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WHAT SHOULD BE THE ROLE OF THE ARMED FORCES IN EFFECTIVELY COMBATING THE ILLEGAL DRUG TRADE IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO?

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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Introduction

The geographical location of Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean makes it an ideal location as a transshipment point in the drug trade between the United States and its major supplier, Latin America.¹ Its porous borders, open coastline and proximity to South America provide narcotraffickers with easy access to international markets and a diversity of nation states in which they operate. For these reasons Trinidad and Tobago has gained prominence among narcotraffickers, though not a cocaine producer. Additionally, the country's infrastructure in terms of the airports and sea ports support the operations of more than twelve international commercial airlines and countless international shipping companies who transit through the Caribbean on their way to their North and South American destinations and/or markets. Based on the aforementioned, coupled with the interrelation between illegal drugs and illegal firearms, it has given rise to crime, gang warfare and emerging crime types, especially that of murder.

In 2003, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (GoRTT) and regional countries, received assistance from foreign agencies with operational exercises and workshops focused on intelligence gathering, maritime interdiction, Internal Security (IS) operations and criminal prosecution.² Also, initiatives such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS) and the Caribbean Regional

¹ <http://www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA388320>

² United States Government Accountability Office Report to Congressional Requesters "Drug control cooperation with many major drug transit countries has improved, but better performance reporting and sustainability plans are needed" July 2008

Maritime Agreement were established to assist and support drug interdiction and the general security architecture throughout the region. Locally, the nature and complexity of the growing problem led the GoRTT to embarking on multi-faceted approaches geared towards correcting or rectifying the problem, with initiatives focused on law enforcement, socio-economic and legislation.

In 2005, the predominance of the drug trade in the region was found to be fueling crime and criminal activities not only in Trinidad, but throughout the neighbouring island states. Thus, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) styled unit was formed and was named the Special Intelligence Agency (SIA) of Trinidad and Tobago. Their primary mandate was to liaise and cooperate with other intelligence arms locally, regionally and internationally to gather intelligence for interdiction and other operations to address the crime situation that existed. The CARICOM Regional Fusion Centre (RFC) located in Trinidad is the parent agency to which the SIA reports and the RFC treats with both local and regional issues. Additionally, within the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS), special units such as the Organized Crime and Narcotics Unit (OCNU), Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) and Criminal Gang Intelligence Unit (CGIU) were formed to specifically address the negative effects of the drugs and illegal arms, particularly crime and violence.

From the perspective of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force (TTDF), the Inter Agency Task Force (IATF) was established utilizing troops from the Trinidad and Tobago Regiment (TTR) working in support of the TTPS in areas deemed crime “hotspots”. On the maritime side saw the establishment of a Coastal Radar Centre which aimed at supporting the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard (TTCG) ability of detection, deterrence and interdiction of

illegal drugs and firearms, with its augmented fleet from Damen Shipyards.³ Further in 2005, the Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard (TTAG) was formally established via an upgrade of the TTCG Air Wing, and were equipped with Agusta Westland AW 139 helicopters. All of the abovementioned initiatives were geared towards assisting and supporting drug interdiction operations among other tasks.⁴

Despite all efforts and initiatives of those in authority, the crime rate continued to climb at an alarming rate while the GoRTT continues to grapple with an increase in crime and criminal activities.⁵ Crime Statistics held by the TTPS for the period showed the extent of the crime situation with emphasis here on murders. By the turn of the millennium the murder rate stood at 118. Fast forward eight years later and the murder rate more than quadrupled, as it reached an alarming 550,⁶ the highest in the nation's history. Trinidad and Tobago is the third richest country per capita in the Americas after the U.S. and Canada⁷. However in recent times the average has been more than 28 out of 100,000 people being murdered annually.⁸ Thus, this leaves the country with one of the highest homicide rates per capita among its Caribbean and Latin American neighbours, and ranked 13th in the world out of 25 countries.⁹

This paper examines the role the Armed Forces in effectively combating the illegal drug trade. It analyzes the negative effects narcotrafficking is having in Trinidad and Tobago from a

³ Damen “Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard contracts Damen for fleet of coastal patrol craft” 15 May 2015 http://www.damen.com/en/news/2015/05/trinidad_and_tobago_coast_guard_contracts_damen_for_fleet_of_coastal_patrol_craft

⁴ Government of Trinidad and Tobago “Ministry of National Security Combats Transnational Organised Crime” 30 April 2014 http://www.news.gov.tt/content/ministry-national-security-combats-transnational-organized-crime#.WKO3NGfD_IU

⁵ Jamaica Observer “Trinidad & Tobago Government rolls out new crime-fighting plan” 13 September 2016

⁶ Trinidad and Tobago Crime Statistics <http://www.tcrime.com/stats.php>

⁷ Geography and Travel 25 Countries With the Highest Murder Rates in the World <http://list25.com/25-countries-with-the-highest-murder-rates-in-the-world/>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

Human Security perspective, particularly the personal security dimension. Also, the attractiveness of Trinidad and Tobago as a transshipment hub given its geographical location will also be examined. An Outlook of the TTDF will follow showing its disposition in combatting the illegal drug trade and its ills, to identify the security gap that exists. Moreover, it proposes an operational design that sees the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force (armed forces in this context) being employed in a Border Security role rather than Internal Security (IS). This will be done using an evidence-based approach to analyze the crime situation, in particular firearms related murder and gang violence. Noteworthy, this paper is deemed crucial as it will address a mandate of the GoRTT to reduce crime and violence, and improve the safety and security of the citizenry and the region.

Trinidad and Tobago Attractiveness as a Transshipment Hub

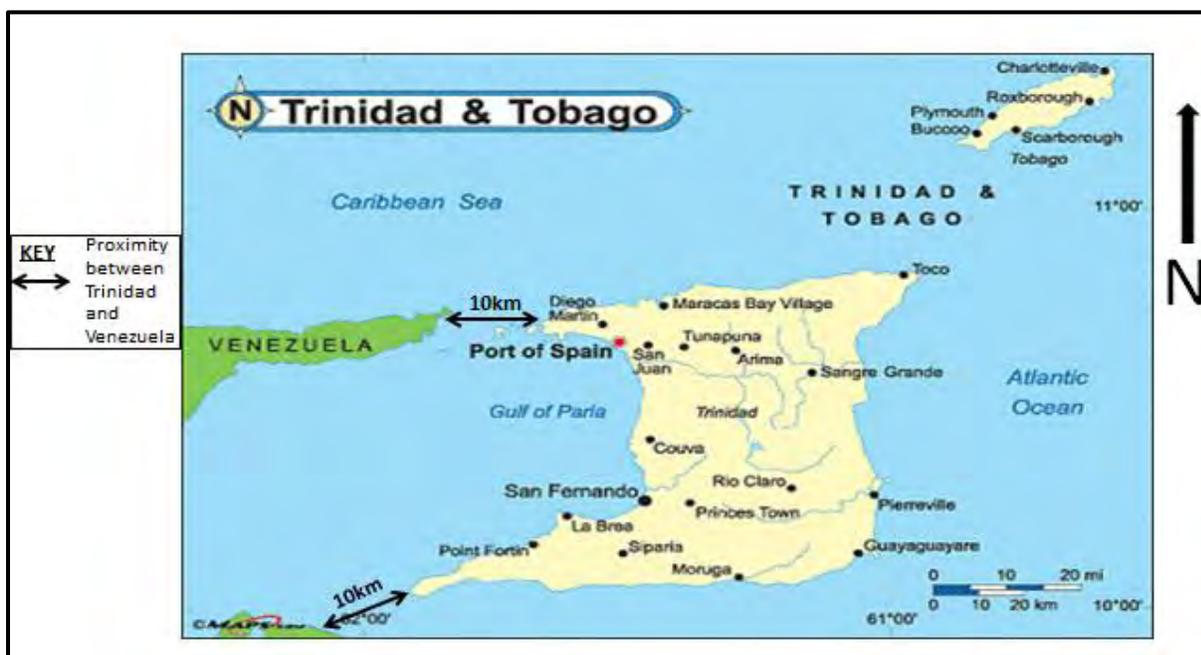
In 2014, the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) cited the porous borders of Trinidad and Tobago as contributing to its attractiveness as a transshipment point for illegal drugs.¹⁰ This is magnified by the fact that at the closest point, Venezuela lies a mere 10 km from Trinidad and Tobago as seen in Figure 1 below. As such, this proximity has led to the country becoming a major transshipment point for illegal substances heading north from South America.¹¹ In fact, narco-traffickers often transport drugs (cocaine) and firearms from Venezuela via go-fast boats and various other means. These commodities are then placed on container (cargo) ships, boats, yachts and even small aircrafts. When one looks at the magnitude of

¹⁰ US Department of State Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2014 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)

¹¹ US Department of State Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2014 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)

interdiction and seizures of illegal drugs and arms over the past decade or so, the results are glaring.

Figure 1 – Map Showing Trinidad in Relation to Venezuela



Source: Author

The TTPS Public Affairs Unit records indicate that in 2015, cocaine and marijuana seizures by police more than doubled over the past year.¹² In fact, records show that there was a 131 percent increase in cocaine seizures in 2005, while marijuana seizures went from 471kg to 1239kg seized for that same year, which marked an increase of 163 percent.¹³ According to the U.S Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), these narcotics figures, though sizable, only represented a small percentage of the approximately 2000kg that is

¹² Trinidad and Tobago Guardian Report “Drug seizures double over past year—TTPS” 13 August 2015

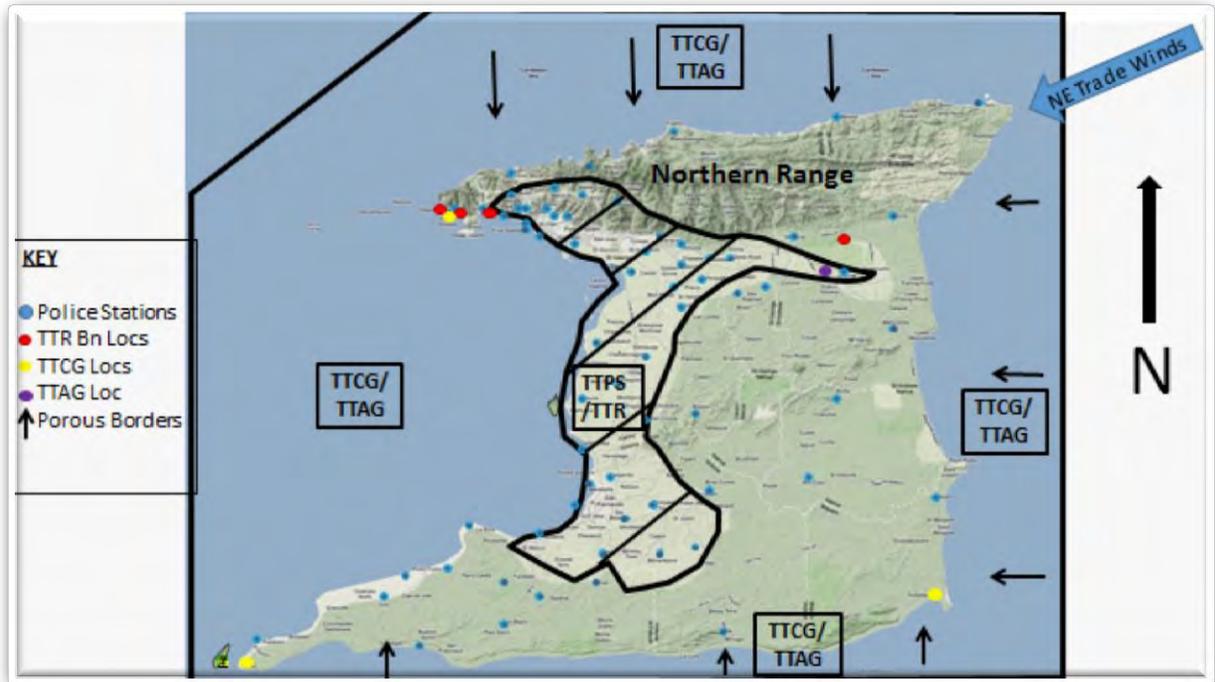
¹³ Ibid

believed to transit through the island on a monthly basis.¹⁴ To compound this issue, the level of corruption is very high within the law enforcement agencies and when one adds the challenges posed by the geographical disposition of military installations and police stations, the situation is alarming.

From a cursory look, the Defence Force and TTPS infrastructures and installations are concentrated predominantly to the Northwest and Western sides of the island, with minimal infrastructure elsewhere (see Figure 2 below). From the information shown, it can be argued that this disposition is interrelated to most of the main population centres however; it renders the Northern, Eastern and Southern coastal areas vulnerable to go fast boats, which are the main routes through which illegal drugs and firearms enter the country. Further, the large number of fishing villages and the topography in and around the identified areas also provide narcotraffickers with natural camouflage to mask their illegal activities.

¹⁴ Tom J Farer “Transnational Crime in the Americas” Psychology Press Page 153

Figure 2 - Disposition of TTDF and TTPS Installations



Source: Unknown

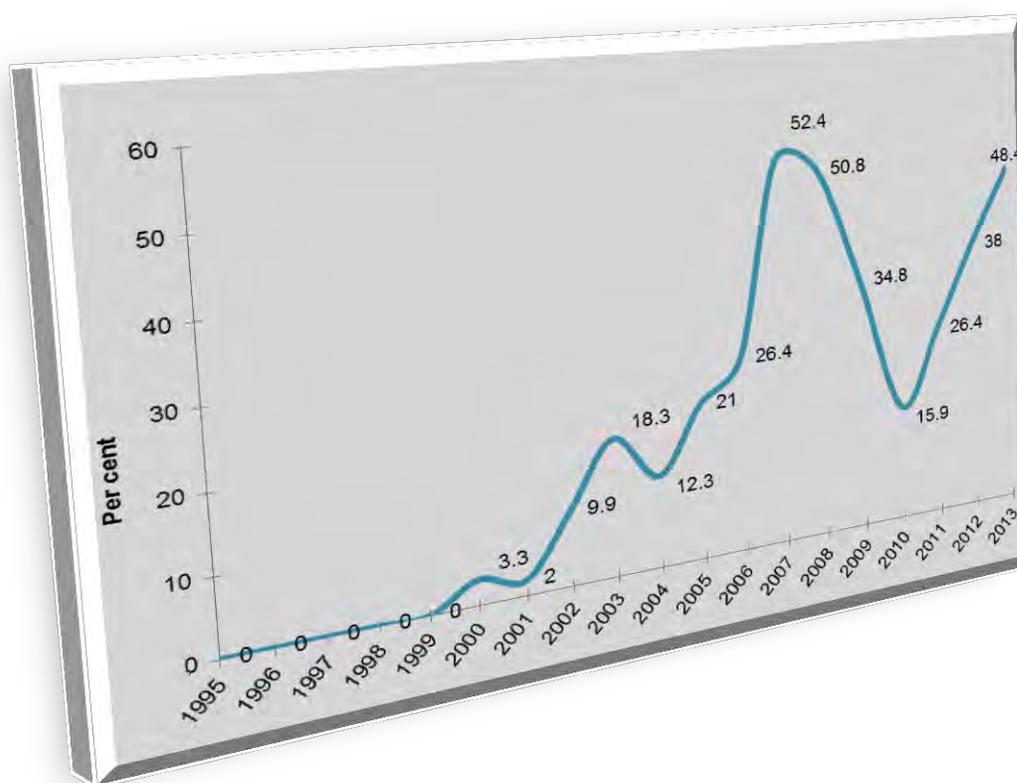
Narcotics Trafficking and its influences on Human Security

Human security in its general sense is multi-sectoral, addressing a range of interdependent global and local threats, insecurities and vulnerabilities. One of the dimensions of Human Security is that of personal security. Consequently, the illegal drug trade in the region has left the citizenry feeling insecure and vulnerable to crime and criminal activities, thereby affecting their personal security. In March 2007, a Joint Report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the World Bank stated that

the explanation for the relatively high rates of crime and violence in the region and their apparent rise in recent years is narcotics trafficking.¹⁵

Further analysis by the TTPS shows one of the major sources of revenue for criminal gangs in the country is the illegal drug trade, and posits that as they are directly linked to the influx of illegal firearms and the rate of homicide, as gangs fight to gain turf. Consequentially, this has led to an upsurge in gang violence and ultimately the increase in the number of gang related murders. (See figure 3 below)

Figure 3 - Gang Related Murders by Year and Percentage



Source: Crime and Problem Analysis Branch of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service

¹⁵ A Joint Report by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime and the Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the World Bank "Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean" March 2007

Large gangs in the Trinidad and Tobago such as Rasta City, Unruly ISIS and the Jamaat al Muslimeen has an approximate strength of more than 500 active members each. They are also the source behind assassinations, murders, kidnappings and other criminal activities that exist and are usually armed with assault Rifles and other small arms. Even so, the TTPS were successful in the removal of 585 firearms in 2014, 691 in 2015 and 765 firearms in 2016,¹⁶ the highest in the nation's history. However, these seizures have done little to curb the availability and supply of illegal firearms.¹⁷

Moreover, the economic crisis and instability in Venezuela has further exasperated the situation as firearms, cocaine and human trafficking were just some of the items which a Bloomberg reporter discovered in Trinidad during a report on the black market trade in Venezuela.¹⁸ In fact, the situation is so volatile that on a weekly basis hundreds of illegal immigrants from Venezuela are held and deported back to homeland, while several are being held with drugs and illegal firearms. This then further worsen an already bad crime situation and places another dimension of vulnerability on human security, that is, the possible transmission of viruses and diseases brought by illegal Venezuelan nationals.

Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force Current Outlook

The Armed Forces comprises the Trinidad and Tobago Regiment (TTR), Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard (TTCG), Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard (TTAG) and Trinidad and

¹⁶ Dorn Townsend "No Other Life: Gangs, Guns and Governance in Trinidad and Tobago" Small Arms Survey Working Paper 8 ,Pg 33-34

¹⁷ Press Conference by Senior Superintendent Radcliff Boxill, Officer in charge of the Criminal Investigation Department and Criminal Records Office of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service <http://www.tv6tnt.com/home/rotator/Police-Say-Gun-Seizures-Increasing--383167051.html?m=y&smobile=y>

¹⁸ Bloomberg Report, "Trinidad's black market trade with Venezuela" - 30 January 2018

Tobago Defence Force Reserves (TTDFR). Together, they are known as the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force (TTDF) and was established in 1962. The force was given several responsibilities; one such under the international agreement is to assist in the prevention of trafficking of narcotics and other illegal goods. Its strength stands at just over 6100 serving personnel. As such, the TTDF is a national instrument available to the state to exert power locally and regionally.

According to the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago, the Security Assistance (CARICOM) Act provides the TTDF with the authority and responsibility to promote a system of regional security to ensure the economic and social integrity of Member States.¹⁹ What this means is that the TTDF has a critical role in influencing and shaping the security architecture of not on the country, but also the CARICOM community.

In terms of the TTDF in combating the illegal drug trade, at present this occurs through Internal Security (IS) operations in the case of the TTR. The TTCG focuses primarily on counterdrug operation and the interdiction of drugs and illegal arms, surveillance operations and search and rescue operations. While the TTAG focuses primarily on reconnaissance and rescue operations in Trinidad and Tobago and throughout the English speaking Caribbean Region. These roles reflect the overall approach of the TTDF and the overall national approach to counterdrug operations and the assistance that's rendered regionally. The approach is fragmentary and is uncoordinated among the key stakeholders namely, the Defence Force, the Police Service, Customs and Excise, Immigration Division and international partners.

¹⁹ Defence Act Chapter 14:05 of the Laws of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the Security Assistance (CARICOM) Act Page 4 Part I

The Security Gap and the New Proposal Operational Design

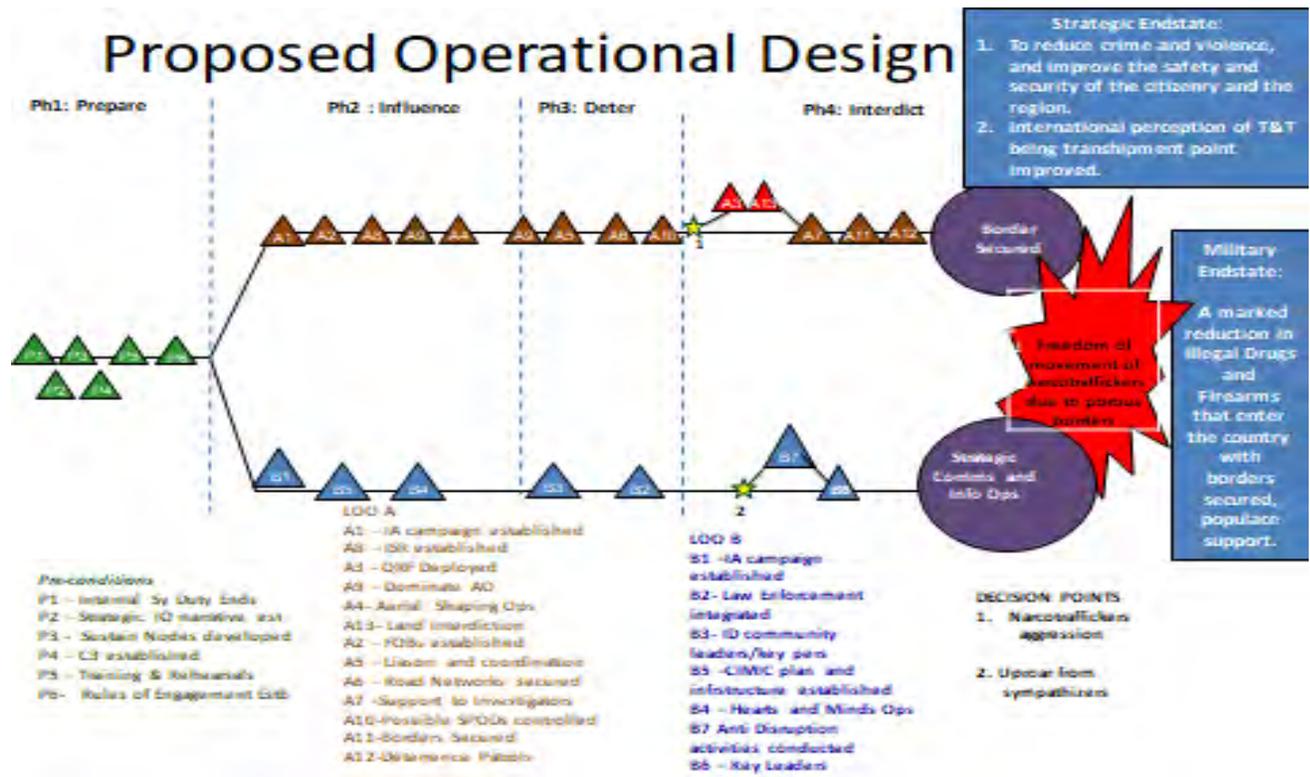
The illegal drug trade influences a wide range of multi sectorial issues however this paper focused on the military functions. As a nation, Trinidad and Tobago must hone its capacity and capability to utilize its power proportionally, while making best use of its limited resources in the fight against the illegal drug trade. As such, this calls for intelligence driven operations with assistance from International and Caribbean partners, which will then be filtered through the relevant operational command centres for planning purposes. While information shows that this occurs, the disposition of the land forces (Regiment) on IS duties was found to be a limiting factor and thus, reduced their capability to effectively respond in a timely manner. This security gap is of grave concern since its indirect effect is the inability to stem the flow of illegal drugs and firearms from entering the country. It further speaks to a lack of cohesion, cooperation and ineffective and inefficient use of resources.

In order to rectify the security gap, this paper proposes that the TTDF should be reassigned from IS duties to that of border security. In so doing, there would be a constant footprint at the more vulnerable points along the Northern, Eastern and Southern coasts, as well as the vegetated and forested areas in the vicinity that are often used as drop of points for further transportation inland or storage for onward transshipment. Ultimately, this would increase the chances of detection, deterrence and interdiction thereby achieving the strategic end state.

The TTPS, who recently restructured the service and made regular more than 2000 Special Reserve Police officers, should be capable of “policing” the areas where crime is prevalent. Additionally, the Customs and Excise (C&E) Division and Immigration would continue to operate with the TTCG and TTAG. The interoperability among agencies has already

begun and would auger well in the future. A new operational design is proposed at Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 – New Proposed Operational Design



Source: Author

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the role of the TTDF in combatting the illegal drug trade and identified that Trinidad and Tobago, based in its proximity to South America, was a major transshipment hub for drugs. Due to the transnational nature of the situation, it was found that Europe and North America narcotraffickers are culpable of using this strategic geographical landscape. It was recognized that a multi-agency integrated and synchronized methodology was

required to treat with the problem however, this paper only focused on one of the roles of the TTDF.

The available data were analyzed and several facts were realized as follows. Firstly, it was shown that the cause of the spike in crime and criminal activities were as a direct result of the proliferation of illegal drugs and firearms in the region, brought upon by narcotraffickers that frequent the region.²⁰ Secondly, the illegal drug trade is a major source of finance for traffickers and it's also used to finance other illegal activities throughout the society, thus negatively impacting human security. Thirdly, the increase in drug trafficking in the country has negative spinoffs in the form of crime, homicides and gang violence. Fourthly, the Caribbean Sea, with its many small islands, beaches, seashores, bays and inlets provides fertile ground for drug traffickers to conduct illegal activities and transship illegal cargoes. Lastly, the attractiveness as a transshipment hub was due to the proximity to Venezuela and the borders were porous due to the small footprint of law enforcement agencies and corruption. The Venezuelan economic crisis also contributed to the human security vulnerabilities. These variables make it difficult to detect narcotrafficking and inadvertently present a gap in the security architecture.

The disposition and deployment of the TTDF were analyzed and both the TTCG and TTAG were found to be effectively employed in the fight against the illegal drug trade. It was proposed that the TTDF should be reassigned from IS duties to that of border security. In so doing, there would be a constant footprint at the more vulnerable points along the Northern, Eastern and Southern coasts, as well as the vegetated and forested areas in the vicinity that are often used as drop of points for further transportation inland or storage for onward

²⁰ A Joint Report by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime and the Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the World Bank "Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean" March 2007

transshipment. Consequentially, this would reduce the availability of illegal drugs and firearms that fuels the gang warfare, crime and violence and ultimately would lead to a lower murder rate. Additionally, in order to be more effective and efficient, an integrated inter agency approach was proposed thus operations should include the Customs and Excise Division and the Immigration Division along with the TTPS, which would increase the probability detection, deterrence and interdiction. A new unit should be established whereby these agencies should come together and form a specialized unit and conduct training together on all aspects border security.

Additionally, a crucial takeaway should be policy and doctrine development for drug control with assistance from our key regional and international stakeholders. Although these initiatives were being ventilated, the limitations of the paper does not allow same thus, this can be a future task of the government. Ultimately, these efforts will demonstrate that Trinidad and Tobago is commitment to assist the security architecture of the region. This may be an example for other Caribbean nations who may be faced with similar challenges in formulating their counterdrug strategy. The resultant effect would be a strategy peace and stability in the region and plan that addresses the vulnerability of the country to the drug trade.

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