

Republic of the Marshall Islands

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SHIP SECURITY ADVISORY NO. 07-22

To: Owners/Operators, Masters, Company Security Officers, Recognized Security Organizations

Subject: INCREASED RISK OF DRUG TRAFFICKING FROM SOUTH AMERICA

Date: 14 June 2022

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) Maritime Administrator (the “Administrator”) hereby draws attention to the increasing prevalence of commercial vessels being used to transport illicit drugs, particularly from South America.

As commercial air travel decreased and land border controls increased in 2020 due to COVID-19, illicit drug trafficking on maritime and waterway routes accelerated in Europe, Latin America, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. There has also been significant growth in the size of drug shipments, challenging drug cartels and organized criminal gangs to become even more innovative in their approach. While long-range electric [narco-submarines](#) are now able to cross the entire Atlantic Ocean, most illicit narcotics (particularly cocaine and heroin) smuggled by sea involve transport via commercial ship.

1.0 Drug Trafficking Trends

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC’s) [2021 World Drug Report](#), record shipments of cocaine were seized in European ports during the pandemic. Preliminary data from 12 countries indicates that quantities seized in seaports were up 18% last year. Global use of illicit drugs was also on the rise from 2015 to 2020. Colombia remains the largest grower of the coca leaf (used to manufacture cocaine), accounting for nearly 70% of the global area under coca cultivation, followed by Peru and Bolivia. Afghanistan accounts for approximately 76% of illicit poppy cultivation, which is used to produce opium, morphine, and heroin.

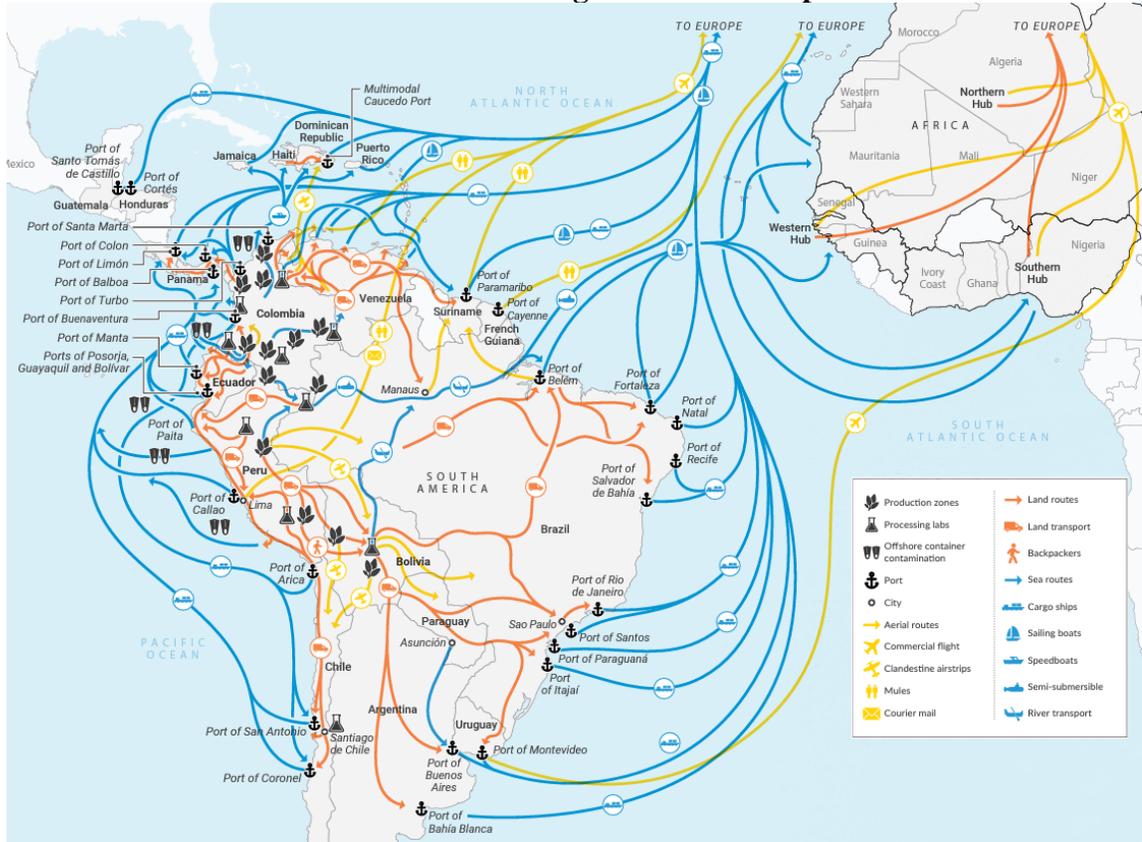
2.0 High Risk Countries and Ports

It is estimated that over 80% of the world’s cocaine is smuggled by sea. Therefore, port operations in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean regions should be subject to rigorous precautionary measures and vigilance. Generally, larger ports are attractive transit points for smugglers because of the quick movement of products.

This SSA is evaluated annually by the Administrator and expires one year after its issuance or renewal unless otherwise noted, superseded, or revoked.

Therefore, smuggling volume is typically proportional with the size of the port. Based on recent seizure data **Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Argentina** are considered particularly high-risk for cocaine trafficking. **Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, and Lebanon** are hot spots for heroin trafficking.

Cocaine Trafficking Routes to Europe



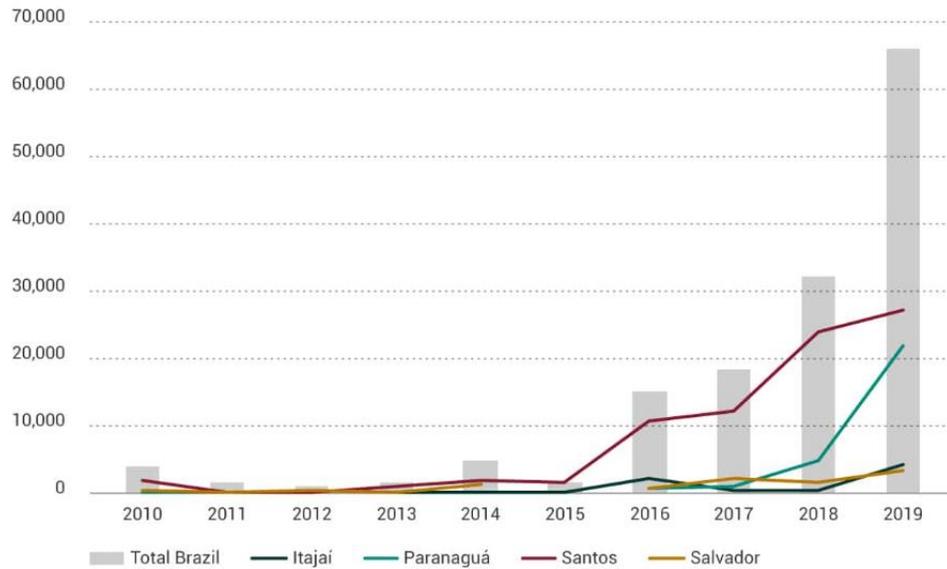
Source: InSight Crime Investigations

2.1 Brazil

When the governments of Colombia and Peru began to crack down on maritime drug smuggling at ports, organized criminal gangs began to migrate east where port authorities were less familiar with the practice.

Today, hotspots for cocaine trafficking include Brazil’s southern ports of Santos, Paranaguá, Itajai/Navegantes, Rio Grande, and São Francisco do Sul. In Northern Brazil, cocaine smuggled across the extensive borders with Colombia and Peru is shipped from Manaus to other ports down the Amazon River and in the Northeast region, particularly in the container terminals of Salvador, Vila do Conde (Barcarena), Pecem, and Suape.

Cocaine Seizures (Kg) in the Ports of Brazil 2010 - 2019



August 2020

insightcrime.org

Source: Brazilian Customs

2.2 Colombia

- .1 Colombian authorities are very alert to drug related issues and frequently search vessels both on board and underwater in response to intelligence reports. At some ports and terminals an underwater inspection (UWI) of the hull is mandatory, particularly at facilities specializing in oil or coal.
- .2 Colombian ports that currently mandate UWIs prior to departure include, but are not limited to:
 - Cartagena (Ecopetrol Terminal);
 - La Guajira (Puerto Bolivar);
 - Riohacha (Puerto Brisa); and
 - Santa Marta (Puerto Drummond, Puerto Nuevo, Ecopetrol Terminal).
- .3 UWIs are not mandatory in the port of Buenaventura and are not offered on-demand by the Colombian navy. Therefore, it is recommended that a private company is hired to conduct a UWI upon arrival and departure from Colombian ports where UWIs are not compulsory. Local agents and P&I correspondents should be able to assist in connecting the ship with local UWI service providers.
- .4 The effectiveness of UWIs in Colombia prompted the governments of Peru and Ecuador to hire their own divers to inspect the hulls of departing cargo ships.

3.0 Drug Trafficking Methods

3.1 Over the past decade, container shipping has become by far the most common form of trafficking into Europe. Every year, 750 million containers are shipped around the globe, but less than 2% of them are inspected.

3.2 Some specific strategies used by maritime drug traffickers include:

- .1 Attaching “torpedoes” to the ship’s hull filled with illegal substances.
- .2 Opening the sea chests and inserting bags within filled with illegal substances.
- .3 Collaboration of local stevedores or crew members.
- .4 Hiding small amounts of drugs in certain remote locations (e.g. cabins, funnels, decks, store room, or engine room) with collaboration from stevedores or even crew members.
- .5 Placing illegal substances within sealed containers before loading. One of the most common methods currently used by drug traffickers all around the world is to break into containers and hide drugs within the cargo, then replacing the security seals (usually this method involves a certain level of collaboration from the terminal operators and/or the cargo agents).

3.3 For additional details on drug trafficking methods, please click on the InSight Crime infographic below:



4.0 Preventative Measures

4.1 International Maritime Organization (IMO) Guidelines

Operators and masters of vessels trading to and from high-risk ports should familiarize themselves with, and ensure their Ship Security Plans take into account, the IMO's *Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Suppression of the Smuggling of Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals on Ships Engaged in International Maritime Traffic* (IMO Resolution [MSC.228\(82\)](#) and IMO Resolution [FAL.9\(34\)](#)).

4.2 International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code

Under the ISPS Code (see RMI Marine Notice [2-011-16](#)), it is the responsibility of port authorities, shipping companies, and seafarers to ensure security at port. This includes preventing unauthorized personnel from accessing port facilities or boarding vessels, implementing security plan measures, and ensuring all personnel are trained, aware, and know how to detect and mitigate potential security risks. In particular, the following best practices should be considered when calling at ports susceptible to drug smuggling activity:

- .1 Contact the vessel's local port agent to carry out a voyage-specific threat assessment prior to calling the port.
- .2 Review the Ship Security Plan, implement relevant preventive measures, and brief the crew accordingly. It is important that the Master and crew take all possible precautions to limit access to the vessel and monitor the surrounding area adjacent to the vessel while in port, such as:
 - Enforcing single entry points onto the vessel and limiting access to essential personnel.
 - Ensuring all external persons record their appropriate details and paperwork before boarding and informing the Master or Chief Officer if there is doubt about an individual's presence onboard.
 - Registering all packages before allowing them to embark the vessel.
 - Placing a permanent watchman in areas where stevedores or repair technicians are working onboard the ship.
 - Observing the vessel's CCTV system and storing the feed for review.
 - Using the vessel's lights to illuminate all accessible areas onboard and the surrounding waters.
 - Maintaining a vigilant lookout for any suspicious activity observed close to the vessel, for example, small boats or divers.

- .3 In the event crew members are permitted to go ashore, advise them to refuse to carry any package from persons ashore.
- .4 Once cargo operations are complete, perform a full search of the vessel. If there is any suspicion that drugs may have been placed onboard, request a comprehensive vessel inspection, including inspection of the vessel's hull below the waterline, prior to departure.
- .5 Contact your P&I club's local correspondent for appointment of guards, sniffer dogs, and underwater hull inspections. Divers should be instructed to pay particular attention to the bilge keels, sea chests, tunnel thruster gratings, sacrificial anodes, and the inside of the rudder compartment.

5.0 Incident Reporting

Any attempt or suspected attempt of drug smuggling must be reported to the Administrator by submitting form [MI-109-6](#) to shipsecurity@register-iri.com. The local authorities, vessel agent, and P&I correspondent must also be informed. If drugs are found onboard, do not touch the drugs. Take a photo or video of the area of the vessel where the drugs were found and seal it off to prevent any unauthorized access.

6.0 References

- .1 RMI Marine Notice [2-011-16](#), *International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code*
- .2 IMO Resolution [MSC.228\(82\)](#) and IMO Resolution [FAL.9\(34\)](#), *Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Suppression of the Smuggling of Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals on Ships Engaged in International Maritime Traffic*
- .3 International Chamber of Shipping, [Drug Trafficking and Drug Abuse on Board Ship: Guidelines for Owners and Masters on Preparation, Prevention, Protection and Response](#)
- .4 UNODC, [World Drug Report 2021](#)
- .5 World Customs Organization, [Illicit Trade Report 2019](#)
- .6 InSight Crime Investigation, [Hide and Seek: How Drug Traffickers Get Creative at Sea](#)
- .7 InSight Crime Investigation, [The Cocaine Pipeline to Europe](#)
- .8 Proinde P&I, [Drug Smuggling on Bulk Carriers out of Brazil on the Rise](#)

- .9 Steamship Mutual, [Venezuela: Drugs and Security Concerns](#)
- .10 SKULD, [Colombia: Drug smuggling - update](#)
- .11 SKULD, [Narcotics Smuggling - increasing risks to ships](#)
- .12 Standard Club, [A wave of drug smuggling from Brazil](#)
- .13 GARD, [Ship operators at increased risk of drug smuggling](#)