

Analysis

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Deep in Guatemala's jungle, drugs, murder neighbors to palm oil

Bullet holes scar a wall in the only school in Semuy II, a remote village in northeastern Guatemala where three soldiers were shot dead early in September as they searched for jungle landing strips used by drug traffickers. In the village school's classrooms, books and open notebooks gathered dust on the desks, while on a board, the fateful date of the shootings was written in red ink: "September 3."

President Jimmy Morales said the soldiers were killed by villagers protecting a drug shipment. In response, the government gave the army temporary emergency powers over a vast swathe of surrounding territory, leading to some startling discoveries. Searches uncovered coca plantations and cocaine laboratories, including in Semuy II's municipality of El Estor, suggesting drug gangs have been operating freely in an area better known for its natural beauty, mining and African palm. The deaths occurred on the fringes of the Patate estate that supplies palm oil to Nestle and Cargill, with authorities saying landing strips on the estate had been used by traffickers.

"We've found landing strips, some of them clandestine. There are some strips that are legal, but there's evidence of planes landing with illicit goods," General Luis Alberto Morales, deputy head of the presidential general staff, told Reuters. Ministry of Defense spokesman Oscar Perez said investigators had also found the remains of torched planes in the wider area, a tell-tale sign the strips were being used for trafficking.

The discovery is a dramatic development in the drug war that brings fields and laboratories used to make cocaine closer to the US market than ever before. The development led Guatemala's interior minister to declare that the country was now a cocaine producing nation - a distinction previously reserved for Andean countries in South America. Images provided by the government of the army's discoveries show what appears to be a well-built laboratory, which Morales said could produce up to half a tonne of cocaine a day. He said the government had discovered 1.5 million coca plants along with the labs, estimating a street value of \$800 million.

Such numbers may be inflated. While Andean plantations vary widely in density of plants per hectare, it would be hard to fit so many plants on the apparently small areas of land so far discovered by the soldiers in the wake of the killings. Only last year, Guatemala discovered a small field of coca for the first time. However, the discovery of sophisticated laboratories fits with recent trends of Colombian gangs exporting half-processed cocaine to finish the product in countries with less strict policing, said Hernando Bernal, an official from the United Nations drugs and crime agency's illicit crop monitoring program.

Fear, isolation

The events of Tuesday, Sept 3 are murky. Around noon, a patrol of nine soldiers with weapons at the ready tried to cross the village of Semuy II, the first time military officials had been seen in years, locals and authorities agree. At this point, the versions diverge. Authorities say the villagers ambushed the soldiers and shot three of them behind the school. Villagers say soldiers sparked a dispute and fired off rounds into the air, and then armed locals opened fire on the soldiers. However, none could say who had fired the fatal shots and no one has been arrested by the investigating authorities.

Speaking in the hills behind the village where he farms cocoa, community leader Vicente Perez, 43, denied the government's accusation that the villagers were growing drugs and protecting traffickers. "Everything the president is saying is a lie," Perez said. While he did not witness the shootings, he said it seemed that collective fear led the situation to spiral out of control. Soldiers and police had not been seen in the area since he was a child, during Guatemala's civil war, he said, adding that the soldiers should have requested permission from the elders of the village before passing through.

According to Edgar Caal, a marine who survived the attack, more than a hundred locals waited with shotguns, machetes, sticks and stones, and before attacking issued the patrol a warning: "Whoever comes to this village is already a dead man," he related in a video released by the government. "We ran for our lives," the young marine said from a hospital bed while the camera took in other injured comrades with scars on their hands, wrists and backs.

Any uptick in violence and drug trafficking in the area could create problems for local producers of palm oil, the world's second-most popular type of oil, used in consumer products ranging from soap to chocolate. Wedged between a jungle-clad hillside and a sprawling palm estate, Semuy II is built on land donated by NaturAceites, a company owned by one of Guatemala's richest families, which delivers the oil to commodities giants Cargill and Nestle. — Reuters

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In this file photo taken on Jan 29, 2009, visitors look at gambling machines at the International Gaming Expo at the Earls Court center in west London. — AFP

UK gambling grapples with underage problem

Raising the minimum legal age for betting and boosting education could be effective tools to tackle the scourge of problem gambling among children in Britain, say industry insiders. The figures are stark. The Gambling Commission, which licenses and regulates gambling, estimates that 55,000 children aged 11-16 have a gambling problem, with 450,000 gambling regularly. The National Health Service this week launched a children and young person's gambling addiction service.

NHS England chief executive Simon Stevens has condemned the "fraction" spent by the industry on helping customers and their families deal with the direct consequences of addiction compared with the amount spent on advertising and marketing. "The NHS should not be left to pick up the pieces," he said. "Gambling and internet firms have a responsibility to their users as well as their shareholders and should do their utmost to prevent rather than cash in on obsessive or harmful behaviour."

It comes at a time of growing concern that online gaming sites and targeted adverts are fuelling the problem. William Woodhams, chief executive of Fitzdares bookmakers, said he feared problem gambling among all ages was far worse than anyone imagined. "It is slightly like the opioid epidemic in the USA. You do not realize it is an epidemic as it happens privately," he told AFP at the Betting on Sports conference in London. "We cannot reverse technology (the apps) we have put in the market and

unfortunately bookies do seem to find legislation heavy-handed and want to self-legislate. But they have made so much money it is a tricky place to be in."

Woodhams believes raising the age limit from 18 is a logical step. "My view on principle is you should not bet until you are 21. We (Fitzdares) are probably the only ones who restrict it to 21 and over," he said. "My opinion is a student loan or money from your first job should not be spent on gambling. "Of course I advocate going racing and to football matches but I just think the other things you can do at 18 like voting is one thing, army is another and driving a car another. "However, spending money on sport needs another level of thought and maybe I am being rude to 18-year-olds but I think 21 is the right age. I was betting aged 16 but got my fingers burnt and stopped and learned my lesson that way."

'Life lessons'

Woodhams also believes that bookies talking about the perils of betting has a limited impact. "The advertisements on TV educating you on betting are being paid for by bookmakers," he said. "I would not ask Johnnie Walker how much I should drink." In its report last year, the Gambling Commission said 14 percent of 11 to 16-year-olds had spent their own money on gambling in the previous week - compared to 13 percent who had drunk alcohol.

In Argentina, hunger cries ring in leaders' ears amid crisis

In the hard-up neighborhood of Claypole on the outskirts of Argentine capital Buenos Aires, Elena Escobar makes her way to the local Caritas Felices soup kitchen to serve food to street children who scrape by from meal to meal. Escobar, 53, says the volunteer-run kitchen has seen a surge of kids and families seeking help over the last few months, amid a biting recession and fast-rising prices that have pushed millions of people into poverty.

"There are many children in need, many malnourished, with kids that get to dinner time and don't have any food," said Escobar. The kitchen receives over 100 children each week, up from around 20-30 when it opened its doors in April. The rise in hunger and poverty creates a complex backdrop for the leaders of Latin America's no. 3 economy, who are in knife-edge talks with creditors to avoid default on billions of dollars of debt amid economic and political upheaval.

Ahead of a presidential election on Oct. 27, officials will head to Washington this month to meet with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a major backer that struck a \$57 billion funding deal with the country last year. Those talks are likely to weigh on the current administration of President Mauricio Macri and the next one, likely led by left-leaning Peronist Alberto Fernandez, the frontrunner to win the vote. The Claypole kitchen is far from alone in witnessing rising hardship, with government data showing poverty rates jumped to 35 percent in the first half of 2019 amid recession and steep inflation, from 27.3 percent a year earlier.

'A scourge'

Around 13% of children and adolescents went hungry in 2018, according to data from the Pontificia Universidad

Catolica Argentina, and rising food prices have become a regular target of popular anger in street protests around the country. Political leaders know something must be done, but face a complex juggling act: bolstering growth and spending to ease issues such as hunger, while cutting debt and averting a damaging default that would shut off access to global markets.

"We can't live in peace with such a scourge," left-leaning Fernandez said in a speech on Monday in reference to hunger, which he described as Argentina's "greatest shame". Fernandez, who has been buoyed by support for populist running mate Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, blames Macri and austerity measures agreed with the International Monetary Fund for the rise in poverty and hunger.

Macri's running mate, Miguel Pichetto, meanwhile, said on Monday the way to eradicate hunger was to generate employment and attract "big global companies" to Argentina. Both sides have said they would honor the country's debts with creditors, including the IMF, though neither has laid out a clear plan for how to do so while boosting spending at home. Most investors expect some sort of losses. Indeed, Moody's Investors Service anticipates holders of Argentina dollar bonds will need to write off 10 percent to 20 percent of their investments, while Fitch Ratings believes the government will write down local and dollar debt.

'Just no work'

Hunger and poverty are not new in Argentina, but have risen abruptly over the past two years amid a series of economic shocks that have rattled the grain-exporting nation, famed for its rich arable land and cattle. The issues have become a lightning rod for anti-government protests and marches, with the hardships of the poor brought into sharp focus as the government has been locked in talks with creditors about repayments on around \$100 billion in debts.

Driving the problem is stubborn inflation, a tumbling peso and a slump in domestic production and consumption, which have hurt spending power, incomes and jobs. "There is just no work," said 46-year-old Isabel Brites, a volunteer at the Los Piletones dining room in Buenos

Aires, who said that was the main message she heard from people eating at the kitchen, which serves around 2,000 meals a day.

Macri, looking to revive his election hopes, has rolled out plans to bolster jobs, including tax cuts for employers. He also announced a freeze on some food prices earlier this year. Sergio Chouza, an economist at the University of Avellaneda in Buenos Aires, said food prices have rocketed nearly 60 percent over the past year, with basics such as dairy up as much as 90 percent. "That results in a deterioration of diets and pushes many people below the poverty line," he said.

More noodles, less meat

Poverty is a key reason for Macri's fall from grace. His economic austerity, part of the \$57 billion funding deal agreed with the IMF last year, reined in deficits but hit growth and voters' wallets. Macri was defeated heavily in a primary election in August. Since then, he has announced lower taxes for the middle class and higher subsidies for the poor along with food aid. The Senate approved an emergency food law last month.

"Perhaps we underestimated the impact of the economic situation on the elections. (The poverty issue) affected the vote for Mauricio," Eduardo Amadeo, a Macri ally and member of Argentina's house of deputies, told Reuters. "The reforms we launched have stabilized the economy and we have tried to reduce the impact from the devaluation in August on people's wallets," Amadeo said. A spokesman for the Ministry of Health and Social Development listed official measures to deal with the crisis, but declined to comment further on poverty rates.

In the meantime, even as soup kitchens flourish, some volunteers say meals are getting more meager amid tight funding conditions and as food donations dry up. "Previously, people donated some meat and chicken; now we only get noodles and rice," said Lorena Nievas, who works at the Abrazando Hogares soup kitchen in the southern Patagonian city of Puerto Madryn. For many residents, however, there is no choice. "I have people from the street who come in for their lunch and snacks here. It's all the food they get," she said. — Reuters

Cheaper to run

The running cost per kilometre of Santiago's Chinese-made electric buses is around 70 pesos (\$0.10), a 230-peso decrease on the rate for a diesel vehicle. But the cost of a journey to the passenger remains the same. The electric buses have a range of around 250 km, meaning they can make three or four return journeys on city routes without needing to recharge at the terminal. They also have motion chargers which means they can top up while going downhill. The electric buses are purchased by the Chilean state and then leased to local private operators including MetBus.

"There's been an important commitment to electromobility in Chile, and (the technology) is here to stay," said Karla Zapata, director of Enel X Chile, the Italian energy subsidiary that provides power for the bus network. There are already 60 charging points for electric cars across the capital, but they are not yet widely used due to a lack of government incentives and regulation, Zapata said.

Social attitudes need to change and prices must fall for Chileans to embrace a shift to electric-powered cars, she said. "What we need to work on is motivating people to change from diesel to electric cars," Zapata said. The company hopes that slower-speed charging units could soon be installed in homes, medium-capacity chargers at work-places, and fast-charging stations at motorway services and outside restaurants, she added. — Reuters

Climate talks host Chile charges up electric transport

Electric and diesel buses pass in turn along one of the main avenues in Chile's capital Santiago, sweeping past the national football stadium and up towards the Andean mountains. The differences are stark. Bright red electric buses glide serenely by, while their old diesel-powered, smoke-belching counterparts grind to a halt with a thunderous clatter. "I use the new electric buses a lot. They're much quieter," said 26-year-old university student Camilo Miranda. "People often overlook noise pollution in a city where air quality has always been the main concern."

Santiago, a city of 5.6 million people, has positioned itself as a global leader in the use of electric buses, as the South American nation pushes forward with ambitious plans to adopt cleaner energy and cut emissions from public transport. With 386 electric buses, accounting for 6 percent of the city's fleet, Santiago has by far the largest fleet outside of global front-runner China, according to the World Resources Institute, a US-based think-tank. The first 100 electric buses bought from China hit the Chilean capital's streets just over a year ago, and the government

plans to introduce them in other cities, although it has not said where.

UN conference

Worldwide, cities account for about three-quarters of carbon emissions and consume more than two-thirds of energy, meaning their success or failure in cutting emissions will have a big impact on whether global warming stays within agreed limits. Chile will be keen to highlight Santiago's use of electric buses when the city hosts this year's UN climate conference (COP25) in December.

In June, the government unveiled a more ambitious climate action plan that included targets to shut all coal power plants by 2040 and become a carbon-neutral economy by 2050, in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement to curb global warming. In Santiago, it is also hoped the zero-emission buses can help the battle to improve poor air quality, which sees a dense smog settle over the city on most cold winter days. "Ahead of the COP25, we want to reinforce the image of Chile as a country that has mobilised new public transport technologies with a focus on clean solutions," Chile's Transport Minister Gloria Hutt told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Our aim is to have all public transport in Chile electric-powered by the year 2040," she said. She added that the government's focus was on expanding the use of electric energy in public transport, with no subsidies or tax breaks in the pipeline to promote the use of electric cars.