

A campaign to brand cocaine an unethical product which perpetuates bloodshed and exploitation in Colombia fails to mention that coca is the only viable cash crop for many farmers who have suffered years of neglect at the hands of their government. **By Garry Leech.**

# Passing the buck

**I**n November 2006, Colombian Vice-President Francisco Santos unveiled his country's new 'Cocaine Curse' media campaign, which laid the blame for Colombia's violence squarely on the shoulders of European drug users.

"We need to tell Europeans that the line of coke they snort is tainted in blood," declared Santos, launching the latest initiative in the Colombian government's Washington-backed 'Shared Responsibility' campaign. More specifically, the vice-president targeted coke-snorting celebrities like Kate Moss, agonising that she had as yet failed to apologise to the Colombian people for the deaths that resulted from her cocaine consumption.

But one could argue that the cocaine consumed by Kate Moss and other Europeans is actually providing a livelihood for thousands of peasant farmers who would otherwise be forced to endure even greater poverty due to the neglect of Santos' government.

## HISTORIC NEGLECT

While increasing the numbers of Europeans who snort cocaine is not a viable, nor desirable, economic development model for Colombia, there is little doubt that the livelihood of many impoverished Colombian farmers is dependent on the demand for cocaine in rich nations. While some analysts blame the illicit drug trade for Colombia's violence – and others blame the prohibition of drugs – in reality, the country's armed conflict had been raging for well over a

*Guilt trip: Below and right two images from the Cocaine Curse campaign*

decade before the cocaine industry emerged in the 1970s. The root causes of the conflict lie in Colombia's gross social and economic inequalities, particularly in the countryside, where 85 per cent of the population lives in poverty.

By focusing the blame for the violence in Colombia's rural drug producing regions on European cocaine users,



**In many rural regions, coca is the only viable cash crop**

Santos is ignoring the Colombian government's historic neglect of these regions. Leftist guerrillas or right-wing paramilitaries, both of whom profit from the drug trade, control many of these areas. The only government presence in these regions consists of military incursions, usually resulting in gross violations of human rights. Rarely are social and economic programmes implemented in these remote parts of the country.

The region containing the Macarena National Park in eastern Colombia exemplifies the degree to which the Colombian government has neglected impoverished farmers. Several thousand peasants live in the park – a common practice in Colombia – many of them having fled

government repression in the 1950s and 1960s. During the ensuing decades, the government has made no attempt to provide social programmes or build infrastructure that would allow farmers to transport their legal food crops to markets. The only government programmes they have ever experienced consist of counter-insurgency operations by soldiers who consider everyone in the region to be guerrillas.



**Bad fruit:**  
bananas damaged  
after being sprayed

As Adam Isacson, a Colombia analyst at the Washington DC-based Center for International Policy, told a US congressional committee in June 2004: "The last several years in Colombia are full of stories of supposedly successful military offensives. The pattern is familiar: thousands of troops rush into a guerrilla stronghold, the guerrillas offer minimal resistance and retreat into the jungle. The troops stay a few weeks, or even months, but the Colombian government doesn't commit any resources to bringing the rest of the government into the zone. They can't stay forever – and since they operate with virtual impunity, that's not always bad news for the civilians in the zone. When the military eventually has to go back to its bases, though, we find that no moves have been made to bring in judges, cops, teachers, doctors, road-builders, or any of the other civilian government services that every society and economy needs in order to function."

**CASH CROP**

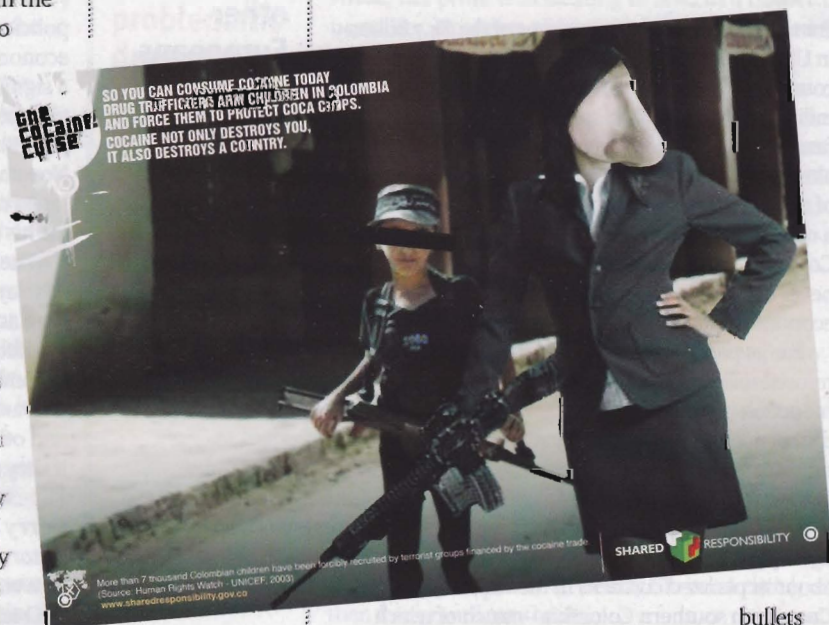
Due to the lack of infrastructure and economic alternatives in many rural regions, coca is the only viable cash crop because drug traffickers come and collect it when it is harvested. Farmers in the Macarena supplement their subsistence food crops with the money they earn from coca crops cultivated on farms measuring approximately four hectares in size. While this cash income has alleviated some of the poverty endured by these families, it has not made them wealthy. Most families still live in wooden shacks without running water and only a gasoline generator to provide electricity for a couple of hours every evening.

It is peasants such as those in the Macarena that have been the principal target in Colombia's US-backed war on drugs. In August 2006, the Macarena became the focal point of the war on drugs when, for the first time, President Alvaro Uribe ordered the aerial fumigation of the national park and its surrounding environs. US-supplied spray planes and helicopter gunships sprayed a chemical concoction – the herbicide glyphosate mixed with the surfactant Cosmo Flux 411-F – that has never been approved for use in the United States. After a week of spraying, Colombia's anti-narcotics police claimed to have destroyed all 11,370 acres of coca in the park.

The spraying not only destroyed coca crops, but also food crops including yucca plants and banana, papaya and avocado trees. Essentially, many farmers lost both their subsistence food crops and their cash crops. Eight days after the fumigations, I met with a middle-aged peasant woman named Cecilia, who requested that her last name not be used for security reasons. She walked around her small wooden house pointing to the banana trees and yucca plants that had been killed by the chemicals. She described how the chemicals blanketed not only the coca crops she and her husband cultivate in order to survive, but also their food crops and two young children, both of whom began vomiting shortly after the spraying and suffered from diarrhea for several days.

**LIVES RUINED**

Cecilia, who has lived her entire life in the Macarena, also claimed that her children had been traumatized by the militaristic nature of the fumigation operation. Helicopter gunships swooped down low over the farm and unleashed a barrage of machine gun fire around the perimeter of her coca fields to clear the way for the spray planes. Eight days later, the earth remained pockmarked with holes created by



bullets from the machine guns while hundreds of shell casings littered the ground, some dangerously close to her house. ... 26



Carlos Villalón

❖ 25 Cecilia's plight was not unique; her neighbours and many others in the region had also been terrorised by the fumigations and were struggling to survive following the destruction of their food crops. Due to governmental neglect of the region, it is Colombia's largest leftist guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), that serves as the de-facto government and provides aid to the distraught farmers. Consequently, such counternarcotics operations are only further entrenching peasant support for Colombia's guerrillas in remote regions such as the Macarena.

#### US AID

For the past six years, 80 per cent of the \$4.7 billion in US aid to Colombia as part of the Plan Colombia counter narcotics program has gone to the country's military and police forces, with only 20 per cent funding social projects, economic development and alternative crop programs. Many analysts are critical of the Bush and Uribe administrations' insistence on a military solution to the drug problem and Colombia's armed conflict, claiming that peace will never be achieved until the underlying social and economic causes are effectively addressed.

For its part, the Bush administration has not only refused to listen to critics, it recently announced a reduction in economic development aid to some of the coca-dependent regions in Colombia that are most in need. Some of the reasons given by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for the cuts appear to contradict the agency's mandate. USAID responded to questions about its planned cutbacks in the department of Caquetá in southern Colombia—much of which endures social and economic conditions similar to those that exist in the Macarena—by stating that “it lacks sufficient economic potential and there is very

**Way of life:** a woman ladles cocaine base out of a bag in exchange for goods

One could argue that the cocaine consumed by Kate Moss and other Europeans is actually providing a livelihood for thousands of peasant farmers

little private-sector investment” and that “the department registers very high levels of conflict.”

According to Isacson this is the wrong answer. “Poor economic prospects? Low private-sector investment? Guerrilla presence and insecurity? These are all reasons to invest generously in Caquetá's development, not to shun the department completely. Does USAID really mean to say that it will only invest in zones where the economy is already viable and where guerrilla presence is low?”

#### GRATEFUL

For years, the governments of the United States and Colombia have neglected the 85 per cent of rural Colombians mired in poverty. Militaristic policies that seek to maintain the gross social and economic inequalities in Colombia continue to be a significant contributor to the country's ongoing violence. It was in this context that Colombian Vice-President Santos arrived in London in November last year to unveil the government's latest campaign to blame European cocaine users for his country's violence.

The new campaign claims: “Cocaine not only destroys you, it also destroys a country.” But as long as the Colombian and US governments refuse to effectively address the economic plight faced by Colombia's rural coca growers, these impoverished peasants will likely remain grateful that Kate Moss and others are willing to consume cocaine. That is if they even know who Kate Moss is. ●

*Garry Leech is an independent journalist and editor of Colombia Journal ([www.colombiajournal.org](http://www.colombiajournal.org)). He is also author of *Crude Interventions: The United States, Oil and the New World (Dis)Order* (Zed Books, 2006) and *Killing Peace: Colombia's Conflict and the Failure of U.S. Intervention* (Inota, 2002).*