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From the Los Angeles Times

A new anti-drug strategy in Colombia

The initiative would funnel more U.S. funds toward economic projects and less toward the nation's military and anti-coca spraying.

By Chris Kraul

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

October 4, 2007

NAPIPI, COLOMBIA — From his dugout canoe in the Napipi River, Jefferson Rojas spotted what he was after: a 40-foot-high jagua tree, its canopy dotted with dozens of thick-skinned fruits the size of tennis balls.

Rojas pulled his boat to shore, macheted his way through thick foliage and with his telephone lineman gear quickly scaled the tree. He lopped off the fruits, which fell with thuds to the floor of the jungle.

Why did Rojas go to such lengths for a fruit that isn't even ripe? Because the body-marking market has caught on to what indigenous tribes here in Choco state have known for centuries: *Jagua* is an excellent source of nonpermanent tattoo ink.

Ink that eventually makes its way to the biceps or backsides of trendy teenagers thousands of miles away might appear to have a tenuous connection to Plan Colombia, the seven-year program that has funneled \$5.4 billion in U.S. taxpayer money into fighting drug traffickers and guerrillas. But with the current fiscal year, which began Monday, more of those funds are to go to economic projects such as Rojas' tattoo ink venture and fewer to finance the Colombian military and anti-coca spraying than in past years.

The initiative will soon take on a "softer" profile, at the insistence of the Democratic-controlled U.S. Congress. It is expected to contain more money to fund "alternative development" programs to encourage farmers to grow legal crops and steer clear of joining armed groups.

After seven years, the "hard" features of Plan Colombia -- the spraying and military aid -- have done little to stem the flow of cocaine to North America and elsewhere,

and members of Congress and like-minded Colombian officials want to try a new approach.

A quarter of the approximately \$550 million in annual Plan Colombia aid typically has been earmarked for economic development, justice reform and institution-building, but the percentage could grow to 40% next fiscal year. That means the U.S. Agency for International Development office at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota could see its budget balloon to as much as \$218 million from this year's \$139 million, said U.S. congressional staffers familiar with the appropriations process.

"It is beyond dispute that spraying chemicals is not a sustainable strategy," Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee controlling foreign aid expenditures, said in an e-mailed comment. "Without real economic alternatives, coca farmers will find ways to grow coca. . . . Rather than continue to act as a rubber stamp, we are shifting more funds into economic and social programs."

The *jagua* tattoo ink project is just the sort that aid officials will be looking to fund. It is environment-friendly, gives incentives for peasants to stay away from violence and drug trafficking, and it helps Afro-Colombian communities, which many aid critics consider a neglected constituency.

In Choco, Afro-Colombian communities such as Napipi have received about \$350,000 in aid from the United States and from the Organization of American States through its Pan American Development Foundation arm.

The fruit gathered by Rojas will be peeled by other members of his cooperative in this impoverished river town of 900, and the pulp sent on charter flights to the EcoFlora factory near Medellin. The family-owned company, which sells cut flowers, extracts an inky blue liquid from the fruit and ships it in powder form to a tattoo parlor supply distributor called Primal Cosmetics in Manchester, England.

In less than a year, the venture between EcoFlora and the largely Afro-Colombian community in this remote corner of Colombia's wettest rain forest expects to generate \$300,000 in sales, via Primal Cosmetics, to tattoo parlors in Britain, the United States, Australia and other countries.

EcoFlora Chief Executive Nicolas Cock Duque said that figure could grow significantly if plans to sell the extract as food coloring to an unnamed soft drink manufacturer come through.

The EcoFlora project provides a case study of how renewable resources can produce real economic gain in isolated, grindingly poor towns like this one.

About half of the \$300,000 in revenue comes back to Napipi in wages to Rojas and 30 other cooperative members. That's a bonanza in this depressed town where

people eke out subsistence living by fishing, farming and illegal logging.

Choco has been the scene of considerable strife in recent years as narco-traffickers, leftist rebels and right-wing paramilitary groups have fought over its strategic geography. Much of Colombia's estimated 500 tons of cocaine shipped annually to the U.S. is processed in the region. More than half a dozen Napipi residents have been killed in drug and insurgent violence in recent years, locals say. In 2002, more than 100 Afro-Colombians in the neighboring town of Bojaya were killed when guerrillas engaged in fighting paramilitary forces launched mortar attacks on a church where residents had taken refuge.

Rojas, 27, has a wiry build and intense eyes that seem to reflect his determination to avoid the violence that has scarred his town. The idea of moving to a bigger city such as Quibdo or Medellin does not interest him. He also farms beans and corn, and it's the country life he has chosen, despite the poverty and violence.

Rojas said young men in his town are tempted to join an armed group not because of ideology but because it is one of the few ways to earn a regular salary of \$200 a month or more. Having a job even as minimally remunerative as *jagua* collection is a powerful incentive to "resist the proselytism of the armed groups," he said.

The *jagua* business also gives locals an alternative to cutting down cedar and other protected tree species in a rain forest increasingly under siege by loggers, said Juan Diego Lopez, an observer for the Pan American Development Foundation. Rojas and others also got training in how to cut the fruit to ensure future harvests.

Much of the additional U.S. development aid could go to help the Colombian government's Social Action agency finance an expanding program called Forest Guardians, in which families that grew coca leaves and opium poppies are paid monthly stipends to raise legitimate crops. The stipends are conditional on all townspeople not replanting illicit crops and on their directing their energies to new crops and markets, such as for organic coffee and tropical fruit juices.

The program, monitored by the United Nations, aids about 50,000 families, and the Colombian government wants to add 80,000 more to the rolls by 2010.

The push is on to expand the program because it seems to be the most successful means of taking families out of illicit farming and keeping them out. Diego Molano, the assistant director of Social Action, said that only 25% of Forest Guardian families so far had gone back to planting illicit crops, whereas 80% of farmers whose coca and poppy crops had been sprayed had returned to illegal farming.

Vanda Felbab-Brown, a researcher at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said alternative development projects take decades and require unflinching commitment by government and the private sector.

"Unfortunately, on a countrywide level, alternative livelihoods projects have rarely been successful, with Thailand being the most prominent example of success," Felbab-Brown said, referring to that country's 20-year campaign to eliminate poppy farming. "Years of sustained and well-funded effort are necessary for such efforts to bear fruit."

Options in Napipi are few. Most of the inhabitants, like Rojas, have been displaced by war and drug trafficking and, as marginalized Afro-Colombians, feel they have no place else to go.

Rojas, a much-valued member of the cooperative for his tree-climbing skills, says membership in the group is not an unalloyed positive. Rojas and others volunteered for the program, which is anything but a welfare handout. The work is strenuous and hazardous, and there isn't a time when he scales one of the three-story-tall *jagua* trees that he doesn't fear he'll fall. And townspeople who aren't members of the 30-family cooperative are envious of his wage.

Still, he's happy to be earning an income.

"The economic well-being here has risen," Rojas said. "The quality of life is higher."

chris.kraul@latimes.com

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