

The Other Face of Narco-Traffickers

By Constanza Vieira

Aleida Cuarán, 36, was sentenced to eight years in a Colombian prison on 24 January 2001. She remembers the exact date, and with a frank gaze states matter-of-factly that she is serving time “for drug trafficking.”

Cuarán is from Mocoa, the capital of the southern Colombian department (province) of Putumayo, an oil-rich zone that is one of the poorest parts of the country, and one of the hardest-hit by armed conflict and drug trafficking.

From prison, she is unable to take care of her four daughters, ages 13, 15, 17 and 18, and a 20-year-old son who was born nearly blind. Cuarán and the father of her children separated 12 years ago, and since then the family has not heard from him.

When she was arrested, she left her family under the responsibility of her sister, who is too poor, however, to take them all into her own home. Only the near-blind son lives with her. The girls rotate between the homes of friends, working for their keep.

All of the girls wash clothes and do other domestic chores in exchange for room and board. But despite everything, only the youngest has dropped out of school.

Cuarán used to do other people’s laundry for a living. Three years ago, she was earning US\$1.15 a day. “There were people who paid me more, to help us out,” she says. “We had to pay rent, and we were always in such great need.”

What worried her most was that her daughters would ask her why they couldn’t all go to school. The problem was that school implied expenses, for uniforms, supplies, and books.

One day someone offered Cuarán a small fortune—US\$160—to carry seven kgs of unrefined cocaine paste on a relatively short trip to Pasto, the capital of the neighbouring department of Nariño, which stretches from the Pacific coast to the Andes mountains, where Pasto is located.

At the time Cuarán accepted the tempting offer, which would feed her family for months, the south-western part of Putumayo, on the border with Ecuador, had the highest density in the world of coca bushes, whose leaves provide the raw material used to produce cocaine.

This civil war-torn country of 44 million is now the world’s top producer of coca.

Up to 1998, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of

Colombia (FARC), the main rebel group, was the only armed organisation that received financing by providing protection for coca plantations.

The guerrilla group also collected “taxes” from drug traffickers for the processing facilities where basic cocaine paste is produced, clandestine airstrips, aircraft, the transport of chemicals, and production, charged on a per kg basis.

But in 1998, the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), the right-wing paramilitary umbrella group, began to penetrate the area dominated by FARC, and is now fighting with the insurgent group for control over the territory and for the “protection tax” and other fees paid by the narco-traffickers.

After she set out carrying the cocaine paste, Cuarán was stopped and searched at an anti-drug control post in El Mirador, two hours from Mocoa along the highway that runs from Colombia’s Amazon jungle region to Pasto. If she had been carrying less than five kgs, she would have been sentenced to only four years in jail.

Now, while she does her time in the Mocoa prison, she is completing her seventh grade studies.

Cuarán is one of 450 women in jail in Putumayo on drug trafficking charges. In Mocoa, 150 children of 80 female prisoners are, like her daughters, going from home to home, trading work for a roof over their heads, meals, and in some cases, the possibility of attending school.

“We cannot continue to fill the prisons up with women who were just trying to feed their children,” Cuarán told IPS.

In Mocoa, one kg of basic cocaine paste fetches US\$1,000. By comparison, a cluster of plantains, a staple of the Colombian diet, sells for US\$2.50, without counting the cost of transportation to market. One kg of cocaine paste is obtained from leaves that take four months to grow, while the plantain harvest takes at least a year.

But the chemical precursors needed to produce cocaine paste are costly, and the peasants who grow coca end up earning only US\$180 per hectare. And by the time the coca-growers are paid, they already owe that money in debt, said Gustavo Burgos, the ombudsman of Mocoa, who receives the complaints filed by local residents.

“It is the person who sells the cocaine paste who earns the money, the middleman between the

campesino (peasant) who grows the coca and the real narco-traffickers," Burgos told IPS.

The intermediaries hire people like Cuarán, often driven by desperate poverty, to act as "drug mules" or couriers.

After a long, complicated journey, the unrefined cocaine paste is converted into cocaine and eventually makes it to the streets of New York or other large U.S. cities, where it sells for between US\$50 and US\$150 a gram, depending on its purity.

The United States, keen on reducing the inflow of drugs, channels financial and military aid to Bogota through the Plan Colombia anti-drug and counterinsurgency strategy, whose main focus is Putumayo.

For the past four years, the U.S. government has provided US\$1.4 million a day to Colombia in military and police aid, according to Adam Isaacson, coordinator of the Washington D.C.-based Centre for International Policy's Colombia programme.

That has provided a much-needed boost for defence spending in Colombia, which has a fiscal deficit equivalent to 2.5 percent of Gross Domestic Product, according to official figures.

One of the aims of Plan Colombia, which was designed with help from the

U.S. government, is to eradicate coca crops by means of widespread aerial spraying, using a heavily concentrated mixture of the herbicide glyphosate.

Although the spraying is driving up the poverty level in Putumayo, already one of the most impoverished regions in the country, the government's aim is to reduce the financing FARC receives from the taxation of coca cultivation and processing.

But Cuarán complained that the persecution focuses on the weakest parts of the chain, the coca farmers and small-time couriers, while the intermediaries freely make their way around the area.

In late November, the Women's Peace Caravan, consisting of more than 100 buses carrying 3,000 women's activists and community leaders, drove through Mocoa as it travelled to the epicentre of the war.

Cuarán and six other women inmates were given permission to leave the prison, accompanied by two guards, to welcome the Peace Caravan in the city square.

Cuarán spoke in the name of her fellow inmates, complaining that in Putumayo there was no compliance with law 750, which was enacted last year. The new law makes house arrest possible for male or female heads of households who have no spouse or partner to help

take care of the family.

"We are calling on society to recognise that we are the victims of the scourge of narco-trafficking, and not links in the chain of crime," said Cuarán.

"In this region which is neglected by the state and harassed by the parties to the conflict, and where there are no jobs, we have very few opportunities," she added.

Marta Elisa Gómez, a local resident of Mocoa, was wearing pretty hand-made denim shoes.

"I made them myself," she told IPS. "I know how to make shoes. I have the moulds, but I can't work because there is no leather sewing machine here. I can only make shoes out of cloth, with great difficulty."

"There is no industry here," said the 37-year-old Gómez. "There is no dairy factory, there is no processing of anything. No one generates employment here. Young people join the 'paracos' (paramilitaries) because there is no work."

A month and a half ago, Gómez's husband had a close call with the paramilitaries. "With the economic situation the way it is, he decided to carry some goods (coca). The paracos found out, and followed him, to steal it." He survived by hiding out in the bush for three days and sleeping in trees, she recalled, bursting into tears.

Putumayo has major oil reserves. But although it is located atop an underground sea of black gold, 79 percent of the population is poor, more than double the official figure for Colombia as a whole.

While this correspondent awaited the return of the Peace Caravan in Mocoa, a boy approached.

All week long, fighting had been going on between the army and the guerrillas, 90 kms south of the city. The rebels had committed acts of sabotage at some 30 spots along oil pipelines, and hard-right President Alvaro Uribe had announced massive sweeps to capture insurgents and their supporters.

"I need you to do me a favour," said Paulo César Rivera, a 10-year-old with big dark-brown eyes, cinnamon-coloured skin and straight jet-black hair. He looked very agitated as he pulled a bullet from the right-hand pocket of his pants, and handed it over.

"I found it on the street this morning. If I give it to a soldier, this bullet will end up killing someone for sure," he said. "Take it away from here."

I asked him what I should do with the bullet. "Have them destroy it, melt it down," he answered before walking away.

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