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JBLW 2609-071703

# SPECIAL INTELLIGENCE REPORT

DCI Crime and Narcotics Center

17 August 2000

## Colombia: Burgeoning Coca Industry in Norte de Santander

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*In 1998, CNC identified a newly emerging coca growing area in the northern Colombian department of Norte de Santander. By 1999, coca cultivation had nearly tripled in the region and numerous cocaine base laboratories and chemical transshipment points had been established.*

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*This Special Intelligence Report documents*

*[Redacted] the locations of cocaine base laboratories and chemical transshipment points throughout much of the Norte de Santander coca growing area. A Colombian National Police offensive in this area in May 2000 resulted in the destruction of numerous laboratories and coca fields, however, substantial coca cultivation and processing capability remains.*

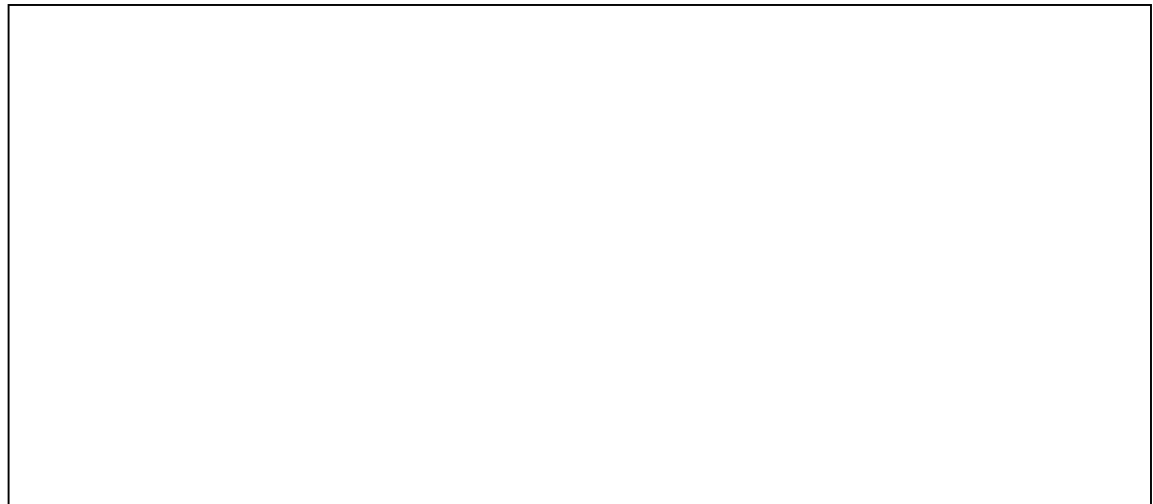
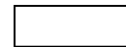
[Large Redacted Area]

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
Sources




**Small But Significant Growing Area** 

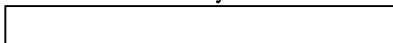
The Norte de Santander coca growing area is located in the northern most part of the department with the same name, and shares it's northern and eastern borders with Venezuela. The coca growing area encompasses about 1,900 square kilometers, or some 190,000 hectares, in an area roughly 35 kilometers wide by 55 kilometers long. The region extends in a north-south fashion nearly parallel with the Rio Catatumbo and its tributaries and is characterized by rolling and hilly terrain with elevations up to about 500 meters.

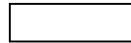
- The slopes of the Cerros de Bobali form the western boundary of the growing area while an all-weather road and oil pipeline mark the southern boundary.
- Foot and pack animal trails comprise the primary transportation infrastructure in the area; the growing area also is accessed via one all-weather road from Tibu, the primary population center and the municipal capital, and via a fair-weather road paralleling the Rio Catatumbo from just west of Tibu. The municipal airfield at Tibu and a clandestine airfield located at the northeast edge of the growing area are the only known airfields servicing the growing area. 


Coca cultivation and cocaine base processing are the primary economic activities of Norte de Santander, but some cattle ranching and oil exploration facilities also are present. 



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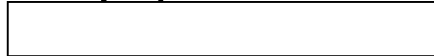
This report was prepared by the DCI Crime and Narcotics Center (CNC). Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the  CNC, on

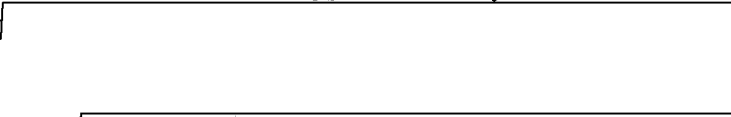


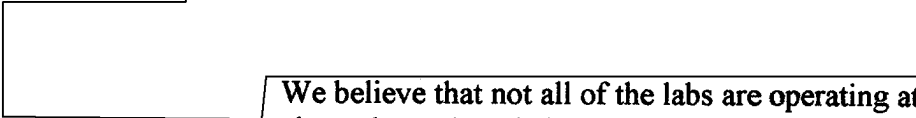


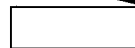
The Norte de Santander growing area suddenly emerged in 1998, when CNC estimated some 2,500 hectares were under cultivation. Prior to that time, this area was mostly a remote, sparsely forested area with some oil exploitation along the eastern boundary. Traffickers and growers, recognizing the high coca potential of the area, the easy availability of chemicals from Venezuela, and limited governmental presence—this area has long been one of the insurgent National Liberation Army (ELN) areas of operation—began to rapidly increase coca plantings. By 1999, cultivation in this area had increased to 8,000 hectares. Laborers for harvesting the coca probably arrived from the nearby urban centers of Tibu and Cucuta. While no recent population data is available, the traditional thatch roof huts of the indigenous population have been replaced with numerous contemporary houses and structures. Paramilitaries began to become a force in the area in 1999 and are currently contesting the ELN for control of the cocaine industry and associated profits. 

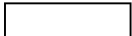
**Cocaine Base Laboratories.** Analysis  resulted in the identification of some 713 cocaine base laboratories within the coca growing area. The distribution of the base laboratories closely correlates with coca field density—the majority of the labs are located within areas of high density coca cultivation 

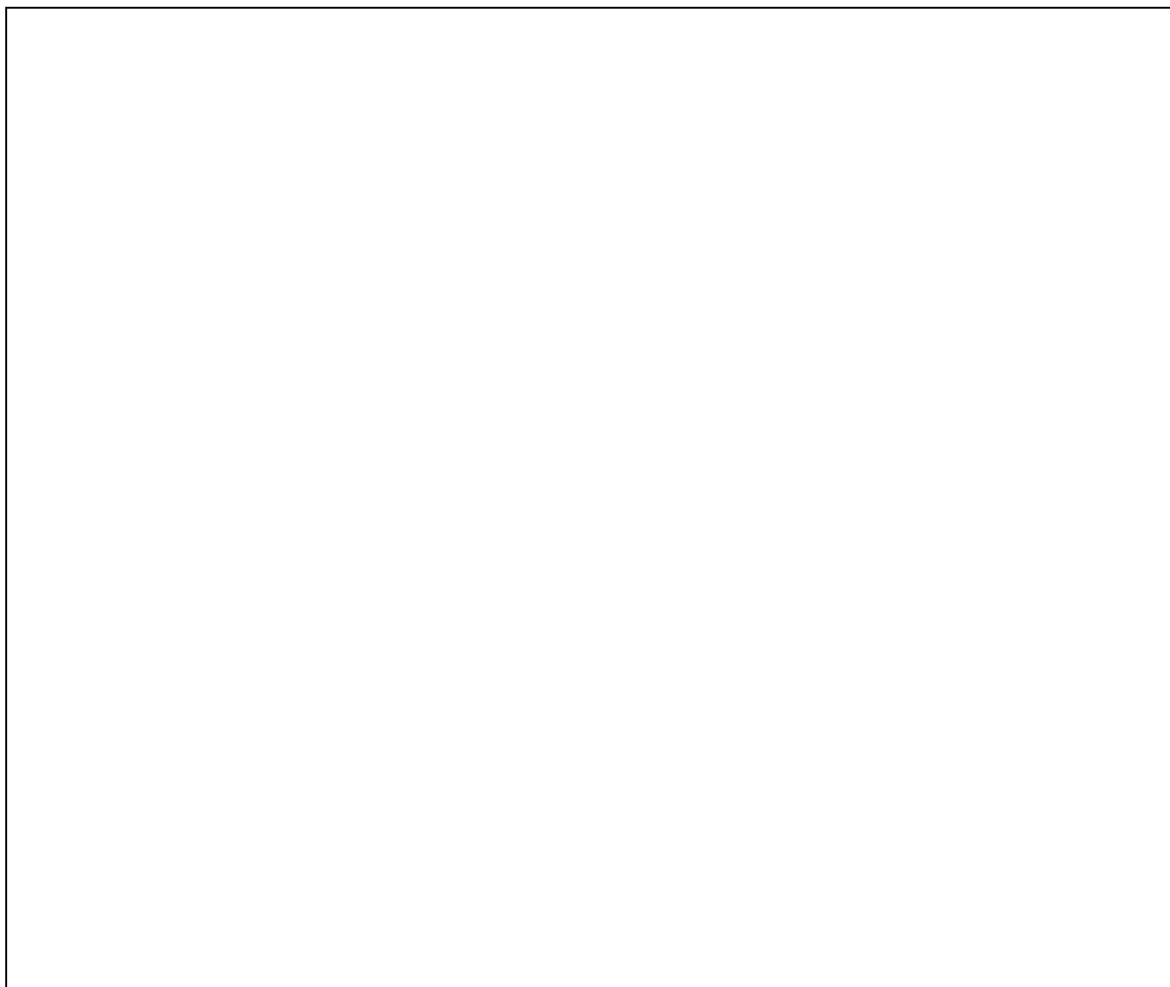


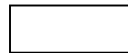
- Although open-sided, the laboratories in Norte de Santander are generally substantial structures, similar to those found in the Guaviare, and typically measure about 25 meters long and 10 meters wide. By contrast, many of the base laboratories in the Putumayo growing area are simply thatch covered huts.
- While all of the identified base labs appear as if they could be operational—

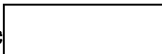
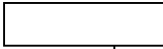
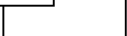
 We believe that not all of the labs are operating at once but most likely depend on when their associated coca fields are being harvested. The average leaf yield of Norte de Santander is believed to be similar to that of Putumayo, and would have resulted in potentially 31 metric tons of leaf being produced in 1999. But if all the 713 base labs in Norte de Santander were in full production, nearly 232 metric tons of leaf could have been processed. Clearly, cocaine base laboratories in Norte de Santander have excess processing capacity.



- Cocaine base laboratories are much more numerous in Norte de Santander than the Guaviare, a remote jungle area that developed as a nearly pure coca economy in the late 1980s. The higher concentration of labs in Norte de Santander can be attributed to this area recently being developed by traffickers specifically for coca cultivation and processing. The more dispersed cultivation in Guaviare also resulted in more dispersed laboratories with probably less excess production capacity. In contrast to the other growing regions, Putumayo was first an area of legitimate cultivation that evolved into coca cultivation and processing in the early and mid-1990s. The area required few base laboratories to process the small amount of coca grown. As coca expanded in Putumayo, processors began to construct more laboratories, resulting in numerous, small, and difficult to detect base laboratories with probably less excess total production capacity as compared to Norte de Santander. 





- Base laboratories in the northern, western, and southern sectors of the area were largely untouched by Operation Motilon. One-third of the destroyed labs were two kilometers of the primary road from Tibu in the eastern side of the area.
- One  airfield in the northeastern corner of the area was identified and destroyed during the operation. Because high levels of chemicals and cocaine products apparently move freely into and out of Venezuela on the Catatumbo river system, destruction of the  airfield probably will have minimal impact on the region. 

While a near 25 percent reduction in lab processors' capabilities and a large reduction in coca growers' capabilities within a three week period should be considered a resounding success, it is likely that without sustained government pressure on this well-developed coca growing region the cocaine trade could soon return to previous levels. 