

## Archived Content

Information identified as archived on the Web is for reference, research or record-keeping purposes. It has not been altered or updated after the date of archiving. Web pages that are archived on the Web are not subject to the Government of Canada Web Standards.

As per the [Communications Policy of the Government of Canada](#), you can request alternate formats on the "[Contact Us](#)" page.

## Information archivée dans le Web

Information archivée dans le Web à des fins de consultation, de recherche ou de tenue de documents. Cette dernière n'a aucunement été modifiée ni mise à jour depuis sa date de mise en archive. Les pages archivées dans le Web ne sont pas assujetties aux normes qui s'appliquent aux sites Web du gouvernement du Canada.

Conformément à la [Politique de communication du gouvernement du Canada](#), vous pouvez demander de recevoir cette information dans tout autre format de rechange à la page « [Contactez-nous](#) ».

CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE / COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES  
JCSP 35 / PCEMI 35

EXERCISE NEW HORIZONS

“Narcotics Trafficking and its Impact on Central American Armed Forces”

By/par Major Asariel Loria

*This paper was written by a student attending the Canadian Forces College in fulfilment of one of the requirements of the Course of Studies. The paper is a scholastic document, and thus contains facts and opinions, which the author alone considered appropriate and correct for the subject. It does not necessarily reflect the policy or the opinion of any agency, including the Government of Canada and the Canadian Department of National Defence. This paper may not be released, quoted or copied, except with the express permission of the Canadian Department of National Defence.*

*La présente étude a été rédigée par un stagiaire du Collège des Forces canadiennes pour satisfaire à l'une des exigences du cours. L'étude est un document qui se rapporte au cours et contient donc des faits et des opinions que seul l'auteur considère appropriés et convenables au sujet. Elle ne reflète pas nécessairement la politique ou l'opinion d'un organisme quelconque, y compris le gouvernement du Canada et le ministère de la Défense nationale du Canada. Il est défendu de diffuser, de citer ou de reproduire cette étude sans la permission expresse du ministère de la Défense nationale.*

## **Abstract**

Central America served as the battle ground for proxy wars between the cold war powers. Drug trafficking emerged in the region immediately after the cold war, which has continued to challenge the peaceful way of life in the region. Criminal activity has gained momentum; security has become a challenge yet not enough is being done to improve the situation in the region. Drug trafficking and its effects have been disturbing in the region. Police forces have been overwhelmed and small sized armed forces are unable to effectively retaliate.

The post cold war Central American armed forces are in dire need of restructuring in order to retake lost ground to drug trafficking. The armed forces cannot effectively combat drug trafficking with its limited resources yet there is a widespread public perception that the security forces are inefficient. Security and prosperity appears to be difficult to achieve in the Central American Region. This essay considers drug trafficking issues that have direct and indirect impact on Central American armed forces and the need to modernize in order to return a safe and secure environment in the region.

## Introduction

The scourge of narcotics trafficking originating from South America with its final destination in North America has produced nefarious impacts in the Central American region. Cocaine has been cultivated and processed in countries such as Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia from the early 1980's due to its demand from North American consumers. Cocaine emerged as a significant export-earner for impoverished South American countries. Around 80 percent of the world's cocaine is produced in Colombia.<sup>1</sup> This has become a transnational issue posing a real threat to seven countries that compose the region.<sup>2</sup> Narcotics trafficking in the isthmus region has given rise to subsidiary threats such as weapons trafficking, gang violence, money laundering, perceived corruption among other threats that contribute to insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

Central American countries that were typically known as 'banana republics' have become 'cocaine republics' and are considered hubs that facilitate the passage of cocaine. Drug cartels in Colombia and Mexico have expanded their areas of influence and

---

<sup>1</sup>International Priorities, "Major Cocaine Producing and Trafficking Regions," <http://collections.europarchive.org/tna/20080205132101/www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front%3Fpagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1044901621747>; Internet; accessed 23 January 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Seven countries in Central America are: Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

<sup>3</sup>Kimberly L. Thachuk, "Transnational Threats, Smuggling and Trafficking in Arms and Human Life," Greenwood Publishing Group, (2007); available from [http://books.google.com/books?id=MpVOdP4XyuoC&pg=PA170&lpg=PA170&dq=transnational+threats+in+central+america&source=bl&ots=jEiDEnv9YJ&sig=FOju5ArnFQacJk3YATqqkXe6lmo&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=3&ct=result#PPA170,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=MpVOdP4XyuoC&pg=PA170&lpg=PA170&dq=transnational+threats+in+central+america&source=bl&ots=jEiDEnv9YJ&sig=FOju5ArnFQacJk3YATqqkXe6lmo&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=3&ct=result#PPA170,M1); Internet; accessed 23 January 2009

networks, operating with impunity and having little respect for Central American security forces and the rule of law. As a result, some Central American countries have fallen victims of drug trafficking and other threats associated with this illegal trade.<sup>4</sup>

Eradication of cocaine has proven a complex and difficult venture since it would affect the very livelihood of growers in South America. Eradication strategies have been implemented but failed.<sup>5</sup> When cocaine plantations have been eradicated, new fields are planted elsewhere. Eradication would perhaps be effective providing that efforts were placed on crop substitution, which would guarantee modest income earnings. Robust and credible security forces would have to engage drug traffickers and cartels that destabilize the South and Central American regions.<sup>6</sup> It appears that efforts for demand reduction in consumption of cocaine are marginal. Consumption demand of cocaine from the United States has been on the rise and its reduction is difficult to achieve. Past U.S. administrations focused on the ‘root cause’ hopelessly trying to achieve demand reduction. The U.S. approach has been the use of security forces as a key instrument for demand reduction in the North American region. A valid assumption is that the

---

<sup>4</sup>Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “The Coke Report Guatemala: The Crown Prince of Central America’s Drug Trafficking,” [http://www.coha.org/NEW\\_PRESS\\_RELEASES/New\\_Press\\_Releases\\_2005/CokeReport%20the%20one.htm](http://www.coha.org/NEW_PRESS_RELEASES/New_Press_Releases_2005/CokeReport%20the%20one.htm); Internet; accessed 23 January 2009.

<sup>5</sup>Witness for Peace, “Forced Manual Eradication: The Latest in the Failed U.S. Drug War in Colombia,” <http://witnessforpeace.org/downloads/2008ColFME.pdf>; Internet; accessed 9 April 9, 2009.

<sup>6</sup>Donald J. Mabry, “Latin American Narcotics Trade and Hemispheric Security,” <http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=746>; Internet; accessed; 23 January 2009.

'root cause' may point in the direction that not enough is being done in continental U.S. to dissuade American citizens from drug consumption.<sup>7</sup> Many decades have passed by with rhetorical declarations such as 'war on drugs,' however, drug trafficking persists and has gained momentum, which has surpassed the expectations of Central American nations and the capabilities of its security forces.

South American nations will inevitably continue with the trend of cocaine production as long as it remains a lucrative business. The current programs to reduce drug consumption in the United States have been futile. Billions of dollars have been spent on the war on drugs strategy; meanwhile, drug treatment is shockingly unavailable for many U.S. citizens who request it.<sup>8</sup> It can be argued that cocaine cultivation in South America and consumption in North America has become a norm. The dynamic behaviour of the two subcontinents has 'compressed' the Central American nations with overwhelming effects. The impoverished Central American region has been pushed yet into another struggle immediately after the cold war.<sup>9</sup> Central American security forces are grappling with drug trafficking and other contemporary threats as a direct consequence of failed drug eradication policies in North and South America.

---

<sup>7</sup>Sayaka Fukumi, *Cocaine Trafficking in Latin America: EU and US Policy Responses* (England: Burlington, VT, 2008), 137-138.

<sup>8</sup>Global Exchange, "Programs in the Americas: The Failed Drug War," <http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/americas/colombia/failedDrugWar.html>; Internet; accessed 23 January 2009.

<sup>9</sup>Craig Delaval, "Drug Wars: Cocaine Conspiracy Theories and the Central Intelligence Agency in Central America," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/special/cia.html>; Internet, accessed 23 January 2009.

The perceived inefficiency of Central American law enforcement institutions has forced the Central American democratic governments to use the military instrument of national power to assist in drug trafficking interdiction process.<sup>10</sup> Military anti drug initiatives have been mounted to combat narcotics trafficking and other associated threats, but their small sizes and equipment are unsuited for drug interdiction purposes.

**This essay will, therefore, demonstrate the need to modernize Central American armed forces in order to effectively combat narcotics trafficking in the region.** The effects of narcotics trafficking in the region will be highlighted, which in turn will provide a better standpoint to justify the modernization of the armed forces. Since narcotics trafficking corridors are known to have a direct impact on Central American military forces' response and interdiction capability; it will be ascertained how these corridors are strategically exploited to effectively transport drugs to North America. Consideration will be taken on the effects narco-traffickers exert while operating in the region. This paper will also synthesize the effectiveness of Central American armed forces against drug trafficking with a view to point some recommendations that may improve interdiction efforts in the region. Narco-trafficking is a threat that affects the entire world; however, this study will focus on the Central American region.

---

<sup>10</sup>Richard L Millett and Orlando J Pérez, "New Threats and old dilemmas: Central America's Armed Forces in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Journal of Mil and Pol Sociology*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (Summer 2005): 60; <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=887580071&SrchMode=2&sid=14&Fmt=6&VInst=PROT&ype=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1224214074&clientId=1711&cfc=1>; Internet; accessed 9 January 09.

## The effects of Narcotics Trafficking

Central America is trapped between the world's major supplier of cocaine - Colombia and the world's prime consumer, the United States.<sup>11</sup> Drug trafficking is not an American problem as it's commonly interpreted and it has been proven that it cannot be tackled unilaterally, but needs attention of the international community.<sup>12</sup> The countries of Central America are diverse, but share a sombre threat: all are affected to some extent by drugs and drug trafficking. Threats of a transnational nature have emerged and others strengthened as a result of drug trafficking such as weapons smuggling, money laundering, human smuggling and organized crime. These threats have further decayed the social fabric of Central American nations. The countries of the region are vulnerable to these threats due to socio-economic factors resulting from income inequality, urbanization, poverty, unemployment, easy access to supply of guns and recovery from the post-cold war era.<sup>13</sup> The United Nations report on threats which are attributed to drugs stated that:

Crime and corruption flourish while development lags. Where crime and corruption reign and drug money perverts the economy, the State no longer has a monopoly on the use of force and citizens no longer

---

<sup>11</sup>United Nations Information Service, "Violent Crime and Drug Trafficking Pose Serious Threats to Development in Central America, UNODC Warns," <http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2007/unisnar1003.html>; Internet; accessed 24 January 2009.

<sup>12</sup>Aram Barra, "Drug Trafficking: From the war on drugs to viable solutions of drug trafficking in Mexico," <http://www.scribd.com/doc/409779/Drug-Trafficking>; Internet; accessed 24 January 2009.

<sup>13</sup>United Nations Information Service, "Violent Crime..."



trust their leaders and public institutions. As a result, the social contract is in tatters and people take the law into their own hands.<sup>14</sup>

A study conducted in El Salvador placed the total national cost of violent behaviour at 11.5 per cent of GDP. Crime is associated with certain social and economic factors and widespread poverty, all of which are present in Central America.<sup>15</sup> Countries in Central America are saturated with firearms due to decades of civil wars triggered by the cold war era. Violent gangs have surfaced as a new phenomenon, which can be largely attributed to the drug trade. Gang violence has resulted in a major social challenge in countries such as Guatemala El Salvador, Honduras and Belize.<sup>16</sup> These gangs were structured by deportees from the United States who gained their knowledge and experience after serving with major gangs in cities such as Los Angeles and New York. Migration from Central America to the United States was high during the cold war. Unfortunately, those Central American offenders were deported to their countries of origin. Central America became the 'junk yard' of skilled criminals who took advantage of the wobbly insecurity situation and started the architecture of well structured gang

---

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>Satya R. Pattnayak and Lowell S. Gustafson, *National and Human Security Issues in Latin America* (United Kingdom: the Edwin Mellen Press Ltd., 2006), 205.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

networks.<sup>17</sup> There is an estimated 100,000 gang members throughout Central America intricately networked to fulfill transnational criminal offences. Law enforcement agencies have been unsuccessful in restraining them. These gangs have under their jurisdiction migration and smuggling routes toward the Mexican border. They also provide secure passageways for trafficking of drugs and weapons across borders.<sup>18</sup>

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Executive Director said that in order to reverse some of the effects that drug trafficking is causing in the region; it would be necessary to implement a programme of action to minimize the impact of drugs and crime in Central America. UNODC Executive Director further stated:

I urge all States of the region, as well as all those with a stake in its stability and prosperity, to agree on a strategic and operational framework to break the links between drugs, crime, and under-development in this region. Many of the region's problems can only be solved from outside, particularly in reducing the supply and demand for drugs. Others require strong domestic political leadership. Cooperation is vital. The problems are too big, too inter-linked and too dangerous to be left to individual States.<sup>19</sup>

Drug trafficking is rampant in the region since judicial systems are not well resourced.

The ratio between police officers in relation to population is disproportionate, therefore,

---

<sup>17</sup>Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Central America's Increasing Gang Problem: A Comforting Handshake Needed as much as a Tough Fist to Fight Crime Epidemic"  
<http://www.coha.org/2007/07/central-america%e2%80%99s-increasing-gang-problem-a-comforting-handshake-needed-as-much-as-a-tough-fist-to-fight-crime-epidemic/>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2009.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>United Nations Information Service, "Violent Crime..."

law enforcement appears to be inadequate. This disparity encourages criminal organizations to operate with impunity.<sup>20</sup> The effects of narcotics trafficking in the region arguably, has reinvigorated threats such as human smuggling, weapons, contraband and has caused the emergence of new threats such as gangs and organized transnational criminal networks.

### **Narcotics trafficking Corridors**

It is important to understand the strategic use of corridors that drug cartels utilize in the Central American region. Central American Law enforcement agencies and armed forces have been unsuccessful in drug interdiction due to the sophistication in which drug cartels thrust their cargo towards the north. It is estimated that 75 – 100 metric tonnes of cocaine and 7,000 – 12,000 metric tonnes of marijuana are consumed per year by U.S. citizens.<sup>21</sup> There are three main corridors that are used by drug cartels to gain access into the U.S. markets. These corridors are the Atlantic Ocean, the Central American Isthmus and the Pacific Ocean. There are ungoverned spaces in these vast regions but arguably the Central American corridor offers the least resistance. This corridor is commonly used due to its proximity with Mexico where powerful Mexican drug cartels ensure that the cargo reaches its final destination.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>Donald J. Mabry, “Latin American...

<sup>22</sup>Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “The Coke Report...

Narcotics' trafficking is made a lot easier in the region since transportation is possible by land air and sea or a combination of these routes. Typically, a combination of routes is normally taken by Colombian traffickers who fly their cargo into bordering Central American countries with Mexico. The cargo is then trucked at illegal border crossings into Mexico. Drug traffickers also employ high powered outboard 'go fast' boats to navigate along the Central American coastline. The Yucatan peninsula is often used as intermediate transit points where small sea vessels release their loads that vanish into Mexico.<sup>23</sup> Belize and Guatemala are deemed strategic points for drug consignments destined for North America because these countries offer a suitable staging area, both by land and sea between the Central American Isthmus and North America.<sup>24</sup> This staging area is exploited by South American drug traffickers with the collaboration of local drug traffickers and Mexican cartels. The small Security forces of both Guatemala and Belize have proved inadequate in combating the narcotics trafficking trend.

These corridors also have a similarity with the 'balloon effect' in South American countries. The balloon effect has been described as squeezing a portion of the balloon, which will bulge elsewhere. When cocaine plants are eradicated in a given area, other

---

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>U.S. Department of Defence, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report." Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement affairs, (March 2006), <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2006/vol1/html/62107.htm>; Internet; accessed 6 January 2009.

fields are cultivated elsewhere in cocaine producing countries.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, when security forces of the Caribbean region apply pressure in the Atlantic corridor, narco-traffickers shift their operations in Central America or the Pacific corridors. Arguably, a regional strategy would be desirable where countries of the Caribbean, Central America, North America and South American security forces would pool their resources and simultaneously eradicate, interdict and vigorously pursue demand reduction efforts in major consuming nations. Such a strategy could prevent the balloon effect of narcotics trafficking in the Central American region.

There have been bilateral strategies and treaties between the United States and other countries such as Mexico (Merida Initiative), Colombia (Plan Patriota), Guatemala among others with little success in curbing the drug trade.<sup>26</sup> These bilateral strategies as opposed to a grand regional strategy would be difficult to synchronize and achieve, therefore, the Central American corridor will inextricable, continue to experience the balloon effect of narcotics trafficking. Interdiction efforts will undoubtedly continue to

---

<sup>25</sup>Plan Colombia and Beyond, “That Stubborn Balloon Effect”  
<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/blog/archives/000044.htm>; Internet; accessed 7 February 2009.

<sup>26</sup>Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “Plan Patriota: What \$700 Million in U.S. Cash Will and Will Not Buy You in Colombia”  
[http://www.coha.org/NEW\\_PRESS\\_RELEASES/New\\_Press\\_Releases\\_2006/06.26\\_Plan\\_Patriota.html](http://www.coha.org/NEW_PRESS_RELEASES/New_Press_Releases_2006/06.26_Plan_Patriota.html);  
Internet; accessed 7 February 2009.

be an essential task of Central American armed forces that are perceived to have adequate air, land and sea resources by their respective governments.

### **Effectiveness of Narcotics Trafficking Networks**

There is a perception that narco-traffickers are always a step ahead of security forces in the region. Drug cartels that control the drug trafficking routes in Central America are intricately and secretly interconnected. It is believed that Central America does not have drug cartels with the exception of Guatemala.<sup>27</sup> Mexican drug cartels, however, are highly organized and have taken over control of trafficking routes.<sup>28</sup> These cartels have established links with gangs and other criminal networks to facilitate the smooth passage through Central America into Mexico and the United States. These highly organized drug cartels are presently being threatened by the government of Mexico in the fight against drugs. It is anticipated that due to their well established links in Central America, Mexican cartels will rely on Central American drug trafficking networks to continue with their illicit activities. Furthermore, these cartels could relocate and use Central America as a base for operations. These would mean that resources as

---

<sup>27</sup>Reuters Foundation, "Guatemala's Colom to Attack Drug Gangs"  
<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N05305028.htm>; Internet; accessed 10 February 2009.

<sup>28</sup>PBH, "Colombia, Mexico: Taking the drug fight to Central America"  
<http://poorbuthappy.com/colombia/post/colombia-mexico-taking-the-drug-fight-to-central-america/>;  
Internet; accessed 10 February 2009.

well as their culture of corruption will be firmly planted in the region.<sup>29</sup> The relocation of these cartels is likely since Central American countries do not have the resources such as Mexico, Colombia or the United States to effectively combat drug trafficking.

Panama and Guatemala's combined defence budget amount to three hundred and sixty four million dollars while that of Mexico and Colombia amount to seven billion dollars.<sup>30</sup>

There is a marked difference in these countries' economies; therefore, the fragile Central American region has the potential to become a battlefield similar or worse than the ongoing situation in Mexico.

Due to economic benefits, drug traffickers have access and employ an array of equipment. It is difficult to ascertain the revenues earned from the drug trade. Experts estimate that South American drug traffickers' annual income can be in the range of three to five billion dollars.<sup>31</sup> Their equipment varies from improvised boats to sophisticated assets such as airplanes and submarines.<sup>32</sup> These traffickers employ the latest communications and technology such as satellite phones, global positioning systems, night vision devices in their improvised transports. A senior Nicaraguan army

---

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>Donald J. Mabry, "Latin American..."

<sup>32</sup>BBC News: Drug Submarine found in Colombia, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/915059.stm>; Internet; accessed 09 April 9, 2009.

commander stated that, “The smugglers are better equipped than our own forces. The narcotic activity has an abundance of money that their boats and planes have become all but disposable; they use them once and then throw them away.”<sup>33</sup> A fascinating aspect of drug traffickers in-transiting through the Central American region is that they are always lightly armed. Some small arms used are easy to acquire such as AK rifles, M-16 rifles, 9 millimetre pistols and light rocket launchers. It is believed that they travel light and their habitual intent is to evade security forces at all costs. The weapons are often used in emergencies especially where confrontations with security forces are unavoidable.<sup>34</sup>

There are various tactics that drug trafficking networks employ as their modus operandi to deliver their cargo by sea air and land. The drug flow by sea which is believed to be the preferred method of transport originates from Colombia by means of ‘go fast’ vessels. These vessels are outfitted with two to five powerful outboard engines, which are capable of transporting approximately one or two metric tons of cocaine.<sup>35</sup> The vessels in-transit the Central American coastal zone until it reaches the reef system near Guatemala, Belize and the southern portion of the Yucatan Peninsula. Taking advantage of the numerous atolls and small islands in Belizean territorial waters, the cargo is divided in small portions and off-loaded into smaller vessels. The main vessel is often sunk and abandoned in order to avoid detection. The smaller vessels transport their

---

<sup>33</sup>Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “The Coke Report...”

<sup>34</sup>Donald J. Mabry, “Latin American...”

<sup>35</sup>U.S. Department of Defence, “International Narcotics...”



cargo into mainland where Mexican drug cartels continue with the 'relay race' until it reaches the customers in North America.<sup>36</sup>

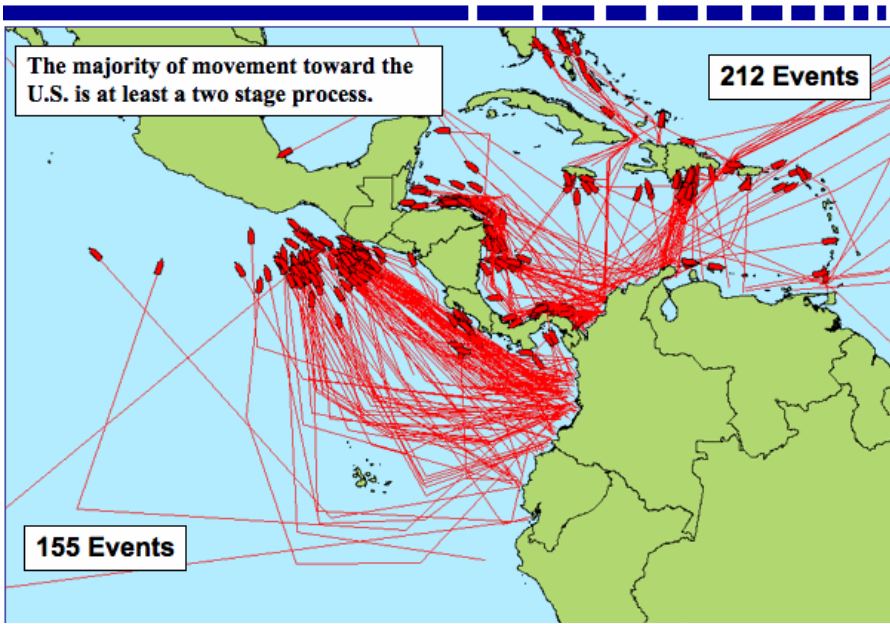


Figure 1 - Suspected maritime activity for 2007 in Central America  
Source: The Center for International Policy's: Colombia Program

Since there still exists air surveillance vulnerability in the Central American region, air routes are exploited by the drug trafficking organizations. The use of small aircraft such as King Air and Cessna types were once a preferred way of transporting

---

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

drugs through Central America into the United States.<sup>37</sup> However, drug trafficking organizations are now using isolated airstrips located in remote and ungoverned areas in Guatemala and other bordering countries with Mexico. Narco-traffickers are now even more intrepid that they have employed Antonov type aircraft, which they land or crash-land at these remote sites.<sup>38</sup> The drugs are offloaded from the aircraft for further transportation into Mexico. The use of air and sea routes has formed a trend in the modus operandi of drug traffickers.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that Belize and Guatemala are pivotal points that are used as ‘relay points’ for cocaine consignments to be yanked into Mexico.

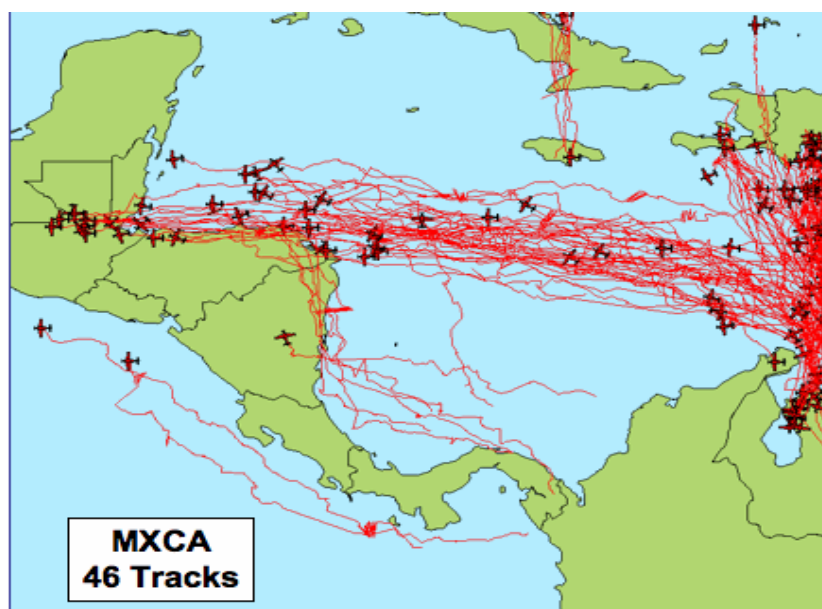


Figure 2 - Suspected air activity for 2007 in Central America  
Source: The Center for International Policy's: Colombia Program

---

<sup>37</sup>U.S. Department of Justice: Drug Enforcement Administration, “Drug Intelligence Brief: Country Brief: Guatemala”  
[http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/Guatemala\\_Country\\_Brief\\_Drug\\_Situation\\_Report.pdf](http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/Guatemala_Country_Brief_Drug_Situation_Report.pdf); Internet; accessed 11 February 2009.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

Drug trafficking organizations also use overland vehicles in the Central American region even though it's a risky venture since there are tighter control points by security forces inland. Vehicles such as trailers, tanker trucks, passenger buses and private cars are used to move drugs through the region.<sup>40</sup> Drug peddlers, through careful planning and cunningness hide their cargo in compartments, fuel tanks, and tires of vehicles.<sup>41</sup> Also, drug traffickers use couriers to smuggle cocaine on commercial aircraft and passenger buses into Mexico. Couriers use many methods to conceal the drugs such as swallowing pellets (also known as mules), concealing drugs in personal items or attached in belts around their waist among other techniques to evade law enforcement authorities.<sup>42</sup>

### **Effectiveness of Central American Armed Forces in Combating Drug Trafficking**

Since the increased production of cocaine and its trafficking backdates from the early 1980's, the United States has granted assistance in many forms to Central American countries to combat the threat. An array of support has been provided ranging from training, materiel, financial aid, special advisors that have not yielded a credible deterrence in the fight against drug trafficking. Central American armed forces such as Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama and Guatemala were fully engaged during the

---

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>41</sup>U.S. Department of Defence, "International Narcotics..."

<sup>42</sup>U.S. Department of Justice: Drug Enforcement Administration, "Drug Intelligence..."

cold war era. These countries were plagued with military coups and civil unrest, which produced guerrilla factions that challenged government administrations. There were strong efforts from the United States to preserve democracy in the region, therefore, considerable assistance was given to equip and modernize the armed forces. Ministers of Defence were high ranking officers appointed by Presidents. The armed forces were, therefore, subordinated to one civilian political figure. This form of government made the region's militaries highly influential and were heavily involved in the political decision making process of their countries.<sup>43</sup>

Central American militaries were robust as a direct result of the cold war and were focused to fight the immediate threat of political instability. The military powers of Central America boasted an inflated personnel strength in the early 1990's: Nicaragua - 86,000 personnel, Guatemala - 46,000 troops, and El Salvador - 63,000 troops.<sup>44</sup> The end of the cold war marked the demobilization of these armed forces. Domestic opposition and a shift of U.S. policy in the region after the cold war caused a drastic reduction in grants, budget and personnel of the armed forces.<sup>45</sup> The reduction was so severe since

---

<sup>43</sup>J. Mark Ruhl, "Curbing Central America's Militaries." *Journal of Democracy* (July 2004): 137; <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=9&did=672333671&SrchMode=2&sid=3&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1224213198&clientId=1711>; Internet; accessed 14 February 2009.

<sup>44</sup>Richard L Millett and Orlando J Pérez, "New Threats...", 59.

<sup>45</sup>J. Mark Ruhl, "Curbing Central...", 137.

countries' armed forces had no more than 15,000 troops.<sup>46</sup> The reduction also meant the demobilisation and destruction or reassignment of equipment to National Civil Police forces. The drastic dismantling of armed forces was also conducted to strengthen civilian authority and to curtail military human rights abuses as part of peace negotiations. The notion of having small militaries would prevent further coups and human rights abuses.<sup>47</sup> Most militaries with the exception of Guatemala were also subordinated to a civilian Minister of Defence that deprived the military from direct political influence. It was deemed necessary to place military institutions under civilian control since such institutions are inherently undemocratic with strict chain of commands that could threaten democracy.<sup>48</sup> The armed forces were restructured and charged with the main task of safeguarding territorial integrity.

The inability of police forces to deter the threat of drug trafficking resulted in an additional task for the armed forces. The small and poorly equipped armies have been battling with the contemporary threat of drug trafficking with modest success. Drug traffickers, fully cognizant of weaknesses on Central American militaries have been exploiting success without major opposition. The abolition of armed forces in Panama and Costa Rica placed the fight on drugs squarely on the shoulders of their police forces.

---

<sup>46</sup>Richard L Millett and Orlando J Pérez, "New Threats...", 59.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>48</sup>Michael C. Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 5.

Costa Rica was the first country to demobilize its military followed by Panama with the U.S. overthrow of Manuel Noriega. The vulnerability of these two countries is obvious without the military factor that could assist in deterring the threat. Furthermore, the police forces of Costa Rica and Panama are the only line of defence and if overwhelmed, there are no other credible forces capable of shouldering the threat.

### **The Way Ahead**

Given that the armed forces are directly impacted by the narcotics threat, the present personnel strength of militaries in the region are insufficient to deal with territorial and sovereignty issues as well as the enormous task of drug interdiction. The Central American forces need to be doubled or tripled to maintain a drug free region. Strengthening Central American armed forces would require increasing defence expenditures. Governments are often hesitant to increase defence budgets, but the present security environment is unstable and could get worse if overlooked. The U.S. is aware of these shortfalls in the region and has maintained military bases in Soto Cano, Honduras and Comalapa in El Salvador.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, current U.S. forces in the region with intent to bolster drug interdiction efforts have not been promising.<sup>50</sup> Former U.S.

---

<sup>49</sup>Alex Sanchez, "Honduras Becomes a U.S. Foothold for Central America." North American Congress on Latin America (November 2006); <http://nacla.org/node/1425>; Internet; accessed 20 February 2009.

Diplomat and expert in the region Ernesto Uribe stated that, “In order for a U.S. military presence to be effective, they would need about as many troops as they have in Afghanistan. There is simply no military solution to the drug war. The problem with drugs is the demand for them in the U.S....”<sup>51</sup> The stigma of violent military repression during the cold war could easily be averted while increasing the strength of the military through continued military subordination to civilian rule. New approaches in training to professionalize militaries are ongoing and essential with particular attention in attitude change.<sup>52</sup>

The U.S. has not demonstrated the same level of support to Central American countries as was the case during the cold war. A vital necessity for the region which is most evident is information sharing that has not been well developed by its armed forces. The establishment of a regional armed forces intelligence centre to share information has not been established. Information sharing on drug related issues is limited due to limited resources and a lack of proper regional intelligence architecture. The establishment of a regional intelligence centre would provide the network and use of technology can be maximized in the exchange of information. Recently there have been some initiatives such as the establishment of an airspace control network that has somewhat curtailed air drug trafficking. The Counter Narcotics Information Exchange Network consists of a

---

<sup>50</sup>Adam Isacson, “Foreign Policy in Focus: Central America Peace and Security.” Interhemispheric Resource Center and Institute for Policy Studies, Vol. 2 No. 6 (January 1997): 2, <http://www.fpip.org/briefs/vol2/v2n6cap.html>; Internet; accessed 19 February 2009.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

series of computer air monitoring terminals manned in each Central American country. Air information is exchanged particularly of location, identification, tracking and intercepting of aircraft originating from Colombia and Venezuela en-route to Central America. This initiative has resulted in significant air interdiction particularly in Belize, Guatemala and Honduras.<sup>53</sup> The region, however, lacks a system that would yield the same results for sea operations. Defence budget of these nations are inadequate to provide a regional monitoring system (radar or satellite imagery) that would further diminish drug trafficking by sea. The U.S. Government was generous in granting the Counter Narcotics Information Exchange System and undisputedly has the economic means to provide yet another pivotal initiative such as a sea monitoring information exchange network.

Central America also took an initiative on its own by regionalizing their armed forces. Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala have formed a military alliance called, “Central American Armed Forces Conference.” The purpose of this conference is to integrate regional defence policy and cooperation at the economic and political level.<sup>54</sup> This alliance is in its infancy stage but is committed to change their military doctrine and strengthen democratic values. It is aimed at reducing historical disputes between

---

<sup>52</sup>Andrew P. Miller, *The Case of El Salvador: Military Disengagement and democratic Consolidation in Post Military regimes* (United Kingdom: the Edwin Mellen Press Ltd., 2006), 90.

<sup>53</sup>U.S. Department of Defence, “International Narcotics...”

<sup>54</sup>Global Strategic Analysis, “Central America: Military Integration.” Oxford Analytica, (December 1997), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=29&did=568339201&SrchMode=1&sid=5&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD>



countries within the region.<sup>55</sup> A milestone was achieved since the inception of the CAAFC, nevertheless, it should provide the basis in the near future on ways to tackle regional threats such as drug trafficking. Arguably, the CAAFC could provide the foundation for the construct of the intelligence architecture, pool resources, and generation of operational plans aimed at curtailing threats.

In the near future, initiatives such as regional military strategies could also be considered, which would perhaps focus or embark drug trafficking interdiction efforts. The region appears to be slowly reacting instead of being proactive against common threats. Drug traffickers have formed complex networks and cartels and Central American militaries followed by forming an alliance not intended to fight the narcotics trafficking but could be included on their agenda once the alliance is well bonded.

Central America underwent challenging times during the Cold War era and the population is now being challenged by an overwhelming threat. Drug trafficking in the region can further erode the social fabric and strengthen other transnational threats, which can pose governance issues. Drug traffickers have been successful in their illegal trade, which is obvious since they have permeated police forces whose professionalism is now in question. They are intricately networked and possess relatively superior technology

---

[&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1224213600&clientId=1711](#); Internet; accessed 19 February 2009.

<sup>55</sup>Global Strategic Analysis, "Central America: Military Integration." Oxford Analytica, (December 1997), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=29&did=568339201&SrchMode=1&sid=5&Fmt=3&VInst=PROV&Type=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1224213600&clientId=1711>; Internet; accessed 19 February 2009.

than most security forces of the region. They have the flexibility to shift their operating patterns through improvisation and creativity and usually exploit ungovernable areas to achieve their end state. Cartels are well financed, which is the driving force to keep bolstering their operations to yield quantifiable profits.<sup>56</sup> These are some of many more issues, which demonstrate the need to modernize Central American armed forces. Flagrant operations by drug traffickers in the region have a direct impact on small sized and ill equipped armed forces that are unable to provide a credible deterrence. Urgent attention should be given to security forces in order to reverse or stem the current trend. Measures of effectiveness should be implemented with emphasis on improved governance, security and prosperity. Once significant reduction of the threat is achieved, the task should revert to police forces, which would be another indicator of success.

## **Conclusion**

The effects of drug trafficking has affected the youth of the impoverished region due to socio economic inequality. The high unemployment rate has made it easier for gangs to recruit and expand their criminal organizations. Some South American countries have been natural growers of cocaine plants but the processing and trafficking has brought new threats to Central America. Drug trafficking in the region has overwhelmed law enforcement institutions that were unable to cope with interdiction efforts for several reasons. The task was inevitably passed to the armed forces that were

---

<sup>56</sup>MSNBC: Cocaine Cartel Man Pleads Guilty in U.S., <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28816065>; Internet; accessed 9 April 2009.

perceived to have the potential to deal with the complexities of this threat. The geographical location gives a marked advantage to drug traffickers that have outperformed security forces. The use of equipment ranges from improvised to extremely sophisticated and their cunningness to evade security forces have made them successful. Central American drug trafficking organizations have formed networks with Mexican cartels that facilitate entry into Mexico. A growing concern is the present war on drugs in Mexico, which can spill over into Central America. The relocation of Mexican drug cartel bases would be detrimental to Central America since it would cause a direct collision with small sized and inadequately equipped armed forces. There have been some U.S. initiatives that have been positive in drug interdiction. Regrettably for the region, U.S. interests appear to be focused elsewhere in the world, which has given the upper hand to drug traffickers that have capitalized to use the Central American corridor with minimum interference. This paper has pointed on indicators that demonstrate the necessity to modernize Central American armed forces in order to effectively combat narcotics trafficking in the region. The strong dependence on the United States ought to be gradually minimized and the region should explore strategies that will be of a common good such as the Conference of Central American Armed Forces.

## Bibliography

- Barra, Aram. "Drug Trafficking: From the war on drugs to viable solutions of drug trafficking in Mexico," <http://www.scribd.com/doc/409779/Drug-Trafficking>; Internet; accessed 24 January 2009.
- Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Central America's Increasing Gang Problem: A Comforting Handshake Needed as much as a Tough Fist to Fight Crime Epidemic" <http://www.coha.org/2007/07/central-america%e2%80%99s-increasing-gang-problem-a-comforting-handshake-needed-as-much-as-a-tough-fist-to-fight-crime-epidemic/>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2009.
- Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Plan Patriota: What \$700 Million in U.S. Cash Will and Will Not Buy You in Colombia" [http://www.coha.org/NEW\\_PRESS\\_RELEASES/New\\_Press\\_Releases\\_2006/06.26\\_Plan\\_Patriota.html](http://www.coha.org/NEW_PRESS_RELEASES/New_Press_Releases_2006/06.26_Plan_Patriota.html); Internet; accessed 7 February 2009.
- Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "The Coke Report Guatemala: The Crown Prince of Central America's Drug Trafficking," [http://www.coha.org/NEW\\_PRESS\\_RELEASES/New\\_Press\\_Releases\\_2005/CokeReport%20the%20one.htm](http://www.coha.org/NEW_PRESS_RELEASES/New_Press_Releases_2005/CokeReport%20the%20one.htm); Internet; accessed 23 January 2009.
- Delaval, Craig. "Drug Wars: Cocaine Conspiracy Theories and the Central Intelligence Agency in Central America," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/special/cia.html>; Internet, accessed 23 January 2009.
- Desch, Michael C. *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Fukumi, Sayaka. *Cocaine Trafficking in Latin America: EU and US Policy Responses*. England: Burlington, VT, 2008.
- Global Exchange, "Programs in the Americas: The Failed Drug War," <http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/americas/colombia/failedDrugWar.html>; Internet; accessed 23 January 2009.

- Global Strategic Analysis, "Central America: Military Integration." Oxford Analytica, (December 1997),  
<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=29&did=568339201&SrchMode=1&sid=5&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1224213600&clientId=1711>; Internet; accessed 19 February 2009.
- International Priorities, "Major Cocaine Producing and Trafficking Regions,"  
<http://collections.europarchive.org/tna/20080205132101/www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front%3Fpagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1044901621747>;  
 Internet; accessed 23 January 2009.
- Isacson, Adam. "Foreign Policy in Focus: Central America Peace and Security." Interhemispheric Resource Center and Institute for Policy Studies, Vol. 2 No. 6 (January 1997): 2, <http://www.fpif.org/briefs/vol2/v2n6cap.html>; Internet; accessed 19 February 2009.
- Mabry, Donald J. "Latin American Narcotics Trade and Hemispheric Security,"  
<http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=746>; Internet; accessed; 23 January 2009.
- Miller, Andrew P. *The Case of El Salvador: Military Disengagement and democratic Consolidation in Post Military regimes*. United Kingdom: the Edwin Mellen Press Ltd., 2006.
- Millett, Richard L and Orlando J Pérez, "New Threats and old dilemmas: Central America's Armed Forces in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Central Michigan University, Journal of Military and Political Sociology, Vol. 33, No. 1, (Summer 2005): 59-79,  
<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=887580071&SrchMode=2&sid=14&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1224214074&clientId=1711&cfc=1>; Internet; accessed 24 January 2009.
- Pattnayak, Satya R. and Lowell S. Gustafson. *National and Human Security Issues in Latin America*. United Kingdom: the Edwin Mellen Press Ltd., 2006.
- PBH, "Colombia, Mexico: Taking the drug fight to Central America"  
<http://poorbuthappy.com/colombia/post/colombia-mexico-taking-the-drug-fight-to-central-america/>; Internet; accessed 10 February 2009.

Plan Colombia and Beyond, “That Stubborn Balloon Effect”

<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/blog/archives/000044.htm>; Internet; accessed 7 February 2009.

Reuters Foundation, “Guatemala’s Colom to Attack Drug Gangs”

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N05305028.htm>; Internet; accessed 10 February 2009.

Ruhl, J. Mark. “Curbing Central America’s Militaries.” *Journal of Democracy* (July 2004): 137-151,

<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=9&did=672333671&SrchMode=2&sid=3&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1224213198&clientId=1711>; Internet; accessed 14 February 2009.

Sanchez, Alex. “Honduras Becomes a U.S. Foothold for Central America.” *North American Congress on Latin America* (November 2006); <http://nacla.org/node/1425>; Internet; accessed 20 February 2009.

Thachuk, Kimberly L. “Transnational Threats, Smuggling and Trafficking in Arms and Human Life,” Greenwood Publishing Group, (2007); available from

[http://books.google.com/books?id=MpVODP4XyuoC&pg=PA170&lpg=PA170&dq=transnational+threats+in+central+america&source=bl&ots=jEiDEnv9YJ&sig=FOju5ArnfQacJk3YATqqkXe6lmo&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=3&ct=result#PPA170,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=MpVODP4XyuoC&pg=PA170&lpg=PA170&dq=transnational+threats+in+central+america&source=bl&ots=jEiDEnv9YJ&sig=FOju5ArnfQacJk3YATqqkXe6lmo&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=3&ct=result#PPA170,M1); Internet; accessed 23 January 2009

United Nations Information Service, “Violent Crime and Drug Trafficking Pose Serious Threats to Development in Central America, UNODC Warns,”

<http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2007/unisnar1003.html>; Internet; accessed 24 January 2009.

U.S. Department of Defence, “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report.” Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement affairs, (March 2006),

<http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2006/vol1/html/62107.htm>; Internet; accessed 6 January 2009.

U.S. Department of Justice: Drug Enforcement Administration, “Drug Intelligence Brief: Country Brief: Guatemala”

[http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/Guatemala\\_Country\\_Brief\\_Drug\\_Situation\\_Report.pdf](http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/Guatemala_Country_Brief_Drug_Situation_Report.pdf); Internet; accessed 11 February 2009.