

Andean Presidents End War on Drugs

by Luis Vásquez

The heads of state of the South American Andes, gathered at the Andean Community of Nations Presidential summit, signed a so-called Lima Act on July 18, in which they approved, according to Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo, “a change in strategy in the current war against drugs.” This “change of strategy,” in effect, signifies abandoning the policy of “crop substitution and forced eradication,” to put emphasis instead on the lyrical-sounding “alternative development.” Under the reign of the International Monetary Fund-dictated free-trade system that is today destroying the region, this can only mean abandoning the fields to production of coca—the raw material for cocaine. Currently, the Andean region produces 97% of the coca leaf used by the world cocaine trade.

As the Peruvian press was quick to comment, this change in focus of the fight against drugs was the main course of the Andean summit. And it signifies “ending the persecutorial bias and putting more emphasis on attracting coca-growers *cocaleros*.” In other words, this “change” represents nothing less than accepting the demands of the *cocalero* movement, which is run by the drug trade, to put an end to police actions of prohibition, interdiction, and forced eradication of coca leaf throughout the region.

Undoubtedly, this total change in orientation has the blessings of Wall Street, and was already seconded by the European Union’s Commissioner of External Affairs, Benita Ferrero Waldner, during a visit to Lima July 14-15, two days before the Presidential summit began. Ferrero held meetings with the Foreign Affairs ministers of the Andean countries, as they were preparing their draft of the Lima Act. In statements to the Lima press, Ferrero declared that “the confrontationalist strategy never worked.” “I believe that there must be a strategy that includes the *cocaleros*,” she said, “because they naturally have to make a living somehow, and they need to live well, and we are going to work with this strategy.”

This new so-called focus of the war on drugs follows the acknowledged failure of the Bush Administration’s Plan Colombia, whose declared intent was to reduce the production of coca and of drug trafficking in the Andean region. In fact, across the region, the reduction of coca production in Colombia has been replaced by an increase in coca production in Bolivia and Peru. In Peru alone, over the past three years, production of coca leaf has grown from 35,000 to 70,000 hectares.

This new and more permissive “anti-drug” orientation was immediately well received by international circles which have been demanding an end to the war on drugs for years. Exemplary is the case of Inter-American Dialogue vice-president Michael Shifter, who happened to be visiting Lima during the signing of the Lima Act, and who told that city’s press that U.S. policy against drugs has not worked, and it were better to change it. “I believe that anti-drug policy is not going to work if there are no viable alternatives of employment, production, and work. If the United States is not prepared to invest seriously in alternative development projects, its program is condemned to failure.”

Legalization of Coca Cultivation

The campaign in favor of a more liberal policy regarding coca cultivation is the fruit of three decades of effort on the part of institutions like the Lindesmith Center and the Andean Commission of Jurists. During those years, millions of farmers, unemployed and desperate because of austerity policies imposed by the IMF, have been pushed into coca-growing as their only means of subsistence. These farmers, now *cocaleros*, are being mobilized throughout the region on behalf of drug-trafficking interests. These mobilizations, which in Bolivia succeeded in overthrowing two Presidents, have managed to win the passage of laws in Peru which legalize the cultivation of coca in certain regions of the country.

In mid-June, the regional government of Cuzco unlawfully issued its own decree legalizing coca cultivation. Specifically, the local government, which is in the hands of the Independent Moralizer Front, a party allied to Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo, decreed the legalization of coca cultivation in its three coca-growing valleys. In the face of this openly unconstitutional and separatist move, the Toledo government grunted its displeasure, and then, faced with *cocalero* mobilizations, including highway blockades, moved to accept the Cuzco decree, without any substantial modifications.

This model was then imitated in every *cocalero* zone in the country. The regional mayors of Huanuco and other authorities in the Huallaga Valley, have announced that they are ready to approve similar measures. In Puno, a violence-wracked area bordering Bolivia, the mayor issued a law liberalizing the cultivation of coca leaf in the Carabaya and Sandia valleys, which have long served to feed into the drug trade. In San Gaban, a town in the Carabaya Valley, *cocaleros* violently seized the hydroelectric plant a year ago, to protest forced eradication of coca crops. The violent expulsion of the occupiers by police led to several deaths, forcing the government eventually to back down on eradication there.

The case of San Gaban is illustrative of what is going on in the 14 *cocalero* regions of Peru. In 2003, San Gaban had only 470 hectares of coca under cultivation. Today, the number of hectares growing coca is more than 3,000. The population during this same period of time has tripled, and all serve as slave labor to the drug trade.