4 Killed In Bolivian Coca Eradication

Paola Flores, AP

LA PAZ, Bolivia (AP) — The death toll rose to four Monday from an attack by gun-wielding coca growers on Bolivian military personnel and police destroying coca fields deemed illegal by the government, the interior minister said. The bodies of a marine and a doctor who was part of the eradication squad were found in fields where Saturday's attack occurred, Carlos Romero said. He said preliminary reports indicated both men were killed by bullets.

Security forces found the bodies after coca growers released six hostages they took during the attack in a rural area of the municipality of Apolo, some 90 miles north of La Paz. An army lieutenant and a police officer, also members of the eradication team, were also killed by gunfire and at least 10 other members suffered gunshot wounds, authorities have said. Officials said 13 coca growers are under arrest. It was the first fatal attack on an eradication team since President Evo Morales, who rose to prominence as a leader of coca growers, was first elected nearly eight years ago.

A spokesman for the growers involved in the violence alleged that security forces attacked them with tear gas and gunshots. The government considers more than two-thirds of Bolivia's coca crop to be legal and dedicated to traditional uses such as alleviating altitude sickness. It destroys what it considers surplus crops. The growers in the Apolo region claim they are being discriminated against, saying Morales favors unionized coca growers in his home region of Chapare while punishing them.

Bolivia is the world's No. 3 coca producer after Peru and Colombia, according to the United Nations, and reduced the area under cultivation for two consecutive years to 98 square miles in 2012. The government says it has destroyed more than 35 square miles of coca so far this year.

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