



# ILLICIT FRONTIERS

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN THE  
AMAZON'S TRI-BORDER REGION

Gabriel Funari

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Gabriel Funari is the head of the Observatory of Illicit Economies in the Amazon Basin at the GI-TOC. His work focuses on environmental crime, transnational drug trafficking and community responses to organized crime. He holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Oxford and a master's degree in Latin American Studies from the University of Cambridge.

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Please direct inquiries to:  
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime  
Avenue de France 23  
Geneva, CH-1202  
Switzerland  
[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he dynamics of violence, organized crime and environmental devastation in the Amazon basin feature prominently in current international forums, including the 2024 UN Biodiversity COP16, held in Colombia, and the 2024 G20 and 2025 Climate COP30 summits hosted by Brazil. To understand these dynamics, it is essential to not just look at the region's vast natural ecosystem, but also to explore the role of urban areas of the rainforest as hubs for illicit economies that influence the climate emergency afflicting the Amazon.

Criminal groups rely on urban infrastructure to produce, transport and sell illicit commodities, and they have also begun to pursue governance authority in the region's cities as part of their objective to dominate profitable criminal market chains in the rainforest. Seeing as these illicit markets drive environmental harms, policy-based conservation solutions for the Amazon must therefore consider the role of criminal actors in the urban spaces of the rainforest region.

This research report explores the links between criminal violence and urban governance in the Amazon through an in-depth study of the twin cities of Leticia (Colombia) and Tabatinga (Brazil). With a combined population of over 110 000, Leticia and Tabatinga are located in the heart of the rainforest where three countries meet: Brazil, Colombia and Peru. Over the last 10 years, criminal violence in the area has risen dramatically as transnational criminal groups compete for control of the profitable illicit markets that operate through Leticia and Tabatinga, including cocaine, cannabis, exotic wildlife and gold.

The report finds that organized crime's intensified influence on urban governance in Leticia and Tabatinga is largely a result of a long-running local turf war between Brazil's largest criminal organizations, the Comando Vermelho (Red Command, CV) and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Command of the Capital, PCC). While criminal groups previously used the two cities solely as a logistical stopover, they are now establishing more permanent bases. Not only have they created a thriving local market for illicit drugs, but they are also engaging in criminal governance,<sup>1</sup> providing funds for local election campaigns, establishing rules of community conduct and enacting violent punishment for transgressions.

Intensified criminal activity in Leticia and Tabatinga has also been driven by the rise in coca cultivation in the Peruvian Amazon and the escalating value of the cocaine supply and transport chains. The tri-border location of the twin cities also enhances the Brazilian groups' longstanding links to

Colombian suppliers of cannabis and cocaine. Drug-trafficking groups active in Leticia and Tabatinga have begun to reinvest their illicit revenue in wildlife trafficking and illicit gold mining. In this process, illicit economies in the Amazon have become increasingly connected to each other at the hands of large transnational criminal groups. Leticia and Tabatinga play a central role in these criminal convergences.

The CV–PCC turf war subsided at the start of 2024, with the CV now dominating the local criminal scene. Even so, violence remains a constant feature of life in Leticia and Tabatinga. The CV and the PCC co-opt local indigenous youth to take part in the drug trade as mules or as farmhands, sex workers and cooks in their coca plantations, often paying them in cocaine base paste instead of cash. These local youth are also encouraged to sell drugs in their communities.<sup>2</sup> All these activities stimulate rising levels of problematic drug consumption, suicide and violence in indigenous communities.

Before 2000, Leticia and Tabatinga had low levels of violence, but the consolidation of organized crime in the region has helped turn this urban sprawl, particularly its Brazilian contingent, into one of the most insecure places in the Americas. Tabatinga registered a homicide rate of 95.9 per 100 000 people in 2023, making it one of the most violent cities in the continent.<sup>3</sup> Leticia's reported homicide rate of 31.4 in 2023 may be substantially lower than its Brazilian neighbour's,<sup>4</sup> but it ranks among the five most violent departmental capitals in Colombia.<sup>5</sup>

The high levels of violence in Leticia and Tabatinga therefore indicate that longstanding forms of criminal governance seen in large cities in Brazil and Colombia are extending into the urban centres of the critically important Amazon region. That extremely violent and transnationally active criminal groups are adopting a long-term strategy in the tri-border region is therefore an alarming development. By controlling the use of violence, setting rules of community conduct, holding sway over profitable market chains in the surrounding region and infiltrating already fragile and under-equipped political institutions, organized crime has become a consolidated governance provider in Leticia and Tabatinga.

## Methodology

The research relies on a qualitative, fieldwork-based methodological approach to explore criminal governance in Leticia and Tabatinga. Its primary data sources consist of interviews with civil society organizers, indigenous leaders, law enforcement officers, journalists, judicial officials, civil servants, humanitarian actors and residents in Leticia and Tabatinga, held between May and July 2024. Fieldwork observations were also recorded to supplement the interview findings. For security reasons, the names of interviewees are not disclosed. All interviews and fieldwork activities were conducted by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. Desk research based on media clippings, scholarship and think-tank reports related to violence and crime in the tri-border region was also conducted to complement the fieldwork data. In addition, an expert round table was held with government officials and researchers from Brazil and Colombia in October 2024 to aid in the development of the policy recommendations included at the end of the report.

The report explores the emergence of organized crime in Leticia and Tabatinga, followed by an examination of the current dynamics of criminal governance in both cities. It then analyzes the convergence of illicit economies in the tri-border region. The paper concludes with potential policy measures to address the entrenchment of criminal governance in Leticia and Tabatinga.



## THE RISE OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE TRI-BORDER REGION

Organized crime has always been prominent in border regions globally,<sup>6</sup> and the tri-border region of the Amazon Basin where Peru, Colombia and Brazil meet is no different. The region, which spans 200 000 square kilometres, is home to 18 indigenous ethnicities, including the Ticuna, Marubo, Kanamari and Matis peoples.<sup>7</sup> Located on the east bank of the Amazon River, Leticia and Tabatinga are the main commercial hubs and population centres of this tri-border area. Across the river, Peru has jurisdiction over the island of Santa Rosa, a small hamlet with approximately 1 000 residents.

Despite historic territorial disputes, the riverine borders between Santa Rosa, Leticia and Tabatinga are without checkpoints or barriers. The same holds true for the land border. As a large avenue, called the Avenida da Amizade (Avenue of Friendship), links Leticia and Tabatinga, the border would barely be noticeable were it not for the large signs and Colombian and Brazilian flag standards. For people who were born and raised in the area, 'life in the border is very intermingled. Families live between Leticia and Tabatinga and people from the Peruvian, Colombian and Brazilian sides circulate here every day.'<sup>8</sup>

Growing global demand for cocaine in the 1970s and 1980s facilitated the first forays of organized crime into the tri-border region. Colombian groups, including Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel and the Cali cartel, began transporting cocaine through the Amazon River to be sold in Brazil and Europe.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Escobar's role in launching the Amazon drug-trafficking route contributed to his rise within Colombia's drug trade.<sup>10</sup> The cartels collaborated with Evaristo Porras, a trafficking boss in Leticia locally known as 'Don Porras'.<sup>11</sup> The twin cities (particularly Leticia) quickly became a prominent stopover point where cartel leaders oversaw the transport of their merchandise through the newly formed Amazon route.<sup>12</sup> Drug traffickers laundered their drug proceeds by opening fashion shops, restaurants, hotels and casinos in Leticia.<sup>13</sup> These venues quickly became infamous, as Escobar, Porras and other drug kingpins met there to celebrate their successes.<sup>14</sup>

The most important node of the Amazon drug route is the Brazilian city of Manaus, which boasts a large port at the intersection of the two largest rivers of the rainforest, the Amazon (known in Brazil as the *Rio Solimões*) and the Rio Negro. Via the Amazon, Leticia and Tabatinga offer direct access to Manaus, a thousand kilometres away. In July 2024, the price of pure cocaine in Leticia and Tabatinga was approximately US\$1 000–US\$2 000 per kilogram. When it arrived in Manaus, it was worth around US\$8 000–US\$10 000.<sup>15</sup> Drug shipments from the twin cities are sent downriver from Manaus to



**FIGURE 1** Leticia and Tabatinga are the main commercial hubs and population centres of the Peru, Colombia and Brazil tri-border area, offering direct access to Manaus, a key node in the Amazon drug route.

be sold throughout Brazil, which offers the second-largest consumer market for cocaine in the world. Other shipments travel from Manaus to Europe on ocean-going vessels.<sup>16</sup>

From Escobar's time to the present day, limited institutional capacity at the local level and the logistical difficulties of policing the thousands of kilometres of waterways make the Amazon route attractive for criminal groups. The obstacles to policing are further aggravated by seasonal rainforest conditions. During the six months of the rainy season, drug traffickers and traders of other illicit commodities are able to run large shipments on the Amazon River. They can also hire mules to travel on river ferries or send smaller vessels through the Amazon's tributaries and streams.<sup>17</sup> The six-month dry season leads to fewer shipments, particularly where the smaller streams have dried up. Criminal groups then ship through the larger unsupervised waterways and send couriers overland through indigenous territories to reach Manaus.<sup>18</sup> The dry season also hampers law enforcement, as the waters are too low for most patrol boats to navigate.

During the early days of the Amazon route, when Don Porras was brokering shipments on behalf of the Colombian cartels, he was integral to the consolidation of the Amazon route through Leticia and Tabatinga. Widely known as the boss of the local illicit ecosystem, he circulated freely through the Brazilian, Colombian and Peruvian sides of the tri-border region.<sup>19</sup> He would also go on to serve as a city councillor in Leticia.<sup>20</sup> However, the twin cities avoided criminal violence. Don Porras did not sell drugs locally, nor did he and his criminal associates try to govern the day-to-day life of local communities.<sup>21</sup> Leticia and Tabatinga were merely nodes for drug shipments, where vessels could stop to refuel, and traffickers could coordinate with each other and stock up on supplies on their way to Manaus.

Don Porras reacted quickly to the collapse of the Medellín and Cali cartels in the 1990s and reached an agreement with the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, to transport cocaine and cannabis cultivated in guerrilla territory through the tri-border region.<sup>22</sup> The 1990s were also



Fishing boats in Manaus. Drug traffickers use small vessels such as these to move shipments through the Amazon drug route. © Paulo Fridman/Corbis via Getty Images

marked by the CV expanding from its stronghold in Rio de Janeiro and diversifying its trafficking routes. Having previously trafficked cocaine and cannabis through Paraguay to sell in Rio and export abroad, the CV moved into the Amazon region with the goal of establishing direct links with drug suppliers in Colombia. It began to use Leticia and Tabatinga as a logistical base to exchange weapons for drugs with the FARC.<sup>23</sup>

The CV's main rival in drug trafficking through Brazil quickly followed suit. By the early 2000s, the PCC was moving drugs through Tabatinga and the nearby Alto Solimões region of the Brazilian Amazon.<sup>24</sup> With the arrival of the PCC and the CV in the tri-border region, Don Porras and the other charismatic old-school 'bosses' of the local scene were no longer central to the trafficking networks. Rather than rely on local brokers, the large, cash-rich and transnationally connected Brazilian groups ran drug shipments and linked up with suppliers themselves.

PCC and CV operatives also did not bother with ostentatious displays of wealth and power in local hotels and casinos but began to exert control over criminal markets in Leticia and Tabatinga from afar, often through prison cells across Brazil and Colombia. Heavily armed, keen to compete for turf and intent on expanding into other illicit trades in the Amazon region, these groups would have lasting effects on local governance in the twin cities.





## DRIVERS OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN LETICIA AND TABATINGA

**W**hile the population in Leticia and Tabatinga expanded and lethal violence grew throughout the first decade of the 2000s, the Amazon route remained key to transnational drug trafficking. Although armed groups like the FARC were unable to operate easily in Leticia because of the heavy military presence in the departmental capital, they freely navigated the Amazon River and its tributaries in the Colombian Amazon.<sup>25</sup> Following the demobilization of paramilitary groups in Colombia in 2005–2006, many former paramilitaries migrated to Leticia. These experts in unlawful violence quickly set up their own criminal enterprises to run drugs and weapons through the tri-border region.<sup>26</sup>

During the same period, the PCC established an alliance with the Primeiro Comando do Norte (First Command of the North, PCN), a new prison-based criminal organization on the Brazilian side of the border. The PCN fought the CV for control of river routes throughout the tri-border region.<sup>27</sup> In their quest to establish control across the Amazon route, both the PCN and the CV began to sell drugs locally in Leticia and Tabatinga.<sup>28</sup> These sales help fund their trafficking operations along the Amazon route, which involves substantial costs for fuel, supplies and boats.

These changes in local criminal markets helped shape a rapid process of informal urbanization in Leticia, which became the capital of Colombia's Amazonas department in 1991,<sup>29</sup> and grew to over 40 000 residents by 2022.<sup>30</sup> Tabatinga also became a significant site of urban migration. Sparsely populated up to the 1990s, its population grew from 50 000 in 2010 to 70 000 in 2024.<sup>31</sup>

The migrants who led this surge came mainly from indigenous territories in neighbouring regions of the Amazon Basin. Seeking livelihoods in the intense commercial flux of the tri-border region,<sup>32</sup> they created informal neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Leticia and Tabatinga. Within this irregularly settled urban space, where residents have limited support from official institutions or access to the law, contract killers became a common means to settle local disputes.<sup>33</sup> Contract killers have proliferated in the area to this day. Homicide is the most common crime committed in both cities, followed by robbery of moto-taxi drivers.<sup>34</sup> It can cost as little as BRL200 (approximately US\$35) to hire a killer in the two cities.<sup>35</sup>

Despite boastful claims of state presence on both sides of the border – including a mural in front of the Brazilian Army headquarters in Tabatinga that declares '*o Brasil começa aqui*' ('Brazil begins

here') – state institutions on both sides of the border are currently under-equipped to deal with this burgeoning urban population.<sup>36</sup> Tabatinga has around 150 law enforcement officers, while Leticia, as a departmental capital, boasts a larger contingent of 500.<sup>37</sup> Civil servants do not remain in the area for long, since, according to a judicial official, 'many state officials perceive being posted to the tri-border region as a sort of punishment. [...] They come, stay a couple of months and want to leave as soon as possible.'<sup>38</sup>

Cocaine base paste and *bazuco*, a potent crack-like drug made from a mixture of residual cocaine paste and a variety of toxic substances, are the most common drugs sold in Leticia and Tabatinga.<sup>39</sup> Drug sales are particularly rife in neighbourhoods on the land border between the two cities. They also take place within a hundred metres of the port areas of Leticia and Tabatinga.<sup>40</sup> Indicating the strategic role of the local scene in financing the Amazon route's logistical costs, illicit operatives in Leticia only accept Brazilian currency for drug payments.<sup>41</sup>



The riverside areas of Tabatinga (left) and Leticia (right).  
Photo: GI-TOC

The arrival of traffickers connected to the PCC and the CV in the tri-border region also led to more drugs being shipped through the Amazon River and its tributaries.<sup>42</sup> Drug traffickers began to recruit young men from the two cities to work as drug mules.<sup>43</sup> These couriers travel on river ferries or on the daily flights from Tabatinga to Manaus, each carrying small quantities (usually 5–10 kilograms) of cocaine or cannabis.<sup>44</sup> The criminal organizations also began to hire large fishing boats that carry hundreds of kilos of drugs from Tabatinga to Manaus.<sup>45</sup> They also carry shipments of pirarucu, the largest river fish in the world, which can span three metres in length and weigh up to 200 kilograms. The drugs are placed in disguised compartments at the bottom of the boats, stashed under the fish and a thick layer of ice.<sup>46</sup>

## Criminal competition and policing capacity

The Brazilian Federal Police is responsible for monitoring the Tabatinga port, the largest harbour in the tri-border region. Yet, unlike other major ports on drug-trafficking routes through Brazil, the Federal Police in Tabatinga does not have the use of a scanner and must rely on its small contingent of officers to manually check vessels and travellers.<sup>47</sup> A judicial official described their frustration:

Mules are arrested every day here, but this kind of policing is like *enxugar o gelo* ['wiping ice dry', a Brazilian expression for a useless task]. Because it is all well and good to be proud of catching

a couple of mules, but for every kid that is arrested here, transporting drugs, there are 20 others that have evaded the police checks and made their way to Manaus.<sup>48</sup>

The failure to halt trafficking flows in the port is compounded by the small police contingent's inability to properly monitor the land border with Leticia. By car or on foot, traffickers regularly pass unchecked through the avenue that crosses through the two cities. Once in Brazil, they stash drug shipments in nearby indigenous territories to await transport to Manaus.<sup>49</sup>

## Infrastructure upgrade

In early 2024, the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva launched an infrastructure programme to improve the navigability of waterways in the Amazon region and create a new route for international trade. The programme seeks to facilitate the export of agricultural commodities and goods produced in the tax-free industrial zone of Manaus through the Ecuadorian port of Manta on the Pacific Ocean.<sup>50</sup> Part of this revamping of riverine infrastructure includes substantial alterations to the Tabatinga port. This will include a Federal Revenue Service customs unit – which local politicians and civil society have long called for – to enhance security protocols and increase the presence of federal government officials in the harbour.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, while the existing Amazon River route currently limits criminal groups to selling their products in Brazil or onward to Europe via Brazilian ports on the Atlantic, waterway improvements from Manaus to Manta could open new and lucrative international illicit markets via the Pacific. ■

Even with these longstanding capacity issues, local law enforcement agencies have conducted a series of notable seizures. Over the last five years, the Colombian Navy has reportedly seized 35 tonnes of cocaine and cannabis in the tri-border region.<sup>52</sup> In July 2024, the Brazilian Federal Police seized 4 tonnes of cocaine that had arrived from Colombia and been stashed in the district of Vila Nova in Tabatinga, awaiting transport to Manaus.<sup>53</sup> The Vila Nova operation was the largest seizure of cocaine in the history of the Brazilian state of Amazonas.<sup>54</sup>

Another major cocaine seizure took place just 10 days later when the Amazonas Civil Police seized 3 tonnes of cocaine base paste and refined cocaine in a rural community near Benjamin Constant, a Brazilian town neighbouring Tabatinga at the head of the Javari Valley.<sup>55</sup> Along with indicating possible capacity improvements in law enforcement agencies in the tri-border area, these recent seizures also shine a light on the prominence of the Amazon route for transnational drug trafficking. That such large cocaine shipments could be seized in a single 10-day period illustrates the massive scale of a criminal ecosystem that can produce, store and distribute large amounts of drugs across Peru, Colombia and Brazil.

## Prison-based criminal governance and turf wars

The CV and the PCC have also consolidated their presence in Leticia and Tabatinga by expanding into local and regional prisons, recruiting inmates to join and manage their criminal governance efforts. As in other parts of Brazil and Colombia, inmates in Amazonian prisons run the local drug trade and adjudicate disputes within their respective criminal groups from behind bars.<sup>56</sup>

Leticia and Tabatinga (right) are key nodes in the Amazon drug route, and different criminal groups vie for their control. Photo: Wikipedia



Local youth who are arrested and charged for micro-trafficking in Leticia and Tabatinga are sent to prisons dominated by criminal organizations.<sup>57</sup> While in these penitentiaries, these youngsters involved in small-scale criminality become fully-fledged members of illicit organizations. Prisons in the tri-border area suffer from overcrowding and are chronically mismanaged by corrupt entities from both the private (on the Brazilian side) and public (on the Colombian side) sectors.<sup>58</sup> Over the course of 2024, local authorities have been notified of inmates suffering from malnutrition and starvation due to food shortages in the Tabatinga prison.<sup>59</sup> Within these institutional failures, the CV and the PCC guarantee the safety of inmates and provide them with hygiene products and other supplies, including phones that can be used to coordinate drug-trafficking activities.<sup>60</sup>

The encroachment of criminal groups into penitentiaries across the Amazon has also led to prison breakouts and massacres. In 2013, a host of drug traffickers who were imprisoned in the Manaus region broke away from the local PCC outfit and created a new group called the Familia do Norte (Family of the North, FDN). In the same year, the FDN orchestrated the mass breakout of 172 affiliated inmates from the Antonio Trindade prison in greater Manaus.<sup>61</sup>

Initially allied with the CV, the FDN quickly spread throughout the region. By 2014, the group was operating independently and had obtained a foothold in Tabatinga and Leticia by embedding itself in local politics.<sup>62</sup> Family members of prominent Tabatinga politicians began to move drugs from the triple border to Manaus on behalf of the FDN.<sup>63</sup> Since the days of Don Porras, similar links between drug traffickers and local politics have also appeared in Leticia.<sup>64</sup> According to local activists, it is now common for criminal operatives to provide politicians with fuel and boats to campaign in the indigenous territories and riverside towns of the tri-border area.<sup>65</sup> Drug-trafficking outfits and wildlife traders also reportedly give politicians money to buy votes, a widespread and longstanding feature of election campaigns in both cities.<sup>66</sup>

In December 2015, a group of unidentified assailants broke into the home of the Tabatinga mayor.<sup>67</sup> The FDN interpreted the incident as an affront to its dominant position in the tri-border region. In response, it launched a wave of violence against PCC operatives in Leticia and Tabatinga and other regions of the Amazon. The regional turf war persisted over the following year, culminating in a prisoner rebellion staged by the FDN in Manaus's largest prison in January 2017. Over a period of 17 hours, members of the FDN killed 56 inmates who were affiliated to the PCC. Many victims were

beheaded in what was one of the worst prison massacres in Brazil.<sup>68</sup> The next two years saw a series of mass killings involving PCC, FDN and CV operatives throughout the prisons of the Amazon region.<sup>69</sup>

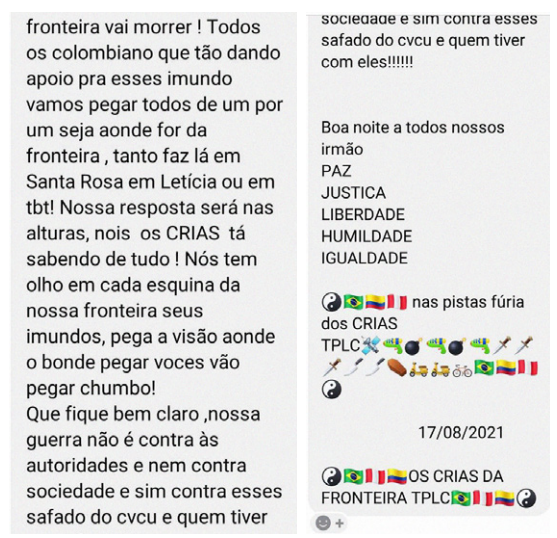
By 2019, the PCC decided on a new strategy to combat the FDN and the CV: it provided weapons and funds for a new Tabatinga-based trafficking group who called themselves Os Crias (The Kids). Led by Brendo dos Santos, a Tabatinga local, Os Crias were true to their name. According to a state official, 'Os Crias were literally kids. [...] Many of them were 15-, 16-year-olds. Because of this, they were really amateurish and undisciplined. [...] They were only focused on spreading violence and did not care about much else.'<sup>70</sup>



Erasing the competition: Os Crias gang graffiti overlays that of the Comando Vermelho in Tabatinga. Photo: Supplied

Os Crias sometimes used the names TPLC (The Kids of Tabatinga, Peru and Leticia) or Comando da Tríplice Fronteira (Command of the Triple Border) to emphasize their PCC links. Having grown up in the tri-border region, they did not restrict their membership to Brazilians but also recruited many of the young Peruvians and Colombians who sold drugs locally. They also recruited members within the prisons of Leticia and Tabatinga.<sup>71</sup> And they brought the terror-based model of criminal governance witnessed in Amazonian prisons home to Leticia and Tabatinga.<sup>72</sup>

Every week, Os Crias shared a *decreto* (decree) on local social media groups. The *decreto* listed people in Leticia and Tabatinga who were going to be murdered by the group over the coming days. Victims included FDN and CV members, as well as residents deemed to have disrespected Os Crias.<sup>73</sup> Local community activists and journalists were also included in these kill lists, which were fulfilled in bouts of armed violence in public locations in both cities.<sup>74</sup>



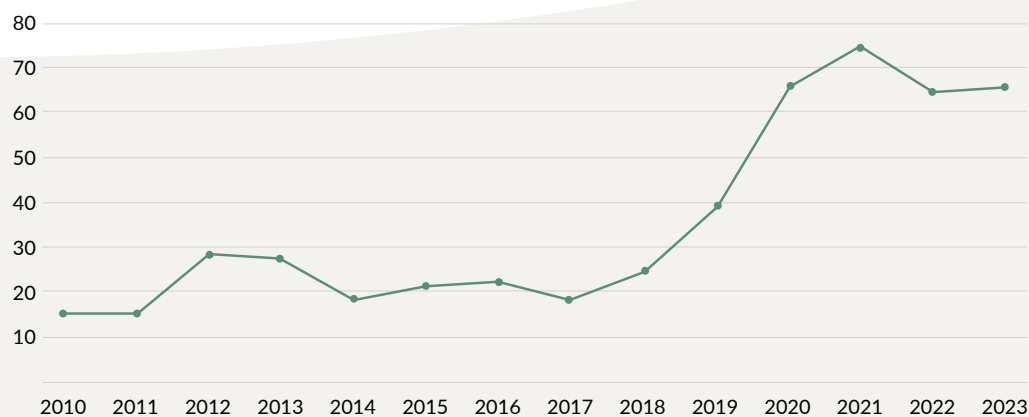
The rising prevalence of illicit activity and armed disputes illustrates the extent to which the Amazon region, particularly its Brazilian component, suffers from high levels of criminality and violence. Between 2011 and 2022, Brazil reported a 5.2% decrease in homicides nationally.<sup>75</sup> The only outlier to this downward trend was the Northern region of the country, which almost fully consists of Amazon territory. The Northern region saw a 76.7% increase in homicides.<sup>76</sup>

Excerpt of a *decreto* (decree) published on an Os Crias social media page.<sup>77</sup> Photo: Tropa dos Crias TPLC, 18 August 2021, via Facebook

This violence has been particularly felt in small- to medium-sized urban areas of the Amazon that are strategic for transnational illicit routes. In the case of Leticia and Tabatinga, the turf war between Os Crias and the CV was the main driver of this recent increase in homicides.<sup>78</sup>

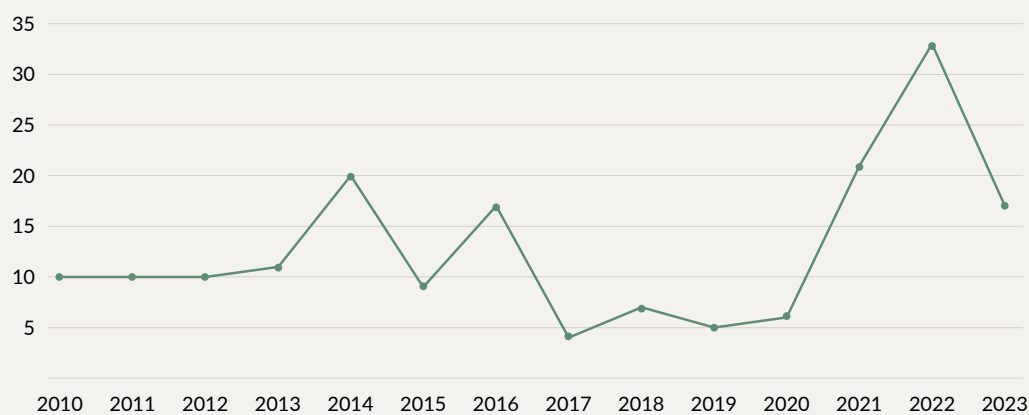
Killings by criminal actors in the area are usually perpetrated with firearms. The Bolsonaro government's decrees to liberalize gun purchases and ownership between 2019 and 2022, and the demobilization of the FARC in Colombia between 2015 and 2017 (many of whose members preferred to sell their weapons clandestinely rather than surrender them to the United Nations mission overseeing the Colombian peace process) have led to a proliferation of high-grade weapons in the tri-border region.<sup>79</sup>

Os Crias's aggressive assassination campaign from 2019 onwards broke the FDN's network in Leticia and Tabatinga. With the FDN dismantled in 2022, the CV continued to compete with Os Crias for control of the cocaine and cannabis supply from Peru and Colombia, and for dominance over drug sales in Leticia and Tabatinga. Turf wars usually escalate during the month of August. At the peak of the dry season, when shipments through the Amazon route are restricted, drug traffickers in Leticia and Tabatinga turn to settling their scores.<sup>80</sup>



**FIGURE 2** Homicides in Tabatinga, 2010–2023.

SOURCE: Institute for Applied Economic Research, *Atlas da violência*, <https://www.ipea.gov.br/atlasviolencia/filtros-series/1/homicidios>



**FIGURE 3** Homicides in Leticia, 2010–2023.

SOURCE: Colombian Ministry of Justice, <https://www.minjusticia.gov.co/programas-co/politica-criminal/Paginas/SIPC-Tasa-de-Homicidios-Basada-en-reporte-de-homicidios-de-la-Policia-Nacional.aspx>

The local dynamics of violence during this peak of criminal competition in the two cities between 2019 and 2023 also began to resemble those of the larger urban centres in Brazil and Colombia, where turf wars between criminal groups are exacerbated by unlawful police violence. In June 2021, a military police sergeant was murdered in broad daylight in the port area of Tabatinga.<sup>81</sup> This lethal incident came in the wake of a series of attacks the CV had launched over the course of the previous week against state institutions throughout the state of Amazonas in response to the murder of one of its local leaders by the military police in Manaus.<sup>82</sup> Following the assassination of the officer in Tabatinga, local law enforcement officers went on a revenge killing spree. At least seven people were murdered, three of whom were tortured and had their bodies thrown into a trash dump.<sup>83</sup>

The Os Crias–CV turf war subsided in August 2023, when the CV murdered Brendo, the leader of Os Crias.<sup>84</sup> Dependent on youthful excitement and lacking a firm organizational structure, Os Crias disintegrated soon after. After Brendo was killed, ‘some of them [Os Crias] were killed off, some joined the CV and some of them joined churches,’ said a judicial official.<sup>85</sup> Since the start of 2024, the CV has consolidated its dominant position in Leticia and Tabatinga, with the Brazilian criminal group operating freely on all three sides of the border.<sup>86</sup>

Homicides still occur regularly, largely in response to unpaid drug debts or violations of CV rules about theft and robberies in neighbourhoods where they are active.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the CV now replicates Os Crias, displaying its authority by publishing kill lists and sharing videos and photos of murder victims on social media groups in both cities.<sup>88</sup> Unlike in the days of Don Porras, the CV leaders are not public figures in the triple border. They nevertheless emulate the earlier drug kingpins by laundering their illicit revenues through local real estate and commercial establishments.<sup>89</sup>

Drug sales in Leticia continue to take place in a low-profile form, most likely because of the greater police presence on the Colombian side of the border. However, *bocas de fumo* – open-air drug sales-points that feature in the CV’s criminal governance in Rio – are also beginning to spring up on street corners of several districts in Tabatinga, including Xingu, Vila Verde, Vila Paraiso and Guadalupe.<sup>90</sup> The CV also controls population flows; outsiders who enter these neighbourhoods at night are interrogated and liable to face violent threats by the group.<sup>91</sup>

These forms of criminal governance, which affect the daily lives of urban communities, represent a notable shift in organized criminal involvement in Leticia and Tabatinga. The CV’s constant deployment of lethal violence to adjudicate disputes and its efforts to exert territorial authority confirm that criminal groups are no longer treating the twin cities as an intermediate node for their trafficking flows. Leticia and Tabatinga are now becoming permanent bases of operation for large-scale criminal groups with transnational reach. This evolution has also strengthened the convergence of illicit economies of the tri-border region.



## CONVERGING ILLICIT ECONOMIES

**T**he CV's established position in Leticia and Tabatinga has helped the group to control drug production and trafficking chains throughout the Amazon region. It has also empowered it to diversify its criminal portfolio in the rainforest. As mentioned, the CV has traded weapons for drugs with the FARC in the tri-border area since the 1990s.<sup>92</sup> The Carolina Ramirez group, an offshoot of a dissident FARC outfit called the Estado Mayor Central, is the current beneficiary of this longstanding CV-FARC link. Carolina Ramirez guerrillas transport cocaine and cannabis, respectively, from Colombia's Putumayo and Cauca regions to CV buyers in Leticia and Tabatinga.<sup>93</sup>

The CV is also responsible for a notable expansion of coca plantations in the Peruvian Amazon.<sup>94</sup> Since 2020, the group has operated plantations in the Ucayali region, which borders the Brazilian state of Acre.<sup>95</sup> By 2022, the Peruvian government had identified over 14 000 hectares under cultivation, a fourfold increase in the rainforest area used for coca cultivation in two years.<sup>96</sup> While the Colombian plantations only cultivate the coca leaf and turn it into base paste, those in the Peruvian Amazon also contain processing labs that refine the primary product into pure cocaine.<sup>97</sup> The coca that is grown and refined in Ucayali is sent by river to Leticia and Tabatinga, where the CV then transports it through the Amazon route to sell in international markets.<sup>98</sup>

Over the last 10 years, the CV has also established coca plantations in the province of Mariscal Ramón Castilla in the Peruvian Amazon.<sup>99</sup> These plantations are closer to Leticia and Tabatinga than Ucayali, thereby expediting the trafficking process.<sup>100</sup> The bulk of these coca production and processing areas are located on the Peruvian side of the Javari Valley, which forms the border with Brazil. The Javari Valley has the largest population of voluntarily isolated indigenous people in the world. The area also boasts unparalleled biodiversity, which is increasingly suffering from criminal interference.

Illegal fishing and hunting are mainstays of the local economy, and indigenous communities of the tri-border contend with the constant invasion of their territories by wildlife traffickers.<sup>101</sup> On the Brazil side of the border, wildlife that is illegally hunted or fished is trafficked for food consumption. Protein from a variety of fish, including pirarucu, and mammals such as tapirs are in demand both for local consumption and for a specialized consumer market in other parts of Brazil and abroad.<sup>102</sup>

Pirarucu that are illegally fished from indigenous territories on the Brazilian side of the tri-border are also transported through Leticia and Tabatinga to be sold in Colombia.<sup>103</sup> Since Brazil has the only conservation areas in which the fish are bred, Colombian legislation allows for legal imports of





Illegal fishing and hunting, including pirarucu poaching, are key activities of the tri-border illicit economy, and criminal groups in the area are heavily involved. © Michael Dantas/AFP via Getty Images

pirarucu.<sup>104</sup> However, the regulations do not include controls to determine whether imports are legally sourced, thereby facilitating the involvement of criminal actors.<sup>105</sup> Criminals also transport taxidermied animal carcasses from the Javari Valley through Tabatinga and Leticia onward to Colombian ports to be exported to Asian and North American markets.<sup>106</sup>

Both the CV and the PCC have invested in these wildlife trafficking activities in the tri-border region over the past decade.<sup>107</sup> Through its recently achieved dominance in Leticia and Tabatinga, the CV is also now ascendant in the local wildlife trade. The links between drug and animal trafficking are particularly strong in the Javari Valley, where the CV and their local allies are setting up coca plantations in the vicinity of lakes where pirarucu and other valuable fish stocks are located.<sup>108</sup> This proximity is convenient for the CV, as the group can feed the plantation workers with meat from illicit fishing and hunting in the Javari.<sup>109</sup>

The CV's local partners in many of the Javari Valley coca plantations are Israelitas, members of a radical Christian sect from Peru whose leader claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ and who adhere to the teachings of the Old Testament.<sup>110</sup> They arrived in the tri-border region during the 1990s as part of a programme under the Fujimori government to increase the population and stimulate economic development in the Peruvian Amazon.<sup>111</sup> The Israelitas settled on Islândia, a Peruvian island located where the Javari and Amazon Rivers meet in the tri-border area. Establishing themselves in this strategic junction, they quickly became prominent traders of the legal and illegal goods that traverse the area. Drugs, wildlife and illicitly mined gold regularly pass through the Israelites' turf. They are therefore an important local partner in the CV's expansion into other illicit markets.<sup>112</sup>

The proximity of illicit coca, fish and animals in the Javari allows the CV to streamline its various distribution logistics. The group can also oversee its own production and distribution of cocaine, instead of spending time and resources on local drug suppliers in Peru, Colombia and elsewhere. The CV has thus won unprecedented control over the production, transport and commercialization chain of cocaine and other illicit goods in the tri-border region of the Amazon. As the first Brazilian criminal outfit to perceive the value of Leticia and Tabatinga back in the 1990s, the CV is now reaping its benefits.

The convergence of illicit wildlife and drug trades in the tri-border area has also blighted the lives of indigenous people. Criminal groups regularly invade indigenous territories to recruit labour for their drug cultivation and trafficking activities. Indigenous boys are hired as drug mules or as plantation workers, while girls and women are sent to the plantations to work as sex workers and cooks.<sup>113</sup> Some of these youths can earn up to US\$500 a month to work the plantations, far more than they would receive in a regular local job.<sup>114</sup> However, they commonly spend their income purchasing food, alcohol and drugs on the plantations. By the time they get back home, these young people are caught in a vicious cycle, running out of cash and feeling pushed to return to work.<sup>115</sup> Indigenous activists in Leticia and Tabatinga report a growing population of homeless people, a rise in suicides among indigenous youth, and rehabilitation centres operating at maximum capacity in both towns.<sup>116</sup>

Government officials, activists and journalists in the tri-border region have been attacked by criminals involved in drug and wildlife markets. In September 2019, Maxciel Pereira dos Santos, an official of the Brazilian National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples was shot dead in Tabatinga's main thoroughfare.<sup>117</sup> He was killed in retaliation for his efforts to combat illegal fishing in the Javari Valley.<sup>118</sup> The similar murders of indigenous activist Bruno Pereira and British journalist Dom Phillips in the Javari Valley made international headlines in June 2022. The man who reportedly ordered the killings is a Peruvian national who ran much of the illegal fishing trade in the Javari.<sup>119</sup>

Furthermore, the high value of illicit commodities flowing through the tri-border region has encouraged the emergence of river piracy.<sup>120</sup> These pirates are heavily armed and some have bulletproof vessels fast enough to evade police patrols.<sup>121</sup> As well as stealing gold, drugs and wildlife, river pirates also rob the local indigenous people who travel on the river to purchase food and supplies in Leticia and Tabatinga.<sup>122</sup>

Finally, the consistently high price of gold in international markets will likely continue to fuel illicit mining in the region.<sup>123</sup> Although there is little illicit mining near Leticia and Tabatinga, their water supplies and fish stocks are affected by mercury contamination from clandestine gold mines within the rainforest that drain into the Amazon River.<sup>124</sup> Since the two cities remain important nodes for the movement of gold across the Brazilian and Colombian borders, the criminal groups involved in urban criminal governance are also investing in illicit mining throughout the rainforest.<sup>125</sup> The large revenue that the CV takes from illicit mining is a further boost to its long-term ability to wield authority in Leticia and Tabatinga.

The illicit economies of the tri-border area and the wider Amazon region are therefore closely interwoven with the intensified forms of criminal governance seen over the past decade in Leticia and Tabatinga. The high levels of criminal violence in the twin cities is a result of transnational organized crime's increasing efforts to simultaneously hold sway over both the urban and forest areas of the Amazon region.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Leticia and Tabatinga exemplify the complexities of the Amazon's criminal ecosystem. The twin cities connect areas of the rainforest that produce valuable illicit goods with international shipping lanes through which these products can be sold for substantial profits, with the involvement of a wide array of actors. Colombian guerrillas, Brazilian drug traffickers, local contract killers, illicit wildlife traders, river pirates, Peruvian Christian fundamentalists and many others coalesce in and around this unique urban space and its three international borders.

This report finds that the impact of organized crime on urban life in Leticia and Tabatinga has accentuated over the last 10 years. The two cities are increasingly being used as permanent bases of operations by criminal actors, particularly large Brazilian drug-trafficking groups. The sharp rise in violent crime reflects the high stakes of transnational criminal groups' battles for control of the region's profitable illicit markets.

Along with using the urban infrastructure of Leticia and Tabatinga to move their products, these groups have also started to impose criminal governance at the local level. They sell drugs throughout the urban space, recruit local youth to work as mules, sex workers and plantation workers, fund political campaigns, establish rules of community conduct, and summarily and publicly execute those who transgress their rules. Through these efforts, organized crime has become a consolidated provider of governance in Leticia and Tabatinga.

In addition, the CV's current dominant position in the twin cities has bolstered its efforts to take over the production and trafficking chains of drugs, wildlife and gold in the rainforest and to increasingly profit from the area's large and interconnected illicit economies. As strategic hubs for these illicit economies, Leticia and Tabatinga will likely continue to suffer from criminal governance over the long term.

For years, transnational criminal groups have treated the tri-border as a priority area of operation. It is past time that the national governments of the Amazon region follow suit. Policy efforts to address this complex and sophisticated criminal ecosystem must bear in mind that transnational organized crime is a strategic threat shared by all the countries of the Amazon basin. Addressing it, therefore, requires cross-border cooperation.

Linkages between profitable illicit markets in the Javari Valley are fuelling criminal governance in Leticia and Tabatinga. © Bruno Kelly/Amazônia Real via Flickr



As one military officer consulted by the author noted, 'Criminals do not see borders as barriers, but we (the armed forces of the tri-border area countries) do'.<sup>126</sup> Implementing measures such as intelligence-sharing procedures and joint training programmes on environmental crime for law enforcement in Brazil, Colombia and Peru could significantly improve transnational responses to organized crime.

Since criminal actors operate across the three jurisdictions of the tri-border area, it is crucial for officials to familiarize themselves with the legal and institutional systems of their neighbouring countries. There is currently minimal dialogue between these institutions. As a result, criminals can evade arrest warrants by simply crossing the Amazon River or the border between Leticia and Tabatinga while remaining active in their turf's vicinity.

Enhancing information sharing and expanding technical expertise on illicit economies in the Amazon could also help curb international financial flows used by groups such as the CV to launder illicit revenue across borders. Allowing financial intelligence units to cross-check financial records with their counterparts in neighbouring countries would help reveal how criminal organizations reinvest and diversify their illicit profits across the Amazon. Authorities are currently largely in the dark when it comes to money laundering by transnational criminal groups in the tri-border area. Improved data sharing among financial intelligence units could provide critical information to disrupt trafficking flows and halt the laundering of criminal profits in the local economy. This would also help shift local police efforts away from coercion-driven responses, which remain the primary institutional approach to organized crime in the region. Heavy-handed tactics, such as the June 2021 police revenge killings in Tabatinga, consistently fail to reduce crime and only fuel new cycles of insecurity.

Addressing the rise of criminal governance in Leticia and Tabatinga also requires action beyond law enforcement. While violence in both cities has decreased over the past year, the main factor has been the CV's monopolization of the local criminal ecosystem. To ensure a sustained reduction in violence, the ability of criminal groups to influence public security must be restricted. This can be done through violence reduction programmes in urban neighbourhoods and surrounding indigenous territories, which require the long-term support of national government agencies. These programmes should involve local social services and civil society organizations to curb organized crime's influence on communities and strengthen resilience.

Job training and mentorship programmes could be pivotal in providing local youth with alternatives to joining criminal networks. Government support for existing civil society initiatives, such as those promoting the management of the pirarucu supply chain by indigenous communities, could help reduce the influence of criminal actors in this local trade. In addition, expanding drug rehabilitation centres is also essential, given the rise in problematic drug use in Leticia and Tabatinga, which has contributed to urban insecurity and criminal encroachment in the two cities.

A recent Brazilian federal initiative could serve as a model for holistic violence-reduction strategies across the tri-border area. In July 2024, the Lula administration included Tabatinga as one of its pilot sites for a national strategy to combat the effects of drug trafficking on indigenous communities.<sup>127</sup> The strategy includes sending federal public defenders to work alongside local indigenous activists to provide specialized legal advice to indigenous people, who frequently struggle in their interactions with the criminal justice system because of linguistic differences and institutional bias. The programme also provides vocational courses at federal universities for indigenous youth and implements a specialized care protocol for local health agencies to treat the rise in alcohol and drug abuse among the population.

As a policy package that seeks to address some of the socioeconomic issues that contribute to the consolidation of organized crime in Tabatinga, this pilot programme offers an innovative blueprint for state responses to criminal governance in the Amazon's urban areas. For the programme to succeed, it requires sustained political support beyond the pilot phase. If implemented long term, it could inspire similar initiatives in the Colombian and Peruvian sectors of the tri-border region. Only through sustained and wide-ranging policy measures can the root causes of the Amazon's criminal ecosystem be effectively addressed.

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