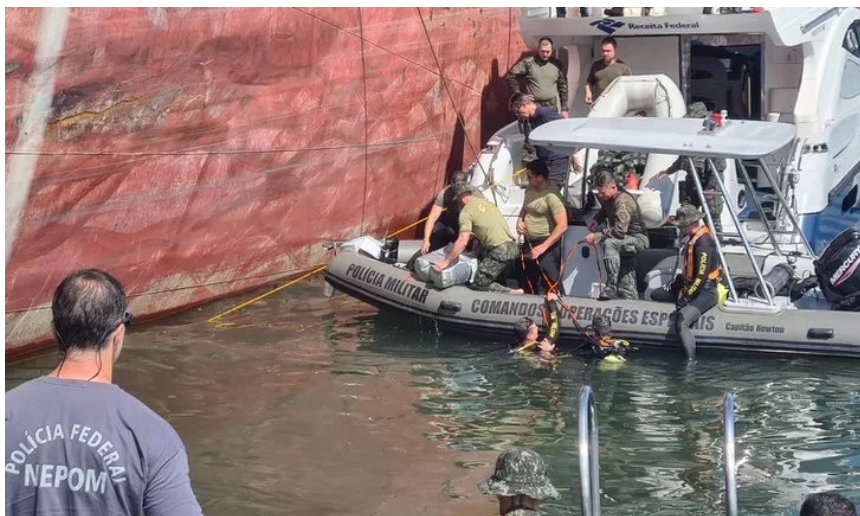


## NEWS

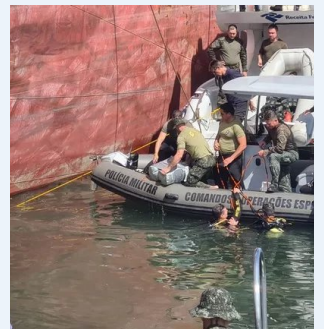


### UPDATE ON MARITIME COCAINE TRAFFICKING IN BRAZIL

13/07/2023 - 6:13 | Author: Proinde

Smuggling illicit drugs inside containers and ship hulls continues at high levels, and crews must stay vigilant and take preventive measures

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whenever in Brazilian ports and anchorages

## Upward global and regional trends

### Cocaine busts

Despite not being a producer, Brazil remains a strategic hub for the transshipment and trafficking of illicit drugs domestically and across air and sea borders to consumer or intermediary markets in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Between 2017 and 2022, it trailed only Colombia as the top country of origin for cocaine intercepted by law enforcement authorities worldwide, though only about 5% of the global amount was seized in the country.

Cocaine seizures in Brazil by year (in m/t)

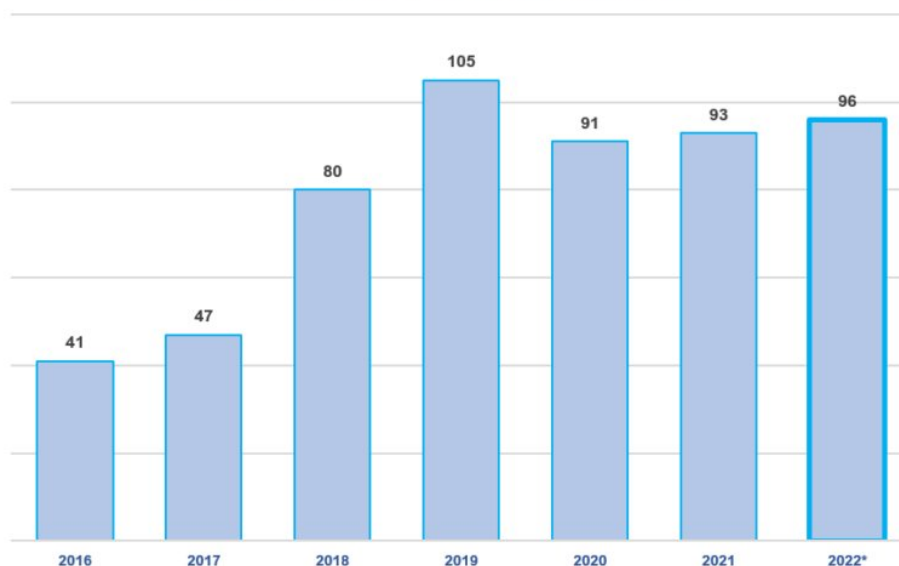


Figure 1: Cocaine seizures in Brazil, in m/t. \* Estimated. Source: UNODC/Federal Police

Following a trend that emerged halfway through the COVID-19 pandemic and continues in full swing, as explained in this [circular](#) and this [update](#), the amount of cocaine seized in ports and anchorages, whether hidden inside shipping containers or within or attached to hulls of ships, indicates that the size and frequency of cocaine shipments leaving Brazil by sea remain on the rise, in line with the continued expansion of drug markets and the increase in worldwide consumption and users, as highlighted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)) in its [World Drug Report 2023](#) released last month.

While cocaine volumes impounded within Brazil over the last few years have remained at high but stable levels, a considerably higher proportion of seizures have taken place in ports and terminals across the country, mostly in the larger traditional ports in the south, with [Northern Arc ports](#) registering growing volumes in pace with the surge in local port traffic. **Figure 1**

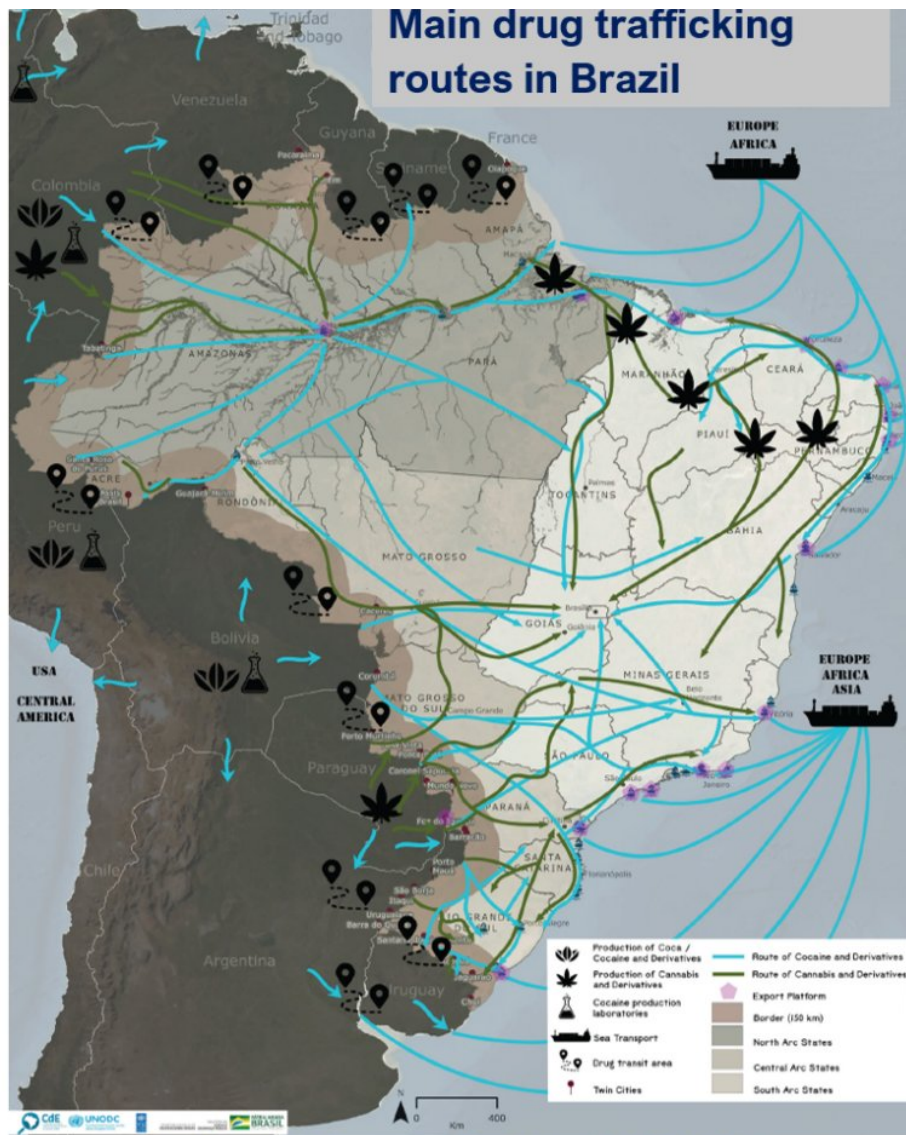


Figure 2: Main drug trafficking routes in Brazil. Source: UNODC/CdE-CoE Brazil

## Rise of maritime drug trafficking

Higher volumes of maritime cocaine shipments intercepted by police forces in-country and abroad in the last few years are driven by multiple factors, including:

- Greater lucrativeness amid increased production efficiency and worldwide rise in demand
- Growth in the proportion of maritime drug trafficking compared to other modalities
- Early detection at departure or entry points through preventive security measures, including underwater surveys arranged by shipowners or ordered by local authorities
- Good risk assessment and best practices adopted by ship and port operators and crews
- Enhanced intelligence sharing and cooperation between federal and state police forces, customs, port facilities and international criminal



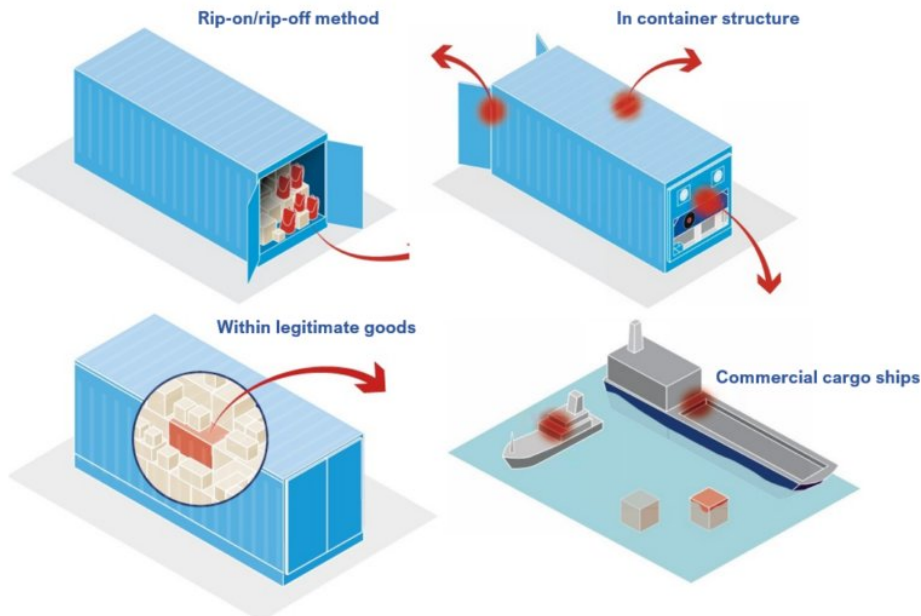


Figure 4: Typical methods of drug concealment in shipping containers and commercial ships

While shipping boxes are still widely exploited in the international drug trade, the trend that surfaced at the height of the pandemic – and has been perfected ever since – is to conceal drugs in the submerged areas and compartments of the ship’s hull for later retrieval.

Unlike containerised cocaine, which rarely implicates the crew or carries consequences for the ship, in some jurisdictions across the globe, seafarers have been facing criminal prosecution even when drugs were hidden out of their reach and without evidence of their knowledge or consent.

## Cocaine smuggling on ships’ hulls

### Change of *modus operandi*

Organised criminal groups are always one step ahead of public security agencies and constantly change their modalities, routes and networks of partners, financiers, and accomplices to adapt and sustain the flow and profitability of their illicit activities. As the transport of drugs in containers was severely hampered by the pandemic, international traffickers had to look for new ways to continue supplying eager consumer markets.

They went on to systematically smuggle drugs on merchant ships, either by stashing them into cargo holds, void spaces on deck and inside engine rooms and accommodations, or, more recently, by the so-called “parasite modality”, whereby the cocaine is attached to the vessel’s hull below the waterline without the need for assistance or connivance from the crew or payoffs to dock workers or other third parties.

## Sea chests as drug caches

In recent years, most cocaine recovered directly from oceangoing cargo vessels (other than inside containers) was secreted in the hull's underwater parts, mainly in sea chests, which are only accessible from outside the ship. Local traffickers have been using this secluded compartment extensively to cache drugs. **Figure 5**

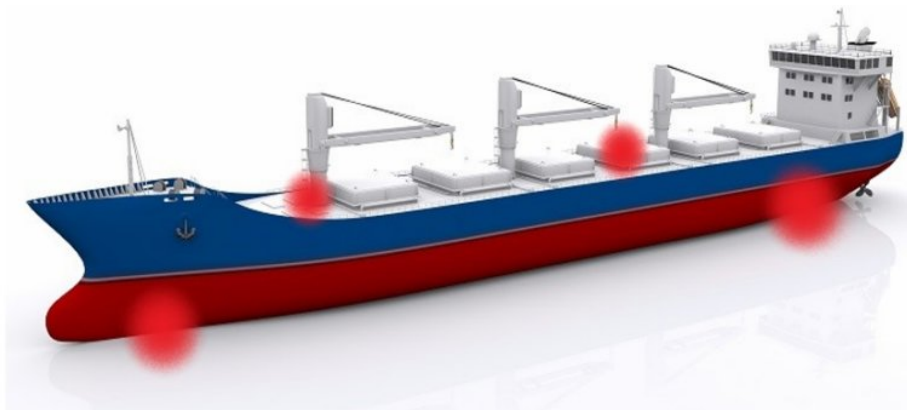


Figure 5: illicit drugs can be concealed onboard the vessel or on the hull below the waterline.

A cavity in the hull below the waterline, the sea chest is fitted with a strainer plate and an inlet reservoir to draw seawater through the vessel's piping systems for ballast, engine cooling, firefighting, cargo hold washing and other functions. It is usually equipped with a removable grating, offers ideal storage conditions and objects lodged in it can only be detected through an underwater inspection.

Generally, the illicit drug is packaged in watertight bags (with ballast to prevent them from floating), tied together with ropes or straps for better handling and securing underwater. They come in different dimensions, weights and shapes and sometimes include a tracking device. **Pictures below**

## Covert divers

In addition to intelligence work, logistical planning and, above all, opportunity, all it takes is a qualified scuba diver with shipbuilding knowledge to dive from the shore or a small boat, ideally at night, and place the drug packages inside the sea chest or strapped to the underwater hull surface, rudder, bow thruster, etc., and another professional to retrieve the stash at the port of destination. In fact, criminal groups sometimes employ the same dive crew at both ends.

Given the high profitability of maritime drug trafficking, covert divers tend to wear state-of-the-art gear, such as "rebreathers", breathing apparatuses that eliminate bubbles, thus further hindering detection.

## Incidence of sea chest contamination

The organisational arrangements of public security forces in Brazil are intricate and decentralised. Different public institutions at state and federal levels act in a fragmented way in repressing (and reporting) drug-related crimes, making it difficult to collect accurate statistical data, even more so when it comes to seaborne cocaine seizures. However, it was possible to gather and analyse quality data from different sources, including the [Federal Police](#) (maritime and border police), the [Federal Revenue Service](#) (customs), the [Centre of Excellence for Illicit Drug Supply Reduction](#) (CoE Brazil), as well as press reports and independent consulting.

Year	Number of incidents	Quantity seized (Kg)	Yearly variation
2020	9	893	-
2021	13	1,798	+ 101 %
2022	26	4,269	+ 137 %
2023 (until April)	19	5,122	+ 20 %

Figure 6: Number of incidents of cargo ships with sea chests contaminated with cocaine in Brazil and quantity seized. Source: UNODC/Federal Police/CoE Brazil/independent consultancy

From January 2020 to December 2022, law enforcement agencies in Brazil and abroad intercepted nearly seven tonnes of cocaine in the sea chests of about fifty cargo ships of varied types, sizes and flags. During 2020, eight out of nine vessels with contaminated sea chests were containerships. In 2021, five out of thirteen reported incidents involved fruit juice carriers. Last year, of the 26 cargo ships with drugs in that underwater compartment, twenty were bulk carriers. Until April this year, no less than seventeen of the vessels contaminated were bulkers. In one of them, in Italy, no less than a tonne of cocaine was found cached in the sea chest of a bulker carrying wood pulp. **Figures 6 & 7**

During the research period, some ships were contaminated with cocaine on the sea chest more than once. A couple of them had seizures both at the Brazilian port where the drug was originally hidden and at the port of destination.

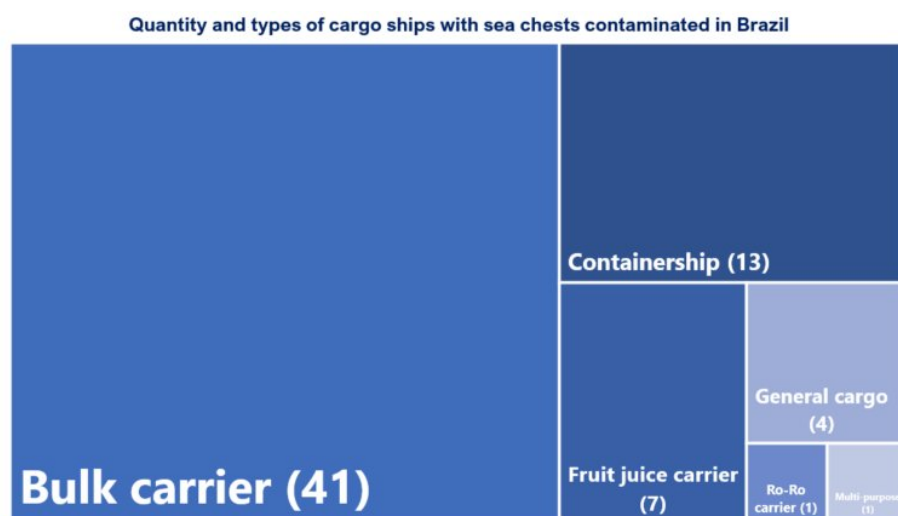
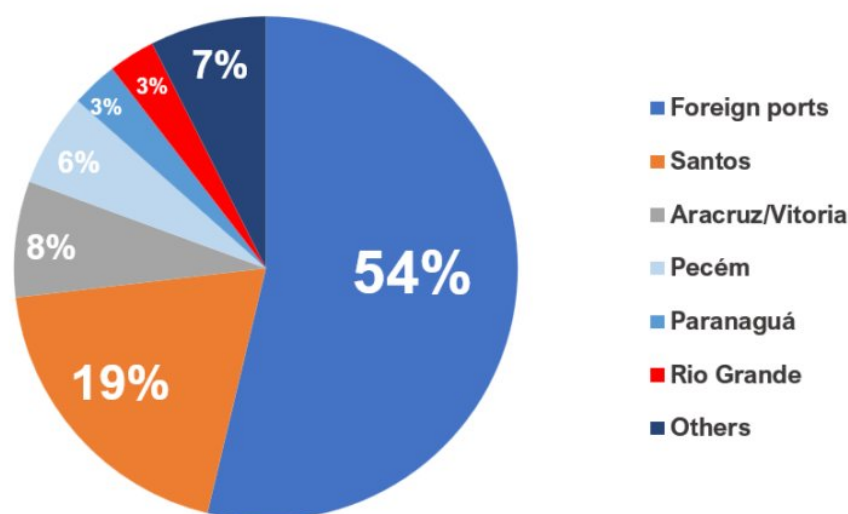


Figure 7: Types of cargo ships with sea chests contaminated with cocaine in Brazil Jan 2020-April 2023. Source: UNODC/Federal Police/CoE Brazil/independent consulting

As the sharing between Brazilian and foreign criminal police forces evolved over the pandemic, numerous seizures of drug shipments departing from Brazil were intercepted in overseas ports in the last two years. Indeed, in 36 cases surveyed, the drug bust occurred abroad, mostly in Europe, with record-breaking seizures in 2023.

The busy port of Santos on the coast of São Paulo, South America's largest city, has seen thirteen seizures of cocaine from sea chests of ships, chiefly bulk carriers loading grain and forest products. Most of these contaminations likely occurred at night in the open – and poorly patrolled – anchorage, where the waters are deeper, and visibility is better for diving. **Figure 8**

**Port of seizure of cocaine cached in sea chests of cargo ships (%)**



**Figure 8: Ports where cocaine shipments from Brazil were seized, Jan 2020-April 2023.**  
Source: Federal Police/Customs/CoE Brazil/independent consulting

None of the seizures in Brazilian resulted in the arrest of the crew or detention of the vessel, with loss confined to the time lost in decontaminating the sea chest, since the Brazilian authorities have been taking the view that, in this modality of trafficking, the drug is placed on ship unwittingly to the crew. Unfortunately, in some cases where the drug was intercepted abroad, crewmembers were prosecuted, and vessels suffered extensive delays.

## Underwater inspections

Underwater inspection services in Brazilian ports and anchorages are allowed as long as they are performed by qualified professional divers accredited by the maritime authority and comply with the "Maritime Authority Standards for Underwater Activities" ([NORMAM 15/DPC](#)) issued by the Brazilian Navy's Directorate of Ports and Coasts ([DPC](#)) in 2021 and recently updated.

In some ports, diving companies are licensed and supervised by the

port authority. For example, Santos Port Authority (SPA)'s Norm [NAP.SUMAS.POR.017](#) of 28 December 2022 regulates the rendering of underwater services within the organised port of Santos and its anchorage. Among its various provisions, diving companies must inform SPA ten days in advance for underwater repair works to be carried out. In the case of visual inspections and minor repair services, communication can be made within 48 hours before the job start. Vessels undergoing underwaters inspections at Santos roads must be aware of [fines for anchoring outside designated areas](#).

Given the best diving conditions, preventive underwater inspections are usually conducted at the anchorage before the vessel comes alongside. Hull surfaces and compartments are sometimes examined again after leaving the berth and before starting the voyage.

In some ports, arranging underwater inspections can be expensive and time-consuming, demanding planning before the vessel arrives. Furthermore, these preventive inspections, including employing private security guards and sniffer dogs, are not a warranty that the ship is drug-free. There have been at least two cases where owners arranged full anti-drug measures, including dive inspections, yet, drugs were found on board and in sea chests.

There are suggestions that some professional divers legitimately employed by diving companies also provide freelance services to criminal groups for a handsome fee or through coercion or threats against them and their families.



**Cocaine packages retrieved from ships' sea chests. Source: Hellenic Coast Guard/Federal Police/Customs**

Currently, underwaters surveys are not mandatory anywhere in Brazil. Therefore, we suggest hiring this service – combined or not with other measures, such as sniffer dogs and private security guards – when the master or crew have reason to believe that the vessel's hull was contaminated while the vessel was waiting to berth or during cargo operations, or in the event any other ship in the vicinity is known to have been contaminated.

Due to the limited visibility and under keel clearance alongside most berths, the best location for the dive inspection is at the anchorage and in daylight, noting that depending on the port involved, there may be some delays in procuring relevant permits from the local authorities. Therefore, anti-drug services must be arranged as early as possible whenever required or recommended.

## Drug-related crimes in the Amazon

The UNODC reported that drug smuggling is increasingly compounding and intersecting with other illegal or unregulated activities that harm the environment and threaten the security and livelihood of vulnerable and impoverished populations, such as isolated riverside communities in the Amazon.

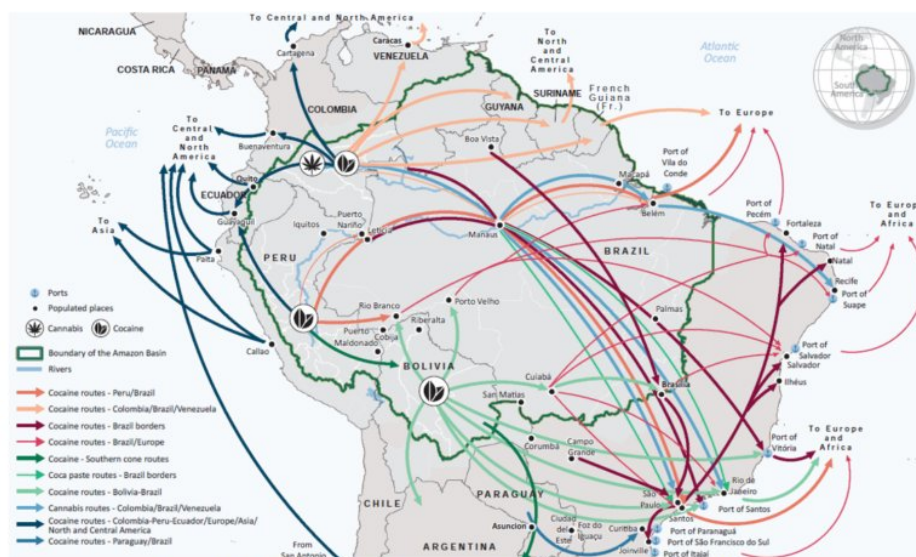


Figure 9: Selected drug trafficking routes in the Amazon Basin. Source: UNODC

Many of the more than a thousand rivers and tributaries of the Amazon Basin are used as vectors of drug trafficking and converging crimes. The region is chronically menaced by drug, wildlife and weapons smuggling across the vast and poorly policed borders with the Andean countries. In the inland waterways upriver and at the mouth of the Amazon River, armed robberies against barge convoys on the move and anchored ships, illegal gold mining and logging, among other crimes, are also widespread. **Figure 9**

In addition to environmental damage, criminal activities threaten the well-being of local inhabitants and jeopardise the safety of river navigation, particularly during the dry season.

### Drug smuggling in the inland waterways

Although the region is widely used as a gateway for cocaine supplied by the three neighbouring producers, most of the drug smuggled across the extensive Amazonian border (in small boats or private aircraft that

land on clandestine airstrips) is transported in various modes to metropolitan regions where half of it is sold to meet domestic demand. The other half is moved to the coast and shipped abroad through seaports, such as Rio Grande, Imbituba, Paranaguá, Rio de Janeiro, Vitória and Santos, the latter standing out as the main point of departure for maritime cocaine trafficking in Brazil.

Despite a relatively low incidence of drug contamination of oceangoing cargo ships calling at the Northern Arc river ports, there are reports of substantial cocaine seizures in sailboats and fishing boats used by local traffickers as drug conveyances. The Federal Police have also seen a sharp increase in drugs concealed in timber consignments for export, mainly to Western Europe.

The largest cocaine shipment ever intercepted in a Brazilian port was in Vila do Conde (Barcarena) near Belém in November 2022, when [customs seized nearly three tonnes of cocaine hiding in a container](#) with soya bean meal in bags bound for Sines in Portugal.

## Piracy and armed robbery

Incidents of piracy and armed robbery in Brazil are largely concentrated in the waterways of the Amazon. Nevertheless, even though this risk is small elsewhere in the country, all national ports are subject, to a greater or lesser extent, to maritime drug trafficking, often with dire consequences for the crew and shipowners if the drugs are confiscated at the destination or an intermediary port of call. The driving factors influencing contamination are the opportunity presented and the level of security and surveillance adopted by the port facility and the visiting vessel.

## Challenges to shipping

Brazil shares more than 8,000 kilometres of largely unpoliced borders over the Amazon rainforest with the three cocaine-producing Andean countries, as well as 1,365 Km of ground and river crossings with Paraguay in the Southern Cone, a major outpost for transit of cocaine from Bolivia and Peru downstream the Paraná-Paraguay waterway to the River Plate estuary and the Atlantic Ocean where it is transhipped onto oceangoing vessels bound for Europe and Africa.

Its extensive coastline, unguarded inland waterways and borders, and a good air network provide multiple routes for transporting and dispatching cocaine to virtually every continent.

The volume of cocaine busted in Brazilian ports grows year by year. Given that fight against international drug trafficking is fashioned in a poorly structured way, with scarce financial resources available and a general lack of political will, all signs point to the fact that the country is

bound to continue to be a key player in the global maritime trafficking of cocaine in the coming years. Therefore, prevention is the only alternative to vessels calling at Brazilian ports and anchorages.

## Preventive measures

International maritime organisations and P&I clubs have been tackling the problem of seaborne drug trafficking. They regularly publish a wealth of loss prevention material with tips on risk management and preventive measures, international regulatory requirements, and clarification on the scope and conditions of cover afforded for risks arising from the discovery of drugs on board the insured ship.

The most recent authoritative publications on the matter are referenced below, in descending alphabetical order, for further reference and information:

### International Organisations

**UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC):** [World Drug Report 2023](#)

**International Chamber of Shipping (ICS):** [Drug Trafficking and Drug Abuse on Board Ship 2023-2024 Edition](#)

**Centre of Excellence for Illicit Drug Supply Reduction (CoE Brazil):** [Strategic Study – Covid-19 and Drug Trafficking in Brazil: the Adaptation of Organized Crime and the Actions of Police Forces During the Pandemic](#)

**International Maritime Organization (IMO):** [Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Suppression of the Smuggling of Drugs...\(IMO Resolution MSC.228\(82\)\)](#)

### P&I Clubs

**NorthStandard:** [The Evolving Threat of Illicit Drug Trafficking at Sea](#)

**West of England:** [South and Central America – Drug Smuggling](#)

**Standard Club:** [A Wave of Drug Smuggling from Brazil](#)

**Steamship Mutual:** [Brazil: Drug Smuggling](#)

**Gard:** [Ship Operators at Increased Risk of Drug Smuggling](#)

**UK P&I:** [Measures to Prevent the Smuggling of Cocaine](#)

**Swedish Club:** [Drug Smuggling on Bulk Carriers Out of Brazil on the Rise](#)