

GDPO Situation Analysis

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Reforms in Reverse; Colombia Goes Back to Glyphosate

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Subject

In May 2015 the Colombian government suspended the aerial fumigation of coca crops using the herbicide glyphosate. Six months on, the government has said it will continue to use the chemical but will change the method of delivery: illicit crops will now be 'fogged' by operators on the ground. The move has been widely criticised in Colombia, and it has dashed nascent hopes of a new approach to illicit cultivation in the wake of last year's suspension.

The Suspension of Aerial Fumigation

The decision to end aerial fumigation was originally imposed upon the Colombian government by a World Health Organisation (WHO) declaration classifying the herbicide glyphosate as potentially carcinogenic to humans. A vote at the National Narcotics Council followed, and the decision was taken to suspend aerial fumigation. Then, during a revealing five month 'transition period' in which operations continued, the government openly and admittedly exposed many rural communities to a chemical they themselves had recognised after decades of denial to be carcinogenic.

At that time, there were hopes the WHO statement and its implications would provide an opportunity for the Colombian government to bring its drug policy in line with the administration's reformist rhetoric, vociferously articulated on the international stage. But while officials admitted fundamental changes were needed, there were also a number of warnings signs. When, not long after the decision to suspend was made, the Defence Minister announced that the Police were testing substitute chemicals, it was revealed that this was being done without consulting the National Council for Pesticides, the body that should take the lead in determining the health and environmental impact of any substitute.

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Speaking with the press, officials suggested the suspension would be used to re-focus efforts up the drug trafficking chain of responsibility, and would include new initiatives against drug production and money laundering. And in international conferences, President Santos continued to speak of the need to move away from the failed War on Drugs Approach to illicit cultivation. At home, however, writing in the newsletter of the police forces, he assured his readers: “We will continue directly combating, with all the power of our police forces and the support of our military forces, the criminal organisations that profit from narco-trafficking and its environment of illegality.”

The Return of Glyphosate

A new anti-narcotics strategy was announced at the end of April this year. From now on, it stated, a greater emphasis would be placed on the destruction of drug laboratories, rather than crops.² Then in early May, following a pause in fumigation operations of just over six months, the use of ground fogging with glyphosate was announced. According to initial reports the policy will be overseen by the national anti-narcotics police and the official target is to destroy at least 16,200 hectares of illicit crops this year; the UN estimates 69,000 hectares were cultivated in 2014, up from 48,000 the year before.³

The manner in which the new policy was adopted has raised eyebrows in Colombia. The National Narcotics Council, the arbiter on matters of drug policy in the country, was convened while only the vice ministers of the eight ministries making up the body were present. It also took place just before the new Justice Minister, Jorge Londoño, had taken up his new role. Londoño has since then made clear he would have opposed the policy.

Among those in favour of the new measure was the Minister of Health, Alejandro Gaviria: he said the manual application of glyphosate would not put the local population at risk. The Minister of Agriculture likewise expressed his support for the new policy. Although it is slower, he said, fogging is more secure and the necessary precautions would be taken to ensure the health of those involved would not be effected.⁴ Critics countered by pointing out that manual eradication with glyphosate will expose operators on the ground to the harmful chemical, as well as anti-personnel mines and attacks from groups defending the crops, be they paramilitaries or guerrillas.

For many Colombian analysts the decision to re-adopt forced eradication with glyphosate is inexplicable. Health and human rights implications aside, the policy has been proven to be not just ineffective but extremely costly. Even the most moderate criticisms that can be levelled at aerial fumigation - that it is expensive and ineffective - are even more applicable when applied to fogging.⁵ For this reason, many of those who supported aerial fumigation have expressed shock at the decision, arguing it is simply a less efficient version of an old policy.

When the announcement was made the Attorney General, Alejandro Ordóñez, told the press: ‘Let’s remember that last year the justification for the suspension was the harmful nature of glyphosate. So in the end, is glyphosate harmful to health or not?’⁶ The health, human rights and environmental problems associated

2 <http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/justicia/estrategia-antinarcoticos-de-colombia-en-2016/16571442>

3 http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2016/05/05/colombia/1462412622_636433.html

4 <http://www.elpais.com.co/elpais/judicial/noticias/por-hay-polemica-por-uso-glifosato-aspersion-terrestre>

5 See for example: <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/erradicacion-terrestre-glifosato-va-provocar-mas-muerte-articulo-630496>

6 <http://www.elpais.com.co/elpais/judicial/noticias/por-hay-polemica-por-uso-glifosato-aspersion-terrestre>

with aerial fumigation using glyphosate are well-documented, and regardless of the conversion to fogging the same legitimacy problems remain.⁷ Pedro Arenas, a former mayor and congressional representative, and current director of the Colombia based Observatory for Crops and Cultivators Declared Illicit, recently told the GDPO:

‘The national government has once more launched a strategy that appeases the international organisations who concentrate on the number of hectares cultivated rather than emphasising the dialogue and joint strategies with producers in order to define, control and perhaps reduce the level of cultivation.’

Given the obvious problems, why the decision was made is not clear. It could, for example, have been decided to eradicate crops as it has been done in other countries, by simply destroying the crops rather than spraying them with a carcinogenic chemical. Local analysts have speculated that pressure may have come from Washington given fumigation uses the commercial product Round-Up, produced by the US-based Monsanto corporation.⁸ Another unanswered question is what will happen to the airplanes used to carry out fumigation operations in the past, or the private military contractors employed to fly them?

Rhetoric and Responsibility

During the recent United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS), the Colombian ambassador to the UN stated, ‘There is the need for countries to review a new alternative to the drug problem,’ and she added, it is a debate in which Colombia has played a leading role’. During his speech, President Santos argued that the drug issue should be recognised as a health and human rights issue, not a security one. And, as he has done in the past, he criticised the punitive measures which have not proven effective in reducing drug use, and then he criticised the ‘repressive’ policies that have been used to target small producers. He continued: ‘After so many lives that have been destroyed, after so much corruption and so much violence, after so many young people being marched off to jail, can we say that we have won the war (on drugs) or at least that we are winning it? Unfortunately the answer is “no”’.⁹

Back in Colombia, a coalition of NGOs released a statement regarding the re-adoption of glyphosate:

‘This decision is not coherent with the official discourse of President Santos, as it is contrary to the evidence, violates the principle of precaution and puts at high risk the rights to health and a healthy environment, among other rights of rural communities and the eradicators. Without having previously implemented an adequate focus in economic development, agreed with the communities, the use of forced eradication has proved to be mistaken and harmful. It is inadmissible that decisions at home should negate the change of focus that Colombia has correctly defended in the international debate.’¹⁰

Equally problematic is the recent decision by the government to open a new phase in its War on Drugs-style approach. The paramilitary groups, the main drug trafficking organisations in the country, were put through a weak and widely-criticised demobilisation process back in 2007. New groups emerged after this process,

7 See Eventon, R. Bewley-Taylor, D. (2016), Above the Law, Under the Radar: A History of Private Contractors and Aerial Fumigation in Colombia, GDPO, February http://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/Privatisation_final.pdf

8 <http://www.contagioradio.com/fumigaciones-terrestres-con-glifosato-una-decision-paradojica-y-negligente-articulo-23658/>

9 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-drugs-colombia-idUSKCN0X12MQ>

10 http://www.dejusticia.org/files/r2_actividades_recursos/fi_name_recurso.829.pdf

many of them made up of the same people who had supposedly demobilised. But the government designated them not as paramilitaries but ‘BACRIM’, a Spanish neologism for Criminal Groups. Critics pointed out that the new label was an attempt to obscure the failure of the demobilisation, to shroud the political objectives of the forces and to deny compensation to their victims. On May 5th of this year, around the same time the new fogging policy was being announced, the name was changed again: now the government will refer to them as ‘Organised Armed Groups’. The change in title is important: it means the armed forces can now be deployed to attack the groups who still control much of the drug trade in the country, particularly along the Caribbean coast.¹¹

What Next?

- The re-adoption of glyphosate and the move to employ the army demonstrate the vast gap that still exists between the pronouncements of the Colombian government on the international stage, and its policies back at home. It seems progressive rhetoric has bought Colombia the political space to continue regressive drug policies at home, while they decry those same policies on the international stage.
- The peace negotiations are the elephant in the room. According to the relevant section of the negotiation agenda, any peace deal will be predicated on the government prioritising voluntary eradication over forced methods. Therefore, assuming a peace deal is concluded in the next few months, there will need to be another reassessment of the policy if the administration is to honour its side of the demobilisation agreement.¹²

11 <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/hoy-guerra-contra-bacrim-incluye-bombardeos-articulo-630851>

12 Government officials have said they would retain the right to forced eradication measures when, due to security conditions on the ground, voluntary options are not viable

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