

OPINION

Colombia's oil theft soars, leaving trail of environmental harm

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Photo: Reuters



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In a clearing of Colombia's Pacific jungle, the dense canopy encircles an area of desolation left by a clandestine refinery, where oil waste blackens everything underfoot, seeping into the soil and coating the vegetation.

The scent of moist earth and flowers is overpowered by the stench of chemicals from stagnant pools - the waste product from a rudimentary refining process that turns oil stolen from a nearby pipeline into a bootleg fuel known as pategrillo, or 'cricket's foot', because of its greenish hue.

The makeshift gasoline is used to make cocaine and helps fuel Colombia's drug trade. The leaves of coca plants are soaked in pategrillo - or other fuels, like gasoline - to extract alkaloid compounds to make the narcotic, according to national police. It is also used to

power heavy machinery at illegal mining operations, the police said.

With Colombia's potential cocaine production hitting record levels, according to UN estimates, oil theft is on the rise: the volume stolen from two of Colombia's major oil pipelines has more than tripled since 2018 to an average of 3,447 barrels a day as of Nov. 30, according to police data.

But little is known about the scale of the environmental impact of spills from tapping pipelines and from illicit refineries, which are often in remote and dangerous regions.

Reuters accompanied a police unit tasked with tackling oil theft in September to two sites near Tumaco, a Pacific port in southwest Colombia that is the terminal for the country's Transandino oil pipeline.

The jungle clearing sheltering the clandestine refinery - larger than a soccer pitch - remained blackened by oil though it was raided by police in March and the operation dismantled.

Police said the refinery had belonged to the Urias Rondon faction of dissident FARC rebels - who reject a 2016 peace deal with the government - to produce paste for making cocaine.

Reuters was not able to confirm that independently nor to contact the Urias Rondon group for comment.

Twisted metal from destroyed barrels and more than a dozen metal cooking stoves - capable of processing 500 to 1,000 gallons of oil - littered the site, just over an hour's walk from the small town of La Guayacana.

Nearby trees had been stripped of their leaves by polluting vapors that escape during the refining operations.

"The damage is extreme. The animals, the trees - everything is totally burned," said Colonel Johan Pena, commander of the police unit charged with tackling oil theft in Narino, a province bordering Ecuador that is known for cocaine production.

"Words aren't enough to show the world the damage."

Much of the nearby Transandino pipeline - which carries oil from Putumayo province on the far side of the Andes to Tumaco - runs above ground, making it an easy target for thieves.

Around 951 barrels per day were stolen in the first 11 months of the year from the Transandino, up around 5% on theft levels through the end of last year.

Pipeline operator [Cenit](#), a subsidiary of majority state-owned company [Ecopetrol](#), did not respond to questions about the challenges facing clean-up operations in remote areas.

Colombia's police had knocked out 112 clandestine refineries in the region of Tumaco as of mid-October this year, compared with 103 raided all of last year and 112 destroyed in 2020, Colonel William Castano, director of Colombia's rural Carabineros police force, told Reuters.

Typically, only one third of the stolen crude is used after it is refined at such sites, Castano said; the rest is dumped into the ground.

Castano said that an illegal refinery contaminates an average of three square kilometers of the surrounding environment, according to a police estimate. Reuters was unable to determine on what that estimate was based.

“It damages the fauna, the flora, pollutes the air, damages the soil, the subsoil, damages groundwater and also harms the tributaries that pass through these parts of the country,” he said.

Colombia, one of the world’s mega-diverse countries, boasts tens of thousands of different species and contains almost 600,000 square kilometers of jungles and forests, whose preservation is vital for tackling climate change because they store large amounts of carbon.

Reuters approached more than a dozen environmental groups, rights advocates, government agencies and international organizations who either said they had no detailed information on the extent of the environmental damage in Colombia from oil theft or did not respond to questions.

“We still don’t know the environmental impacts it causes, because this is an illegal, clandestine process, hidden in unsafe places,” said Hector Hernando Bernal, an official at the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) responsible for the disposal of seized drugs and chemicals.

Colombia’s Ministry of Mines and Energy said in a statement that continued spills “that harm people and ecosystems” were worrying and the government was investigating the issue.

Potential cocaine output rose 14% to a record high of 1,400 tonnes in 2021, according to the UNODC, while demand for fuels used in the cocaine trade rose to between 447 million and 705 million liters, the organization told Reuters.

It was not possible to say what quantity of the fuel was pategrillo, the UNODC said.

“Theft of hydrocarbons also strengthens the military might of (illegal armed) groups,” said Katherine Casas, an investigator for energy advocacy group Crudo Transparente.

Pategrillo is the third-largest source of income for Colombia’s gangs after drugs and illegal mining, helping them to buy weapons and other equipment, Casas said.

Guerrillas of Colombia’s National Liberation Army (ELN) and dissidents from the demobilized FARC rebels are also known to tax pategrillo at around \$2.10 a barrel, according to a report from German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung published this summer.

Oil pipelines are often tapped with hand drills, leaky valves and plastic tubing, and crude is stored and refined haphazardly, resulting in frequent spills, according to police, analysts and the UNODC.

Once it gets to illegal refineries, the oil is transferred to cylindrical stills and cooked at high

temperatures. The resulting vapor, once cooled, makes patergillo.

Depending on the size of a spill, ground contaminated by oil can take decades to heal and longer than a century to fully recover, Narino's environmental authority, Corponarino, said in a statement.

Police, analysts and scientists provided Reuters with similar estimates.

Oil spills on land smother soil pore spaces, restricting microorganisms' access to oxygen, said Martha Daza, a professor at Cali-based university Universidad del Valle's school of engineering of natural resources and the environment.

"By clogging these pores, water cannot circulate and the availability of oxygen for biotic activity in the soil is reduced, both for macroorganisms, like earthworms, ants, and plant roots, as well as for microorganisms," Daza said. "It's very damaging."

In Tumaco, Reuters journalists saw settlements within 200 meters of the Transandino pipeline. Oil had dripped from an illicit valve, and the tendrils of a black cloud of crude spiraled through a stagnant puddle below.

Rural communities not connected to mains water supply depend on rivers and face health risks from spills, according to Bram Ebus, a consultant for the International Crisis Group who has investigated Colombia's illicit oil industry.

"Illicit valves placed on pipelines quickly become dislodged. The crude that pours into rivers and creeks can pollute aqueducts servicing entire towns," Ebus told Reuters.

Regional health authorities in Narino did not immediately respond to questions about the health impact of oil spills.—*Reuters*

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