

Colombia knocks out two illegal oil refineries belonging to rebel army

By Oliver Griffin



BOGOTA, Dec 28 (Reuters) - Colombian security forces on Tuesday neutralized two clandestine refineries in the country's northeast which belonged to the rebel National Liberation Army (ELN), the defense ministry said.

The operation in Norte de Santander province, which sits on Colombia's border with Venezuela, involved 900 members of the military and police forces, the defense ministry said in a statement.

The refineries provided the leftist ELN with more than 30 million pesos (around \$7,500) in illicit earnings each month.

Norte de Santander has evolved into the new epicenter of Colombia's long internal conflict as security forces battle drug gangs and rebels while coca production increases.

Theft from Colombia's oil pipelines - particularly from the Cano Limon-Covenas pipeline, which runs through Norte de Santander and other provinces - is booming as illegal armed groups look to replace dwindling supplies of smuggled Venezuelan gasoline for use in the drug trade.

An average of 3,299 barrels of oil were being stolen per day in Colombia through June 30, of which 2,430 barrels came from the Cano Limon Covenas pipeline, as seizures of gasoline smuggled from Venezuela slowed to a trickle, Reuters reported last month. [read more](#)

Stolen oil is processed in clandestine refineries and turned into a rudimentary gasoline known as "pategrillo" or "cricket's foot" - so-called for its green color - that is used in cocaine production, according to police and analysts.

It Tuesday's operation, security forces also discovered an illegal valve used for stealing crude oil in the Cano Limon-Covenas pipeline, the statement added.

This year 41 illegal valves have been found on the pipeline in Catatumbo, it said, citing information from **Cenit**, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Colombia's state-owned oil company **Ecopetrol**.

Some 690,000 barrels of crude have been stolen in Catatumbo this year, of which 70% has been used in processing cocaine, the defense ministry said.

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