

Colombian heroin becoming increasingly common

■ **DRUGS:** Cheap, pure, white Colombian heroin has become popular in the northeastern United States

By Christopher Torchia
The Associated Press

SAN JOSE DE LAS HERMOSAS, Colombia — Standing waist-high in red, pink and violet poppy flowers, a peasant delicately slits a plant bulb with a razor. Milky-white opium gum, the key ingredient in heroin, oozes from the gash.

"This work is innocent because I'm just making a few pesos," says Chucho, who sells the opium in San Jose de las Herosas, a ramshackle village an hour's walk down the valley.

It is stage one in the making of high-purity Colombian heroin that in the last few years has grabbed a big chunk of the U.S. East Coast market for the drug. Some Colombian heroin is also reaching Eu-

rope.

On Feb. 28, the United States cited the growing threat of Colombian heroin among reasons for decertifying Colombia, the world's biggest producer of cocaine, as an ally in the war on drugs.

Dwarfed by decades-old Asian heroin trafficking networks, Colombia produces only 1.5 percent of the world's opium, which is refined through a chemical process into morphine, and then heroin.

But Colombians have promoted the drug with the same entrepreneurial agility they applied to cocaine, making strong inroads in the biggest U.S. heroin market — the Northeast. American officials say they account for at least 80 percent of heroin sales in the New York area.

The key is simple: marked-down prices for white-powder heroin so pure that it can be smoked or snorted instead of injected, avoiding the use of needles

and the danger of AIDS.

The price of a kilo of Colombian heroin in the United States is as low as \$85,000; a kilo from Southeast Asia might cost twice as much.

Unlike their counterparts in Asia and the Middle East, Colombian heroin traffickers employ few middlemen who must share in the profits, enabling them to keep prices down, said Anthony Senneca, acting chief of the New York office of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Thousands of miles from New York, the production chain begins in remote places like San Jose in Colombia's Tolima province.

There is no police station. Army patrols rarely venture here. Leftist rebels who tax opium buyers rule the hills.

Armed guerrillas in civilian clothing who belong to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the country's biggest rebel band, monitor traffic and make

sure opium traders do not get mugged.

At a roadside kiosk where travelers buy food and drink, a visitor asked to talk to the local guerrilla commander. "Did you come to buy?" replied the young vendor, signaling how deeply rebels are involved in the business.

Colombians started growing poppies in the late 1980s, and heroin cooks were brought in from Asia to teach them how to make heroin. High prices encouraged a planting boom in the early 1990s, which in turn produced a big supply that has pushed down prices despite periodic crop-poisoning raids by police planes.

In San Jose, a kilo of opium gum costs 500,000 pesos (\$500) or less, well under half the price five years ago. Many poppy harvesters are paid just \$8 a day with free food.

Still, that is enough in this impoverished land to keep farmers growing poppies, and the DEA warns of a growing Colombian

plague. Sixty-two percent of the heroin seized at U.S. airports in 1995 was from Colombia. Five years ago, the percentage was negligible.

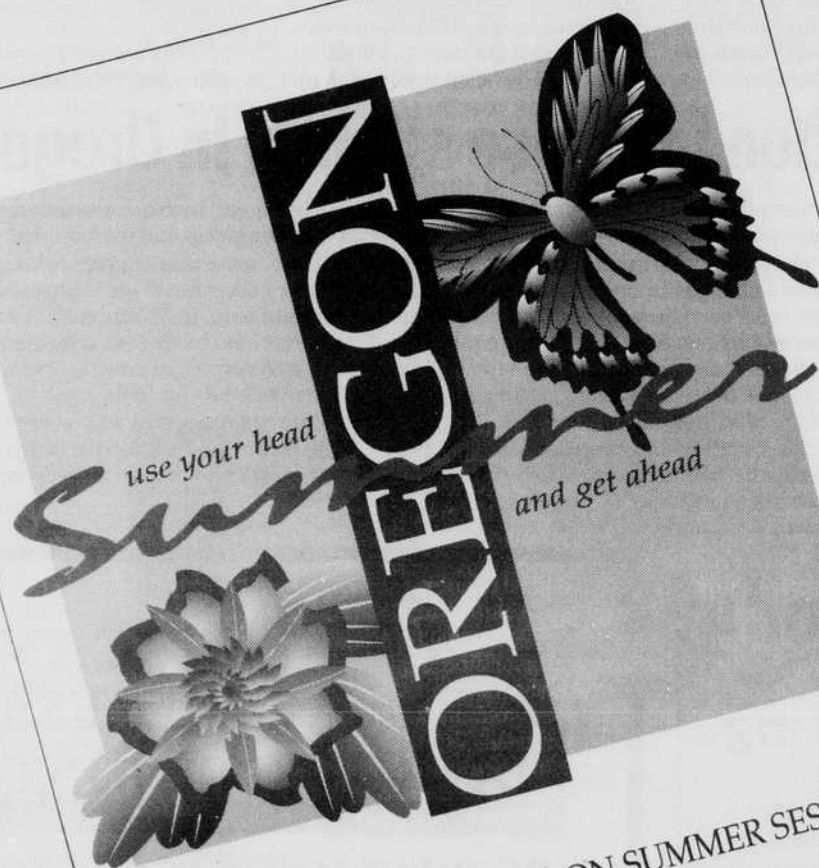
The statistic, however, reflects in part that Colombians usually smuggle heroin by sending it in with more easily detected couriers on commercial flights to Miami and New York.

Asian traffickers usually smuggle heroin in greater bulk into the United States by sea, which is harder to detect and therefore seized less often.

The Colombians' use of "mules" who hide one or two kilograms of heroin in suitcases or swallow rubber packets filled with the drug is an indication that it is still a business for small-time operators.

By contrast, Colombia's cocaine cartels smuggle their product by the ton on jets, boats and even small submarines.

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