

## The politicisation of fumigations

### Glyphosate on the Colombian-Ecuadorian Border

After six long years of intensive fumigation within the scope of Plan Colombia, it is surprising that we are still embroiled in the old controversy over whether or not to perform aerial spraying with glyphosate.<sup>1</sup> Not because it has been proven whether these fumigations are harmless or harmful to human health and to the environment but rather because, after so much experience of fumigation, it is clear to the entire world that this strategy does not achieve the purpose for which it was conceived: to reduce the surface area used for illicit crops, as well as the supply and demand for cocaine on international markets. At this point, the question we should be asking is: how is it possible we are still fumigating?

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The insistence on fumigation, despite its undeniable failure in practice, is a sign that fumigation involves interests that go beyond antinarcotics and represent what are essentially political interests, to justify the US military and law enforcement presence in such a sensitive region. Within such a perspective, the debate on whether or not it is harmful or harmless is of secondary importance. Health and environmental considerations are secondary to those who defend fumigation. Colombia, aided by the United States, the main supporter of this strategy, will always be quick to point out how glyphosate is less harmful than aspirin, as they used to say in the 1990s and, contradicting all evidence, insist on the wonders of fumigation. Moreover, if the harmfulness of glyphosate<sup>2</sup> were proven beyond a doubt, the pro-fumigation camp would no doubt advocate a replacement herbicide, or some other eradicating agent, such as the *fusarium* fungus<sup>3</sup>, which has been in preparation for some time now. On the other hand, those who oppose aerial spraying continue to set up binational and multinational commissions, writing protocols, conducting new studies, threatening actions before international courts, or simply protesting, with very little

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

The conditions are currently ripe for Andean countries to undertake a substantial change in anti-narcotic policy in the region. Instead of wallowing in their ideological differences, these nations should join forces and funds to address the common problem of drug production and traffic. In the case of the diplomatic dispute between Colombia and Ecuador over fumigation:

- If other countries wish to become involved, they do so in a responsible and conciliatory manner. The last thing needed at the moment is to further incite the passions of the different governments. The war on drugs must not work against the common interest in integration.
- The Colombian government should realise that greater flexibility on the issue is more politically convenient. It would show that it is capable of maintaining a balance between its relationship with Washington and its friendliness with neighbouring countries.
- Technical issues of fumigation should not be mixed with political issues, as this results in losing sight of the main point that fumigation has been useless.
- Security without development is unsustainable. As long as the presence of the State does not materialise in the form of jobs, infrastructure and enhanced living conditions, investments in security are doomed to failure.
- A UN assessment concluded that illegal crops should only be eradicated when other income alternatives exist.
- ACNUR should recognise displaced populations as a consequence of fumigation and interdiction policies as an integral part of the refugee statute, and provide for them accordingly.
- Recent studies contain warnings regarding the potential impact of glyphosate on the environment, especially for amphibian species. As Colombia has the world's second highest biodiversity in amphibians, the government should take this warning seriously.

chance of any of these acts furthering their cause.

Meanwhile both the environmental destruction and humanitarian crisis continue in areas such as the Columbia-Ecuador border, first due to the indiscriminate occupation of the Amazon Basin by coca crops and its processing into cocaine hydrochloride, and secondly due to the destruction caused by aerial chemical eradication.

Without prejudicing the legal arguments against fumigation on health and environmental grounds, which continue to be valid unless it can be proved that fumigation is indeed harmless,<sup>4</sup> those opposed to fumigation might find better grounds to question the practice on the basis that it is ineffective, since there already exists irrefutable evidence of this. One needs simply to look at a map of Colombia to see the advance and dissemination of coca crops throughout the country to increasingly remote areas since the beginning of spraying. The correlation is so strong that one can even conclude that this has only been made possible because of the fumigation.<sup>5</sup> Whether harmful or not to the environment and human health, fumigation has been useless and even worse, counterproductive.

#### **DIPLOMATIC DISPUTE OVER GLYPHOSATE**

Aerial spraying conducted in Colombia between September and October 2005 in the regions bordering Ecuador<sup>6</sup> raised a strong wave of protests from Ecuadoran civil society organisations and resulted in threats from the Ecuador government to bring Colombia before international courts. The result was that the Colombian government announced it would suspend fumigation in a ten kilometre strip north of the border. A year later, and due to a significant increase of coca farming in that area,<sup>7</sup> in December 2006 the Uribe government, pressured by the US government, decided to restart glyphosate spraying in the region.

It goes without saying that this did not go unnoticed in Ecuador, which was in the midst of bringing in a new government. A year earlier, the government of President

Palacios had requested that fumigation be suspended until the conclusions of a new UN technical mission study were released, which contained recommendations on the impacts of glyphosate spraying.<sup>8</sup> Inasmuch as fumigation was unilaterally restarted, it was seen almost as a breach of a tacit agreement made with the neighbouring country. The attitude of the Uribe government was perceived as arrogant and displayed his inability to make an important ally in the region.

The soured diplomatic relations seem to have been mended in mid-January 2007 during a meeting in Nicaragua between President Uribe and the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, who had recently taken office. The two agreed that Colombia would keep Ecuador informed each time it was to conduct a new spraying campaign at the border, and that the OAS would conduct a new study on the impacts of glyphosate.<sup>9</sup>

The controversy took on larger proportions when President Chávez, in his usual boisterous style, warned that he would not tolerate fumigation on his border, and he, along with other leftist governments such as Argentina, Bolivia and even Peru, offered support to Ecuador. The result of this diplomatic escalation is that the issue of fumigation has now become a landmark issue of pro- and anti-US regional policy. This politicisation, however, may actually be working against the dismantling the failed and harmful strategy of fumigation. It is true that the United States is behind fumigation, backed by the economic interests of companies such as Monsanto and Dyncorp<sup>10</sup>, who share in this lucrative business – which is one of the reasons it meets with opposition. But it is also true that the disastrous consequences of the current anti-drug policy, of which fumigation is but one component, are a reality that surpasses ideologies, and the nations that suffer its consequences firsthand must find a solution instead of becoming polarised.

The particularly complex characteristics of the Colombian-Ecuadoran border – where you have a combination of security problems due to armed forces disputing the territory, illegal crops, drug production and trafficking, pressures generated through oil

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drilling, forced displacement of populations due to lack of security, etc– should in themselves be reason enough to put bilateral disputes and differences of agendas aside and strive to conduct joint actions to address the problems affecting both sides of the border.

#### **DRUGS AND THE CONFLICT IN THE ANDEAN-AMAZON REGION**

The border states (*departamentos*) of Putumayo and Nariño exemplify everything that could go from bad to worse when one mixes the drugs trade with armed conflict and national security interests. The isolation that is characteristic of border areas has facilitated this combination, enabling a criminal economy – a flow of money, drugs, weapons and chemical precursors. It has also allowed breathing space for drug traffic, and enabled it to set up transnational networks that separate the different phases of the business. Unfortunately, countries in the Andean-Amazon region – presently only Colombia and Ecuador, although the situation threatens to spread to Peru, which shares a border with these countries – have failed to sufficiently consider the effects of the situation and therefore have not adopted cross border measures that could stem the criminal dynamics.

The United States is the protagonist of anti-narcotic affairs in the region, which includes the establishment of the military base at Manta, through which it has been able to expand its control in the Andean region. This partly explains the ‘abandonment’ of these areas by the national governments. The Colombian government has accepted US funds and initiatives to confront armed groups and narcotics production and preparation without considering the full effects.<sup>11</sup>

#### **REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND CHANGE**

Countries of South America, particularly those in the Andean region, have for some time expressed an interest in promoting further regional integration. Drug policy could be a good opportunity to demonstrate whether this interest in integration is real or merely rhetorical. President Correa has said that he will not extend permission for the US to use the base at Manta when it comes up for renewal in 2009, which will undoubtedly affect regional control plans of the Southern Command for years to come. The interdiction operations conducted by the base have been ineffective in halting the advance of drug traffic, which has even increased in the area. Ecuador has become not only a country of transit but is now most likely also a producer of alkaloids. The US drug policy for the region is not bearing fruit. The new government in Ecuador, along with the government of Colombia, now has the opportunity to come up with an Amazonian regional proposal - a proposal that pays special attention to the conflict-ridden border area to enhance security and discourage cropping, making fumigation unnecessary.

If Ecuador and Colombia were to sit and honestly examine (beyond their political agendas) the reasons for their border dispute, they would find that in the end there is not that much to disagree on. Colombia says that coca cropping and production cause more harm to health and the environment than glyphosate. Ecuador, in turn, says that it is also no friend to coca crops, but highlights the environmental degradation, health problems, and population displacement caused by fumigation. In the end, they’re talking about the same problem; the difference is only in the means to a solution. Colombia would not fumigate if it weren’t for pressure from the US. It would be implementing other forms of eradication or offering alternative development programmes that provide income to the population. Then, the border situation might not be what it is today, because if fumigation was not being practiced in other parts of the country, the coca crops and the war they bring with them would not have been displaced to the border areas of Nariño and Putumayo.

In the current geopolitical panorama of the hemisphere, the Uribe government is the US's strongest ally in the Andes-Amazon region. A high-ranking mission of US officials visited Colombia recently to talk about Plan Colombia II, and President Bush will soon visit the country. Given the excellent state of relations between the two nations, and the US's interest in maintaining its ally, this is the time when the Colombian government could attempt some independence regarding the war against drugs. If the Karzai government in Afghanistan, a country that is heavily dependent on US aid, was able to clearly express its rejection of glyphosate, why can't the Uribe government now do something similar? Instead of sending Colombians to Afghanistan to contribute to escalating the drug war in that ravaged country, the Uribe government would be better off listening to the debate going on in Afghanistan, which has led to a rejection of glyphosate fumigation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For further information on fumigation within Plan Colombia, see:  
[http://www.tni.org/detail\\_page.phtml?page=drogas-colombia-docs\\_plan&lang=sp](http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?page=drogas-colombia-docs_plan&lang=sp) and  
[http://www.tni.org/detail\\_page.phtml?page=drogas-colombia-docs\\_ecuador&lang=sp](http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?page=drogas-colombia-docs_ecuador&lang=sp)

<sup>2</sup> Last January, the Court of Lyon (France) convicted the transnational company Monsanto for false advertising regarding its product, RoundUp, the active ingredient of which is glyphosate, a substance classified by the European Commission as toxic to aquatic organisms and potentially causing harmful long term effects on the environment. See:  
<http://www.liberation.fr/actualite/terre/231309.FR.php>

<sup>3</sup> For further information on fungus used against coca crops, see:  
[http://www.tni.org/detail\\_page.phtml?page=drogas-chembio-docs\\_chembio&lang=sp](http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?page=drogas-chembio-docs_chembio&lang=sp)

<sup>4</sup> By the principle of precaution accepted by international courts and agreements, where no one can conduct an activity when there is suspicion it may be harmful.

<sup>5</sup> These changes in crop planting patterns can be seen by consulting the relevant sections of the UNODC annual reports on illegal crops in Colombia, and comparing the situation in 1999 (before the startup of Plan Colombia and its massive fumigation) with the changes that have taken place to 2006. The following link is to a Colombian government document where one can also see that coca was produced in 12 *departamentos* (states) in 1999. In 2004, the number of producer states had risen to 23:

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[http://odc.dne.gov.co/publicaciones/PUBLICACIONO\\_N\\_27.xls](http://odc.dne.gov.co/publicaciones/PUBLICACIONO_N_27.xls)

<sup>6</sup> More on the conflict between Ecuador and Colombia over fumigation in, *Las fumigaciones no respetan fronteras: Ecuador inicia demanda internacional por las fumigaciones*, TNI – Drug Policy Briefing No.15:

<http://www.tni.org/policybriefings/brief15s.htm>.

Background information is at:

[http://www.tni.org/detail\\_page.phtml?page=drogas-colombia-docs\\_ecuador&lang=sp](http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?page=drogas-colombia-docs_ecuador&lang=sp)

<sup>7</sup> According to estimates by the Colombian government, in early December 2006, in the *departamento* of Putumayo alone, there were 16,000 hectares, while according to the *Colombia Coca Survey for 2005*, by UNODC, this *departamento* had only 8,963 hectares in December 2005.

[http://www.unodc.org/pdf/andean/Colombia\\_coca\\_survey\\_2005\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/pdf/andean/Colombia_coca_survey_2005_eng.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> A May 2006 report from the UN Technical Mission that visited the border, proposed conducting a series of five studies to scientifically clarify what the impact of aerial spraying with glyphosate was on health, the environment and agriculture and livestock raising. Read the press release of the Ecuadoran chancellery on May 3, 2006:

<http://www.mmrree.gov.ec/mre/documentos/novedades/boletines/ano2006/mayo/bol344.htm>

<sup>9</sup> This agreement seemed to ignore the that a study had been conducted in 2005 by the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission CICAD, an agency linked to the OAS, concluded that glyphosate presented no risk to human beings: [www.cicad.oas.org/es/glisfosatoInformeFinal.pdf](http://www.cicad.oas.org/es/glisfosatoInformeFinal.pdf). This study has been widely refuted by several academic institutions, including the Institute of Environmental Studies of the National University of Colombia, (IDEA), *Estudio de los efectos del programa de erradicación de cultivos ilícitos mediante la aspersión aérea con el herbicida glifosato (PECIG) y de los cultivos ilícitos en la salud humana y el medio ambiente*, Bogotá, May 2005; and experts such as Ricardo Vargas, (2005) *Algunos comentarios puntuales al estudio de la OEA-CICAD sobre los impactos del glifosato utilizado en programas de erradicación de cultivos ilícitos en Colombia*, May 2005:

<http://www.tni.org/archives/vargas/cidad-s.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the activities of Dyncorp in relation to fumigation, see article by Adam Isacson at <http://www.cipcol.org/archives/000390.htm>

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