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MARITIME DRUG TRAFFICKING
ROUTES AND METHODS
IN THE AMERICAS



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Annex I

Drug Trafficking Routes (Map)

Executive Summary

The trends in South American cocaine production and distribution raise the probability that maritime transport will continue to play a significant role in the overall strategy of narco-traffickers. In the absence of a comprehensive waterways engagement strategy, maritime smuggling routes are only going to proliferate. The transnational nature of the drug trade implies that countries should cooperate in their counternarcotics efforts at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. This should include negotiating comprehensive maritime counternarcotics agreements that address issues such as shipriders, boarding procedures, pursuit and entry, etc. to facilitate well-coordinated interdiction operations. In the final analysis, successful implementation of a comprehensive waterways engagement strategy is ultimately the only way to significantly improve maritime interdiction operations in both source and transit zones.

Scope of the Report

This paper is intended to briefly outline the maritime routes and methods in drug trafficking in South America and into and through the Caribbean. It also provides details on the methods and types of conveyance used for drug shipments as well as detection and monitoring techniques typically employed by maritime law enforcement authorities. The methods, routings and modes of transport used by drug traffickers are frequently changed according to their own preferences, resources and perceptions of the danger of interdiction. The information provided below is a summary compiled from unclassified sources. It is not meant to be a comprehensive report, but seeks to give only a snapshot of maritime drug trafficking which governments in the region can consider when preparing to counter this problem.

Trafficking Routes – South America

There are many maritime routes within South America that are exploited by narco-trafficking organizations. However, a close look at the Amazon – not just the part belonging to Brazil, but the basin of the Amazon river as a whole – helps shed light on the real magnitude of the problem. (Please refer to the map at Annex I to have a graphic representation of the narrative below.)

The basin as a whole covers 7.8 million km², 66% of which are within Brazilian territory. The rest not only includes rain forest areas but also the mountainous regions of Andean countries. The upper valleys of the Huallaga and Ucayali rivers, both tributaries of the Amazon rivers, produce most of the Peruvian coca-cocaine output; Bolivia's main producing regions, Chapare and the Yungas, are linked by boat to the Guaporé and Madeira rivers which cross most of Brazil's central Amazon; some coca and cocaine production areas of Colombia are located in the upper valleys of the Apaporis and Caquetá rivers, which takes the name of Japurá in Brazil, as well as in the upper valleys of the Vaupés and Putumayo rivers, the latter becoming the Ica in Brazil.

Apart from rivers and air, rail facilities and roads link Bolivia's coca production areas, not only to the south of the Brazilian Amazon, but also to the states of Southern Mato Grosso and São Paulo in the center-south of Brazil. Colombia's Andean valleys are linked by mostly tarred roads to Manaus, the largest city in Brazil's Amazon region, through Venezuela.

Drug transport in the region is characterized by multiple routes and hubs which serve as warehouses used as platforms for export, commercial outlets or mere transit points. Some of the most significant Amazon corridors have been identified:

1. The Brazil-Colombia corridor, divided into two main routes: a) the route to Venezuela which cuts into Brazil through the Roraima territory, goes on to Manaus and links to Guyana; b) the route of the upper Rio Negro, which goes through São Gabriel da Cachoeira and leads to Manaus.
2. The Peru-Colombia-Brazil corridor, with the upper part of the Amazon river connecting the lower valleys of the Huallaga, Ucayali and Marañon rivers of Peru and Colombia's Putumayo river with Manaus, through the towns of Iquitos (Peru), Leticia (Colombia), and Tabatinga (Brazil).
3. The Peru-Brazil corridor, where the state of Acre is the routes' main point of entry into Brazil, with a) the Puerto Portillo (Peru), to Cruzeiro do Sul (Brazil), route; b) the Puerto Maldonado (Peru), Cobija (Bolivia), to Nova Brasileia and Rio Branco (Brazil), route.
4. The Bolivia-Brazil corridor has the largest number of possibilities: a) Magdalena (Bolivia), Costa Marques (Brazil), Cacoal-Ji Parna by road BR-364; b) the route of the state of Rondônia (Brazil) via Guayamerin (Bolivia), Guajaramirim and Porto Velho (Brazil), linking Bolivia's Yungas to Manaus through the upper valley of the Beni and southwestern Brazil by road BR-364; c) the Pantanal route: to the north via Cochabamba (Bolivia), Cáceres, Cuiabá (Brazil), through Barra do Garcas towards Goiânia in Goiás State or heading to Uberlândia and Ribeirão Preto (Brazil); to the south via Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Puerto Suárez (Bolivia), and Corumbá (Brazil), on to Campo Grande, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, and west to São Paulo state (Brazil).
5. The Bolivia-Paraguay-Brazil corridor, with routes: a) Pedro Juan Caballero (Paraguay), Ponta Porã and Londrina (Brazil); and b) Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), Foz do Iguacú (Brazil), to the ports of Paranaguá, Santos and Rio de Janeiro on the Atlantic coast of Brazil.

Traffic Through the Caribbean and Mexico

Maritime cocaine smuggling through the Caribbean often moves in the direction of Puerto Rico where it is repackaged and staged for direct shipments to major U. S. East Coast markets. Seaborne smuggling operations consist primarily of go-fast boats

that depart from Colombia's North Coast and Venezuela, typically carrying between 800- and 1200-kilogram shipments of cocaine. Sailing and fishing vessels are also used, although to a more limited extent. These vessels depart the North Coast of Colombia, hugging the Venezuelan coast, and either proceed directly to Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, or Haiti, or keep close to the coasts of the eastern Caribbean islands until they reach their final destinations. Traveling up the island chains allows traffickers to blend with other vessel traffic. Vessels sometimes off-load to locally built open fishing boats, known as *yolas*, positioned from 40 to 150 nautical miles off the coast of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, or in the Leeward Islands. The *yolas* proceed to Puerto Rico and off-load cocaine on Puerto Rico's east coast.

A large part of the cocaine traffic between South America and the United States is routed through Mexico by using a number of routes and methods. Maritime activity includes shipping cocaine from Colombia's western coast by bulk cargo ships or fishing vessels sailing from the Port of Buenaventura, following eastern Pacific routes to either Mexico or Central America.

High-speed "go-fast boats", freighters, and fishing vessels sail from Colombia's North Coast; from the Ports of Cartagena or Barranquilla; from the Gulfs of Uraba or Morrosquillo; or from the Guajira Peninsula. Vessels with cocaine shipments to be transported through Mexico follow northwesterly courses into the western Caribbean, en route to such locations as Bancos Chinchorro, Cancun, Isla Mujeres, and Cozumel, off the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula, where the cocaine shipments are off-loaded on shore, or transferred to Mexican vessels for delivery to shore.

Trafficking Methods

Traffickers conceal shipments of cocaine within commercial maritime cargo carried by legitimate shipping services from South America into the United States. A variety of concealment methods are used, including the secretion of cocaine within container walls or floors, commingling the drug with legitimate cargo, and concealing it within compartments in legitimate cargo. In addition to concealing the shipments of cocaine within maritime cargo, traffickers circumvent inspection by altering shipping documents at intermediate transshipment points, and using counterfeit customs seals.

Bulk cargo ships are frequently used to smuggle cocaine to staging sites in the western Caribbean-Gulf of Mexico area. These vessels typically are 150- to 250- foot coastal freighters that carry an average cocaine load of approximately 2.5 metric tons. The most common storage locations for cocaine are hidden compartments within fuel or ballast tanks. Modifications sometimes are made to the structure of the vessel, in order to make access to hidden compartments virtually impossible without literally tearing the vessel apart. Additionally, compartments in some cases are mounted on the ship's exterior such as sealed metal tubes attached to the underside of the vessel.

Commercial fishing vessels are also used for smuggling operations. Fishing vessels are well suited for smuggling operations because they typically have capacities

for large shipments and are equipped with sophisticated navigation and communications equipment. Consequently, they do not require refitting that would indicate the vessels' roles in smuggling operations. Additionally, commercial fishing vessels are often able to stay at sea for long periods and travel long distances.

Smugglers also try to avoid detection by operating at night without navigation lights. Smugglers receive off-loads during at-sea transfers from mother ships that arrive from source countries, and then land with the cocaine at marinas, isolated inlets, bays, bayous, beaches, or other areas that would hinder surveillance. Landing sites are typically located near major roads that connect to interstate highway systems, thus proving smugglers with easy access to escape routes.

Maritime craft known as low-profile vessels (LPVs) have also been used to smuggle cocaine, especially to Puerto Rico. LPVs are small, sleek vessels that ride low in water and often have light gray camouflage paint schemes – all factors that make these vessels difficult to spot at sea at distances of over 1.5 nautical miles. Finally, traffickers also use the satellite-based Global Positioning System (GPS), which can pinpoint the maritime and air drops in the sea with great accuracy. As a result, traffickers do not have to openly communicate as frequently as they did in the past and can better make use of the vast area of water in the Caribbean.

Typical Maritime Threat Profiles

Low profile vessels:

15-25 ft. in length, outboard engine, speed 10-20 kts., wooden or fiberglass construction, 1-4 feet freeboard, open construction; crew of 2-4 persons; often no registry; limited duration at sea in other than calm sea state.

Go-fast vessels:

25-50 ft. open boat; high horsepower to weight ratio; typically powered by twin outboard engines; capable of sustained speeds of 20-40 kts in 1-3 ft. seas; may carry extra fuel to extend range from departure points in South America to Caribbean islands or Central America; 2-4 storage compartments; fiberglass or wood construction; crew of 2-5 persons; ability to stay at sea is limited to a couple of days; often not registered with any state.

Fishing vessels/small coastal freighters:

40-250 ft.; speed 6-15 kts; capability to stay at sea for 5-20 days; holds for fish or other cargo; liquid load capacity (fuel, water, lube oil); crew of 3-15 persons; can be outfitted with advanced communication and navigation equipment; often configured with hidden compartments in liquid load tanks, holds, or beneath false decks; steel construction; flag of convenience or regional registry; may require dockside boarding to safely access and account for all space.

Recreational vessels:

25-70 ft. cabin cruisers or sailing yachts; speed of 6-25 kts; capability to stay at sea 3-7 days; crew of 2-8 persons; may contain small hidden compartments behind appliances, gear storage lockers, berthing area or within modified fuel or water tanks; fiberglass, wood and aluminum construction; regional and worldwide flags.

Ocean going freighters:

Over 250 ft.; speed of 10-25 kts; capability to stay at sea for weeks; crew of 8-20 persons; multiple holds for bulk or palletised cargo; or cargo carried in intermodal containers; numerous fuel, water and oil tanks; ballast voids and machinery spaces; flag of convenience registry; normally requires dockside search to conduct thorough search safely.

Detection and Monitoring of Maritime Threats*Low-profile/go-fasts:*

Visual identification from vessels and aircraft is extremely difficult at night at any sea state other than calm. Radar from vessels and aircraft has limited success due to the absence of metal in the hull construction and the low freeboard. Once visual contact is established, it must be maintained through foreign waters or contact will be lost. Go-fasts present the dual problem of low-profile detection difficulties plus high speed for escape into foreign territorial waters.

Fishing vessels/small coastal freighters:

Detection is accomplished by visual identification from aircraft or vessel and radar (land, vessel or aircraft based). Once detected, the vessels are easier to track due to metal construction. Normal vessel activity (fishing, commercial delivery) often takes these vessels into foreign territorial waters in "innocent passage".

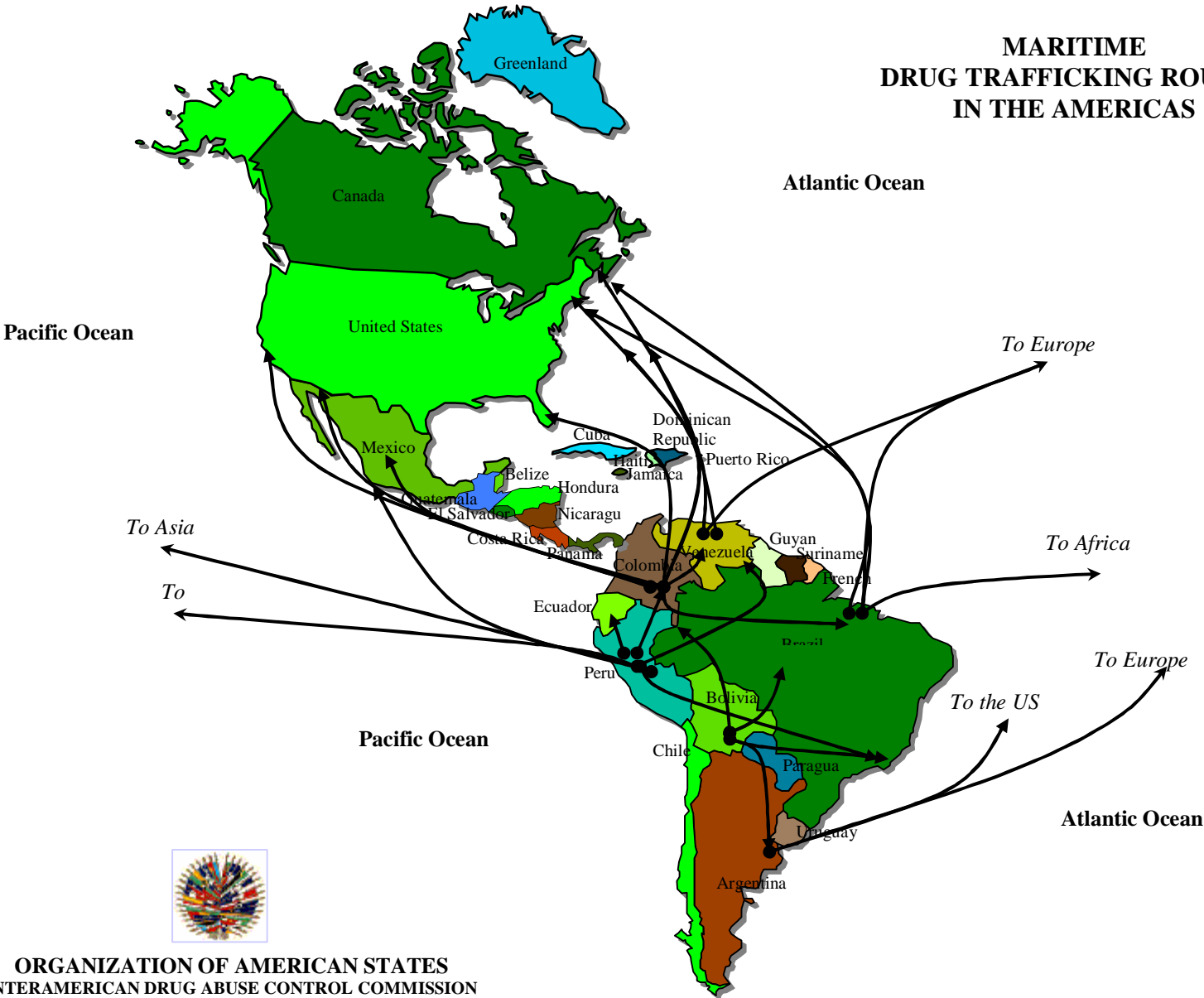
Recreational vessels:

Detection is accomplished primarily by visual identification and vessel radar. Land and aircraft based radar is less effective as most of hull construction is fiberglass or wood. Small size and slower speeds (leaving a small wake) make visual detection from aircraft difficult in other than calm sea state. Cruising activity often places vessels in close proximity to foreign territorial waters.

Conclusion

Drug traffickers are increasingly relying on non-commercial and commercial maritime vessels--such as the ones outlined in this paper--to transport drugs. According to law enforcement sources, about 85% of the cocaine being trafficked towards the US through the Caribbean corridor is maritime. In addition, drug smuggling via commercial vessels is believed to be the primary method for shipping drugs in the transit zone. Therefore, maritime cooperation among law enforcement authorities will be essential in reversing this trend. This cooperation should include intelligence sharing at all levels in order to enhance trust, which is absolutely essential in this type of multinational approach. In the absence of such maritime cooperation in the source and transit zones, the trend will only get worse.

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