

# Moonies accused of involvement in drugs

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Paraguay -- The Reverend Moon has carved out a section of Paraguay that is twice the size of Luxembourg. Seamus Mirodan went to see it

Reverend Sun Myung Moon, spiritual leader of the Unification Church, self-proclaimed Messiah, multimillionaire and a generous contributor to the US Republican Party, has been showing a strong interest over the last five years in little-known Paraguay at the centre of the South American continent.

Since 1999, Rev Moon has built his personal empire which begins on the marshy banks of the River Paraguay and stretches beyond the hazy, level horizon through 600,000 hectares of arid land - equivalent to more than two Luxembourgs - punctuated by solitary clusters of withered trees and sad bushes which struggle desperately for air.

The scorching sun beats relentlessly on one of Latin America's most desolate zones. It is here in the northern province of Chaco, directly above the Guaraní aquifer, the largest resource of fresh drinking water in the world, where Moon's associates claim he wishes to build an ecological paradise.

Nevertheless, national Senator Domingo Laino sees a different pattern in Moon's acquisitions. "There are two principal branches to Moon's interest in Paraguay," he said, "control of the largest fresh drinking water source in the world and control of the narcotics business", which is so prevalent in this area. "President Lula told me that Brazil took serious measures to curb Moon a few years back as it became evident that he was buying up the border between our two countries," said the senator.

Allegations from local law enforcement officials support this claim. The so-called Dr Montiel, Paraguay's drugs tsar from 1976-89, said: "The fact that they came and bought in Chaco and on both sides of the Brazilian border is very telling. It is an enormously strategic point in both the narcotics and arms trades and indeed the available intelligence clearly shows that the Moon sect is involved in both these enterprises."

Paraguay is the major drugs port through which virtually all the cocaine produced by Bolivia and Peru passes. In the world's second most corrupt country, "the ease of buying influence is second to none", said Montiel. "Corruption reaches dangerous levels and he who wants transparency in Paraguay is a dead man. Indeed the famous Iran contra affair was operated from Ciudad del Este" on the south-east Paraguayan border with Argentina and Brazil.

Not content with expanses of potentially invaluable land, Rev Moon has also taken over entire towns, including factories and homes. In Puerto Casado, tensions between Moon disciples and locals led to violent confrontation over the last year following the closure of the only source of work, a lumber factory, and the dismissal of 19 workers who tried to form a union in order to demand an eight-hour day and the national minimum wage of GBP80 sterling per month.

According to Senator Emilio Camacho: "The Moon sect is a mafia. They seek to subvert government control and are effectively building a state within a state. I believe they are hoping the local population will leave so they have unquestioned authority in the zone and are free to do whatever they want."

This is not the first time such accusations have been levelled against Rev Moon and his associates in South America. Last June, the Chilean government refused to recognise the sect as a religious association and accused them of being "a danger to society". An aid to the Chilean Interior Minister described Rev Moon's ideology, somewhere to the right of the Taliban's Mullah Omar, as "profoundly anti-communist, xenophobic and with a marked Nazi inspiration". Venezuela and Honduras have expelled the cult.

Rev Moon's South American adventure began in 1994 during a fishing trip. Rev Jung Min Hong, vice-president of Victoria S.A., said: "A golden El Dorado fish jumped into his boat. The reverend was awestruck by its beauty and decided that he must invest here for love of the environment, in order to protect nature."

Having decided to buy land in the area, he first visited (according to local Zeta magazine) the city of Pedro Juan Caballero in the province of Amambay. Provincial governor Mr Roberto Acevedo said: "This is the Mecca of the narcotics trade where dealers live with complete immunity. They own judges, the police, even politicians."

Rev Moon travelled there with Fermin De Alarcon, a Spanish financier, in the latter's private jet. Mr De Alarcon tried unsuccessfully to sell the religious leader his Banco General and is currently a fugitive from the Paraguayan justice system after withdrawing all the funds in that and other banks before disappearing.

Rev Moon bought the Banco de Credito in 1996, in nearby Uruguay, the banking hub of Latin America. On the day of opening under its new ownership, the Uruguayan bank employees' union blew the whistle on a suspected money-laundering scheme after a procession of 4,200 Japanese women, all Moon-followers, allegedly deposited up to \$25,000 each in cash. By the end of business that day, \$80 million had been deposited.

The same year saw the inauguration of Rev Moon's local media empire: Tiempos del Mundo, a newspaper distributed in the majority of the major capitals across South America. At the opening of the offices in Buenos Aires, George Bush snr was guest of honour and referred to Rev Moon, one of his major benefactors at the time of his first electoral campaign, as "a man of honour". Indeed the reverend forged strong links with the Republican Party, not least by opening the Washington Times in 1982, estimated to lose some \$50 million a year and once described by Bush as "so valuable in Washington, where we read it every day".

From Amambay, Rev Moon moved across the border to the town of Ponta Pora in the southern Brazilian province of Mato Grosso do Sul, famous for its vast marijuana plantations. He bought nearly 200,000 hectares and built a "model city" called the New Hope Garden. He also owns a hotel there in the city of Porto Mortinho, home to Fahd Yamil, who Governor Acevedo described as "the Vito Corleone of the zone. He commands the price of everything and everyone who operates in the zone has to pay him for protection."

In 1999, the Brazilian federal police launched an investigation into the involvement of Rev Moon's associates in money-laundering and tax evasion, amidst accusations of drug-running. By October of that year, he had down-sized his operation in Brazil and bought land in Paraguay. According to local landowners, everything was paid for in cash, often for more than it was actually worth.

Construction began immediately on a new model city, Puerto Leda. Reverend Sano, the secretary-general of Rev Moon's Foundation for Sustainable Development, which has its base in Leda, claimed only \$4 million was invested to build everything from a landing-strip to a power plant. The town is also equipped with a 25-metre swimming pool and its own police and navy stations, even though Rev Sano claims it is only home to 10 Japanese sect members.

Rev Moon's first involvement in the continent came during the late 1970s when his organisation donated the first \$100,000 to Oliver North's Nicaraguan Freedom Fund. The religious leader was implicated in many of the so-called Contra scandals during the Reagan-Bush administration.

Rev Moon's ideology allowed him to cuddle up to many South American dictators during this era. Indeed, according to Bolivian intelligence reports at the time, he sought to recruit an "armed church" of 7,000 Bolivians receiving paramilitary training to support the infamous cocaine coup which brought Gen Carlos Meza to power with Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie running his security operations.

Asked about these activities, Rev Sano admitted his organisation was "very anti-communist ... The third world war will be fought between those who believe in God, namely democrats, and those who do not believe in God - communists."

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