Eradicating coca

Burning leaves, spurning leavers

TUMACO AND VILLA DEL ROSARIO
The United States pays for a pointless drug war in Colombia, but is less keen to help with a huge refugee crisis

A plume of pink smoke wafts above the treetops, signalling where the Black Hawk helicopters should land. They circle down and, one at a time, rest their front wheels on the hillside. It is too steep to land properly, so they keep their rotors whirring while the passengers alight and then immediately lift off again.

The Colombian government is pulling up coca bushes, the leaves of which are used to make cocaine. It is a costly task, both in blood and treasure. Ten Colombians were killed during coca-eradication operations in 2019, and 50 were wounded.

Gun-toting police stand guard on the hillside, near Tumaco in south-western Colombia, to scare off gangsters. Riot police with shields, batons and tear-gas grenades stand ready, too. Their job is to deal with angry coca farmers, who object to having their crops destroyed. They wear anti-slash gloves in case a farmer expresses his feelings with a machete.

Dogs sniff the field for landmines, which gangsters sometimes plant to make eradication more hazardous. Happily, they find none. Finally, men working in pairs uproot the coca bushes with a shovel and a two-handed tug. They are farmers, flown in from other parts of Colombia so they cannot be identified by the gangs. They are paid well, to compensate for the risk and long absences from home.

President Iván Duque’s administration is trying to wipe out coca, as the United States insists it must. Last year it destroyed 100,000 hectares of it—twice as much as the previous administration managed in 2017. However, cocaleros replanted slightly more. Coca was grown on 212,000 hectares of Colombia in 2019, 2% more than the previous year, according to estimates released by the White House on March 5th. And the new bushes were higher-yielding than the ones they replaced. Potential pure cocaine production rose by 8%, to 951 tonnes.

Both the White House and the Duque administration try to put a positive spin on these dismal numbers. The number of coca fields has stabilised, they argue, after rising sharply over the previous decade.

But so long as people want to snort cocaine, it will be hard to stop people from growing coca. Demand is brisk. Some 2m Americans took the drug in 2018, up from 1.4m in 2011, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Colombia produces perhaps 70% of the world’s cocaine.

If, somehow, eradication reduced the supply significantly, the price would rise, raising the incentive for farmers to plant more coca. And as a helicopter ride over south-western Colombia illustrates, there is plenty of space on which to grow it. The forest stretches to the horizon in every direction, punctuated only by smouldering gaps where it has been slashed and burned to make way for coca bushes.

Colombia is twice the size of France. Gangs encourage coca farmers to encroach on national parks, which are 11% of Colombian territory. Many indigenous reserves (which are 32% of Colombian territory) are full of coca. Police can only enter in consultation with their leaders. In areas with no good roads, farmers struggle to get alternative crops such as papayas to market. Coca leaves, by contrast, are light; and the buyers come knocking on your door. Since farmers seldom own the land they sow, they are not deterred by threats to confiscate it.

Small wonder that Mr Duque’s predecessor, Juan Manuel Santos, likened the war on drugs to pedalling “a stationary bicycle”.

Yet President Donald Trump urges Colombia to pedal harder. He demands that it resume aerial spraying of herbicide on coca fields. This stopped in 2015 after the World

Also in this section
30 Bello: Maduro’s political quarantine
32 A little lichen relief
Health Organisation said it might cause cancer. Spraying by hand continues—men in hazmat suits carefully target individual plants. Mr Trump wants to dump clouds of glyphosate over wide areas again. "You're gonna have to spray," he told Mr Duque on March 3rd. "If you don't spray, you're not gonna get rid of [the coca fields]."

Colombia may have to comply. The Trump administration has previously threatened to decertify it as an ally in the war on drugs, which could trigger sanctions and the withdrawal of most American aid. "Aggressive forced eradication [is] a way of appeasing the US government," writes Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution, a think-tank.

Since 2000 the United States has given Colombia more than $5bn to fight drugs and deal with insurgencies. For 2019-20 Congress has approved $48m in aid to continue that war, and also to promote peace with ex-rebels and rural development. In 2016 the FARC, the largest insurgent group, signed a peace deal and has laid down its arms. That created a vacuum in other parts of the country that has been filled by other drug-dealing groups.

In remote areas where the state is more or less absent, dozens of local leaders are being murdered. Intensive forced eradication of coca makes matters worse. It alienates rural Colombians from the state, argues Ms Felbab-Brown, and so makes it harder to pacify the coca-growing areas. Often, the state destroys a farmer's livelihood today and offers an alternative, such as a road to get papayas to market, some time in the future. For peasants who live hand-to-mouth, this is unappealing.

Meanwhile, on the other side of Colombia, an emergency that outsiders are ne-

**Bello** Venezuela’s political quarantine

As if it were needed, coronavirus is a cruel reminder that the man who holds all the power in Venezuela is not Juan Guaidó, whom some 60 countries recognise as its president, but Nicolás Maduro, the dictator who kept the office by electoral theft. Blaming foreigners for 36 detected cases of covid-19, on March 16th Mr Maduro ordered a lockdown of the country similar to those in Spain and Italy, placing the armed forces in charge of enforcing it. That may be medically sensible. It is also politically convenient.

Mr Guaidó, who is the speaker of the National Assembly, last month began a new round of street demonstrations against Mr Maduro’s regime, which will now presumably stop. They are a shadow of the massive protests that followed his proclamation as “interim president” four months ago, when Mr Maduro began a second term after a fraudulent election. In theory the opposition remains committed to ousting Mr Maduro and calling a democratic presidential ballot. But sweeping American sanctions on Venezuela’s oil industry have so far failed to break the regime. Talks between government and opposition broke down in September. That leaves the opposition with a dilemma.

Under the constitution an election for the National Assembly is due towards the end of this year. In 2015, in Venezuela’s last free election, the opposition won a big majority in the assembly. Mr Maduro’s people see the chance to seize the only institution they don’t control. Radicals in the opposition insist that the vote will be a farce and pledge to boycott it. Any credible election would have to include a fresh presidential vote, they say. Pragmatists fear that a boycott will render the opposition irrelevant. They see a faint opportunity for a deal.

Earlier this month representatives of the government and the opposition agreed on a procedure to appoint new members to the electoral authority. In theory the government would accept international observation of the vote, by the UN and the European Union, says a European diplomat. But there are plenty of obstacles. Around 30 of the opposition’s legislators have been stripped of their parliamentary immunity by Mr Maduro’s puppet judiciary, and are either in exile or jail. Its main parties are banned on technicalities. Any deal would have to involve complete freedom for campaigning.

But Mr Maduro has weaknesses, too. Thanks mainly to his mismanagement, Venezuela is in no condition to cope with the virus. Its hospitals were already death traps. Many of its doctors are among the 4.5m Venezuelans who have fled his rule. With Russian help, Venezuela’s production of oil, which accounts for 95% of its legal exports, has stopped falling (though it is still only 60% of its level of 2016). But this month’s plunge in the oil price leaves it below Venezuela’s average cost of production. On March 15th Mr Maduro wrote to the IMF, which he has spent years denouncing as an imperialist tool, asking for a $5bn loan to fight covid-19. The IMF turned him down because his government lacks sufficient international recognition.

There is little sign that Mr Guaidó’s backers in the administration of President Donald Trump are prepared to contemplate any deal in Venezuela. This week Mr Trump nominated Carlos Trujillo, a hardliner, to be his top diplomat on Latin America. The region continues to be polarised by Venezuela, as the battle to be secretary-general of the Organisation of American States, a 34-member club, has illustrated. Luis Almagro, the Uruguayan incumbent, is seeking a second term in a vote of foreign ministers due to take place on March 20th (virus permitting). A vocal opponent of Mr Maduro, he has been more effective at grandstanding than diplomacy, say his critics. But there is no space for nuance. Hugo de Zela, an experienced Peruvian diplomat who favoured a less confrontational approach, this week dropped out.

Mr Almagro is likely to be his remaining rival, Maria Fernanda Espinosa, a former Ecuadorian foreign minister widely seen as Mr Maduro’s candidate.

The hardliners have a problem. There is no evidence that sanctions alone will get rid of Mr Maduro. That means having to deal with him, one way or another. This week Colombia, which has no diplomatic relations with Venezuela, recognised that when its health minister spoke to his counterpart about the virus. None of this means caving in to dictatorship. It is merely to grasp that the virus offers a fresh opportunity for negotiations. "It’s a road," says the European diplomat. "There is no other one."
glecting. Thousands of Venezuelan refugees arrive every day. On March 13th Mr Duque announced that border crossings would be closed temporarily because of covid-19. This is unlikely to stop the influx entirely—the border is more than 2,000km (1,200 miles) long and impossible to police.

The refugees who have recently crossed are in a wretched state. "One group came and picked up some dirty saucepans. I thought they were going to clean them, but they started licking them. That's when I realised how hungry they were," says Father Jose David Caña Pérez, who runs a Catholic feeding centre in the border town of Villa del Rosario.

Venezuela's economy shrank by two-thirds between 2013 and 2019, mainly because of the ineptitude of Nicolás Maduro's dictatorship. The proportion of Venezuelans who are extremely poor has risen from 10% in 2014 to an incredible 85% in 2019. "I had a choice between buying shoes for my kids or food," says Anaís Parra, who used to work in a bakery in Venezuela. Now she sits in Father Caña's feeding centre, watching her children tuck into pork, beans and plantains. By selling snacks in the street, she earns as much as a day in Colombia as she did in a month in Venezuela.

Of the 4.5m Venezuelans who have left their country, Colombia has absorbed 1.5m. Its foreign-born population has risen 4-fold since 2013. It has welcomed the newcomers, treating their illnesses, educating their children and letting them work. Until this week, thousands of children who lived in Venezuela before the border opened to classrooms in Colombia each day. On the Colombian side, the state laid on buses for them. On the Venezuelan side, their own government made them walk.

The pressure on the border is likely to intensify. The price of oil, Venezuela's only big export besides people, has crashed. Peru and Ecuador, two of Colombia's neighbours which had previously accepted lots of refugees, tightened visa rules last year. Colombia stoutly kept its border open for a long time; whether it will formally re-open it when the threat of the novel coronavirus eventually lifts remains to be seen.

The rest of the world is helping, but not much. It would cost about $1.3bn a year—or 0.5% of GDP—for Colombia to cope with the influx humanely, the International Monetary Fund estimates. Donors are supplying an eighth of this. Colombia is doing what it can, but it is struggling. Many refugees sleep on bits of cardboard under trees. Schools are groaning with extra pupils.

Clinics are finding it even harder. It was the fear of Colombia's health service being overwhelmed that prompted the border closure. Venezuelans cannot get treatment for covid-19 in their own country, so they are likely to seek it in Colombia. Indeed, many cannot even get soap in Venezuela.

The case for choosing a Canadian lichen is compelling. The country has more than 2,500 species of lichen, a composite of fungi and another element, algae or cyanobacteria (tree-living photosynthetic bacteria). Only Russia has a comparable number. Inconspicuous on suburban trees, this and driveways, lichens help prevent soil erosion and fix atmospheric nitrogen in the soil. They provide winter food for caribou (reindeer). So far, California is the only jurisdiction with an official lichen (face lichen, chosen in 2015). Iceland, Scotland and the Faroe Islands have issued stamps, so at least their citizens are licking lichen.

The tough question is whether to designate a Canadian lichen but which one. Lichenologists have drawn up a shortlist of seven. They include the common freckle pelt lichen, which "blankets moss, soil and low shrubs in exposed moist areas", says the museum's website. Canada has half the world's endowment of this sort.

The bright orange elegant sunburst lichen (pictured) grows on rocks and bones. Hunters use it to find nests and burrows. Horsehair lichen, "intricate brown tresses festooning the branches of fir, spruce and pine", is eaten by flying squirrels. Trevor Goward, a naturalist, favours it because it contains a third element, yeast (also a type of fungus). Its three-part composition best represents "the origins of Canada: First Nations, the French and the English", he says. Troy McMullin, a botanist who launched the vote, is rooting for the star-tipped reindeer lichen, which "grows like a cauliflower and is instantly recognisable, if you have what I call lichen eyes".

But the road to national recognition is rocky. In a ballot four years ago, almost 50,000 Canadians voted on a national bird. They chose the loon, which appears on the one-dollar coin, but the Royal Canadian Geographic Society insisted on the grey jay. The government did not endorse it, perhaps because it had already singled out the beaver and backed a horse. Lichens may be luckless, too. The Department of Canadian Heritage is "not actively considering" adopting one as a symbol. The pro-lichen movement will have to be a grassroots one.

Colombians feel a historic obligation: many of them went to work in Venezuela back in the days when Venezuela was prosperous and Colombia was not. Venezuelans are culturally similar and speak the same language, so they assimilate relatively easily. Because the refugees work, they will ultimately contribute to the Colombian economy, argues the finance minister, Alberto Carrasquilla. "Immigration is a net plus, over the medium term," he says.

But in the short term, the welcome mat has worn thin. A year ago most Colombians approved of the government's policy of offering a haven to Venezuelans, according to Gallup. Now most do not. Many people near the border "feel threatened. They feel there is no control over who is coming in," said Estefania Colmenares, a journalist, shortly before the border closed.

Colombia did not create either of these crises. The drug trade is driven by global demand. The Venezuelan exodus is driven by a corrupt, brutal and incompetent dictatorship in Venezuela. Yet Colombia is left to deal with the consequences: swaths of ungovernable territory in one part of the country, overstretched public services in another. It needs the right kind of help: less bullying to wage an unwinnable war on drugs, and more cash to cope with a refugee crisis in the middle of a pandemic. ■