We aren't terrorists or traffickers. We are farmers. I fought against the terrorists," Maria Palomino, 59, whose husband was in a peasant patrol and was killed by insurgents, said while chatting in her first language of Quechua with farm hands picking coca on her daughter's plot.

Widespread poverty and a history of underinvestment by the government in roads, education

and healthcare mean that coca has long been a fallback for people like Medina and Palomino.

It grows quickly, can be harvested four times a year, and functions as a kind of parallel currency, used to pay farm hands or augment income between coffee and cacao harvests.

"Coca is our petty cash," said Medina.

Although some of the coca is chewed as a mild stimulant or brewed for tea, as it has been for centuries, experts say up to 90 percent of it winds up being refined into cocaine.

The UN and private aid groups are trying to untangle the culture of coca and violence in this region by working with small farmers to plant alternative crops, but people tend to keep a hand in coca even after they move into the legitimate economy.

Medina is the quality control inspector at the CACVRA agricultural cooperative, which exports organic coffee and cacao raised by its 2,000 members to the US and Europe. Palomino's daughter works for a company that exports cacao. Her grandchildren are going to university.

Medina encourages farmers to increase their incomes by improving the quality of their beans and marketing the coffee as organic, fair-trade, high-altitude, or grown by women. Yet, like a fifth of the farmers in her cooperative, her mother still plants coca to make ends meet.

Coca also distorts the local farm economy. Planters complain that during harvests farm hands charge double or triple the normal daily wage to pick coffee because they can make so much more working coca.

"The increases in labor prices have been severe, and the only way to respond is to sell higher-value coffee," said Ilich Nicolas Gavilan, who manages the cooperative. "The issue of coca is incredibly complex."

To enter the VRAE, you must bounce along a dirt road for four hours, snaking around hairpin turns that lurch precariously over steep gorges blanketed by rain forest.

Along the way, shotgun-toting peasant patrols stop cars to charge a toll and anti-drug police search vehicles and jot down the names of everybody going into the area. It is about six hours by car from the city of Huamanga, the Shining Path's birthplace.

The VRAE runs across four of Peru's provinces, a cause of administrative headaches as the government tries to implement a security, development and anti-drug strategy. And the efforts are hurt by some public officials in the pay of traffickers.

"I have to be sincere, the corruption that exists in this area at some point affects everything," said Luis Guevara Ortega, an appointee who represents Garcia's office in the Sivia district of the VRAE.

Critics say the government has bitten off more than it can chew in the VRAE, and members of peasant patrols on the front line say there is no incentive to really go after the Shining Path.

"If Garcia guaranteed us life insurance policies for our families, we could go in and wipe out the Shining Path in two months, but why are we going to risk our lives for nothing?" said Reinaldo Silva, a patrol leader in the town of Pichari.

## Risks Peru faces in coca-growing valleys

BY TERRY WADE  
REUTERS, AYNÁ SAN FRANCISCO, PERU

A growing cocaine trade and a remnant group of Shining Path rebels in Peru's Ene and Apurimac River Valleys, known as the VRAE, have become President Alan Garcia's toughest domestic issue. Prime Minister Javier Velasquez warns that increasingly powerful drug traffickers could gain influence in Congress, although most analysts say the mounting violence in the VRAE does not yet pose acute risks to stability in Peru. Longer term, anti-drug officials say these are their main concerns:

### SECURITY PUSH STUMBLES, DEATH TOLL MOUNTS

Considered the most likely outcome, Garcia's security strategy fails to make significant progress and the Shining Path kill more soldiers and police in ambushes. Presidential candidates try to exploit the VRAE as a campaign issue in 2011, when Garcia — who is liked by foreign investors but unpopular at home — cannot run. Keiko Fujimori, a conservative lawmaker, enjoys broad support among the military and is a frontrunner in the race. But her father, former President Alberto Fujimori, was convicted of human rights

crimes stemming from his heavy-handed counter-insurgency efforts.

### SHINING PATH GROWS, RUNS CANDIDATES

Rival leaders of the Shining Path in the VRAE and a calmer coca-growing valley called the Alto Huallaga could put aside their differences and unify, causing more security headaches. Rebels in Alto Huallaga still profess a certain allegiance to the jailed founder of the Shining Path, Abimael Guzman, while analysts say those in the VRAE have broken with him. Lawyers for Guzman have formed a political party and plan to run

candidates in regional elections next year, although Garcia insists it will not happen.

Guzman launched his war against the state in 1980 after turning his back on elections and unleashing his rebel army. Analysts say his more conciliatory tone now reflects his group's weakness and may also be part of an attempt to get his life sentence shortened.

### COCALEROS AND HUMALA

Coca growers could try to strengthen ties to Peru's only significant leftist party, the Nationalist Party of Ollanta Humala. The party already includes several prominent members

sympathetic to coca farmers. Humala unnered financial markets when he nearly won the 2006 presidential race, but he is trailing in polls for the 2011 general election. Coca growers have elected politicians to municipal posts, and a few legislators in Congress represent specific coca-raising valleys, but they remain fragmented nationally.

### SACRED LEAF, MORE PLANTING

Peruvian officials occasionally defend traditional uses of coca in food and tea, but less stridently than leftist Bolivian President Evo Morales, an Aymara Indian and a former coca grower in the world's

No. 3 producer.

Anti-drug experts worry that efforts to promote the "sacred leaf" of indigenous groups could end up creating a more permissive environment for trafficking. UN officials say curbing growth in the VRAE, which has an estimated 16,000 planted hectares, is crucial because Peru could overtake Colombia as the world's top coca grower in coming years. Output in Colombia is falling as it receives the biggest slice of US anti-drug aid in the region. The UN estimates Colombian cocaine output in 2008 was 430 tonnes, while in Peru it was 302 tonnes and in Bolivia 113 tonnes.