

Legal Bolivian 'coke' poses problem

Editor's note: Clifford Cheney, managing editor of the Logan Herald Journal and former UPI reporter, recently spent a month in Bolivia on a journalism exchange program and wrote the following article.

By CLIFFORD CHENEY
United Press International

CHULUMANI, Bolivia — The terraced hillside rising behind the patio was bright green with this season's first crop of coca leaves, the source of cocaine for the illicit drug market in the United States.

Our host, a LaPaz banker, took a sip from his glass and nodded toward the crop growing next door to his vacation home.

"The campesinos have been raising coca here since long before cocaine was ever heard of," he said. It has been one of their basic crops since before the time of Christ. To them, it's just like a crop of tobacco.

The day before, in the newsroom of one of La Paz's daily newspapers, Bolivian editor took a puff on his cigarette then held it up and told me, "This is worse for you than pasta."

A few days later, in the lodge of Machalaya, the world's highest ski resort at a dizzying 17,000 feet above sea level in the Bolivian Andes, I sipped on a cup of hot tea brewed from coca leaves. "Good for altitude sickness," I was told.

Indeed, the coca leaf — known in the United States only as the source of illegal cocaine — is a routine and integral part of the lifestyle of Bolivia.

Highly educated people in La Paz drink coca tea to fight altitude sickness and to aid digestion. The campesinos of the bleak Altiplano chew coca leaves daily to help them withstand hunger and cold. The tin miners of Oruro chew the leaves because they believe the plant prevents lung disease.

Coca is widely used as a folk remedy and pain reliever. The Aymara Indians use coca leaves, as Gypsies use tea leaves, to tell fortunes and predict the future.

Yet, alongside Bolivia's traditional legal market for the coca leaf as herb, there is a booming illegal market. The biggest purchaser of coca leaf is an international narcotics smuggling organization which produces and sells millions of dollars of Bolivian cocaine each year in the United States and Europe.

One of the top priorities of the U.S. Embassy in La Paz is to work with Bolivian police and other agencies to cut off the flow of cocaine at its source.

The coca problem is one area where non-developmental objectives play a significant part in our AID (Agency for International Development) programs in Bolivia," said U.S. Ambassador Paul H. Boeker.

Perhaps half of the coca leaves grown in Bolivia — in the Yungas region around Chulumani and the Chapari region near Cochabamba — go into the illegal drug market.

First the leaf is ground into a

roads into that previously uncultivated area. "We think the domestic demand for coca, the legitimate market demand for chewing and tea, is about half the supply that is presently being grown," said Howard Steele, a Department of Agriculture economist assigned to the U.S. Embassy. Steele's job is to provide the cam-

enforcement of any kind done in this country until this program was started," said Lopez, a former California policeman. "The Bolivians still lack the records, training and laws to do an adequate job."

I visited the headquarters of Bolivia's newly organized National Division for Control of Dangerous Substances. There I saw the beginning of Phase 2 of the U.S.-financed Narcotics Control Program — registration of coca vendors in the La Paz area.

Most of the vendors were Aymara and Quechua Indians, dressed in simple native clothing — the men and women standing in line to fill out forms and have their photographs taken. In coming weeks, vendors in the rural areas of the country were to be registered.

Eventually, there would be fines or imprisonment for those who sold coca leaves without a license. It doesn't make much sense to the campesinos, but to Lopez and the other U.S. officials working on the coca problem in Bolivia, vendor registration is another barrier to stop the northward flow of illegal cocaine.

Other barriers include coca taxation, new Bolivian narcotics laws, customs checkpoints on roads, stationing of narcotics agents around the country, and registration of coca growers which was Phase 1 of the program.

Registration of growers began last year. Lopez said almost 14,000 growers, an estimated 70 percent of



pastelike "base," which is then refined into cocaine hydrochloride. Much of the refining and most of the international distribution takes place in Colombia.

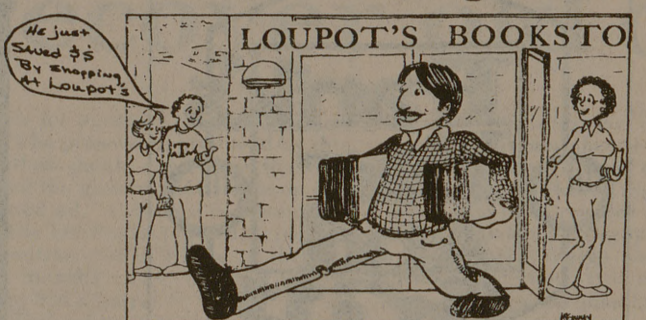
Coca production has been increasing in Bolivia in the past few years, primarily as a result of an expanding illegal market in the United States and Europe. One irony of American foreign aid to Bolivia is that the biggest expansion of coca acreage occurred in the Chapari after the United States financed new

payments, the project is one half of a double-edged effort to fight, at its source, the traffic of cocaine to the United States.

The other half is a Bolivian law enforcement campaign involving narcotics officers from the U.S. State and Justice departments.

"There was not any narcotics law

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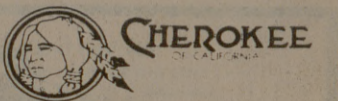
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