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Latin America rejects old U.S. approach in drugs war



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BUENOS AIRES

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Factbox

[Factbox: Drug policy reforms in Latin America](#)

Fri, Jan 29 2010

BUENOS AIRES (Reuters) - As an increasingly violent and costly drugs war clogs up prisons with small-time users, some Latin American countries are abandoning hardline U.S. policies on consumption to intensify the fight against major traffickers.

WORLD

Convinced that the four-decade-old, U.S.-led war on drugs has failed, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico and other countries are relaxing penalties for possession and personal use of small amounts of narcotics.

Critics warn drug abuse and violence will rise if the small-scale consumption of cocaine, marijuana and other drugs is tolerated, but policy makers in much of Latin America argue the new laws will free up resources to go after big traffickers and treat addicts.

The shift away from zero-tolerance policies has picked up pace in the past year and U.S. President Barack Obama's administration has voiced little opposition to the changes. That is a dramatic switch after decades of Washington's resolute opposition to any easing of laws against consumption.

Even in countries such as Argentina, where drug violence is still unusual, judges are backing decriminalization because the justice system is congested with small-time busts, leaving prosecutors unable to go after bigger fish.

"The courts were overwhelmed with cases of small consumers. We have a real drug consumption problem in Argentina and we cannot fix it just by punishing," said Horacio Cattani, a federal judge who is on a high-level commission that drafted new drug laws for Argentina.

Most of the world's cocaine still comes out of the Andean countries of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, even after billions of dollars spent eradicating crops.

In Mexico, the drug war has killed more than 16,000 people since late 2006 when President Felipe Calderon took office and deployed tens of thousands of soldiers to combat ruthless cartels that behead and dismember rivals, and bribe or intimidate police and judges.

Drug violence has also soared in Central America, where street gangs have taken over the trade and in some cases infiltrated political parties.

Mexico is the world's biggest producer of marijuana and Paraguay, in the heart of South America, has taken the No. 2 position as demand grows in neighboring Argentina and Brazil.

RETHINKING THE PROBLEM

Brazil and Mexico, the two largest economies in Latin America, are taking the lead in a new approach to individual drug consumers. Brazil has partially decriminalized drug use and in Mexico, carrying small amounts of any drug is no longer a criminal offense.

In Argentina, President Cristina Fernandez is expected to soon send a drug reform bill to

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Congress that proposes sending users to treatment instead of jail, following on a Supreme Court ruling that made it illegal to prosecute drug consumers.

In Ecuador, the leftist government has freed 2,000 traffickers in a pardon for small-time traffickers known as "drug mules", and other users hope they will soon be freed under penal code reforms.

Jessica Trujillo has been in an Ecuadorean prison for a year awaiting sentencing for possession of 1.5 grams of a cocaine derivative.

"A lot of people here get the same sentence for carrying a few grams or a few tons," said Trujillo, who acknowledged her drug addiction in a telephone interview from Quito's El Inca prison. "I don't think consumers should go to jail because drug addiction is not a crime -- it's an illness."

U.S. TURNS A BLIND EYE

Since the Nixon administration declared a war on drugs four decades ago, the United States had resisted Latin American moves to relax drug policy. Mexico was close to decriminalizing some drug possession in 2006 but turned back under U.S. pressure.

But President Barack Obama's administration was silent last year when Mexico and Argentina moved toward decriminalization.

"The U.S. is retreating from imposing a model," said John Walsh, head of drug policy for the Washington Office on Latin America think tank. "The White House... is going to be taking a more measured approach to talking about drug policy."

Even some areas of the United States, the top global drug consumer, are rethinking their approach, with more than a dozen states now allowing marijuana use for medical purposes.

Former presidents of Brazil, Colombia and Mexico issued a report last year saying U.S. coca crop eradication efforts in Latin America have merely pushed cultivation areas from one region to the other.

"The dominant strategy has been the so-called 'war on drugs.'... This strategy has clearly failed. It must therefore be changed," former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso said during a recent conference in Washington.

The trend in Latin America is not uniform, however. Conservative leaders continue to support harsh punishment for drug users in top cocaine producers Colombia and Peru, where heavily armed guerrillas or former rebels control drug production in lawless jungle areas.

Colombia was out of step with the rest of the region when it decriminalized personal drug use in 1994 but now, just when other countries are heading in that direction, its Congress last month amended the constitution to again make possession illegal.

Colombia is the world's No. 1 cocaine producer and has received more than \$5 billion in mostly military aid from Washington to fight drug traffickers and leftist FARC rebels.

No. 2 cocaine producer, Peru, is not moving to reform drug laws, which include harsh sentences for small distribution.

DANGERS OF LEGALIZATION

Argentina is Latin America's biggest per capita market for cocaine, and marijuana use is on the rise along with paco, a crack-like drug made from cocaine lab leftovers.

But critics of current laws say expensive federal raids on drug houses -- about one a day -- have limited effect.

During one recent raid in a Buenos Aires slum, dozens of agents backed up by a helicopter broke open seven houses with battering rams. The six-hour operation netted just 300 small pellets of paco and two kilos of cocaine.

However, President Fernandez has met opposition to drug law reform from the head of a inter-ministerial drug agency, the Catholic Church and even some non-profit groups that work with abusers.

"We have a government that has turned apathetic toward drug trafficking. It hurts me because I see people dying," said Leticia del Valle, a lawyer and former paco addict.

Claudio Izaguirre, president of the Argentine Anti-drug Association, says drug use will rise if it is decriminalized and that the health system cannot cope with more addicts.

"Argentina has 2,500 beds in private rehab centers and the treatment costs almost \$800 per month. There is no free treatment, except for one center with 70 beds for the whole country." (Reporting by Luis Andres Henao; Editing by [Fiona Ortiz](#) and [Kieran Murray](#))

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I am conservative politically, but I realize our current drug policies are costing lives and money and are not working. Marijuana should be legalized and taxed like alcohol and cigarettes. That will get rid of a significant portion of the problem. For hard drugs, it is time to mount a publicity campaign denouncing users, rich or poor, as murderers. It's their demand that makes the drug business profitable and causes world wide misery.

Put the harsh realities of drug violence on prime time TV. Denounce Hollywood and the pop music industry every time they release "entertainment" that in any way excuses or glamorizes drug use and trafficking. At the same time keep educating our young people and keep busting the bigger players with tough mandatory sentencing including the death penalty. It is appropriate for the murderers that they are.

John-B [Report As Abusive](#)

Jan 30, 2010

I just spent 335 days in jail for a first time, personal amount possession of marijuana charge in a small Texas county jail. Each jail or prison costs tax payers around \$350 a day per person. Comal county jail is at 95% occupancy with a 314 maximum capacity. This jail costs tax payers from city, county, state and federal funds around \$105,000 a day, and there are over 200 counties in Texas. Now around 80% of those incarcerated are in on drug related charges in this county, with 180 inmates merely charged with possession crimes. Victim less crimes that should receive treatment rather than jail or prison.

Educate users to the dangers of self medication and spend the money used to incarcerate on health coverage so their isn't such a need to turn to illegal drugs. Not one person I interviewed had medical coverage through a job, but a few of them, not including myself, were on medicaid (state sponsored health care) and were trading prescriptions for illegal drugs or money.

The U.S. has a severe medical care epidemic and should call the war on drugs what it really is: The War on your Health! Treat meth, heroin, cocaine, and prescription pill addicts with a rehabilitation style treatment that has a proven success rate versus the current revolving door policy that the prisons have. Prison guards call addicts job security.

Legalize Cannabis Sativa or Marijuana and grow it in the U.S. eliminating the demand for import from other countries, eliminate the harmful pesticides that are used in less regulated countries that present dangerous health issues upon ingestion, and stop supplying the drug cartels 80 billion dollars a year of U.S. money for a plant. This also would eliminate over half of the current inmate population which would free up resources and space for criminals who are violent, habitual offenders, known gang members and traffickers.

A 40 year war in our own country that has this many casualties would have already been called off due to a severe lack of resources with no real winning scenarios. I think the real reason that the war on drugs continues is because it creates law enforcement jobs and provides the crime to necessitate the legal systems demand for more and more funds. Only \$50.00 of that \$350.00 goes to house, feed and clothe the inmate, \$300.00 goes towards the counties new SWAT truck, communications equipment, brand new sheriff's vehicles every year and of course the judges retirement fund.

stuffnthings [Report As Abusive](#)

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Money laundering involving a Mexican drug cartel and a high profile US money manager. Find it at <http://storyburn.com>

hambo [Report As Abusive](#)

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Universal Health Care on a Single Payer basis is the way to provide therapy for the user, the veteran, the housewife and single parent in a working poor household.

It is not as depressing to use small amounts of marijuana as it is to slosh back booze at a social function.

What we think of as a social lubricator is more addictive and it is a mental and physical depressant, unlike coffee, tea, and marijuana. And insurance is not going to recognize a drunk until he is in a coma.

The worst problem with the immoral drug war blitz is that it is a convenient way to subdue democratic politics within and outside a country. Its purpose is to control people, not drugs, and it wastes money like nothing else except the other useless forms of corrupt warfare.

Lining pockets, winning elections, rewarding cronies, as well as providing another outlet for armament, civil rights abuse, and graft-taking; these outrageous attacks divert resources from education and health services.

The result is that the money squandered cannot be used in any positive or healthful programs, which, in the near future, could stabilize social stress and frustration.

In short, these myopic policies blind us to the self-indulgent and sinister perpetuation intended by their authors.

bobby99

BOBBY99 [Report As Abusive](#)

Jan 31, 2010

Model Americas program after those in Europe. They are consistently better and more cost effective.

darfut [Report As Abusive](#)

Jan 31, 2010

For me an addict is a sick person trying to self-medicate. Marihuana is a great medicine for a myriad of conditions, why? we just don't know because so little has been invested in researching its properties. We just know that it works for quite a lot of people and they prefer it to legal drugs. Other illegal drugs are very toxic, but if the only treatment given to the addiction is drug deprivation, the underlying sickness (usually mental) will bring on a relapse. I totally agree with stuffnthings comment, the war goes on because it brings on job security at minimum and a possibility of "earning" lots of money for all those opposing legalization. Nobody cares for the drug user, just for their pockets.

JustCommonSense [Report As Abusive](#)

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In Europe, most repressive drug measures by the legal system failed – it seems there is a parallel in history with the US in the thirties on alcohol (Prohibition). Controlled prescriptions of methadone and other substances and therapy is seen the preferred way to treat drug sick and mostly desperate people – admittedly more complex but more effective and ultimately less costly. This way you start to take the big business from the mafia and related organisations, keep prisons free for those who really belong there and reduce prostitution and low end crime for money in the cities. This is seen like a business and best business man approach the customers – some European States have gone this way and I see no signs that they regret it.

European1 [Report As Abusive](#)

Jan 31, 2010

Go Latin America!! So no to the war on drugs!!!

I agree that cocaine, crystal meth, crack, etc... still need to be kept off the streets. But cannabis should be legal. It's safer by far than alcohol could ever be. It's also safer by far than tobacco. If we can "drink responsibly" then it's obviously no problem to "smoke responsibly" also.

Legalizing marijuana would go a long way towards winning the war on drugs. If people have a safe and legal alternative they will leave hard drugs alone. Some people might actually stop alcohol consumption if cannabis were legal. We need to be sensible about things. And putting a pot smoker in prison just is not sensible at all.

I hope Latin America gives the US a good example of how things can be done correctly. Good luck and God speed.

Benny_Acosta [Report As Abusive](#)

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