

Pope Francis to Chew Coca Leaves During Bolivia Visit



La Paz, June 30 (teleSUR-RHC)-- Pope Francis says he would like to chew coca leaves when he visits the Andean country next month, according to Bolivian Government officials.

"He has specifically requested that he wants to chew coca, so we will be awaiting the Holy Father with the sacred coca leaf," Culture Minister Marko Machicao said in an interview on Sunday.

Pope Francis will visit La Paz on July 8, located some 3,640 meters above sea level, one of the highest cities in the world. For centuries, local people have chewed coca leaves to combat the effects of altitude. "We offered (the Pope) coca tea or something for the altitude," Machicao said.

While the coca leaf is the raw material for cocaine, the Bolivian constitution protects the plant as part of the country's cultural heritage and states that in its natural state it is not a narcotic and has traditional, cultural, food, and medicinal uses. Coca leaves act as a stimulant, but they also alleviate hunger, thirst, and can be used for medicinal purposes. The leaves are also often consumed in teas, breads and ground into flour.

In 2013, the Bolivian government successfully petitioned the United Nations for special permission for coca growing and its licit uses within its borders. Bolivian President Evo Morales supports the policy of "social control" to manage coca cultivation by enforcing a cap of 2,500 square meters per family.

As a result of the newly introduced policies, coca cultivation in Bolivia fell 9 percent in 2013 and 26 percent in the past three years, according to a 2014 U.N. report. Currently, the Bolivian government is working on a coca leaf commercialization law.

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