

# The Caribbean is the Fragile Third Border of Drug Trafficking

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In May 2009, a state of emergency was declared in Kingston, Jamaica, raising concerns over drug trafficking and other criminal activities in the Caribbean. The conflict arose following Jamaican Prime Minister

Bruce Golding's decision to hand over the island's top drug lord, Christopher "Dudus" Coke, in deference to Washington's extradition request. The U.S. State Department had labeled him as one of the world's most dangerous criminals and has been calling for his capture for over a year. In recent years Coke's "Shower Posse" cartel had expanded its narcotic and firearm network as far as Brooklyn, N.Y. and even to parts of Canada. Following years of history, his widespread influence in the trade geographically and socially has made a deepening impact in Jamaica, as well as other areas such as the U.S., Canada and neighboring Caribbean islands.

Based in the Kingston slum, Tivoli Gardens, Dudus has brought both violence and good works to his immediate West Kingston neighborhood. By providing employment, education, medical and food supplies, he has received widespread local support. After Golding's nine-month delay, the Jamaican security forces were ordered by the Prime Minister to arrest Coke. Militant supporters of the Jamaican Don barricaded streets, burned several police stations, and engaged in an armed conflict, which claimed a total of 76 lives.

Following a five-week manhunt throughout the island, Jamaican law enforcement officials eventually apprehended Coke. At the time of his arrest, he was traveling with Rev. Al Miller, an evangelical minister, who is speculated to have brokered an unknown deal in exchange for the drug lord's surrender to government officials. The spate of violence accompanying the search for Coke has brought wide international attention to the island drug picture as well as the threat that drug trafficking poses to the entire Caribbean region.

Drug trafficking, starting as early as the 1970s, has plagued the West Indian islands. Huge South American cartels utilize the geographical advantages of the Caribbean Basin as a channel between the supply markets in South America and the demand markets in the U.S. and Europe. The multi-billion dollar drug market also has strengthened the growing alliance between Caribbean crime groups and their South and Central American counterparts, which has exacerbated a number of socioeconomic problems associated with the Caribbean and drugs.

According to the 2009 UN World Drug Report, 20percent of the illicit drugs destined for the United States are conveyed via the Caribbean islands. As a result of the U.S.-led Mérida

Initiative and Plan Colombia, the Caribbean Basin has become a victim of the balloon effect, as drug trafficking has been pushed in the direction of the region. Traffic through the Caribbean is expected to increase even further in the coming years unless effective measures are implemented to curtail the now flourishing market.

### **The Caribbean Blueprint**

Cuba and the Bahamas have always been ideal venues for drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). Over 4,000 keys spanning the 4,800 kilometers of Cuban coastline provide cover for speedboats, fishing vessels and light aircraft originating from Colombia, Venezuela, Jamaica, and Hispaniola en route to southern Florida. Additionally, the Royal Bahamian Police Force clearly does not have sufficient manpower and resources to effectively patrol the vast spread of uninhabited islands and cays of the Bahamian archipelago.

Puerto Rico is another attractive haven to South American cartels as it is a major commercial gateway to the United States both in term of frequent air traffic and freighter shipments to mainland destinations. In 1994, Puerto Rico was labeled as a high intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA). DTOs take advantage of the fact that many items being shipped to the mainland U.S. from Puerto Rico are not subject to screening and customs clearance, thus making the island one of the prime shipment points for smugglers.

The islands of Eustatius, Saba, Saint Maarten, Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, which constitute the Netherland Antilles, have seen an increase in the number of travelers transporting cocaine and heroin to the Netherlands. According to the U.S State Department, over the last three years, more than 6,000 drug mules have been arrested at Schipol International Airport in Amsterdam. Last month, U.S Drug Enforcement Agency officials reported that 3,269 pounds of cocaine, with an estimated street value of US\$46 million, were seized 34 miles northwest of the Aruban capitol, Oranjestad. In addition to supplying the European market, these islands serve as a principal base for the importation of European ecstasy aimed at entering the United States.

Jamaica, one of the larger islands in the region, is the leading producer and exporter of marijuana in the Caribbean. However, a significant percentage of its production is also consumed locally. Marijuana was introduced to the island by indentured laborers from India during the mid-19th century. Like today's deep-rooted Rastafarian culture in Jamaica, the indentured laborers also viewed marijuana as a medicine, intoxicant, and a religious sacrament. While cultivation is widespread throughout the island, most of the marijuana production is centralized in the Blue Mountains, located in the northeastern part of the island. Farmers adeptly make use of valleys, ridges and mountainsides in the production of marijuana.

Because of Jamaica's mountainous terrain, the island's law enforcement officials routinely use aerial patrol to locate marijuana plantations. Farmers have therefore become innovative in their cultivation methods, favoring the concealment of marijuana plants amidst banana and coconut trees in order to make it difficult for pilots to distinguish marijuana plants. While Jamaica is a major supplier of cannabis to the region, the country is also a major transit point for illicit hard drugs originating from South America.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is another notable producer of marijuana in the Lesser Antilles. The illegal drug trade has infiltrated the island's agricultural sector, where the banana industry still accounts for more than half of the island's economy. The island's small-scale banana producers, which are not technologically advanced in their production methods, face endless pressure from banana corporations to lower their prices. Consequently, St. Vincent farmers have made a transition from banana production to marijuana cultivation as their main source of income. Most farmers in the St. Vincent agricultural sector often live in poor and underdeveloped environments, making it difficult to direct these farmers to another form of farming because marijuana cultivation demonstrably makes more money than other commercial crops.

The flow of narcotics into Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) has gradually increased throughout the last few years. South American cartels exploit the proximity of the islands to Venezuela (seven miles at its nearest point) to transport cocaine to other Caribbean islands, where it is then moved to North American and European destinations. In 2005, 1.75 tons of pure cocaine, with a street value of TT\$700 million (US\$112 million) were seized on Monos Island, a few kilometers off the Trinidadian mainland. This drug bust was the largest narcotics seizure in T&T history. Two and half years later, a former Canadian Coast Guard vessel, the *Destiny Empress*, was seized off the coast of Spain. Spanish National Police, tipped off by Scotland Yard officials, discovered £375 million worth of cocaine destined for the U.K. The Trinidad and Tobago broadcasting channel CNC3 reported that the *Destiny Empress* spent several days prior to its seizure undergoing repairs in a Trinidadian port, less than a mile from the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard Headquarters at Staubles Bay, Chaguaramas. The results stemming from this operation must have raised concerns about weakening maritime security in the Caribbean.

While Colombian and Mexican groups dominate the drug trafficking industry, South American DTOs from Brazil, Bolivia, and Venezuela have involved a number of Caribbean countries in their operations. Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana function as a particularly active crossroad for cocaine and heroine shipments headed to Europe and Africa. Guyana and its neighbor, Suriname, are home to dense hardwood forests and interior highlands, which are desirable environments for drug cultivation. Several South American cartels make use of airdrops and airfields carved out of these dense rainforests. Meanwhile, smugglers simultaneously capitalize on the inlets and rivers leading to the Atlantic between Venezuela and the northwest region of Guyana to transport drugs. Furthermore, with the majority of the Surinamese population concentrated on the Atlantic coast of the country, local government officials barely have an infrastructure to access isolated communities. Consequently, border protection is weak, allowing for an unimpeded flow of illicit drugs.

### **By Any Means Necessary**

Most of the drugs that flow through the Caribbean enter by sea via freight carriers, fishing vessels, and yachts as well as other types of sailing vessels. In an attempt to avoid radar detection, DTOs transport large shipments of cocaine, marijuana, and heroin throughout the islands by go-fast and cigarette boats, which are made of fiberglass, making them lightweight, extremely fast and highly maneuverable. Another type of vessel that has recently emerged is the narcosub, a self-propelled semi-submarine capable of concealing 5 to 17 tons of illicit drugs. Even though they are difficult to distinguish from the horizon, narcosubs are easily detectable by air patrol. However, advanced military equipment has not deterred resilient traffickers. Smuggling engineers have created the narcotorpedo, a hollowed, submersible vessel resembling a torpedo towed by boat. If successfully detected by coast guard officials, the vessel is equipped with a floatable transmitter, making its later recovery easier for drug runners.

In response to the expansion of U.S. border inspections and enhanced security measures, drug couriers themselves have become more innovative. Customs officials have found drugs lining registered mail, commingled with legitimate food products such as bagged coffee, seafood, and liquefied canned products. Cartels also conceal narcotics in hollow areas of construction material. According to a 2009 report by the U.S. State Department, customs officials discovered a notable trend in 2007 in Barbados, whereby employees working in key commercial transportation positions, such as baggage handlers, FedEx, and DHL, assisted with drug trafficking. The report also noted the emerging trend of having cocaine soaked into clothing to avoid detection.

### **Crime and Violence**

In recent years, crime and gang violence have drastically increased in every Caribbean country. In a 2007 report, the World Bank estimated that the overall murder rate in the Caribbean stood at “30 per 100,000 population...higher than any other region of the world and have risen in recent years for many of the region’s countries.” Communities throughout

the islands are being transformed themselves into war zones as local gangs expand their revenue-producing occupations to include kidnapping, human trafficking, firearms trafficking, and organized crime.

While the larger and more prominent Caribbean islands like Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados receive a majority of the news headlines; the smaller islands of the Eastern Caribbean are rapidly absorbing the consequences of drug trafficking. In a report by Caribbean Net News, Inspector Andre Mitchel of the Royal St. Kitts and Nevis Police Force disclosed at a presentation on Anti-social Behavior:

In St Kitts and Nevis, we have experienced kidnapping, similar problems. Murder and other incidents of shooting, burglary and breaking in offences together with robbery and larceny have accounted for over 60 percent of our crime. Drug related offences have quietly accounted for an average of 20 percent of all crime over the past five years on Nevis.

Criminal groups have proven to be resilient and high tech not only in protecting drug turf preserves from neighboring gangs, but also in deterring law enforcement officials. Local gangs also have infiltrated school systems in the Caribbean, as it is a fertile market in the recruitment of younger gang members. Therefore, it should not come as an alarming surprise to observe local news headlines calling attention to an increase in Caribbean youth who are both committing and falling victim to violent crimes, many of them drug related.

#### Declining Tourism

Tourism is a major industry in the Caribbean. Many, if not most, of its islands are dependent on tourism to make up for their economies. During the 2009 fiscal year, the region recorded 22.1 million visitors travelling for tourist-related activity. Renowned for idyllic beaches, coral reefs, and turquoise lagoons, the twin island state of Antigua and Barbuda received, 265,844 tourists by air in 2008. While the tourism sector generates a significant portion of the islands' jobs and more than half of their GDP, Antigua and Barbuda has seen an upsurge in violent crimes, which have been predominantly linked to the illicit drug trade. Two years ago, Antigua's tourism market was badly stained following the fatal shooting of a honeymoon couple, Benjamin and Catherine Mullany, in their hotel room. The story of Nina Nilssen, an American tourist who was found stabbed to death near the popular Pigeon Point Beach in Antigua, has also badly scarred the island's reputation. Tourism, an industry heavily reliant on the perceptions of the foreign community, will undoubtedly decline in the Caribbean if crime and drug-related violence continues to escalate.

#### Money Laundering and Corruption

Corruption caused by the illicit drug trade is an emerging theme in the Caribbean region. It is also a major obstacle to effective drug control. Drug traffickers use their financial leverage fueled by the multi million-dollar drug market to penetrate and suborn law enforcement units and institutions of justice.

In 2001, a corruption scandal erupted within the Puerto Rican police force. In an operation titled "Operation Lost Honor," spearheaded by the FBI, 29 members of the Puerto Rican police, as well as members of the Criminal Investigations Corps, were charged with facilitating massive shipments of cocaine.

A report by the UNIDCP, titled "Economic and Social Consequences of Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking" found:

It is difficult to have a functioning democratic system when drug cartels have the means to buy protection, political support, or votes at every level of government and society...where a member of the legislature or judiciary, earning only a modest income, can easily gain the equivalent of some 20 months salary from a trafficker by making one favourable decision.

A growing culture of corruption ensuing from a lack of transparency in Caribbean society will undermine the credibility of any of its governments as well as frustrate economic growth in the region.

#### Preventive Measures

From 1980 to 2008, Latin America and the Caribbean received an estimated total of \$13.1 billion from the U.S. State Department, USAID, and the Department of Defense to combat the drug trade. Foreign financial and technical assistance from the United States has focused on stopping the cultivation of cocaine and marijuana in the region, as well as developing the infrastructure necessary to assist their countries' police security forces. Among the Latin American countries receiving such aid are Jamaica and the Bahamas, which have received assistance from the State Department and other U.S. agencies. These nations have received equipment and training through Operation Windjammer and Operation Bahamas and Turks and Caicos (OPBAT), two distinct strategies designed to address flow of illegal drugs from South America to the U.S. via Jamaica, Bahamas and the greater Caribbean.

In the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the war on drugs became associated with international terrorism. However, critics of U.S. foreign policy assert that the U.S. has not placed significant stress on the demand side of the drug market. Sir Ronald Sanders, a writer, consultant, and former ambassador to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), raised a number of issues in an interview with COHA. He explained that unless the United States begins to tackle the demand aspect, the production market will continue to flourish. He further emphasized that while the Caribbean region needs an active coast guard and military assistance to fight DTOs, there is a disproportionate emphasis on foreign military assistance to the Caribbean region, which will only lead to a build up of excessive arms.

In April 2009, President Obama launched the US\$45 million Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) at the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago. CBSI is designed to arm, train and professionalize Caribbean law enforcement forces, boost anti-trafficking efforts, and promote citizen safety partnerships in the region. This is not the first time the U.S. has highlighted the benefits of CBSI to regional security chiefs. Following her visit to Barbados in the final leg of her recent Latin American tour, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton highlighted the significance of CBSI's maritime patrol and interdiction capabilities as well as establishing the role of local awareness in combating drug trafficking in the region. Finally, she also confirmed that the Obama administration has requested the U.S. State Department to award US\$79 million dollars to fund the CSBI 2011 budget.

### **Immigration Policy**

CARICOM has raised concerns over the deportation of convicted Caribbean criminals from the U.S., U.K., and Canada back to their home countries. An estimated 3.5 million Caribbean-born nationals were residing in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, according to 2000 and 2001 census data. The surge in the number of deportees back to the Caribbean dates back to the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) passed in 1996. This legislation authorizes the deportation of individuals, many of whom have served stints in prison after being found guilty of crimes of theft, racketeering, document fraud, and other minor offences.

While no concrete evidence confirms that deportees have disproportionately entered the drug trafficking industry and intensified crime in the Caribbean, there is a growing concern that the deportees are not serving as legitimate role models for the younger generations. In most cases, deportees barely have any local relatives and return to countries of origin which face rising unemployment and inflation. Additionally, there rarely seems to be any transitional programs in place to effectively reintegrate deportees into Caribbean society. Consequently, deportees are often forced by various pressures and circumstances to thrust themselves into revisiting their former failed lives.

### **Foreign Help But Regional Willpower**

Caribbean states have been individually attempting to respond to the drug trafficking crisis by using insufficient resources to eradicate the cultivation of marijuana and drug smuggling activities. However, the islands of the Caribbean seldom have the resources to individually

combat the illicit drug trade, as many of these islands are already highly indebted, thus making it difficult to effectively balance and effectively allocate their budgets. They are automatically placed in an unwinnable position where they cannot even contest the surges in local crime now being witnessed. The region clearly does not have the ability to provide adequate territorial policing and overall security, thus producing an extreme susceptibility to the influence of DTOs. CARICOM needs to play a major role in addressing drug trafficking because it is threatening the economies of the Caribbean region and directly affecting the area's civil society. These effects are seen through the soaring statistics of drug abuse, crime, and gang membership.

### **Effective Measures, An Effective Solution**

The Caribbean has become a victim of growing drug trafficking statistics. The demand countries are not doing enough to curtail narcotics. While regional cooperation is pivotal, and strong relationships need to be forged, the U.S. should be more attuned to the small size, weak economies, and the vulnerability of the Caribbean states. CBSI is not guaranteed to work in Caribbean states, which continue to experience slow economic growth.

For a successful model to be embraced, extensive research needs to be done on the vulnerabilities of the Caribbean islands. It is clear that the region is a major transit corridor and not a prime producer of narcotics. What the Caribbean region needs is vigilant monitoring of law enforcement agencies, effective anti-drug community outreach programs for the younger generations, and sufficient investment and foreign assistance efforts that would make the drug market less attractive for Caribbean nationals. However, unless the U.S. begins to tackle the demand aspect of the illicit drug trade, the Caribbean will continually serve as a lucrative channel to foreign drug markets that are sure to jeopardize their cultures and sovereignty.

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