

FEATURE-Panama tribe faces threat as cocaine comes ashore

By **Mike Power** 883 words
18 February 2006 19:04

KUNA YALA, Panama, Feb 19 (Reuters) - Two Kuna Indian fishermen haul a bale of cocaine from their rickety sailing boat on to a busy dock on a tiny island off Panama's Caribbean coast then sprint with it to a safe house.

That brings the day's catch to 14 packages, says a local. Each contains 30 one-kg (two-pound) packets of cocaine, for a total haul of 420 kg (926 pounds), dumped at sea by Colombian smugglers fleeing coastal patrols.

The traffickers travel at night in fibreglass boats with three 200-horsepower engines, shipping drugs from Cartagena to the United States in seas north of Kuna Yala, a chain of 365 mostly uninhabited islands along Panama's northern coast that comprise a semi-autonomous homeland for the Kuna Indians.

When chased by patrols, the traffickers often sink their craft or dump their cargo and take the loss in order to avoid the risk of being prosecuted for drug smuggling.

"When we find them at sea without drugs or passports we have to turn them over to immigration officials," said Jose Guerra, a spokesman for the national maritime service. "Then they are deported as illegal immigrants."

Poor locals scoop up the abandoned cargo and sell most of it to visiting drug dealers. But tribal chiefs say the influx of drugs and money is threatening Kuna culture and health, as some cocaine stays on the islands to be consumed.

By sunrise most of this day's haul is sold to dealers from nearby Colon for more than \$250,000, islanders say. By lunch time, the cash windfall has been shared out and a festive mood prevails. Children clutching bills skip to the shops to buy toys. No one has change for even the smallest note for the next 24 hours.

"Everyone is involved in this, even the women and children. It's like winning the lottery," said one fisherman mending his nets.

WHITE GOLD

The setting is idyllic. The wind blows through stick-walled cabins and rustles thatched roofs until it sounds like the whole island is whispering. The horizon is dotted with islanders in tiny boats searching the sparkling seas for the "white gold" that comes closer to land in the dry season when the north wind blows.

The Kuna are an independent people who practise subsistence agriculture, embroidery, coconut farming, lobster fishing and small-scale tourism in the 200-mile (320-km) long archipelago.

It is just 30 minutes from cosmopolitan Panama City by plane, but culturally it is a world away. Kuna is the first language here, and many women wear traditional vivid dresses, adorning themselves with coloured bracelets, fine gold jewellery and delicate nose rings.

The islands feature in government tourism campaigns, but the reality behind the glossy brochures is extreme poverty, with up to 70 percent infant malnutrition,

according to the United Nations. So some communities welcome the drug hauls.

As more islanders consume the cocaine, the windfall's flipside is a wave of addiction and domestic violence.

Dr. Edison Murillo has worked across the area for 13 years and says he sees an increase in drug-related illnesses. Lobster divers are using cocaine to help them fish, he said.

"Most of the deaths from cocaine intoxication are found in this group," he said. "They use it to help them dive deeper."

GLOBAL ILL

The Kuna General Congress, a legislative body in Panama City, says it cannot fight the problem alone.

"The Panamanian government is not offering enough help," said tribal leader Gilberto Arias. "This is a global problem. We do not grow coca (the raw material for cocaine), nor do we export it. We punish those who we find involved in this."

One local chief told Reuters that drugs were changing his island. "Some young men don't farm any more. They just go to the hills to take cocaine," he said.

The chief, who asked not to be identified, wants to organise a secret police force to fight drugs after a teenager died on the island last year of an overdose.

The national police have local units made up of Kuna Indians to police the islands, although some residents say they turn a blind eye to the drugs.

Patricio Candanedo, Panama's public prosecutor for narcotics, said Kuna chiefs are assisting national anti-drugs forces. "They are supporting our work and we have excellent cooperation," he said.

On another island farther east, dozens of hand-painted signs warn villagers "Drugs Destroy Families" and "Drugs Kill."

Farmer Arturo brought ashore a traffickers' boat last year. "I was guarding my coconuts when I saw this thing floating in the sea. I was scared as I thought it was a monster, but then I saw it was a boat.

"I got help to bring it ashore. It had three 200-horsepower engines," he said. "We sold them, and now we are waiting to sell the boat."

As he spoke, a group of children played in the shade beneath the 40-foot (12-metre) hull, hanging above their heads secured only by bricks and slender wooden ramps made of coconut trees.