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Scapegoats for the drug mafia

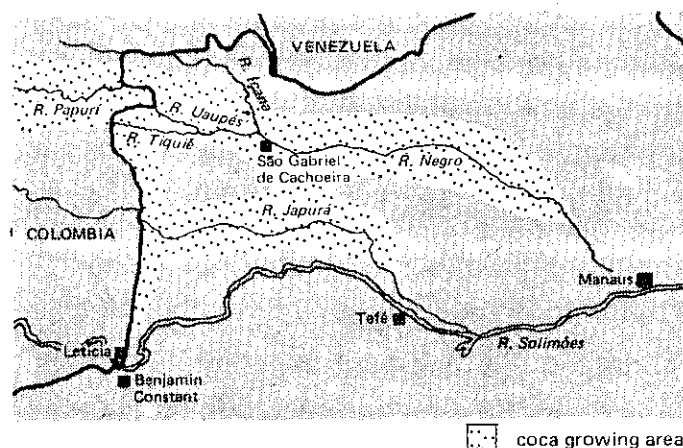
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Brazil's increasing involvement in the cocaine business has had the unexpected side-effect of heaping yet more miseries on the heads of the hapless Tucano and Makú Indians of the Rio Negro region (see map). The federal police and popular press have accused the Indians of cultivating coca on a large scale, and being the main beneficiaries of the growth of cocaine use.

The truth is rather different. The police have been conducting a campaign of defamation against the Rio Negro Indians to divert attention from their own corrupt involvement in the business. Journalists,

for their part, have been only too ready to lend themselves to this ploy. A report from an anthropologist who was recently in the area indicates that there is no evidence that Indians have been increasing their traditional cultivation of coca; on the contrary, its use as a stimulant appears to be dying out in many areas, as a result of enforced acculturation.

Rather than as a producer, Brazil appears to be getting drawn into the cocaine business for its processing and trans-shipment facilities. The move across the border by the 'mafias' based in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia has been designed principally as a means of diversifying export routes, and maintaining both mobility and access to essential supplies of chemicals. They also enjoy the additional advantage of gaining access to the growing Brazilian market for cocaine. The involvement of the Brazilian police in this development appears to be quite subordinate to the well-organised syndicates in the Andean countries. The recent dismissal of the federal police chief in Amazonas state, Ivo Americano, seems to have been the result of a skilful frame-up by Colombian cocaine-trafficking interests. □



■ Details of growing coca production in the Colombian Amazon were published in WR-81-05.