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## A 'Narco-State' with devastating consequences. The voice of the missionaries: drug abuse on the rise and young people lured by easy money

You only have to look up at the sky and notice the background sounds. It is impossible for the residents of the northern regions of Bolivia, which stretch from the Andean plateau to the Amazon forest and the Chiquitanian savannah, not to be aware of the daily air traffic above their heads. Throughout the day, small planes can be seen in the sky, having taken off from hundreds of small airstrips (as many as 440, according to a recent investigation by the independent network 'Connectas' and the newspaper 'El Deber') located throughout the country. This daily air traffic, worth millions of dollars, is made possible thanks to substantial collusion with the political powers, which risks being unmasked at a time of heated controversy between the President of the Republic, Luis Arce, and his predecessor, Evo Morales, leader of the socialist party MAS. **500 kilos per aircraft.** The planes that take off are never empty. The average load is 500 kilograms, bound first for other Latin American countries and then for Europe, including Italy. The aircraft are then torched in neighbouring countries, especially in Paraguay. Moreover, compared to a shipment of 500 kilos of cocaine, which costs around 30 euros per gram, the 35,000 Euro average value of a second-hand Cessna or Piper is a negligible sum. As a result, this South American state has become a "paradise for the "Narcos" (Mexicans, Colombians, Brazilians), a kind of "air corridor" linking the Andes with Brazil and the southernmost countries of South America, the so-called "Cono Sur", albeit with different characteristics and "missions" with respect to Ecuador, which is now increasingly making headlines. It is a "narco-state" with a specific and leading role in what can be considered a "narco-continent". Moreover, the effects of drug trafficking are not only visible in the skies, but can also be seen in the devastating consequences within local communities - marked by unprecedented levels of severity and gravity. The case of the five soldiers burnt alive in their car by organised crime gangs near the border with Argentina in mid-January is particularly telling. **The end of Evo's "rhetoric".** Monsignor **Eugenio Coter**, from Bergamo, Bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Pando, in the north of the country, on the border with Peru and Brazil, has been following these incidents. He told SIR about the situation in these communities: "For many years, Bolivia was considered a country of coca cultivation. And it is a well-known fact that the former president, Evo Morales, started out as a trade unionist and president of the coca growers' union, the 'cocaleros' of the Chapare province, north of Cochabamba. Over the years, Evo has consistently promoted the rhetoric of 'empire'. He used to insist that coca cultivation served the needs of the rich countries. On the contrary, this phenomenon, which has flourished in the midst of countless collusions, is clearly eroding the country's social fabric and local economy." It was during his visits to the vast territory of the Apostolic Vicariate that the bishop was made aware of these phenomena. "I was ascending the Madidi River, near the foothills of the Andes, and at a certain point I was stopped: 'Don't go any further, there are drug dealers up there.' Last year, 3,000 people were murdered in the country, and the problem of violence and hired killers is particularly acute in Cobija and Guayaramerín, two cities on the border with Brazil. The former is particularly affected by the activities of the Primeiro Comando da Capital, a very powerful Brazilian cartel from Sao Paulo." Above all, drug trafficking and the widespread availability of drugs are poisoning society and destroying the lives of many young people, even in the remote areas of the country, including the apostolic vicariate of Msgr. Coter: "A great problem is emerging in the field of education, also because of the enormous increase in the abuse of drugs. A few weeks ago a young man ran over a group of faithful taking part in a torchlight procession with his car, he was high on cocaine. Many young people are also tempted by the possibility of making easy money. Flight academies are very popular: 16 hours of flying time entitles the student to fly an aeroplane. We have put a lot of effort into schools in the past, but there should be constant vigilance." Regarding public surveillance, "there are thirteen radar stations spread throughout the country, but these are scarce,

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malfunctioning and often sabotaged.” **Drugs, gold mining, deforestation and human trafficking: a vicious circle.** A similar reality to that described by Msgr. Coter can be found further south, in the area of the Apostolic Vicariate of Beni. Father Fabio Garbari, a Jesuit missionary from the Italian region of Trentino, serves the province of Moxos. He told SIR: "I am not an expert, I can only report some observations. The period of the pandemic was a boost for drug trafficking. In general, all legal activities came to a halt and illegal activities flourished. There are also many airstrips in this area, some of them within the large agricultural and cattle farms, known locally as 'estrancias ganaderas'. There are many planes flying and many pilots flying them. These are job opportunities. Faced with this business, some people are even happy, they say they are better off now than before". But the situation is very different: "Drug trafficking brings with it the problem of money laundering, and this gives a boost to other activities, from gold mining, with the presence of mercury that poisons communities, to intensive farming and cattle ranching, which increases deforestation, with direct consequences for climate change. In this way, drug trafficking increases the factors of destruction in a tragic sequence. Even mining sites are linked to human trafficking.” **The fight against drug trafficking became a political weapon in Arce vs. Evo.** The political changes taking place in the country are exploding in the face of this situation. The Bolivian Bishops' Conference dedicated a pastoral letter to the scourge of drug trafficking in 2016, when the crisis was not as serious as it is today, and wrote, inter alia: "It is well known that drug trafficking, in its strategy of expansion and impunity, also penetrates the state apparatuses and law enforcement agencies and corrupts the consciences of the people." This is still the case today, although there is something new: in recent months Evo Morales has openly disowned his heir apparent, the incumbent president Luis Arce. This fratricidal war is looming over next year's presidential elections. Suddenly the fight against drug trafficking, real or perceived, has become a political weapon. Police have raided the Chapare - hitherto a kind of 'state within a state' - several times in recent months. Dozens of coca and cocaine factories (Bolivian chemists are particularly prized) have been destroyed. Morales felt under attack and cornered. Developments are unpredictable, but political skirmishes are unlikely to undermine a phenomenon so deeply rooted in the public establishment, with the connivance of civil servants and police officers (often specialists in the practice of 'volteo', the confiscation of a load that is eventually 'resold'). And nourished by powerful international drug cartels. (\*) journalist at "La vita del popolo"

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