

Escalation of Drug Trafficking in Central America

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The lack of government capacity and economic power disadvantage compared to the drug industry, has lead to an increase in violence and corruption.

"Using systematic violence and corruption, intimidation and extortion of public officials, the wealthy and powerful criminal groups have been able to weaken police and judicial systems. They often use violence to threaten or punish anonymous complainants. Witnesses in drug-related cases often risk their life and those of their family members. Unless we break the vicious circle of smuggling and corruption, international drug control will never fully succeed."

The preface of the report by the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) for 2010, clearly reaffirms the reality facing Central America with respect to drug trafficking:

"Due to its geographic location between the main producing countries and consumer markets, Central America and the Caribbean continue to be used as a transit area for smuggling illegal drugs on a large scale. These region's long coastlines, border porosity and a limited capacity by law enforcement agencies and institutions facilitates trafficking activities, which aggravate the impact in drug-related crimes."

"Despite considerable efforts by regional governments, the drug problem facing Central America and the Caribbean has been exacerbated by endemic corruption, widespread poverty and high unemployment rates. It is believed that the street value of all drugs in transit through the Caribbean alone exceeds that of the legitimate economy. Drug trafficking proceeds are used to bribe public officials, leading to increased corruption within the government, enforcement agencies and the judicial branch, further weakening already fragile institutions."

"In some cases, profits amassed by drug trafficking organizations with their illegal activities have enabled them to effectively challenge government control of some of the country's areas, endangering the security and political stability of the state. The Board noted with concern the adverse effect which corruption has on the work of drug control in Central America and the Caribbean and urges governments of all regional countries to take urgent measures in order to combat all manifestations of the problem."

"In Central America, drug-related violence continues to rage in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, the countries denominated "Northern Triangle" because gangs operating in each of them have come to form alliances with international criminal organizations. According to the 2010 World Drug Report, the "Northern Triangle" has the highest murder rate in the world, as well as high rates in other forms of crime. Only Honduras reports about 60% of all crimes related to drugs. In Panama, the murder rate more than doubled between 2006 and 2009 and officials

attributed the rise to drug-related violence. In addition, as part of attempting to destabilize governments, drug traffickers have chosen high-level public officials as victims, for example, in December 2009 the Honduran head of the Drug Trafficking Combat Department was murdered."

"Even though, due to reduced demand the total cocaine amount being smuggled into North America has decreased, the percentage secretly passed through Central America has increased, especially in Guatemala and Honduras. Reportedly, shipments of illicit drugs from South America also pass through the Caribbean headed for West Africa and Europe."

*Source: International Narcotics Control Board
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