



BOLIVIA INFORMATION FORUM

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Banning coca chewing a 'no-brainer'

Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca made a flying visit to London on January 20 as part of a diplomatic tour of Europe to garner support for Bolivia's proposed amendment to the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. The amendment would decriminalise the practice of chewing coca leaves. During the visit to London - which followed stops in Spain, France and Belgium - Choquehuanca met with UK Government officials in the Home Office and was interviewed by the BBC and CNN. Speaking about misconceptions regarding traditional uses of the coca leaf, he said: "We have been practicing the chewing of coca leaves for thousands of years... this means that it is a fundamental part of our culture. What we are asking the countries of the international community is that they let us, Bolivians, exercise, practice and strengthen our culture. We don't understand why some countries would want to attack our culture."

The chewing of coca is a practice that goes back to time immemorial in Bolivia. Not only is it a way of countering physical fatigue and staving off hunger, but it has deep religious significance among indigenous peoples in the Andean region. Its use is widespread in Ecuador, Peru, northern Argentina and northern Chile, as well as in Bolivia. Coca tea (mate) is widely used by visitors to the highlands as the best remedy for dealing with the symptoms of altitude sickness.

Although coca is one of the ingredients in the manufacture of cocaine, it is in itself a completely benign substance. As well as being used for chewing, it is also used to make a number of products, including toothpaste, flour and soft drinks. The Bolivian authorities have sought to develop these products as alternative uses for coca. It takes huge amounts of coca leaves to produce only small quantities of refined cocaine. The Bolivian authorities have stressed their total opposition to the production of cocaine and are fighting to reduce trafficking of the drug.

Bolivian governments have long argued the need to reform the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs so as to enable a distinction to be drawn between the harmless consumption of coca and the use of coca for cocaine. Reform has always met with fierce opposition, particularly from the United States. The United States was one of the main architects of

the 1961 Convention. The Convention specifically mandated the phasing out of coca chewing over a 25 year period, a period which elapsed in 1986. The ban on coca chewing was based on a 1950 report. According to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and the Transnational Institute, the evidence on which this was based was unscientific and "blatantly racist".

The Morales government, which took office in 2006, approached UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon in 2009, requesting that the ban on coca chewing should be removed from the Convention. President Evo Morales has argued strongly that coca consumption is a key aspect of indigenous identity in Bolivia, and that the 1961 Convention is an affront to Bolivian sovereignty in this matter. Under UN rules, states have 18 months in which to register their observations to such a proposed change. This 18 month period ends on January 31, 2011.

Predictably, the United States has sought to organise resistance to such a change. It wishes the unreformed 1961 Convention to remain the basis for international law on the issue of coca. For its part, the Bolivian government has sought to lobby other Latin American countries to support it in its stand. It has had considerable success, winning the backing of UNASUR, the grouping of South American states, as well as ALBA, the alliance that also includes a number of Caribbean states, including Cuba, as well as Ecuador, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia.

However it only takes one country to block a change in the rules, which the United States can therefore do. But the Bolivian government is keen to ensure that European governments do not simply cave in to US pressure on this point and that they provide support to Bolivia on an issue which has been aptly described as a 'no-brainer'. A leader article in the Economist magazine this week draws a stark comparison between US responses to the brutally violent drug wars raging in Mexico and the "storm in an Andean teacup" over Bolivia's modest proposal.

The Bolivia Information Forum would therefore urge the British government not to acquiesce on this issue, and to make clear its support for a change in international rules which are clearly at variance with – amongst other things – the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.