

JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF DARKNESS FEEDING RECORD DRUGS TRADE

On the cocaine trail



RAW MATERIAL Paste which forms drug

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on the Jiguamiando river, Colombia

In a remote clearing in the Colombian rainforest, blue plastic barrels leaking toxic chemicals betray the clandestine cocaine laboratory. Deep in rebel-patrolled territory, this tarpaulin-covered wooden shelter, where coca leaves are soaked in petrol, represents the start of a journey that ends with lines of white powder being snorted in Britain.

Two years ago this illegal processing plant on the fringe of a massive plantation of coca plants was where Celia Kasama's family grew their crops.

Now it is in the hands of a gun-toting coke trafficker who pays rent to armed militiamen in a protection racket that deprives indigenous Colombians like Celia of their land.

For Celia, 30, and her sons Anselmo, 13, and Anibal, 10, there is no profit in the cocaine that comes from the green leaves plucked here.

For them, the multi-billion pound illicit industry attracts only trouble, putting them at risk in the long-running war between the drugs cartels, left-wing groups, the Colombian military and right-wing paramilitaries.

Meanwhile kerosene, sulphuric acid and ammonia – used to extract the active ingredient to make base cocaine from the dried leaves – pollute the river they bathe in and drink from.

"We were here first," says Celia's husband Erubiama, 52. "This has always been our land. It belongs to our ancestors and the government legally assigned this territory to us."

"The traffickers came here and cut down our trees and pulled up our crops."

"Some were armed, so there was nothing we could do to stop them. All of us have been put in a perilous position by the coca grown here."

"Dangerous people come to our village to get their money from the man in charge of the plantation. We are also threatened by him. He has a gun."

"We live downstream from this spot and there are four other plantations, too, so all the chemicals flow into the river we use. We don't want coca here."

Peer into one of the barrels in the lab to inspect a cream-coloured sludge at the bottom. Erubiama tells me this is the paste which will be dried out, wrapped in plastic to be sold on and then further refined into powder before being smuggled abroad.

Despite successes in the US-backed war on drugs against the notorious

Poisoning lives from Colombian jungle to the streets of Britain



SOURCE Coca plant from which drug is made



“ Traffickers came here and cut down our trees and pulled up our crops. Some were armed... there was nothing we could do
ERUBIAMA KASAMA A FARMER IN THE REGION



DANGEROUS Travelling into narco territory



Medellin and Cali cartels in the 1990s, there was record production of cocaine in Colombia in 2016 and 2017. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 423,000 acres of the South American country's land was used to grow coca in 2017, up 17% on the previous year. This was enough to produce more than 1,500 tons of cocaine. Home Office figures show powder cocaine use in Britain increased by more than 8% in the past four years. We arrived at the village of Alto Guayabal just before nightfall following a three-hour journey in a wooden dug-out canoe fitted with an

THE SATURDAY BIG READ

outboard motor. Progress up the Jiguamiando River against the current was painfully slow because we were constantly getting out to push the boat as it ran aground in low dry-season waters.

The journey had started before dawn in Colombia's northern city of Apartado. Outside its cities, much of the mountainous nation is notoriously inaccessible. From the village, we trekked for an hour along a narrow path through thick vegetation to reach the cocaine lab. Being so distant from civilisation makes it perfect for traffickers. They

can operate without fear of disruption and there is little chance they would be spotted by the army helicopters which fly overhead. Our escorts warned of roaming gangs of armed men from the National Liberation Army (ELN) in the vicinity as we travelled along the river. The group still exerts influence over swathes of jungle terrain. Just last month it carried out a car bombing at a police academy in the capital Bogota, which killed 21. The coca-leaf plantations these guerrillas control through force remain their main source of income. For this reason, the British charity

claiming their land and people who have offered to substitute coca for other crops like coffee and cocoa under a government scheme. People whose land was stolen and who have demanded it be returned have also been targeted. Land is at the heart of the armed conflict here. The paramilitaries and ELN buy arms and ammunition from coca leaves, illegal mining and palm-oil plantations.

In Nueva Esperanza back down the river villagers spoke of an army helicopter bomb attack as recently as December. They had to scramble for shelter in the dead of night as soldiers strafed their homes to flush ELN rebels from a hideout in the forest. We are taken down a track on motorbikes to be shown fragments of the bombs that were dropped and bullet casings from the raid. Erasmus Ortiz-Sierra, 74, tells me they are "always under threat". "We have had to learn to protect ourselves," says Erasmus, who was forced here in the late 1990s after FARC militia took his home village. "It is still bad today. Where we have narco-traffickers we have armed groups. As

long as we have coca crops on our territory, we are affected. They are fighting for rent of the land." Mum-of-four Elvia Flores chips in: "The paramilitaries are a terrible worry. They have made us all anxious. We are on the front line. "That raid was so terrifying, so loud, the houses were shaking. The children were screaming, shouting for help." Her children stop playing, becoming quiet as their mother talks. For them, cocaine is not a harmless recreational drug, but the fuel bringing violence into their lives.

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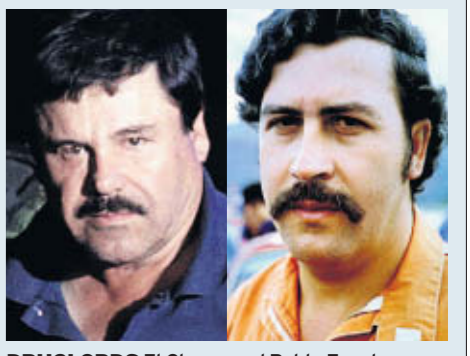
TOXIC HELL Cocaine lab hidden in jungle



PROBE Mirror's Tom Parry at secret drugs lab



TERROR Casings picked up after paramilitary attack



DRUGLORDS El Chapo and Pablo Escobar

Business is still booming in the land of Escobar

COLOMBIA remains the undisputed cocaine capital of the world.

The trade, exploited for decades by ruthless druglords like the late Pablo Escobar, has been fictionalised in a string of films and TV series including Netflix hit Narcos.

But the grim reality is production hit record levels in 2017, rocketing by around 31% year-on-year to some 1,400 tonnes - worth \$2.7billion (£2billion) in the local market.

The white powder is shipped to countries all over the world including Britain and the US, which is the world's largest consumer.

Colombia, backed annually by around \$400million from the US, has fought for years against cocaine farmers.

Schemes have included using drones to spray coca crops with herbicide, which sparked criticism after the World Health Organization warned the chemical could be linked to cancer.

In 2017, the South American nation signed a \$300million agreement with the UN

to compensate farmers who switched from growing coca to other crops.

But the cocaine trade still thrives despite a peace deal in 2017 that ended five decades of armed conflict with rebel group the FARC.

And it was back in the spotlight last week when Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman was found guilty in a New York court of drug trafficking.

El Chapo, who led the Sinaloa Cartel, became the most powerful narcotics boss in the world by shipping cocaine from Colombia through Mexico to the US.

The billionaire, who faces life in prison, has bragged of killing around 3,000 people.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo admitted last month that he was worried by increased coca leaf production in Colombia, adding that the two countries would work together in a bid to halve output by 2023.

He said: "The United States remains deeply concerned about the surge in cocaine production in Colombia since 2013."

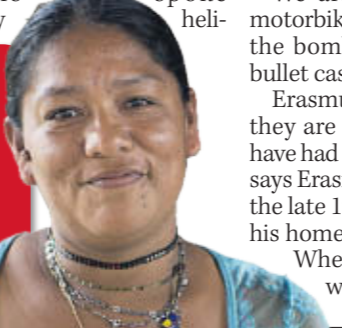
"We know we must do our part to reduce demand in our country and we'll work alongside you here as well."

Colombian president Ivan Duque, who was elected last August, said more than 80,000 hectares of illicit crops were destroyed in 2018 and the government would target a further 100,000 hectares this year.

But Colombia says more money is needed to persuade farmers to grow less lucrative crops.

“ The US is concerned about the surge in cocaine production
MIKE POMPEO US SECRETARY OF STATE

“ We are on the front line. The raid was so terrifying, the houses were shaking. The children screaming for help
ELVIA FLORES ON ARMY RAID AGAINST HER VILLAGE



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