

SECURING COLOMBIA'S PORTS

David Becker, Deputy Director of the US Embassy's Narcotics Assistance Section in Colombia, and Julian Palacio, General Manager of the Colombian Port of Santa Marta, report on new security measures developed by Colombian Port Authorities and Anti-Narcotics Police on stricter control programmes for port security.

Over the past year the Colombian Anti-narcotics Police have determinedly undertaken stricter measures to control the traffic of narcotics through the country's seaports and airports. With the use of sophisticated radar equipment, many illegal narcotics trafficker's aircraft have been shot down within the domestic air space of South America over the past year and several tons of illegal substances have subsequently been seized. This has narrowed the narcotics trafficker's airborne circle of operations and contributed to deterring the use of aircraft in criminal matters. In response to the clamp down, narcotics traffickers have oriented their activities towards seaport environments by targeting ships destined for Europe and North America in order to maintain the drugs supply to high consumption centres. Europe now represents approximately 30% of all cocaine consumption in the world, and virtually all of that cocaine arrives via commercial maritime shipping.

Every day narcotics traffickers conceive of new ways to smuggle their consignments past security controls located at the vicinity of terminals, at the entrance to ports and ships in Colombia. Port authorities, fully aware of the problem, have concentrated their efforts on control strategies to minimize the use of cargo ships and boats being used to transport drug consignments. The programme is supported by the General Director of the National Police, and the Office of the Attorney General of Colombia which forms part of an agreement headed by the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) of the United States Embassy in Colombia.

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The programme involves the exclusive deployment of a special group of highly trained professional Anti-narcotics Policemen, who undergo rigorous selection procedures and training and are armed with good technological resources. Ports Corporations are responsible for providing the financial resources required for funding the counter narcotics programme – approximately US\$250,000 each per port per year. From a start of 60 narcotics police agents, the port security programme now has 120 agents who analyze documents, work sources, and inspect selected containers and ships. The police work very closely with port officials, who provide funding for equipment and operational expenses. In return the ports are provided with experienced anti-narcotics police in their efforts to prevent cargo and ships from being used to smuggle Colombian narcotics. The core activities undertaken by the specialist Anti-narcotics Colombian Police units at these ports include thorough analysis of shipping documents, underwater inspection of ship's hulls, supervision and observation of ships and port activities, harbour patrols, inspection of on board and dock cargo, and intelligence operations.

Documentation Analysis

Each Colombian port's Anti-narcotics Police team has a unit dedicated to analyzing shipping documentation. Police agents have direct online computer access to all documents submitted by port users (both for import and export cargo) and are responsible for verifying the authenticity of exporting companies, details pertaining to the type of cargo, shipment addresses, and destinations. The purpose of this

activity is to enable the identification of anomalous situations that constitute the basis for inspections of cargo and ships, which, in many cases, prevents the shipment of narcotics within legal cargo.

Underwater Inspections

Ports Corporations have a highly trained team of divers from the Anti-narcotics Police that inspect all ships arriving at the ports. This inspection, which is also carried out prior to the ship leaving port, involves an extensive search of hulls below the float line for drugs attached to the hull in water tight capsules or other devices. As a result of these inspections, trafficking of drugs in this manner has been frustrated. Recent underwater inspections in the Port of Santa Marta have yielded 140kg of hydrochloride of cocaine and 200kg of marijuana.

Container Inspections

These inspections are carried out on both full and empty containers – especially those destined for export. The inspection of 100% of all empty export containers is carried out prior to shipment and verified by means of a list submitted by the Maritime Agent of the ship. If any container does not appear to be listed and thus not inspected, it will not be loaded until this requirement is fulfilled.

Containers loaded for export are inspected by police in the presence of the cargo owner or their representative, and in the following cases:

- When requested by the owner of the cargo, if the police agree
- When the police officer responsible for document analysis identifies a factor of risk within the documentation
- When the police determine that there exists information of illegal export in relation to the cargo or its owner

Observation and Supervision of Docked Ships

An anti-narcotics agent is posted at the boarding stairways of all ships with final destination ports of Europe or the United States. These agents are responsible for keeping an eye on all access routes to the ship, as well as direct control of operations and the co-ordination of underwater inspections once ship operations have been completed. Equipped with communication systems that enable direct contact with the port base in order to summon immediate support when required, the observation post has reported excellent results in the prevention of criminal acts and the capture of criminals. There have been a surprising number of stowaways who have carried kilos of cocaine or heroin to finance their new life abroad, one port reported more than 10 cases in a month.

Harbour Patrols

Ports Corporations have outboard motor boats assigned to the anti-narcotics police for patrols of the inner harbour, the bay and surrounding areas of

the docks in order to prevent small boats from having possible access to cargo ships. These patrols are also aimed at preventing divers from getting near enough to ships to attach drugs to the hulls or deliver packages which can be hauled up the sides of the ship to be taken on board for transportation to the required destination.

Inspection of Provisions

Supported by the Anti-narcotics Police, continuous inspections are undertaken on all provisions entering the ships, by companies authorized by and registered at the port. Supplies are also inspected prior to being carried on board ships by anti-narcotics personnel, who certify in writing that the materials being loaded do not include any illegal substances.

On-Board Inspections

Police agents, trained by United States Customs officers and the Anti-drugs Corps of the British Government, carry out thorough inspections on board ships. These inspections are done on a selective manner depending on the port of destination or port of origin of the ship, or as a result of information received by the Colombian police. This inspection process utilizes portable field laboratories that allow the detection and chemical identification of any narcotics concealed in another product, and by dogs trained in the detection of narcotic substances.

Techniques For Combating Drug Smuggling in Ports

As the risk of drug smuggling is very high in Colombian ports, ship masters should take strict measures to reduce the risk of their vessels being used by the narcotics traffickers. However, it is well worth remembering that most of this advice is common sense and could be applied to any ports of call.

The following measures are recommended while in port:

- Limit the entry on board only to people involved in the loading/unloading operations and those who are properly identified by the port authority
- Do not allow women on board except when they are involved in the vessel's operation
- Strict control of those entering and leaving the ship (including crewmembers)
- Ensure careful inspection of provisions loaded locally
- Keep a permanent watch on deck by either crewmembers or private night watchmen
- Provide adequate lighting on deck and around the vessel at night
- Report to the port authority if any suspicious boats are seen near the vessel
- Conduct an underwater inspection of the vessel's hull and rudder to ensure no packages have been stuck there. (This measure has been proven to be effective)
- Utilize underwater active acoustic sensor technology
- Request immediate assistance if drugs are found during any inspections

Owners trading ships to Colombia are reminded that there are now twelve anti-drug smuggling agreements established between BIMCO and national customs administrations. Participation in these programmes serves well to protect ship owners and their crews from the consequences that can arise should drugs be found on board their vessels

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Thorough inspections of the harbour area, ships and containers, has frustrated the efforts of narco traffickers attempting to operate through the Port of Santa Marta.

Intelligence Operations

Officers specialized in matters of intelligence collect and analyze information related to illegal business in order to destabilize logistics used by groups operating outside of the law. The units collect both public information on businesses and ownership, and informant information on suspicious businesses, in order to build their databases on trafficking patterns.

The Results

These joint efforts have paid off. Over the last three years, the ports have seized a total of 31.5 tons of cocaine and 79 tons of marijuana, up from almost zero before the programme began. The success is so marked that the Colombian Navy is seeing an increase in small boats attempting to go to Mexico with loads of cocaine, because commercial maritime shipping is no longer safe for traffickers. Other reports indicate that suspicious Colombian containers are going to Ecuador and Venezuela just to avoid the port security system. Since starting the program British, French

and Dutch customs and police officials have co-operated with the programme, also providing training and assistance, receiving information and investigatory assistance in return.

How This Works in Reality

In late February, a shipper provided documents to the port indicating that they intended to ship a used incinerator to another Honduras and scheduling a departure date. The documents were routinely provided to the police unit at the port 24 hours in advance. Police consulted databases on the company and the equipment and decided not to inspect. The port loaded the container and the ship departed. But after sailing additional information was received from other sources suggesting that cocaine was on board. The police contacted their fellow unit in Cartagena, where the ship was picking up more cargo. The unit in Cartagena off loaded the container and inspected using drug dogs and detectors. Bolted and welded inside the several ton incinerator was a space that had been lined with lead, concealing 2 tons of cocaine. The walls were so thick the police had to use cutting torches to get inside to remove the cocaine. This is one of three smuggling cases involving heavy equipment that police have found so far, not to mention numerous smaller cargo cases.

Under the direction and co-ordination of the Ports Corporations and the General Director of the Anti-narcotics Police, the security status of Colombian ports has greatly improved. The ongoing problem of drug trafficking presents a challenge, which demands continuous day-to-day planning of new mechanisms and strategies to combat the increasingly innovative methods employed by criminals groups in the smuggling and trafficking of drugs through Colombian ports. **I**

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