



### 1-on-1 with FARC guerrilla leader on Colombia drug policy

By Brittany Peterson

**WASHINGTON (VR)**—Peace talks have been taking place in Cuba between a Colombian rebel group and the government in a bid to end a 50-year conflict over land and economic justice for farmers. Our very own Brittany Peterson was on the ground in Havana and had an opportunity to sit down with one of the guerrillas-turned-peace-delegate, to discuss the third of six negotiation points: illicit crops. Below is the audio and transcript.

Read more: [http://voiceofrussia.com/us/2014\\_02\\_11/FARC-guerrilla-proposes-new-drug-policy-in-Colombia-8155/](http://voiceofrussia.com/us/2014_02_11/FARC-guerrilla-proposes-new-drug-policy-in-Colombia-8155/)

**Peterson:** We are here with Laura Villa, a member of the peace delegation of the FARC for the ongoing negotiations in Havana between the organization and the Colombian government. They are looking for a solution to what has been a 50-year internal conflict in Colombia between the FARC and the government. The FARC is the Spanish acronym for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. It is the oldest active armed guerrilla group in Latin America. Laura is a guerrilla fighter and also a member of the peace delegation. Thank you for being with us Laura to talk to discuss Colombia's drug policies. To begin, talk about Colombia's current drug policy.

**Villa:** First of all, I would like to say hello and send my greetings to all the people of the world. A fraternal, Latin American, and Bolivarian greeting on behalf of the Peace Delegation and all the guerrillas who make up the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. You already said it, that we are here in Havana putting forth our best effort to advance with the peace process in Colombia. We are currently on the third, or really the fourth point of debate on the agenda that is called "Solution to the problem of illicit drugs, but it is the third point we are debating here at the negotiation table.

You ask me what is involved in the current anti-drug policy. I would begin by saying that if we do a survey at a global level of conferences and symposiums regarding anti-drug policies, one arrives to the conclusion that the global anti-drug policy has failed.

The main causes of the failure of the anti-drug policy is, first of all, that consumption has not decreased, nor has production. Colombia currently produces 95% of cocaine consumed in the United States. Secondly, consumers are treated in a punitive and criminal manner. This is an urgent public health issue and should be addressed accordingly. Thirdly, the Colombian farmers who grow the coca leaf are also treated with repressive and punitive policies. There are situations like in the Macarena region, where the national army has committed some of the worst human rights violations. That has appeared in several news outlets and trials in Colombia. The fourth is a policy of prohibition, which is a hypocritical policy. Prohibition increases profits for those involved in the drug trade, increases the costs of operation, but, there is a persecution against the consumers.

**Peterson:** I want to stress that the coca leaf was used in Colombia well before the Spanish arrived to the Americas. Can you explain what the FARC's policy is on the issue of legalizing illicit crops. Because there is a big difference between the coca leaf and cocaine.

**Villa:** Your question is very important. In many news outlets, there is a fairly negative propaganda about the coca leaf. They use slogans like "Coca kills," or "We want a country free of coca." But really the FARC embraces the demands of the farmers and the majority, we say "Colombia wants a country, it wants a nation free of cocaine." The coca leaf doesn't kill people. We want to promote knowledge and respect for the properties of the coca leaf that are medicinal, therapeutic, artisanal, industrial, and that preserve a historical and cultural legacy in certain

communities. That it can continue to be produced in a manner that is regulated and controlled and with active participation by the state, but without the detriment of criminalizing and pursuing our farmers.

**Peterson:** What is involved in the FARC's proposal for the third issue on the negotiation table, involving illicit crops.

**Villa:** We want to emphasize that the changes must begin with changing the goals and objectives of the anti-drug policy. Our proposal is called "An anti-drug policy for the sovereignty and well-being of the poor farmers." What does it involve? The issue of drug trafficking is totally connected with the issue of land, so comprehensive agrarian reform is necessary, where the farmer has land and infrastructure for production. The solution also calls for respect and recognition for the coca leaf as a plant with medicinal, therapeutic, artisanal and industrial properties. It also calls to address the topic of drug consumers as a public health issue, using prevention and education. It also requires stopping the fumigation of the coca crops, and compensate the victims of the fumigations. Not only those in towns, but also those in rural zones. The demilitarization of territory where there are illicit crops is also necessary. The problem is not fixed with repression or criminalization. The presence of the State is needed, but in bringing infrastructure for social development. And finally, the participation of other countries is also necessary.

**Peterson:** Who are the financial beneficiaries of the drug trade in Colombia?

**Villa:** We define drug trafficking as a transnational business, which is tied to a Capitalistic model. It has four phases: production, circulation, commercialization and distribution. Within these phases, there are weak links and strong links. The strong links are the ones that retain most of the profit. Who receives the profit? The money launderers and the owners of the main highways. Those who commercialize the drugs. They are companies dedicated to money laundering and mafia work, but they are not the focus of the persecution and prohibition policies. Who are the weak links? They are the ones who do not reap the benefits from this business. They are mainly the farmers and the consumers.

**Peterson:** Before we continue to discuss who has impacted by this anti-drug policy, talk a bit about the economic institutions that move the money in the drug trade and if they have faced any sort of punishment.

**Villa:** As I said, they are mafia-life organizations. No one knows who they are. However, big banks and large financial entities are full of that kind of money. The drug trafficking industry moves around 500 billion dollars a year, and the industry makes up about 3% of Colombia's economy.

**Peterson:** Why are the farmers growing the coca leaf rather than other crops?

**Villa:** First of all, the coca leaf has certain characteristics for its cultivation. It can be cultivated several times each year. The byproduct of the coca leaf is very small. When you look at the structure of rural zones in Colombia, there are no highways so the farmer can transport banana or yuca crops. There are no roads, so transportation is very expensive. The other thing is that farmers can find buyers for the entire harvest, unlike food crops, where you have to go compete in conditions where, for example the free trade agreement leaves farmers in total disadvantage. So cocaine, which is the final product of the coca leaf, generates certain ease for farmers given their situation of poverty and misery. Since they don't have a lot of land, it are nearly obligated to produce this plant to generate any profit.

**Peterson:** Since the coca leaf is an illegal crop in Colombia, what do farms do when their production is stopped? Do they have to leave rural areas for the cities? What other options are there?

**Villa:** That's where the issue of displacement comes into play, and thus the increasing the statistic of the impoverished in Colombia.

**Peterson:** Even if the coca leaf is legalized, what will stop the buyers from purchasing the harvests to use for cocaine production and export? What will stop people from producing cocaine?

**Villa:** The first is to solve the farmers' problems. That they don't have to grow the coca leaf to live better. That they can substitute that crop for another, but with dignified conditions. The second is to pursue those who are truly responsible for the drug trade and who see most of the profits, which are the money launderers and the owners of the highways. Where are they? Many people know who they are, but it seems that the will doesn't exist to go after them, to go after the mafia. So we have to create policies that truly process and penalize, without impunity for the beneficiaries of this trade. And the third part is education and prevention for our young people, for consumers, for everyone who suffers from addiction. This must happen. The primary consumption is for marijuana, the second is amphetamines, the third in cocaine and opium. So even if people stop growing crops to produce cocaine and marijuana, there is still the amphetamines and opium. So this is a complex problem that can't be resolved by simply prohibiting the cultivation of the coca leaf.

**Peterson:** Thank you Laura for joining us to explain the FARC's proposal for a comprehensive drug policy in Colombia, and how the country could exist with the coca leaf but without cocaine.

**Villa:** Ok, take care.

**Peterson:** That was Laura Villa. She is a delegate of the FARC who is present in Cuba for the ongoing peace talks with the Colombian government.

Read more: [http://voiceofrussia.com/us/2014\\_02\\_11/FARC-guerrilla-proposes-new-drug-policy-in-Colombia-8155/](http://voiceofrussia.com/us/2014_02_11/FARC-guerrilla-proposes-new-drug-policy-in-Colombia-8155/)