



The Re-emergence of the Biological War on Drugs

In 2000, it became public knowledge that the United States, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the United Kingdom were planning to use a biological agent to eradicate illegal crops around the world. Behind this project was a U.S. scientist, David Sands¹, who was experimenting with biological agents (fungi) capable of eliminating opium poppy, coca and marijuana crops. At the time, strong opposition from major media, as well as environmental and other organizations, halted the implementation of the project, at least in Colombia, one of the countries where it was to begin.

Unfortunately, the mycoherbicide scheme was only derailed temporarily. It has arisen again in recent months. While U.S.-funded research on these biological agents dropped out of public view for a time, it was never suspended, and the investigation was completed in 2002.

The rapid and intensive recovery of Afghanistan's opium economy after the fall of the Taliban regime unleashed tense debate in the international drug control community, with the fungus re-emerging as a "solution" worth considering. It is important to note that while at the time (2000), the U. N. International Drug Control Programme

¹ Ag/Bio Con (Agricultural Biological Control) is the company from Montana who trades the *Fusarium oxysporum*. The Vice president of Ag/Bio Con, David C. Sands, is a professor at the University of the State of Montana.

Recommendations

UNODC should clarify its position vis-à-vis the re-emerging mycoherbicide option, re-affirming its earlier position that it is "*neither implementing, or planning to implement, or discussing the possibility of implementing a bio-control project in Colombia or anywhere else in the Andes*", as the agency wrote to the ombudsman in August 2000, and for the first time explicitly distance itself from any fungal option for Afghanistan.

UNODC should clarify the current status of the earmarked funds provided to UNDCP by the United States government for the development of biological eradication agents. Where are those funds, what has been done so far with them, how much is left, what is planned concerning its further use, and who can decide about their destiny?

The results of the Uzbek/Central Asia research on the development of a fungus for opium poppy eradication should be made public. Both the United Kingdom –as the main donor – and UNODC should clarify the conclusions they have drawn from those results regarding the future of the project.

The UN Commission on Narcotics Drugs (CND) in its governing role should consider adopting a resolution to specify that UNDCP has no mandate to enter into any chemical nor biological drugs control projects. A group of countries could table a draft resolution to this end at the next session in March 2005, based for example on the various Andean declarations that prohibit such use, and the European Parliament resolution of February 2001 stating that the European Union "*must take the necessary steps to secure an end to the large scale use of chemical herbicides and prevent the introduction of biological agents such as *Fusarium oxysporum*, given the dangers of their use to human health and the environment alike*".

The Uribe government in Colombia should re-affirm the former Pastrana government's rejection of a bio-control project. The Karzai government in Afghanistan, as well as the international community involved in the country's reconstruction efforts should take a clear position on the issue.

(UNDCP, operating under the UNODC umbrella) publicly distanced itself from the project involving *Fusarium*, the fungus being considered for use on coca in Colombia, the same was not true of development of another fungus (*Pleospora papaveracea*) that was intended for use in eradicating poppy crops in Afghanistan. The experiments with this fungus were carried out in Uzbekistan/Central Asia and were financed by the United Kingdom.

The UNODC's position now is more nuanced. According to Howard Stead, head of the organization's scientific section, although "to date, studies have offered no evidence that the fungus can cause environmental damage," the mere possibility of such harm is still serious cause for concern, and the office recommends further study before the substance is considered for widespread use. The U.N. agency also stated that it is not considering use of the fungus in its programmes or continued research in this area. Nevertheless, it wants to make the Uzbekistan project, and ways of using *Pleospora papaveracea*, available to any interested government.²

The British government has taken a similar position, making it clear from the outset of debate over the fungus that it is willing to withdraw support from the project and halt research if the biological substances are found to cause environmental harm.

Only in the United States, where research into mycoherbicides was (secretly) part of the 2002 Bush Administration budget,³ does there appear to be unconditional support for the fungus project. The Bush Administration has the support of members of Congress on this issue. At a December 2002 hearing, Florida Rep. John Mica repeatedly expressed support for a biological attack on illegal crops in Colombia. "We have to restore our ... mycoherbicide. ... Things that have been under study for so long must be put into practice."⁴ The United States has invested millions of dollars in this research and has assigned several more millions, the largest share of which has been transferred to the UNDCP to be used as funds for development and application. What is lacking now is clear support from such entities as the United Nations and the governments of other countries that would give the fungus policy a multilateral appearance.

For that reason, David Sands was invited to UNODC headquarters in Vienna in March 2003 to meet with UNODC team members and give a talk, sponsored by the White House, in which he announced that the mycoherbicides were ready for use by any country interested in applying them.⁵

Background of the debate over the fungus in Colombia

In 2000, the U.S. Congress recommended use of the *Fusarium oxysporum* fungus as a biological control agent for eradicating coca crops in Colombia. At the time, the news that the United States was seriously considering use of biological agents in the war on drugs led to a strong opposition movement in Colombia and the rest of the world. Not only would the use of this fungus represent a potential violation of the global prohibition on biological weapons, such biological agents are also hazardous to the

² "Fungus new weapon against opium", UPI Science News - By Marina Kozlova, *The Washington Times* July 8, 2003.

³ "Cuts and Cash for Coke Crackdown", Mike Isikoff, *Newsweek*, April 16, 2002.

⁴ Extract from hearing before the *House Government Reform Committee*, December 12, 2002.

⁵ "What about drug production", Anthony White, former UNDCP director of supply reduction, April 15, 2003.

Presentation at the Vienna Civic Centre, parallel to the Ministerial Segment of the 2003 session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND).

environment and could have unforeseen consequences for agriculture and the vegetation in various ecosystems.

In 2000-2001, the *Transnational Institute*, in conjunction with other international NGOs working on the problem of illicit crops, Colombian civil society associations and environmental organizations carried out an effective, broad-based campaign to prevent the use of *Fusarium* in Colombia. In July 2000, the United Nations advised against the use of the fungus on coca crops in Colombia.⁶

The U.N. position was important because it left the United States alone in backing the *Fusarium* project. The risk of unilateral use of a biological agent finally led the Clinton Administration to interrupt the plan, which could have been perceived by the rest of the world as a form of biological warfare. At the time, Colombia prohibited the use of the fungus in the war on drugs.

The threat of the use of a biological agent also sparked a strong reaction from countries in the Andean-Amazon region, leading to a prohibition on the use of mycoherbicides in Ecuador and Peru and a joint resolution by the environmental ministries of the region's countries expressing opposition to the use of *Fusarium* in their territories.

The international pressure created by the debate also led the U.S. Congress to withdraw the conditions that it had imposed on the Colombian government, under which military aid would be provided only if the country accepted the use of mycoherbicides on its illicit crops.

The fungus strikes back

Now, however, the fungus is returning to centre stage. According to documents revealed recently in various media,⁷ the United States has renewed its pressure on the Colombian government to implement the use of mycoherbicides. In October 2003, the U.S. State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs asked the Colombian government to resume promotion of research and development involving the use of mycoherbicides on poppy and coca crops. Before making the request, the State Department had already spoken with Colombian President Uribe about the issue. Uribe expressed interest and requested training for experts from the Colombian Agriculture Institute. The United States expressed its ongoing intention to extend invitations to these experts, as well as officials involved in designing anti-drug policies, so that they could make recommendations to the president for future action.

The current state of these meetings is not public knowledge, but the fact that they are going on at a time when the Uribe government is waging a full-scale campaign to win an extension for Plan Colombia, which is officially due to end in 2005, is cause for concern. This conjunction of circumstances raises fears that the United States may make the Colombian government's acceptance of the controversial scheme for using biological agents on illegal crops a condition for extending Plan Colombia. As we have mentioned, on other occasions the United States has used such conditions as a form of pressure to achieve its own objectives.

⁶ For more information on this subject, see the TNI publications, *Vicious Circle* and "Fungus against coca" from Martin Jelsma, at: <http://www.tni.org/drugs/>

⁷ For the full texts of the correspondence between the State Department, the Colombian embassy in Washington and the Colombian government, look at: <http://colombia.indymedia.org/news/2004/03/11692.php>

Another cause for concern is the fact that the initiative comes from the State Department and that it refers to new technology that the United States may have been developing since 2001. For some time, the environmental organization *Sunshine* has been denouncing the possibility that the United States may impose the use of a fungus isolated in Colombia, a "creole fungus," arguing that the substance is safe because it is of local origin.⁸

In a letter dated the 6th of April 1999, the Head of the Florida based Environmental Protection Department, David Struh, wrote to the Drug Tsar of this State, Jim McDonough, right at the moment Florida was seriously considering the use of *Fusarium oxysporum* against marihuana plantations: "*Fusarium species are capable of evolving rapidly ...Mutagenicity is by far the most disturbing factor in attempting to use a Fusarium species as a bioherbicide. It is difficult, if not impossible, to control the spread of Fusarium species. The mutated fungi can cause disease in a large number of crops, including tomatoes, peppers, flowers, corn and vines, and are normally considered a threat to farmers as a pest, rather than as a pesticide. Fusarium species are more active in warm soils and can stay resident in the soil for years. Their longevity and enhanced activity under Florida conditions are of concern, as this could lead to an increased risk of mutagenicity.*" Due to the risks mentioned, the State of Florida finally decided not to use the *Fusarium*. However, the United States are pressuring other countries to implement something they do not want in their own territory.

The fungus threat has been latent during these years. If the United States begins pressuring again for its use, environmental groups and other concerned international organizations are likely to revive the sharp debate over use of the fungus that was launched in 2000-2001.

For more information see TNI's website: <http://www.tni.org/drugs/>

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⁸ See the web site of Sunshine: <http://www.sunshine-project.org/agentgreen/>