

Colombians Protest Fumigation

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A group of elected officials from Colombia appealed here yesterday for congressional and public support for their campaign to stop U.S.-funded aerial fumigation of drug crops in their country, saying the policy endangers human health and the environment and is ineffective in reducing illegal cultivation.

Their appeal came as Colombia's counter-narcotics police, working with U.S. assistance, resumed the spraying program after a one-week hiatus following a Bogota judge's order shutting it down.

The July 23 order was in response to a complaint filed by Indian communities in southeastern Colombia. When the government of President Andres Pastrana asked for clarification, the judge amended his injunction to apply only to areas populated by the complaining communities, described by Colombian National Narcotics Director Gabriel Merchan as "very, very, very small." But the ruling sent a chill through U.S. officials in charge of the \$ 1.3 billion aid program in Colombia. They said the counter-drug effort -- which also includes military assistance and money for alternative development in the countryside -- could not continue without the fumigation.

"Our assistance is a three-legged stool," an administration official said yesterday. "We do not believe that if you pull out any of the legs, the whole thing can stand."

The administration has requested \$ 822 million for counter-drug programs in the Andean region for fiscal 2002, with about half for Colombia and the rest for six other countries.

But the fumigation policy has come under increasing criticism both here and in Colombia. Bills to end it have been introduced in both houses of the Colombian Congress. Governors in six southern Colombian states have joined human rights organizations and some officials of the Pastrana government in opposing it. The United Nations drug control program has called it "inhumane" and "ineffective."

The protests have posed a dilemma for the United States, which says its interest in fortifying Colombian democracy is as strong as its desire to stop the drug exports that provide 90 percent of the cocaine in this country and an increasing amount of heroin.

In Washington, the World Wildlife Fund has also called for suspension of the fumigation until the "potentially grave environmental impact" can be studied, and restrictive language was inserted in the House and Senate versions of the foreign aid bill last week.

Governors from the southern Colombian states of Cauca and Narino, along with two members of the Colombian Congress and two U.S. House members, told a news conference here yesterday that the fumigation is ineffective in stemming drug exports, endangers the environment and violates the human rights of Colombian peasants.

"The fumigation policy is madness," said Colombian Sen. Rafael Orduz, a member of Pastrana's Conservative Party and the former vice president of Colombia's Industrial Chemical Association. Rep. John Conyers Jr. (Mich.), the senior Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee who appeared with Rep. Janice D. "Jan" Schakowsky (D-Ill.), called the policy "a very terrible thing we're doing. I don't think we would do it in the United States, and I don't think we should do it in Colombia."

Although Colombia has been spraying Roundup on drug crops since 1992, the program increased to a massive level with the U.S. aid program. Since December, more than 125,000 acres of coca have been fumigated by planes flown largely by U.S. government contract employees. Under Plan Colombia, as the overall anti-drug effort is known, the fumigated areas are to be secured from attacks by leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary forces by the U.S.-trained and -equipped Colombian military. Small farmers in coca-growing areas are to be offered the opportunity to avoid spraying if they agree to substitute legal crops for coca or opium poppies used to produce heroin.

But so far, the fumigation leg of the stool has far outpaced the military and development legs. Peasant farmers and their elected officials have protested that the spraying has destroyed food crops, threatens land and water resources, and has harmed humans and animals.

U.S. and Colombian officials insist that glyphosate, the key ingredient in Monsanto-manufactured Roundup, is harmless to human and animal life and quickly dissipates in the environment. A State Department "Fact Sheet" says that reports of harm "have been largely based on unverified accounts provided by farmers whose illicit crops have been sprayed" and are thus not trustworthy.

But the Colombian governors offered videotapes to support their charges of babies with rashes, dead animals and ruined food crops. They noted that U.S. Roundup products carry warnings to use protective eye covering and to avoid inhaling the chemical, spraying it on water, or allowing domestic animals into treated fields for at least two weeks -- all of which is impossible for those sprayed without warning from the air.

Roundup also boasts that replanting can begin within one day after unwanted vegetation is

sprayed. Reporters visiting parts of southern Colombia fumigated last spring have noted that parts of the region have already been replanted with coca.