Honduras rallies to protect the banana

by Andrew Thompson

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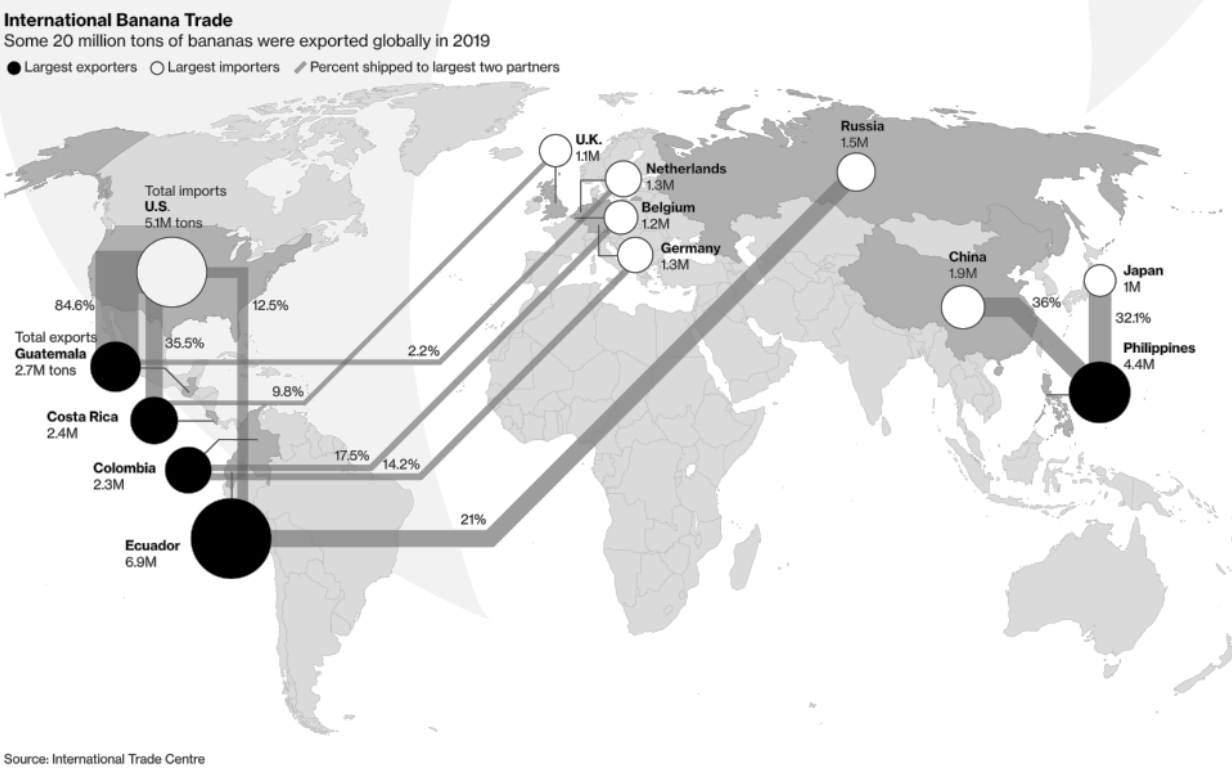
What happened?

A small Honduras-based agricultural research centre says that with its partners it has developed 11 genetic hybrids of the Cavendish banana, part of the battle to protect it against the soil fungus known as TR4.

The details

The Cavendish banana, the most widely available in global supermarkets, is fighting for its life. The problem is that bananas are highly susceptible to disease. The Panama disease wiped out many Latin American plantations in the 1950s and 1960s. At that point the Cavendish was introduced as a more disease resistant variant, replacing the previously dominant Gros Michel (Big Mike) variety. Now Cavendish is itself being threatened by a soil-based fungus called Fusarium Tropical Race 4 (TR4). An outbreak of TR4 was detected in Colombia in late 2019. Although it spreads slowly it is devastating, causing the plants to wilt and blacken. It cannot be controlled by fungicides and is transmitted through soil particles.



Source: Bloomberg

The industry says more disease-resistant variants are needed. Fyffes says stringent and expensive bio-security measures are required to combat TR4, but that it has not yet been able to find an alternative to the Cavendish. Executives at Del Monte say that on a 5-10 year horizon there could be a drastic reduction in banana supplies from Latin America, triggering much higher global prices (the word's main banana exporters are Ecuador, the Philippines, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Colombia). Banana exports are worth roughly US$8bn a year.

In Honduras, itself an important banana exporter, Adolfo Martínez, the director of Fundación Hondureña de Investigación Agrícola (Fhia), says that 11 Cavendish hybrids are currently being tested for TR4-resistance in Australia and South Africa. Fhia, originally set up in 1984 by USAID, the government of Honduras, and Chiquita International, has a network of 80 international partners. Martínez, a Colombian, says the research centre has had a difficult year because of COVID-19 and two hurricanes that hit the country last November and destroyed its 80-hectare banana research plantation.

What does it mean?

The problems facing the Cavendish may be a harbinger of intensified future risks in Latin America and elsewhere coming from climate change and from human and crop diseases. Bananas and other crops will need increased investment in research and development to protect future revenue.

About the Author

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As well as being a Canning House Associate Fellow, Andrew is a former foreign correspondent (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro) and a broadcaster for the BBC's Latin American Service. Working through La Rambla Research Ltd., he writes about economics, political risk, and business in Latin America.

These stories are also available on Andrew's blog site, *La Rambla Research*.