January 17, 2024 / Cocaine problems

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL KING (host): Everyone is worried about Ecuador, right now. Europe is worried because cocaine from Ecuador is reaching European ports in record amounts.

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*<CLIP> BBC: Cocaine that’s getting through the ports of Antwerp is now flooding the rest of Europe.*

NOEL: The U.S. is worried about Ecuador because violence from that cocaine trade is sending Ecuadorians fleeing our way.

WILL FREEMAN (fellow, Council on Foreign Relations): Just in fiscal year 2022, I believe 107,000 Ecuadorians, uh, arrived at the US-Mexico border. Uh, so that's a huge number relative to the scale of the country.

NOEL: And Ecuador is profoundly worried about Ecuador as drug gangs fight for control of ports, streets and prisons and officials openly speculate that the country’s become a narcostate.

WILL: At the time, I wondered if they were speaking in hyperbole, but I think the events of the last, uh, few months and the last couple of weeks have shown that they weren't.

NOEL: On *Today, Explained,* the world’s most urgent cocaine problem.

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**[THEME]**

NOEL: Ana Lankes is *The Economist’s* woman in Brazil. She’s been writing about Ecuador, a country very on edge after the events of last week.

ANA LANKES (correspondent, *The Economist)*: Last week, Ecuador was totally engulfed in chaos caused by drug trafficking gangs.

<SCORING IN> Progressive momentum a APM

ANA: On January 7th, prison guards discovered that the leader of a very powerful gang was not in his cell.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA  
ALESSANDRO RAMPIETTI, CORRESPONDENT: This is José Adolfo Macías, better known as Fito, the leader of the powerful Los Choneros gang in Ecuador. He was serving a long sentence for murder, drug trafficking, and organized crime in this maximum security prison in the port city of Guayaquil. But on Sunday when soldiers raided the facility as part of a government crackdown, authorities said he was nowhere to be found.*

ANA: And when news of his escape spread and a nationwide manhunt was called, gang members in prisons across the country basically began rioting and taking prison guards hostage. So the next day, Ecuador's new president, Daniel Naboa, declared a state of emergency for 60 days to retake control of the prisons.

*<CLIP> BBC NEWS  
MIMI SWABY, JOURNALIST: Now this signing of the decree has basically allowed the authorities to carry out search and rescue operations in this manhunt to try and find Ecuador’s most dangerous and most wanted criminal…*

ANA: And that's when gangsters started fighting back on the streets. So they did things like detonate bombs. They burned cars, they kidnaped policemen. And some really shocking images were that a group of gangsters seized control of a television station in the middle of a live broadcast, and another armed group raided a university. And that's when the president declared an internal armed conflict. And he's ordered the army to neutralize 22 organized crime groups, including Fito’s gang.

*<CLIP> BBC NEWS*

*MIMI SWABY, JOURNALIST: Three thousand police officers and soldiers are currently scouring Ecuador trying to find this cartel leader. This is a serious security crisis and this escape of Fito is somewhat of an embarrassment for this president who only took office in November vowing to tackle gang-related crime and this surge of violence.*

<SCORING OUT> Progressive momentum a APM

NOEL:This attack on television was spectacular. It was the kind of thing that you don't often see, um, live on television. Can you just give us a sense of what a viewer would have been seeing if they had the TV on at that moment?

ANA: Yeah, it was really terrifying.

*<CLIP> ASSOCIATED PRESS: Armed men storm Ecuador TV studio during live broadcast*

ANA: So the gunmen showed up and they showed off grenades, dynamite sticks and machine guns on television, and they pistol whipped staff to the floor. And then they forced an anchor to say on television that the police shouldn't do anything.

*<CLIP> BBC*

*IONE WELLS, CORRESPONDENT: A moment of utter horror broadcast live on television. Armed men with balaclavas over their faces broke into the set of this public television channel in Ecuador while it was live on air, brandishing guns and what appears to be explosives.*

ANA: So all 13 armed gunmen were arrested. And I think the point of this attack was basically for the gangs to show off just how powerful they have become and to show off their weapons. So when you watch the clips, that's what they're literally doing. This was on air for 15 minutes. They're basically displaying grenades and machine guns on camera.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS*

*VLAD DUTHIERS, ANCHOR: Even the clip we showed there doesn’t show the full extent of the terrifying moments, when one of the gunmen pointed what looked like a shotgun at the anchor’s neck and told them to read whatever they wanted him to say.*

ANA: So obviously there's shock and horror. There's also been international public support. So the US government has promised to send military, State Department and law enforcement officials to Ecuador in the coming weeks. And there's also been regional repercussions. So Peru, uh, which shares a border with Ecuador, also called a state of emergency on its northern border.

NOEL: The president, Daniel Noboa, you said, declares an internal armed conflict. What does that mean? What does that force his government to do or require his government to do?

ANA: It basically means that the army is going to go on to the streets and into prisons, and that they have a much stronger kind of legal protection to go after these organized crime groups. But he has said that they have to follow, kind of, the rules of international humanitarian law.

*<CLIP> DW*

*NICOLE RIS, LATIN AMERICA CORRESPONDENT: Noboa in his declaration also said that he wants to, in his words, neutralize more than 20 of the criminal gangs in the country. He only took office in November so this is his first really severe security crisis.*

NOEL:What's been the result of that declaration?

ANA: So in the past week, over 1000 people have been arrested and all the hostages that were seized during the prison riots, there were over 150 of them, have been freed. But there are fears that this could lead to a spiral of escalating violence and strongman approaches in the rest of Latin America have not usually worked. They have worked in some cases, but they haven't usually worked. So that is a legitimate fear.

NOEL: Alright, let's pull back a little bit from the violence that happened. So, Ecuador is located between Colombia and Peru. This is a part of the world that has dealt with drug wars, that has dealt with the drug trade. Is this time different for Ecuador, though?

ANA: So I'll start with a really striking statistic. In 2019, Ecuador was one of the safest countries in Latin America. It had a homicide rate that was basically the same as the U.S., but last year, Ecuador's homicide rate had grown to 45 per 100,000. It grew more than six fold from 2019. And that means that Ecuador is now Latin America's deadliest country, mainland Latin America, because some Caribbean countries have higher homicide rates. And the violence that's been adopted is really gory. It includes public hangings and decapitations and immolation of rival gang members in prisons and prisons have really been the focus of a lot of this violence. So since 2020, over 450 inmates have been murdered in prison massacres. And basically, this is mainly happening because of cocaine.

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ANA: So three things have happened in the past decade or decade and a half that have turned Ecuador into a major hub for international drug trafficking. The first is that Ecuador has become a much more important hub for Peruvian and Colombian cocaine to move to Europe and the U.S. The second reason Ecuador has descended into violence is because both the supply of and the demand for cocaine, um, are rising, particularly in Europe. So much of the cocaine in the U.S. is shipped from Colombia. But according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, gangs have established new routes from places like Ecuador and South America’s Southern Cone to Europe. And then I think the third reason that Ecuador has become kind of this crime hub in South America is because bad politics has made it easier for gangs to flourish. Basically, there was a populist left wing president called Rafael Correa, who was in power between 2007 and 2017. And in the name of anti-imperialism, he reduced cooperation with the DEA and he had a really bad relationship with the police. And since he left power, Ecuadorian politics has been consumed by the fight between his followers and his opponents. And that means instead of focusing on, you know, the spiraling security crisis, politicians have been very focused on elections and on getting power in Congress. Meanwhile, the gangs have basically just been buying off corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, and this is a really big part of the story. One reason Ecuador's gangs have been able to rise is because they have bought off many politicians and bureaucrats. So Fito, the guy we started with, the kingpin who escaped from jail, he escaped right before he was meant to be moved to a maximum security ward. And there's no way he could have gotten that information without inside help.

<SCORING OUT> Hang in the balance (a) APM

NOEL:Okay, so we've seen, Ana, how drug gangs have terrorized Mexico. We've seen what gangs have done in El Salvador. We know that it is terrifying to live in a country in this kind of disarray. And often when it gets really desperate, it leads people to flee. Does the Ecuadorian government have a fix for these massive, massive problems?

ANA:There is no quick fix. One of the reasons some analysts think that the prison riots happened is because Noboa came to power, only just like a few weeks ago, and he promised to establish two new maximum security prisons, and possibly also like a floating prison off the coast of Ecuador, where he'd put the the worst criminals. And he'd also called for a referendum that would basically expand the role for the military in combating criminal organizations. And it would help the state to seize assets owned by criminals, and it would lead to the extradition. It would legalize the extradition. If the referendum is approved, it would legalize the extradition of some of these kingpins. So all of that has caused, obviously, anger among the gangs. But some of these policies, especially the construction of, kind of, maximum security jails and sending the army onto the streets, they kind of ape the policy of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. And what he has done in recent years, since 2022, he's thrown around 2% of the adult population in jail for suspected links to gangs. But it's come at a huge cost because most people aren't getting a free trial, the free press has been muzzled, and Bukele has used his popularity to undermine, uh, you know, the independence of Congress and the courts. So part of Noboa’s strategy looks a little similar to this. And that's what I mean with there are some legitimate fears that this could really lead to, as you know, an escalation of violence in the short term and then of human rights problems in the long term.

<SCORING IN> Finding the issue (b) APM

ANA: But it's not entirely clear what else he can do right now. So he has also, you know, called for the reestablishment of an anti-narcotics unit in the police. And I think generally the extradition of criminals and also the seizure of their assets are a good thing. So I think basically right now it's really hard to know what the right thing to do is. And this is… there's no easy solutions to this. Because at the heart of the problem is rising demand for cocaine and also rising supply.

NOEL: That was Ana Lankes of leading magazine *The Economist.* Coming up, a little bit about cocaine.

<SCORING OUT> Finding the issue (b) APM

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

NOEL: It’s Today Explained. We’re back. Will Freeman is with me. He’s a fellow for Latin America studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, He's spent some time in Ecuador talking to key players about their fears that the country is becoming a narco-state, or a place where the drug trade is knit into everything. Ecuador sits between Peru and Colombia. Both big producers of cocaine. Will says for many years, it was a Colombian group, the FARC, that used to control the drug trade in Ecuador while its government…

WILL FREEMAN (fellow, Council on Foreign Relations): The government, for the most part, stayed out of the FARC’s way. So there was sort of, uh, de facto agreement, if you will, to hear no evil, see no evil, uh, look the other way. And it kept things relatively stable. Now, all that started to change, uh, in 2016, when FARC demobilized as part of a peace accord with, uh, the Colombian state.

*<CLIP> CNN:*

*PATRICK OPPMANN, CORRESPONDENT: After more than five decades of bloodshed, there may be a chance for peace in Colombia again. The Colombian government and the Marxist guerrillas, known as FARC, are due to sign a revised peace deal Thursday to end the conflict that has killed more than 200,000 people and forced millions more Colombians from their homes.*

WILL: You saw a power vacuum emerge in Ecuador. And the situation got much, much more complicated with different groups from around Latin America and around the world swooping in to try to control this valuable piece of, uh, turf.

*<CLIP> FRANCE24:*

*YUKA ROYER, CORRESPONDENT: A gun battle inside the walls of a prison. Not a rare occurrence in Ecuador. Criminal groups from Mexico, Colombia and Brazil have long battled for control inside Latin American prisons, which they use to orchestrate drug trafficking and other activities on the outside.*

WILL:By all means, from what we know, it does seem that increasing volumes of cocaine are flowing over the borders, especially of Colombia into Ecuador. Uh, last year now, ex-President Guillermo Lasso, uh, who held office from 2021 to 2023, said his government seized the largest, uh, volume of cocaine ever in Ecuador's history. Now, on the one hand, the government tried to tout that as a success. But what it really shows us is that the volume of drugs is, uh, has never probably been greater flowing through Ecuador.

NOEL: So the drugs come from Colombia and Peru and they end up in Europe. Can you walk us through the journey of how they get from the initial point, through Ecuador and then to their final destination? What does this look like?

WILL: Let's take one common route, for instance, from the south of Colombia, from a department like Putumayo or Naranjo.

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*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA:*

*KARL PENHAHUL, CORRESPONDENT: If you know where to look. It's not hard to find illegal plantations of coca leaves. The main ingredient of cocaine.*

WILL: So what you'd see is, uh, you know, farmers basically controlled by Colombian organized crime producing coca, uh, which in recent years, uh, has reached levels we've never seen before. I mean, an absolutely unprecedented, uh, volume of coca being grown, produced. You're then seeing it trafficked over the border by different Colombian groups, in some cases by Venezuelan groups. And what you're then seeing is the drug move along transit routes in Ecuador.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA:*

*LUCIA NEWMAN, CORRESPONDENT: Small fishing boats like these and homemade submarines also take Colombian cocaine north.*

WILL: Once the drug is actually out of these isolated rural areas in southern Colombia and on the road in Ecuador, it's relatively easy to move. There, in Ecuador, you're seeing local gangs violently fight each other for supremacy in Ecuador's port cities. Increasingly, what these gangs and cartels are doing is smuggling, uh, drugs into container ships, which are then, uh, you know, just, of course, also carrying legal goods, uh, then fanned out across the entire world to ports, uh, like Rotterdam, uh, and Amsterdam in the Netherlands, uh, to Australia, to other countries.

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WILL: And, uh, just by a twist of fate, making this all the more complicated, bananas are one of Ecuador's largest exports. That's a lot of what's being shipped through some of these ports. And of course, you need to move those containers quickly. Bananas will rot.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA:*

*LUCIA NEWMAN, CORRESPONDENT: Luscious tropical fruits, especially bananas, are exported from Guayaquil’s Pacific ports to Europe, Asia and Russia. So far this year, more than 300 tons of cocaine have been confiscated in cargo.*

WILL: So, uh, you're dealing with a situation where, uh, containers are constantly being loaded on and off ships. There is very little in the way of infrastructure to screen what's happening. Uh, despite persistent government efforts to get something installed. Now, from there, uh, these container ships, let's just pick one destination. Uh, many of them will end up at Rotterdam, one of the busiest ports in northwestern Europe, and be offloading goods every week, every month, uh, in which there is some amount of, uh, hidden cocaine.

*<CLIP> EURONEWS:*

*REPORTER: Customs officials in the Netherlands have netted the country's largest ever haul of drugs. They seized the shipment of over 8000 kg of cocaine in the port of Rotterdam on the 13th of July.*

WILL: Just last year, we saw officials from EU member states, Norway and Turkey seize 307 tonnes of cocaine, uh, across the EU and also Europe's ports. Uh, that's quadruple the volume of cocaine seized in 2016. So that should give you a sense of the way this problem is really escalating. And, uh, where many of these drugs move through Ecuador ultimately end up.

NOEL:It also gives us a sense if that much supply is going in, presumably there's that much demand in Europe for cocaine?

WILL: Yeah. That's right. I mean, we can just read by the signals we get from these drug seizures, uh, by discoveries made by European officials across the continent. But it does seem that, uh, we're seeing ever larger amounts of, uh, drugs bought and sold in Europe.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS:*

*COCAINE: BRITAIN’S OPEN SECRET: On a night out, we met hairdressers, bar staff, a teacher and medical workers who said they’ve used cocaine.*

*SPEAKER: I have done cocaine before. I would say, yeah, it is like a fun experience and stuff, but I do find, like, it is very regular. You do get like a lot of people off right here on the streets and stuff.*

NOEL:Many Americans associate cocaine with these smuggling networks between the U.S. and South and Latin America that started in, I guess, the 1980s. Um, you know, we've all seen the movies and the TV shows. How did it end up that Europe is the final destination and not the United States? Or is the United States also getting cocaine that comes through Ecuador?

WILL: The United States is still absolutely a major consumer…

*<CLIP> WOLF OF WALL STREET*

*MARK HANNA: <snort>*

WILL: …if not the largest consumer in the world of cocaine.

*<CLIP> WOLF OF WALL STREET*

*JORDAN BELFORT: Mr. Hanna, you’re able to do the drugs during the day and still function, still do your job?*

*MARK HANNA: Well, how the fuck else would you do your job? Cocaine and hookers, my friend.*

WILL: But compared to the 1980s, its market share has decreased. We've seen Europe, Australia, uh, parts of Asia start to consume more and more, while at the same time we've seen Americans, uh, turning ever more often to fentanyl, to opioids, to methamphetamines.So I think the we're seeing the shift partly as Latin American and European criminal organizations, which were used to being able to ship so much to the U.S., are looking in a very entrepreneurial way, if you will. Uh, they're looking to see where else they can sell their product, and they found a very receptive market in Europe.

NOEL: All right. So you've seen really unfortunate and at times devastating violence on the front end in Ecuador. Is there violence on the receiving end in Europe?

WILL:More than you might expect.

NOEL: Huh!

WILL: Because often that's not the impression we have of northwestern Europe. Think about a country like the Netherlands, who associates the Netherlands with, uh, gangland style hits on reporters and judges, or the kidnapping of port officials that those are actually incidents we've seen over the last couple of years there enough to prompt the mayor of Amsterdam, a couple of weeks ago in *The Guardian* to publish an op ed saying that she's worried about the Netherlands becoming a narco state, in all seriousness. So I think that this is a problem, that if the EU doesn't step up and get a handle on, uh, you know, we could see it as the source of more and more violence in that part of the world as well.

NOEL:We have had in the United States, as you know, a long and protracted war on drugs…

WILL: Mhm.

NOEL: …that today is widely viewed as unsuccessful. Right. We've also seen strongman leaders in South and Latin America try to take on narco traffickers. How does Ecuador start to combat this problem without making the mistakes that we've made for the past generation or two?

WILL: First, I'd say let's reconceptualize this, let's look at the problem as it is. I'd argue that that's not only as a problem of drug trafficking, but as a problem of organized crime. So Ecuador, the rest of Latin America for that matter, needs to win a war against organized crime, not just drug trafficking. Why do I bring it up? Because these groups in Ecuador are already expanding into new illicit markets. So they started off with drugs, but increasingly they're extorting legal businesses. They're involved in illegal mining, uh, which is hugely profitable. Some Ecuadorian officials even told me more profitable than drugs. Uh, and they're involved in human smuggling and the facilitation of irregular migration through Ecuador. So what can Ecuador or other countries do to start to bend the curve here, uh, and change the situation on the ground? Well, I think nothing is more important than cutting the links that have formed between criminal actors, between mafias and state officials. Uh, nowhere in the world does organized crime grow without some measure of state protection. Ecuador is no exception to that story, going back 15, 20 years now. There have been very pervasive issues of organized crime groups co-opting parts of the state, buying off or threatening state officials into working with them, into providing them protection. You know, I think we also really need to see serious efforts to investigate money laundering. Uh, organized crime always depends on interfacing with the legal economy. And often that can make it an even more difficult problem to tackle as, uh, licit legal, above ground businesses depend on cash infusions and cash inflows from criminal actors. So before that problem, uh, really gets to be all consuming, I think Ecuador needs to take down the money launderers as well. These are some of the steps, uh, that hopefully the Daniel Noboa government is considering.

<SCORING IN> Finding the issue (b) APM

NOEL: Today’s episode was produced by Haleema Shah. Matthew Collette is our editor. David Herman is our engineer. Laura Bullard fact-checked alongside Isabel Angell. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

<SCORING OUT> Finding the issue (b) APM

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]