

# Columbia cracking down on \$2 billion marijuana industry

By MARTIN McREYNOLDS  
United Press International

RIOHACHA, Colombia — The breeze that rustles the palm trees is hot and damp. Caribbean waters wash the sparkling beach.

But beyond the dreamy waterfront, things change fast.

In Riohacha's rutted, dusty streets, swaggering men in bluejeans and straw hats mingle with Indian women from the countryside, their faces smeared with ritual black paint, their bodies wrapped in bright flowing dresses.

Accommodations for visitors are minimal in this city of 70,000 but it doesn't matter. Strangers are advised to be well on their way to safer parts before sundown.

This is the capital of La Guajira State and the hub of Colombia's biggest illegal industry — growing and smuggling marijuana to the United States.

It is also a key outpost in the government's battle to chop down the drug traffic that threatens to overshadow all of the country's legitimate business.

Estimates of the total Colombian drug business vary, but it is generally guessed to be around \$2 billion annually, a good part of which lands in the hands of international dealers based in the United States.

In addition to homegrown pot, Colombia is one of the countries where cocaine from Peru and Bolivia is processed for shipment to the U.S., mainly by gangs operating out of the cities of Medellin and Cali.

The white powder accounts for less than half the dollar total, however, and involves a much smaller labor force than marijuana, which employs up to 150,000 Colombians.

At an army base outside Riohacha, soldiers in T-shirts and fatigue trousers stack scores of large bales wrapped in burlap bags. Tons of "Santa Marta Gold," prime marijuana from the slopes of the Santa Marta Mountains seized in the latest army operation, are being prepared for a bonfire of destruction.

A dozen trucks confiscated in the action are lined up in a row. A few yards away are the mangled remains of a small plane that crashed on the highway near the army base, presumably on a pot mission that went wrong.

A lot of similar flights have run into trouble since President Julio Cesar Turbay ordered the armed forces to clamp down on the drug traffic last October.

Through the end of June, the armed forces had seized 80 airplanes in Northern Colombia, nearly all U.S.-registered, including a DC-7, a DC-6, a Convair and three venerable DC-3's, along with a vast fleet of small twin-engine planes. Of that total, 23 planes had crashed while attempting dangerous landings on makeshift runways.

A total of 72 boats, 308 vehicles and 879 firearms were also confiscated.

During the same period, 1,169 suspects were arrested including 186 foreigners, all but a handful Ameri-

cans.

The army says it destroyed nearly 38,000 tons of marijuana including 50,000 bales ready for shipment and the estimated yield of plants growing on 25 acres. It also grabbed 2.2 million amphetamine tablets ready for export and 74 pounds of cocaine apparently being handled by marijuana smugglers outside the main cocaine route.

"We figure we have got our hands on less than 10 percent of the total production," an army officer said grimly.

Marijuana, often masked as homesteaders' plots of corn and other crops, grows vigorously in secluded ravines of the Santa Marta mountains that rise abruptly from the flat La Guajira peninsula jutting into the Caribbean.

Some of the plantations are huge. The army announced it recently discovered a single area of more than 24,000 acres planted in marijuana that will take months to destroy.

"In the first two weeks, 100 soldiers pulling up the plants, stacking them to dry and then burning them were able to cover only 500 acres," the army officer said.

"At that rate, it will take us two years to finish the job in this one area alone. We're trying to get help from the agriculture department — it's not a soldier's job to dig up plants."

The root of the enforcement problem is money — bundles of dollars and pesos that convince farmers to run the risk of raising the illegal crop and tempt ill-paid police, soldiers

and even judges to collaborate with the drug traffic.

La Guajira has long been known in Colombia as an economically depressed area where contraband was considered a normal way of life. The local populace welcomed outsiders with the same open-hearted warmth that Tennessee mountaineers reserve for internal revenue officers.

The level of violence has risen as rival gangs fight for marijuana profits. The economy has been transformed in an area stretching along the Caribbean coast from the historic port of Cartagena through Barranquilla, Santa Marta and Riohacha to the traditional smuggling town of Maicao near the Venezuelan border.

At Santa Marta, the country's third biggest port and one of its popular tourist resorts, whole neighborhoods of new houses are said to be occupied by the drug kingpins and their prosperous subordinates. Shootouts by rival gangs are common.

"This used to be the safest place on earth, but the drug mafia has changed all that," said a storekeeper in Santa Marta. "Now, when you walk out the door of your house, you never know if you're coming back. You walk out, but they might carry you back."

In Barranquilla, a newsman lowered his voice when talking about the "marimberos" — the marijuana dealers.

"The corruption is unbelievable," he said. "Nobody can resist the amounts of dollars the marimberos offer — nobody. But don't say I told you that. I don't want to turn up dead."

The marijuana, dried and wrapped in "bultos" (bales) or "pacas" (tightly compressed bricks made in portable presses), is taken by mule train and trucks to any of the 100 or so clandestine airstrips that dot the peninsula or to countless anchorages along 300 miles of coastline.

"It's easy to make a landing strip in a few hours almost anywhere in La Guajira," said an American source who follows the drug business in Barranquilla. "You bulldoze the brush out of the way, pack down the sandy soil and you're ready for business. Of course, there are no lights for night landings and it's very risky."



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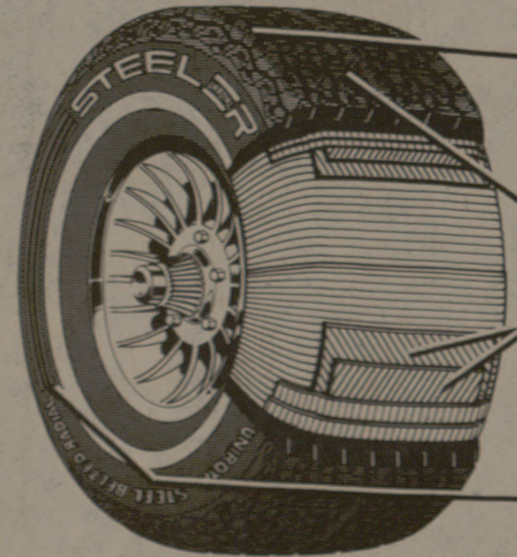
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