

CARIBBEAN CORRIDORS
MAPPING COCAINE FLOWS TO EUROPE



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BRAZILIAN AMAZON

NEW TRAFFICKING CORRIDORS AND
EXPANDING CRIMINAL CONTROL

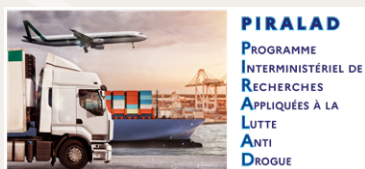
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2025, Portuguese police and naval troops intercepted a submarine off the Azores carrying 6.6 tonnes of cocaine bound for Europe.¹ The vessel had departed from Macapá, Brazil, a city at the mouth of the Amazon River on the Atlantic coast.² Seven months earlier, the Brazilian police had conducted two drug-seizure operations over 2 000 kilometres upriver in the tri-border region where Brazil, Colombia and Peru meet.³ The combined haul – just over 7 tonnes of cocaine, bound for international export – was the largest amount of cocaine ever seized in the Brazilian Amazon.⁴

These seizures represent only a fraction of the Amazon's transnational cocaine flows. Since the 1980s, the rainforest region has served as a corridor connecting the coca-producing regions of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia with large consumer markets in Brazil and Europe.⁵ Over the past 15 years, however, cocaine trafficking has expanded dramatically, driven by surging European demand as well as the arrival of large organized crime groups like the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Vermelho (CV) in the region.⁶ Between 2019 and 2024, there was a 574% increase in cocaine seizures by state-level forces across Brazil's nine Amazon basin states, with more than 162 tonnes seized in this four-year period.⁷ Meanwhile, there was an 84% increase in cocaine seizures by the federal police in the Brazilian Amazon from 2019 to 2024, with a total of 118 tonnes seized during that period.⁸

The growth of trafficking has been accompanied by a dramatic rise in violence, as various criminal groups and state-embedded actors vie for dominance over profitable cocaine flows. In 2024, widespread armed disputes involving transnational drug trafficking groups, local criminal operatives and law enforcement contributed to a homicide rate in the Brazilian Amazon of 27.3 per 100 000, 31% above the national average.⁹

This report explores the latest developments in cocaine trafficking through the Amazon, focusing primarily on flows through the Brazilian rainforest, which acts as a key corridor for exports to Europe. Regional cocaine trafficking is becoming increasingly diversified, with criminal groups currently rerouting cocaine shipments towards the Brazilian state of Amapá and French Guiana for Europe-bound exports, rather than following the standard course of the Amazon River route that has the long-established exit through the Port of Vila do Conde near Belém in Pará state.

The Amazon's cocaine ecosystem now increasingly comprises a wide range of actors. Among the diverse local groups, transnational entities and loose networks of criminal operatives involved in the trade, the CV is currently in an ascendant position.

Over the past decade, the CV has been able to establish its authority over main nodes on the region's drug trafficking routes. The group has also expanded its operations beyond Brazil. It runs coca plantations in Peru and retains a long-standing alliance with Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents to move cocaine through the Colombian Amazon. More recently, CV operatives have diversified into illicit gold mining in French Guiana. It is essential that law enforcement stakeholders in the region pay greater attention to the CV's expansion across the rainforest basin, including in the Guiana Shield.

The principal method for cocaine trafficking from the Amazon to Europe is concealed shipments inside fishing vessels that are able to navigate both the river systems of the Amazon and international waters. This has been the main technique since the days of the original Colombian drug cartels in the 1980s. However, this study has found that drug traffickers are diversifying their methods for transoceanic export, including through the use of submersibles, armoured speedboats and containers. As such, traffickers are increasingly relying on the 'rip-on/rip-off' method, whereby cocaine is concealed inside legitimate cargo or in the engine compartments of containers, and it is then removed at destination ports before official inspections.

Trafficking modalities are also diversifying within the Amazon itself. Individuals are being hired as 'mules' to carry cocaine on regional flights, while small planes and clandestine airstrips are used to transport cocaine through the rainforest's vast expanse.

The substantial profit margins in the cocaine trade, driven by persistently high European demand, have facilitated the development of these routes. Cocaine hydrochloride is sourced in the producing regions of Colombia and Peru at approximately US\$1 000 per kilogram.¹⁰ Once it crosses into the Brazilian Amazon, its value increases to US\$2 500–US\$3 500 per kilogram, and to US\$4 000–US\$5 000 per kilogram by the time it leaves for Europe.¹¹ With current retail prices in Europe ranging between €50 000–€70 000 per kilogram, cocaine trafficking provides criminal groups with a robust source of revenue.¹²

These large profits are increasingly being reinvested in illicit gold mining. Gold mining in the Amazon is mostly illegal at source; extraction sites are generally located within Indigenous territories or protected areas where all mining is prohibited. Nevertheless, Amazonian gold is easily able to enter licit market flows through gaps in licensing regulation. Gold-mining investments allow criminal groups to launder their illegal drug proceeds through the extraction and sale of an increasingly valuable commodity. Involvement in the gold industry also allows traffickers to streamline their logistics by taking advantage of the networks of small planes, clandestine airstrips and corrupt law enforcement that illicit miners have cultivated across the Amazon for decades. With international gold prices having reached an all-time high of US\$5 500 per ounce in January 2026, these overlaps between drugs and illicit mining are likely to grow, leading to the further strengthening of transnational organized crime and the flow of illicit goods through the rainforest region.

The report begins with an overview of the Amazon drug route's development over time, from its early days in the 1980s, when Colombian cartels moved product along the river and its tributaries, to the more recent expansion of rainforest routes and the proliferation of violent illicit actors. The report then focuses on the Brazilian city of Manaus, which serves as the central node connecting the Amazon's various cocaine flows, followed by an analysis of the rising and widely overlooked role of the state of Amapá in exports into Europe. The concluding section contains a set of recommendations to improve multilateral and local efforts to curb cocaine trafficking through the Amazon to Europe.

Methodology

The report draws on fieldwork conducted between May and June 2025 in two of the main nodes of the Brazilian Amazon's cocaine route: the city of Manaus, the epicentre of organized crime in the rainforest and the main logistical node in the transnational drug flows through the region; and the state of Amapá, including the regional capital, Macapá, and the neighbouring port of Santana, a strategic cocaine export hub.¹³

Field research was also undertaken in French Guiana between June and July 2025, including in its border region with Amapá. Interviews were conducted with stakeholders in state and federal law enforcement agencies; government officials in public security secretariats; port officials; criminal attorneys; civil society leaders; current and former drug dealers; and local journalists and researchers. The report also draws on field observations, media clippings and previous GI-TOC research in the Amazon as supplementary data sources.

Key findings

- Since 2010, the Brazilian Amazon region has become an increasingly significant corridor for moving cocaine from producing regions in Latin America to European markets.
- Over the past decade, traffickers have increasingly rerouted from Manaus towards Amapá, with Macapá and Santana emerging as critical nodes along this route. Nevertheless, Belém remains a major exit point in transnational drug flows.
- The CV is currently in an ascendant position in the region, which has allowed the group to be at the forefront of the recent rerouting of cocaine exports from the Amazon to Europe through Amapá.
- Drug traffickers are diversifying their methods for transoceanic export, including through the use of submersibles, armoured speedboats and containerized cargo.
- The long-term strategies of large transnational criminal groups like the PCC and the CV in the Amazon are no longer focused exclusively on the drug trade. These groups are reinvesting their drug profits in the Amazon's various other illicit economies, with gold mining foremost among them.
- To counter the infiltration of organized crime in the Amazon, authorities should enhance cross-border law enforcement cooperation, improve oversight capacity at export hubs and direct investigative resources to tackling the convergence of cocaine and gold.



THE DEVELOPMENT OF COCAINE TRAFFICKING IN THE AMAZON

The Amazon basin offers several strategic advantages for transnational drug flows. Its main waterway, the Amazon River, and its tributaries offer direct access to coca cultivation zones in the Colombian department of Putumayo and in Peru's Mariscal Ramón Castilla province and Ucayali department.¹⁴ The other end of the river network provides drug traffickers with access to international ports on the Brazilian coast for exports bound for Europe, West Africa and North America. Alternatively, traffickers can use the river system to reach the Brazilian retail market, the second-largest cocaine consumption hub in the world.

The vast expanse of the Amazon makes it virtually impossible for local law enforcement to monitor the flow of illicit goods across the region, with even basic functions hampered by rainforest conditions. Fuel is extremely expensive, for instance, preventing regular police patrols along the river network, and most police forces are understaffed. Corruption among local police forces and government agencies is endemic, which allows various illicit trades – including drugs, wildlife trafficking, gold mining and logging – to operate unchecked.¹⁵ In the words of one law enforcement official, the Amazon is 'a happy hunting ground for organized crime'.¹⁶

The original Colombian drug cartels were among the first organized crime groups to recognize the strategic value of the Amazon. With the cocaine boom in full swing in the US and Europe in the 1980s, the Medellín and Cali cartels saw the Amazon as an important new avenue in their efforts to evade law enforcement scrutiny and reach new customers around the world. They established alliances with local criminal bosses who operated deep in rainforest territory to export cocaine shipments along the river.¹⁷ This became known as the 'Solimões route', through which cocaine was moved from the tri-border region of the Amazon between Brazil, Peru and Colombia to the key transport hub of Manaus (see Figure 1).¹⁸ Manaus is the largest city of the Amazonas region and boasts a harbour that is able to accommodate ocean-going ships.

During this early phase of drug trafficking through the Amazon, a small portion of cocaine was flown by small plane into clandestine airstrips around Manaus from the producing regions of Colombia and Peru. However, the main method of transport was by river, on small fishing boats manned by local criminal operatives who were adept at navigating the labyrinthine waterways of the rainforest.¹⁹ Once they arrived in Manaus, the drugs were either diverted to the south-east of Brazil or were trans-shipped

onto larger vessels before continuing upriver to Belém, the largest international port in the Brazilian Amazon, to make the Atlantic crossing.

The collapse of the Medellín and Cali cartels in the early 1990s caused the first shift in the Amazon drug route. The FARC capitalized on the resulting power vacuum and mobilized the same network of local Amazonian criminal bosses that Pablo Escobar and his Cali rivals had used to export drugs through the rainforest.²⁰ At the same time, the CV also began to recognize the value of becoming involved in the Amazon drug trade.

By 1990, the CV had become a dominant force in Rio's drug market, and the group was seeking to diversify its cocaine supply chains. Previously, the CV had sourced its cocaine exclusively from Bolivia, relying on land routes through Paraguay. At the behest of one its leaders, Fernandinho Beira-Mar, the group began operating in the tri-border region of the Amazon around the mid-1990s to build a strategic alliance with the FARC. The CV provided Brazilian weapons to the Colombian guerrilla group, which the FARC paid for with cocaine.²¹ This alliance with the FARC was crucial in enabling the CV to expand throughout the Brazilian Amazon, as the group began to move increasingly large amounts of cocaine along the Solimões route. The CV's ability to procure cocaine directly from the FARC made it a formidable stakeholder in the regional drug trade.²²



FIGURE 1 Cocaine export routes through the Amazon.

However, the CV was not the only outfit with access to suppliers of high-quality cocaine, nor was it the only group moving drugs through the Amazon. Individual illicit entrepreneurs, family clans²³ and smaller criminal networks were involved in cocaine trafficking in the region, attracted by the high profits and low risk of being caught in the Amazon's under-policed waterways.²⁴ This trafficking ecosystem was for the most part peaceful, as no single group had the capacity to monopolize all the thousands of kilometres of river spanning the route.²⁵ As a result, those carrying drugs by small boat were mostly unarmed.²⁶

The lack of violence and armed disputes allowed the transnational drug trade through the Amazon to flourish by the early 2000s. At that time, the CV began to focus on consolidating its presence in the Belém metropolitan region, where the Vila do Conde port offered expansive infrastructure capacity for large-scale drug shipments to Europe.²⁷ Vila do Conde is one of the largest ports in Brazil, and a main conduit for soy exports, one of the country's most important commodities.

After achieving control of drug exports through Vila do Conde in 2010, the CV began to establish criminal governance over the urban margins of the city. The resulting violent clashes with police officers and police-backed militias quickly turned Belém into one of the most violent cities in the Americas.²⁸ This was illustrative of another major shift in the local drug trade in the Amazon; trafficking in the region had become increasingly violent and competitive by the 2010s.

The CV eventually outmatched the local militias and reached stable arrangements with corrupt local law enforcement. Other criminal groups reacted to the CV's monopolization of the Belém export route by adapting their trafficking strategies through the Amazon. During this time, the PCC also began to operate in the Amazon, as part of a wider strategy to expand its drug export operations. As the following section will detail, Manaus would once again prove to be integral to these new dynamics of cocaine flows through the Amazon.



MANAUS: A KEY JUNCTION IN THE AMAZON DRUG ROUTE

Manaus is a city of confluence. Located at the meeting point of the two largest rivers of the rainforest, the Amazon and the Negro, it is a critical junction for the flow of licit and illicit commerce (see Figure 2). The city has always been a prominent trading hub, where the region's various Indigenous peoples, merchants, immigrants and illicit profiteers coalesce. The city's dock area is abounding with transatlantic container ships, barges, fishing vessels, cruise ships and, above all, the thousands of fishing vessels, canoes and other small boats that carry people and goods across the rainforest daily.²⁹

Manaus is almost exclusively accessible by river or air; the city has a single and little-used interstate highway access point that connects the densely forested northern portion of Amazonas with the neighbouring state of Roraima. Manaus's tax-free industrial zone has attracted dozens of multinational manufacturers to the city, along with thousands of immigrants to work in their factories. Migration flows have seen it undergo one of the most intense periods of urbanization among Brazilian cities in the past four decades. Manaus's population has increased by 14.5% since 2010, to over 2 million people in 2024, and almost half of the city's territory is now occupied by *favelas*.³⁰

Manaus's harbour has historically served as a crucial logistical node for cocaine trafficking. The Amazon River directly connects the city to the tri-border region, the main entry point for cocaine in the Brazilian Amazon.³¹ Traffickers commonly make the journey by fishing boat or passenger vessel. Upon arriving in Manaus, they rely on the city's expansive port infrastructure to refuel and restock on supplies, before continuing upriver.

The harbour is also a prominent trans-shipment point, where cocaine is transferred onto other vessels for European export, or concealed on trucks that are then sent towards the large cocaine consumer markets in the Brazilian south-east.³² The port at Manaus is the sixth largest in Brazil by number of containers, with 300 000 to 400 000 containers passing through it each year.³³

But it is not just the main harbour that is an asset for cocaine trafficking. According to one local researcher, Manaus's 'massive coastline and dozens of *igarapés* (streams) have always been used to embark and disembark goods on an informal basis', which allows the entire city to serve as an informal port. This internal water network has become a focal point for criminal activity and competition, with the bulk of homicides concentrated in the riverside areas.³⁴



FIGURE 2 The city of Manaus, a key node in the Amazon cocaine route.

The local criminal ecosystem in the main urban centre of the Amazon is highly dynamic and structured around the trafficking of cocaine and ‘skunk’ (a highly potent form of cannabis produced in Colombia, which has become an increasingly popular drug in Brazil over the past five years).³⁵

Manaus also serves as a destination for deal-making. Prices are frequently renegotiated at Manaus, as suppliers, end-point receivers and their local brokers accommodate the various volatilities, logistics and security risks involved. The challenges of traversing the Amazon river network often lead to substantial price changes along the route.³⁶ At current prices, cocaine is purchased in the producing regions in Colombia and Peru for approximately US\$1 000 per kilogram.³⁷ By the time it reaches Manaus, a kilogram of cocaine ranges between US\$2 500 and US\$3 500.³⁸

Costs can fluctuate for a variety of reasons, most of them stemming from the Amazon's unique characteristics. Fuel for fishing vessels and motorized boats coming from the producing regions is prohibitively expensive. Meanwhile, the increasingly violent and competitive nature of drug trafficking in the Amazon has led to rising demand for cocaine shipments to be accompanied by armed security details. The price for security varies depending on whether the hired guns are highly trained off-duty police or armed forces members, or regular local criminal operatives.³⁹ The vast span of the Amazon route – the distance from Tabatinga to Manaus alone is over 1 000 kilometres (see Figure 1) – requires traffickers to stop in the small towns on the banks of the river to refuel and rest. In these locations, it is common for local police officers to demand bribes for traffickers to continue, thereby further increasing the costs of shipments.⁴⁰

A clash of clans

In November 2010, rising tensions between drug traffickers led to the killing of two federal police officers in the town of Anamã, located in the final stretch of the Solimões route, in the vicinity of the Manaus metropolitan region.⁴¹ The two officers were killed in a shoot-out with traffickers, after attempting a dawn raid on a vessel docked in Anamã that was carrying cocaine. The incident is seen as a watershed moment for local law enforcement. It marked the end of a period in which local drug trafficking flows were largely non-violent and relatively small-scale, and the start of a new phase in which well-structured criminal groups began to move increasing quantities of drugs and leverage their coercive capacities across the Amazon.⁴²

Many of the family clans that have historically helped to transport drugs across the Amazon are based in Manaus. They mostly consist of the local criminal bosses in the city's peripheral neighbourhoods, which have grown dramatically over the past decade.⁴³ With the arrival of the PCC in the Amazon around 2010, the clans became central to drug trafficking disputes in the region. Embedded in Manaus's densely populated urban margins, they were also influential in local prisons. By this time, many of the local leaders were incarcerated on homicide and drug trafficking charges, but maintained long-standing bribery arrangements with prison agents and law enforcement officials to enjoy preferential treatment behind bars and to keep moving drugs through the region.⁴⁴

The PCC's strategy for expansion in the Amazon relied on recruiting these highly connected inmates within the prisons of Amazonas state in order to move drugs through the riverine trafficking routes.⁴⁵ Its main rival, the CV, was also pursuing a similar strategy, offering the family clans franchise-like arrangements. These competing approaches by the PCC and the CV led to an outbreak of violence across the prisons of Amazonas state, as CV and PCC inmates fought each other cell block by cell block in order to ally themselves with local criminal networks.⁴⁶ The violence also reverberated outside of the local prisons, as the CV and PCC began to engage in armed confrontations along the Amazon drug route to disrupt each other's shipments. Although Brazil reported a 5.2% decrease in homicides nationally between 2011 and 2022, the Amazon region experienced a

76.7% increase during the same period. The latest homicide data for 2024 points to a continuation of these patterns, with criminal clashes contributing to the annual homicide rate in the Brazilian Amazon being 31% higher than the national average.⁴⁷

Within this brutal and rapidly changing landscape, the local criminal bosses of Amazonas joined forces around 2011 under the banner of the Família do Norte (FDN). The FDN was a Manaus-based criminal group that had been active since 2004.⁴⁸ Initially formed as a micro-trafficking outfit in the neighbourhood of Compensa, by 2012 it was active in large trafficking operations across Amazonas state. The FDN's name underscored the familial nature of drug trafficking in the Amazon, wherein entire family units are active in the business. In fact, it is common for the wives of criminal bosses to manage the local street-corner drug sale points while their husbands are incarcerated.⁴⁹

In 2012, the FDN had decided to ally with the CV to counter the PCC's growing presence in the Amazon. However, in 2014, the FDN broke out on its own. The group became a dominant force in the twin cities of Leticia and Tabatinga in the tri-border region, forging links with the local political elite.⁵⁰ The FDN's dominance over this crucial node threatened the CV and PCC's long-term ability to reach cocaine suppliers and export through the Amazon river and its tributaries. The two groups responded by ramping up armed disputes with the FDN, particularly within the prisons where FDN bosses were incarcerated. This led to a series of violent reprisals, the most prominent of which was a massacre in a Manaus prison in January 2017, where the FDN killed 56 members of the PCC.⁵¹

The massacre – organized by the leader of the FDN, Zé Roberto, and his sons – sought to dismantle the PCC's drug trafficking network in the Amazon.⁵² It began with a rebellion staged by FDN inmates, in which they were able to take over the prison using weapons smuggled in during visiting hours.⁵³ The rebellion lasted 17 hours, during which FDN members invaded the block of cells in which the PCC members were based and killed them using smuggled firearms, knives and by setting fire to the cells.⁵⁴ Bodies of the PCC inmates were thrown outside of the prison walls; six of the bodies had been beheaded.⁵⁵ A total of 12 prison guards and

14 inmates were taken hostage. During the hostage negotiations, the FDN took advantage of its control of the prison to stage a mass breakout of over 130 inmates. Several of these runaway inmates were summarily executed by police officers in the forest areas surrounding the prison.⁵⁶

Another prison massacre took place over a two-day period in May 2019, during which 55 FDN members were killed across four Manaus penitentiaries.⁵⁷ The May 2019 massacre reportedly stemmed from an internal rift in the FDN, in which some of its leaders wanted to reform an alliance with the CV while others sought to maintain the group's independence.⁵⁸ There are also indications that the massacre was instigated following the killing of a civil police officer by João Branco, one of the FDN's leaders, which prompted local police and prison agents to stoke internal divisions in the FDN in order to dismantle the group. The law enforcement agents reportedly allowed weapons to be smuggled into the four prisons for the massacre to take place.⁵⁹

Whatever the cause, the May 2019 killings debilitated the FDN, and its surviving leaders decided to re-join the CV.⁶⁰ After almost a decade of violent competition over the local drug trade had exhausted the FDN's local leaders, reintegrating with the CV was a more attractive solution than joining forces with the PCC. The CV offers a more hands-off

approach than the PCC (see section below); its central leadership in Rio de Janeiro only issues occasional directives for its affiliates across Brazil.⁶¹ As a result, local criminal bosses prefer to cooperate with the CV instead of the PCC, since there will be far less scrutiny over their operations and fewer rules to follow.

The reintegration with the FDN empowered the CV to emerge victorious from its regional turf war against the PCC in 2020. Since then, the only region of the Amazon where the PCC is still in the ascendancy is in Roraima state, on the border with Venezuela.⁶² In February 2020, the CV took control of the drug distribution points in Manaus. Every year since, the group has launched fireworks throughout the city on 10 February to commemorate its victory and assert its criminal authority over the largest urban centre in the Amazon.⁶³ The group has territorial sway over the vast majority of *favelas* and housing projects in the city, a fact that is underscored by the prominent CV graffiti that now covers Manaus's public spaces.⁶⁴

The increased footprint of several large criminal groups in the Amazon did not just result in a far more violent and competitive drug trafficking ecosystem. It also increased the amount of cocaine being shipped through the Amazon to Europe and Brazil. ■

Suspected members of the Comando Vermelho are arrested during a law enforcement operation in one of Brazil's *favelas*, October 2025. © Mauro Pimentel/AFP via Getty Images



The expansion of the corridor

Although police seizure information is an imperfect proxy for measuring the scale of a local drug market and should therefore be treated with caution, seizure data across the Brazilian Amazon aligns with the changing dynamics of local illicit economies. Rainforest cocaine flows have expanded since the early 2010s, driven by greater competition between transnational criminal groups. Given that there were no notable increases in police capacity during this time, the rise in seizures is indicative of an uptick in cocaine trafficking through the Amazon. Combining state-level and federal seizures, government officials confiscated over 200 tonnes of cocaine in the Brazilian Amazon between 2019 and 2024.⁶⁵ Law enforcement officials estimate that these seizures represent less than 10% of the total volume of cocaine trafficked through the Brazilian Amazon.

This dramatic growth in cocaine trafficking has also been the result of an increase in production, with rising coca cultivation over the past decade in the Peruvian and Colombian Amazon.⁶⁶ Coca producing areas in the Peruvian province of Ucayali, for instance, increased four-fold between 2020 and 2022, with over 14 000 hectares currently under cultivation.⁶⁷ This increase is the result of the CV's expansion into Peru from 2015 onwards.⁶⁸ The group has set up coca plantations with labs to process coca leaves into cocaine hydrochloride and coerces local farmers and Indigenous youth to work in these plantations, promising salaries of up to US\$500 a month (approximately the same amount as the average monthly income of an entire household in Ucayali province).⁶⁹ However, in practice, the CV frequently pays its plantation workers in cocaine base paste, which they then encourage the workers to sell within their home communities. This trend is helping to drive a rise in problematic drug consumption among Indigenous communities in the Brazil–Peru–Colombia tri-border region.

CV-run coca plantations are expanding in the Javari Valley between Brazil and Peru. Some of the plantations extend all the way to the banks of the Javari River, which is a tributary of the Amazon and marks the border between the two countries.⁷⁰

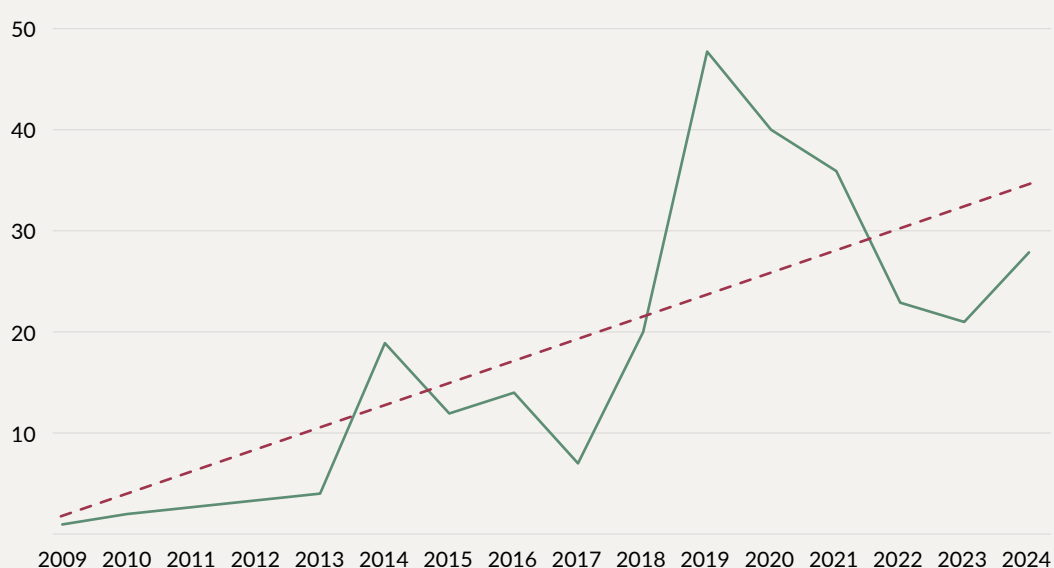


FIGURE 3 Cocaine seizures by federal security forces in the nine Brazilian Amazon states, 2009–2024.

SOURCE: Federal Police of Brazil

The CV moves the cocaine that it produces in the valley by stashing packages within shipments of pirarucu, an extremely valuable species of fish that the group also poaches in the area.⁷¹ The pirarucu is one of the largest species of freshwater fish in the world, weighing up to 200 kilograms and growing up to 3 metres in length. Its meat is highly sought after in the Amazon as well as in international markets in North America, Asia and Europe, and its skin is used by prominent fashion retailers to make leather products.⁷² The pirarucu almost went extinct in the 1960s because of overfishing, and the Indigenous territory in the Javari Valley is one of the last remaining places where the fish can be found. This has led to an expansive wildlife trafficking ecosystem, where local illicit operatives enter Indigenous territory to illegally extract the fish.⁷³ Over the past decade, these local traffickers have allied with the nearby CV coca plantation operatives to coordinate shipments to carry fish and cocaine across the Javari territory.

Another important factor behind the uptick in regional cocaine trafficking has been the growth in European demand. Since 2016, cocaine use has been steadily rising across Europe.⁷⁴ With current retail prices for a gram of cocaine averaging around €50–€70 in major European cities, profit margins for drug traffickers have been significant over the past decade, even with recent analysis showing an oversupply of cocaine in the European market.⁷⁵ The enduringly high profits of the European drug market have incentivized traffickers to export more cocaine through the Amazon corridor, rather than the more circuitous route through Brazil's largest international ports, such as Santos and Itaguaí, located in the south-east.⁷⁶

The expansion of the Amazon drug corridor has also been driven by the incorporation of new routes across the rainforest. In fact, as noted by a law enforcement source, there is no longer such a thing as a single drug trafficking route in the Amazon:

This narrative of the Solimões route, of having a single route, no longer has any bearing on reality. This idea was advanced by the media and some police agencies to try to make sense of what has in fact become a very complex problem that has evolved gradually over time.⁷⁷

Rather than running shipments only along the Amazon, traffickers are also following the course of the Putumayo River, which flows through the coca producing regions of the Putumayo department in Colombia and crosses into Brazil (where the river is called the Içá).⁷⁸ The town of Santo Antônio do Içá – where the Putumayo shipments enter Brazil – has a law enforcement contingent of two federal police officers, who are tasked with monitoring this vast and highly strategic border area.⁷⁹

The routes have also expanded further north from the Içá, to the border regions of Brazil and Colombia on the upper stretches of the Negro River (see Figure 4).⁸⁰ Once the cocaine shipments cross into Brazil in this section of the Amazon, they either sail down the Negro towards Manaus or traffickers take advantage of illicit gold trafficking logistics in the area to move the drugs. They send cocaine consignments on small planes or helicopters, utilizing clandestine airstrips owned by illicit miners, to the neighbouring state of Roraima – one of the major illicit gold mining hotspots in the Amazon basin.⁸¹ Once in Roraima, the cocaine is either placed on board trucks to be transported southwards to Manaus by land, or is put on small boats to be moved along the Branco and lower Negro rivers, also with Manaus as the destination.⁸² Police operations in Manaus have uncovered cocaine and 'skunk' concealed in compartments on fruit trucks that arrive in the city from Roraima.⁸³ It is therefore worth highlighting that even as the drug routes in the Amazon have expanded and diversified, Manaus continues to play a central role as the main trans-shipment point for cocaine in the region.



FIGURE 4 New cocaine routes through the Amazon.

It is not only the sharing of logistics that is driving a confluence of cocaine flows with the illicit gold market. The record rise in international gold prices over the past five years is incentivizing drug trafficking outfits to invest in illicit mining throughout the Amazon. Gold investments allow drug traffickers not only to reinvest their proceeds in an increasingly profitable illicit trade, but also to exchange the gold they extract to purchase cocaine from source suppliers. As an untraceable and easily concealed asset, gold is proving to be an ideal medium for executing wholesale drug deals, rather than using cash payments or front companies that may be subject to financial oversight.⁸⁴

The proliferation of drugs and gold circulating the river systems of the Amazon has also led to the emergence of river pirates. These are criminal outfits, often involving police officers, that navigate the region's waterways using armoured speedboats to steal drugs and gold from illicit operators, as well as fuel and boat engines from Indigenous people and other civilians.⁸⁵ The threat posed by these river pirates has contributed to the increased circulation of semi-automatic rifles and the rising violence attached to the Amazon drug trade.

The methods used for trafficking cocaine in the Amazon have also become increasingly varied over the past 15 years. The main modality remains the fishing vessels that transport cocaine from source destinations to Manaus, where they are trans-shipped onto larger vessels bound for Europe.⁸⁶ However, traffickers are also recruiting Indigenous youths as mules, who can carry 5–10 kilograms of cocaine on river ferries or daily flights between Tabatinga and Manaus.⁸⁷ The FDN specialized in recruiting Indigenous boys to run the Tabatinga–Manaus route during the group's heyday in the tri-border region.⁸⁸ An increasingly common pattern identified by local law enforcement is the concealment of cocaine packages in hollow wooden structures attached to the hulls of fishing vessels.⁸⁹

These structures are able to hold up to 300 kilograms of cocaine and easily evade customs and law enforcement checks.

Other traffickers are even more brazen, and over the past decade have started to use modern speedboats that are able to carry 2–3 tonnes of cocaine at a time.⁹⁰ These speedboats traverse the entire Amazon route, from the coca-producing regions to the trans-shipment points on the Atlantic coast. They are typically manned by 8–10 heavily armed traffickers and former military personnel from Brazil, Colombia and Peru who run security details for the cocaine shipment.⁹¹ Since this method requires a high degree of specialization and is therefore extremely expensive, it is far rarer than trafficking by fishing vessel.

The consolidation of transnational organized crime in the Amazon has therefore transformed the drug trafficking dynamics of the region. The past 15 years has seen a diversification of the routes and modalities used to move drugs across the rainforest, while there are also clear indications that the volume of drugs traversing the Amazon has also dramatically increased.



AMAPÁ: THE AMAZON'S NEW COCAINE TRAFFICKING HOTSPOT

Cocaine flows through the Amazon continue to take advantage of the region's vast river network even after leaving Manaus. The port city of Santarém is a key point on this final stretch. Located midway between Manaus and the mouth of the Amazon on the Atlantic coast, Santarém serves as a stopover for the ferries and transatlantic ships that sail from Manaus. Along with its direct access to the Amazon River, Santarém is the starting point of the BR-163 interstate highway, which cuts southwards over 3 000 kilometres in the direction of Brazil's expansive domestic cocaine consumer market. In Santarém, trucks carrying cocaine for the domestic market disembark the ferries from Manaus and make their way towards the BR-163.⁹²

Meanwhile, the drug shipments bound for international export continue upriver from Santarém. At this point of the Amazon, there are hundreds of streams and riverine islands that traffickers can use to evade law enforcement, stash cocaine loads and rest.⁹³ The most prominent of these islands is the Marajó. A massive river island roughly the size of Switzerland, the Marajó is located just below the Amazon Delta, between Amapá and the Belém region (see Figure 5). It has virtually no law enforcement presence and, according to police sources, serves as 'a fork in the road of sorts' for drug shipments. Upon arriving there, traffickers can choose whether to proceed along the main course of the Amazon and its north-west-bound tributaries towards Amapá, where the river meets the ocean, or sail east towards the tributaries that reach Belém.⁹⁴

As mentioned above, the port of Vila do Conde in the Belém region has historically served as the principal export point for Amazon cocaine flows into Europe. However, surveillance capacity in Vila do Conde has improved over the past decade, with the deployment of scanners and higher numbers of law enforcement officers aimed at halting trafficking flows in what has long been known as a major drug port.⁹⁵ The CV's dominant position in Belém also makes it difficult for other illicit groups to move drugs through Vila do Conde. As a result, over the past decade, traffickers have increasingly rerouted towards Amapá.⁹⁶

Amapá is Brazil's northernmost state. Located on the border with French Guiana, it is one of the smallest states in the country, with a population of approximately 700 000 people.⁹⁷ The state is extremely isolated, with 77% of its territory made up of vegetation.⁹⁸ Indeed, Amapá has no land connection to the rest of the country and is only accessible by river or air. This inaccessibility facilitates drug flows. Limited federal law enforcement scrutiny has drawn drug traffickers to the state and in particular its capital, Macapá, which sits at the mouth of the Amazon on the Atlantic coast, and the neighbouring city of Santana, which boasts an international port.



FIGURE 5 Cocaine flows from Manaus through Santarém, Marajó/Santana and Belém, all major nodes of the Amazon drug trade.

Similar to Manaus 15 years ago, the rising competition over trafficking routes in Amapá has been characterized by elevated violence. Since 2016, Amapá has registered annual homicide rates that far surpass the national average. In 2024, it had the highest homicide rate of Brazil's 27 states (45.1 per 100 000 people), substantially above the national average of 20.8; the previous year, Santana had the highest rate, with 69.9.⁹⁹

Although local law enforcement in Amapá credit disputes between drug traffickers as the main reason for the rise in violence, the state has also witnessed a remarkable increase in police lethality. Amapá has ranked as the Brazilian state with the highest rate of killings by police officers since 2019.¹⁰⁰ According to official figures, the Amapá police killed 137 people in 2024, accounting for 35% of all homicides in the state.¹⁰¹ The police tend to frame this as the result of defensive actions in the course of armed clashes with drug traffickers. However, data reveals that police officer deaths are infrequent in the state. Between 2018 and 2021, the police killed 430 people in Amapá, while only six officers were killed in the line of duty.¹⁰² Rather than being directed at a so-called 'war' with drug traffickers, lethal police violence has become a generalized trend that exacerbates insecurity in Amapá. Summary executions of unarmed civilians by law enforcement are becoming increasingly frequent in what was, up until a decade ago, a remote and largely peaceful region of Brazil.¹⁰³

PCC and CV operatives began to export cocaine through Amapá in around 2015. The PCC initially began to move drugs through the state to circumvent the CV's stronghold in the Belém port area.¹⁰⁴ However, in a display of its strength in the Amazon, the CV quickly followed suit and expanded into Amapá. This aimed to allow the group to consolidate its dominance in the Amazon by gaining control of the other major international drug export node in the region.

The arrival of these large transnational groups in Amapá quickly led to the creation of local criminal groups vying for drug profits. These include the Família Terror do Amapá (Family of Terror of Amapá; FTA), the Amigos Para Sempre (Friends Forever; APS) and the União do Crime do Amapá (Crime Union of Amapá; UCA).¹⁰⁵ The founders of the FTA, APS and UCA were prominent local criminals from Amapá who had been sent to federal penitentiaries located in other regions of Brazil. In these federal prisons, they developed close ties with PCC and CV operatives, which led to them form local drug trafficking outfits once they returned to Amapá.¹⁰⁶

The FTA is the largest of these local groups. It is based in the state capital Macapá and boasts 10 000 members and long-standing links to the PCC.¹⁰⁷ The APS, headquartered in the port city of Santana, has around 4 000 members. It emerged as an independent outfit that occasionally partnered with the CV but was fully absorbed into the group in 2024.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the UCA is the smallest outfit and a minor player in the drug trade, with around 2 000 members operating in the southern region of Amapá.¹⁰⁹

The FTA and the APS offer logistical support for large transnational criminal groups exporting cocaine to Europe,¹¹⁰ helping to organize shipments that arrive from Manaus and stashing the drugs in rural properties located on the outskirts of Macapá and Santana.¹¹¹ However, these local groups are not given access to the pure cocaine shipments. Instead, the CV and the PCC handle the export of the high-grade cocaine themselves and provide the FTA and the APS with skunk and cocaine base paste to sell into the local consumer market. Skunk and base paste follow an entirely different route through the Amazon from the high-grade cocaine, which is brought to Amapá by mules on daily flights from São Paulo to Macapá.¹¹²

When it comes to transnational cocaine flows, the port of Santana is an important node for trafficking logistics through Amapá. The port area is considerably smaller than Belém's Vila do Conde docks; in 2024, 77 transatlantic ships docked in Santana – just 25% of the movement seen in Vila do Conde.¹¹³ However, unlike the port in Belém, Santana does not have a scanner for the containers that pass through it, and manual inspections by federal revenue officials and law enforcement are sporadic.¹¹⁴ The ships that pass through Santana are bound for a variety of European destinations, including Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Russia, Spain and the UK, along with vessels destined for South East Asia and Japan.¹¹⁵ The ships bound for Portugal are most frequently targeted by cocaine traffickers for trans-shipment at the port of Santana.¹¹⁶

It is also important to note that, although only a few ships dock in Santana itself every year, the port and surrounding waters of the Macapá coast are also used as waiting points by the approximately 1 000 transatlantic vessels that make their way to Manaus and back every year.¹¹⁷ The ships have to sit in the waters of Amapá at the entrance of the Amazon for the arrival of *práticos*, the local boat pilots who are the only ones able to navigate the area's rivers. A similar process is followed on the return journey; the ships arriving from Manaus have to wait three to four days to sail past the turbulent waters of the Amazon Delta into the Atlantic.¹¹⁸ During this time, professional divers are able to rip-on cocaine loads to the ships' engine compartments.¹¹⁹ Criminal groups usually fly these divers, many of whom are former elite navy sailors and firemen, in from São Paulo and Rio. The challenging operations usually take place at night, as one law enforcement officer explained:

The deep and dark waters of this stretch of the Amazon River can be up to 30 metres deep with little to no visibility. This requires remarkable expertise from the divers. What's even more remarkable is that, under these conditions, they are able to stash the drugs into the sea chest [the part of the ship's hull that opens up for seawater to enter and cool the engines].¹²⁰



The port of Santana has become a strategic node for criminals to rip-on cocaine loads onto ships bound for Europe. The ship that was docked in the port during a field visit (left) was being loaded with soy, and was bound for Kaliningrad, Russia. Across the Amazon River from the docks lies the island of Santana (right), which is a prominent distribution hub for drug traffickers. *Photos supplied*

In April 2024, the federal police in Amapá seized 150 kilograms of cocaine that had been stashed deep underwater in the sea chest of a ship docked in the port of Santana.¹²¹ The federal police had to call up specialized divers from other Brazilian states to retrieve the cache of drug tablets, after a local fireman had ruptured his eardrum trying to get to it.¹²²

As evidenced by the seizure of 6.6 tonnes of cocaine in Portugal in March 2025, the use of submersibles is also emerging as a new modality in the drug trafficking through Amapá. The submersibles are able to traverse the waterways of the rainforest under the surface, either carrying cocaine loads from the producing regions of Colombia or making the journey empty.¹²³ Once they reach Amapá, the submersibles surface and are parked at any of the various secluded river islands located near the ports of Santana and Macapá. There, if needed, they can be loaded with cocaine before making their way to Europe. According to federal and local police in Amapá, submersibles have been increasingly used in cocaine trafficking over the last decade, but remain far less common than the rip-on method or direct transport on fishing vessels.¹²⁴

Within a few hundred metres of the port of Santana lies a riverine island of the same name. The local police contingent on the island comprises one police vehicle and three beat officers.¹²⁵ The island is located close to the port of Santana on the northern banks of the Amazon Delta, and the island of Marajó towards the southern bank in Pará state (see Figure 5).

Santana island is of immense strategic value because it provides traffickers with an important territorial foothold at a key exit point for drug flows. It is largely covered by dense forest, in which traffickers can bury their cocaine loads while waiting for the right opportunity to load drug shipments.¹²⁶ It also gives traffickers multi-modal options. They can either utilize the island as a launching pad to conduct rip-on operations onto the large vessels docked in Macapá or Santana port, or load cocaine into the smaller

fishing or sailboats stop on the island's southern bank.¹²⁷ The Marajó side has no police presence, and even during the day it is difficult to detect movement on the stretch of the river between Marajó and Santana islands.

Alongside the main Amazon River thoroughfare, traffickers are starting to use a new route for cocaine exports through Amapá. This route begins in the coca producing regions of northern Colombia, from where cocaine is sent to Suriname in tablet form either on small planes or go-fast boats. From Suriname, the cocaine tablets are either directly exported to Europe or transported to Amapá by small planes or using the water network that connects to French Guiana and the border with Amapá on the Oiapoque River.¹²⁸ This route spanning Colombia, Suriname, French Guiana and Amapá is still in an embryonic phase, and is far less used than the Amazon River route.¹²⁹ However, its emergence over the past five years underscores Amapá's growing importance for transnational cocaine flows.

Between June 2024 and June 2025, the Amapá police seized approximately 1 tonne of pure cocaine in Amapá.¹³⁰ Previously annual local law enforcement seizures of high-grade cocaine did not surpass 100 kilograms.¹³¹ The largest single drug seizure in the history of Amapá took place in early June 2025. The joint operation by the federal and local civil police recovered 400 kilograms of cocaine in a rural area of Macapá.¹³² The drugs were owned by the CV, which was awaiting the arrival of a professional diver to stash the cocaine tablets on ships bound for Portugal that were moored at the waiting docks of Santana.¹³³

In other parts of the Amazon, law enforcement seizures are estimated to account for a mere 10% of total cocaine flows. Considering the sparse operational capacity on the ground, these Amapá seizures are likely to represent even less.¹³⁴ The narcotics division of the local Amapá police is staffed by 10 officers with five patrol cars. This team is responsible for overseeing drugs investigations across a state that, at 142 828 km², is slightly larger than England.¹³⁵ The multi-modal and multi-route nature of drug trafficking in Amapá clearly far outstrips this capacity, even considering the recent advances in cocaine seizures by local law enforcement. In June 2025, the price of a kilogram of pure cocaine set for export in Amapá ranged from US\$4 000 to US\$5 000.¹³⁶



FIGURE 6 An emerging cocaine route links Colombia, Suriname, French Guiana and Amapá state in Brazil.

Competing criminal business models

The topography and sparse institutional oversight of the local waterways in Amapá have turned the state into a target area for drug trafficking groups looking to diversify their exports away from Belém.¹³⁷ Similar to what the FDN achieved in Manaus before it was consolidated under the CV, the local criminal groups that facilitate transnational drug trafficking in Amapá (the FTA and the APS) are becoming criminal governance authorities in the peripheral neighbourhoods of Santana and Macapá that have become their turf.¹³⁸ They oversee open-air drug selling points on street corners, adjudicate communal disputes and monitor population flows in and out of their territories.¹³⁹ These groups also partner with local businesspeople involved in the illicit gold trade to merge cocaine with the mining shipments that arrive by private plane to the clandestine airstrips located throughout Macapá and the surrounding metropolitan region.¹⁴⁰ Small planes from Suriname arrive at the various illicit mining sites located in the remote forest areas of Amapá carrying the cocaine, where it is mingled with everything from mining equipment to the coffins of deceased miners. The planes then make the route from the rainforest mining sites to Macapá, where police have discovered cocaine tablets hidden inside coffins.¹⁴¹

The FTA and the APS briefly merged in 2020, but resumed their turf war the following year.¹⁴² The violence of local criminal dynamics has been exacerbated by the fact that both groups have been able to acquire high-grade rifles from Suriname over the past five years.¹⁴³ Members of the FTA and the APS have also started to operate in French Guiana. *Faccionados* (the Brazilian term for members of drug trafficking syndicates) affiliated with both groups, as well as PCC and CV members, are active across all of French Guiana's 110 illicit gold mines, which are mainly located in the eastern and south-eastern regions of the territory.¹⁴⁴

Up until 2022, the FTA was in the ascendancy. The group had over 10 000 members and provided the PCC with a stable local partner to move drugs through the state.¹⁴⁵ However, over the past three years, the CV has aggressively expanded into Amapá. Not only has it fully assimilated the APS into its ranks, but it has also successfully convinced thousands of FTA members to change allegiance to the CV.¹⁴⁶ In the port city of Santana, the CV is able to recruit boys as young as 12 years old.¹⁴⁷ The CV has also taken over drug operations on Santana island.¹⁴⁸ Local law enforcement officials note that the CV has considerable pulling power for criminal operatives because it does not impose strict rules on its members.¹⁴⁹ This is in stark contrast to the PCC, which demands comprehensive alignment from its members and allies:

The PCC requires members to ask for authorization to do anything. Even PCC WhatsApp groups have strict directives. PCC members can only discuss issues related to drug deals. Everyone has to introduce themselves and declare who their godfather is inside the organization. Meanwhile, CV chats tend to be a mess. There is a lot going on, everything from [sending] videos to offering to undertake drug transport, invitations to parties, alerts of police patrols circulating on CV turf.¹⁵⁰

This organizational contrast between the two major Brazilian criminal groups is reflected even in the smallest details of their trafficking operations in the Amazon. The Amapá police note that it is easy to detect whether the cocaine tablets seized in the state before export to Europe belong to the CV or the PCC. The latter's tablets are meticulously assembled, weighing exactly 1 kilogram and wrapped in waterproof packages that are usually blue, grey, white or silver (red packages are avoided entirely because of the association with the CV).¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, the CV uses black or red wrappers, and its tablets are often imprecisely weighed and hastily assembled.

It is perhaps paradoxical that the group that has less of a streamlined organizational culture is the outfit that is currently dominant in moving drugs across the Amazon.¹⁵² However, it is clear that CV's franchise model, wherein it allows its local affiliates to operate with minimal interference from the group's central hierarchy based in Rio de Janeiro, is particularly attractive in contexts like the Amazon. Local groups in cities such as Macapá and Manaus are able to benefit from cash inflows and access to drugs that the CV is able to source, while retaining their ability to govern their turfs as they see fit, without the litany of rules and codes of conduct that the likes of the PCC impose.

This promise of illicit enrichment with minimal restraint has allowed the CV to consolidate its presence on Amazon drug trafficking routes, including the two major exit points for cocaine flows, Belém and Amapá, and the central logistical node of Manaus. This ability to recruit both high-level traffickers from rival organizations as well as foot soldiers involved in micro-trafficking is turning the CV into an ascendant force. Offering a light touch for local traffickers when it comes to central coordination from its leaders, the group has been able to increase its control over the Amazon drug trade during the past decade.

Much of the specialist literature on transnational drug trafficking has emphasized the PCC's role as the principal stakeholder for drug exports through Brazil.¹⁵³ However, as this study shows, the CV's growing reach in the Amazon region is turning the group into an increasingly prominent actor in the trade. Researchers and local law enforcement in the Amazon note that the CV's more undisciplined organizational culture may make the group more vulnerable to encroachment from competitors in the Amazon over the long term. Nevertheless, it is clear that the CV has developed extensive links with local traffickers, considerable market diversification into the gold trade, and corrupt arrangements with local officials and institutions. The group has also established criminal governance authority at the local level across the major nodes of the drug routes through the Amazon. Its dominant position allows the CV to continue to develop trafficking relationships with European buyers and empowers the group to expand internationally by taking advantage of the illicit profit opportunities and porous international borders of the rainforest region.



The Comando Vermelho's rising power, seen partly in the prominence of its graffiti, is reshaping cocaine routes through the Amazon. *Photo supplied*

Through the expansion of organized criminal groups and their rerouting of trafficking flows, Amapá has become an important hub for drug exports through the Amazon. The emergence of the route through Amapá has been widely overlooked by experts and law enforcement stakeholders, who remain primarily focused on exploring the dynamics of trafficking through Belém.¹⁵⁴ In the meantime, large transnational criminal groups have swooped in to establish long-term operational capacity in Amapá, violence has substantially increased, and cocaine traffickers in the Amazon have opened up a new node through which to move their product to international markets.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Once a backwater for organized crime groups and transnational drug flows, the Amazon region is becoming an increasingly significant corridor for moving cocaine from producing regions to European markets. Traffickers take advantage of the region's limited institutional capacity and expansive riverine networks to transport cocaine through the rainforest using a variety of methods and routes. The trafficking methods employed by drug traffickers in the Amazon are constantly changing. From the use of rudimentary mules on flights to complex rip-on procedures, concealing drugs in the compartments of vessels, and the development and use of submersibles, the movement of cocaine across the rainforest is highly varied, with criminals regularly innovating.

The number of routes taken by cocaine traffickers has also increased, particularly since violent competition between the CV and the PCC in the Amazon took off in 2010. The CV is currently in an ascendant position in the region, which has allowed the group to be at the forefront of the recent rerouting of cocaine exports from the Amazon to Europe through Amapá. Until the mid-2010s, cocaine flows left the Amazon towards European markets solely through Belém. The port remains a major node in transnational drug flows. However, persistently high demand for cocaine in Europe has contributed to increased flows through the Amazon, and illicit operatives are increasingly looking towards Amapá as a strategic export point. The limited law enforcement presence and minimal institutional scrutiny on Amapá has been a boon for transnational illicit operatives allying with local criminal networks to move cocaine through the state.

These developments have also been accompanied by rising violence and illicit convergences in the region. The long-term strategies of large transnational criminal groups like the PCC and the CV in the Amazon are no longer focused exclusively on the drug trade. These groups are reinvesting their drug profits in the Amazon's various other illicit economies, with gold mining foremost among them.

The following policy recommendations, aimed at law enforcement and regional policymakers, seek to find solutions to the entrenchment of organized crime in the Amazon and confront the severe socio-economic challenges caused by cocaine trafficking through the region.

Enhance cross-border law enforcement cooperation

This report shows that drug trafficking in the Amazon has become a competitive ecosystem in which a variety of transnational criminal actors are active. The ability of these outfits to operate across the various national jurisdictions of the Amazon demands greater levels of international cooperation by law enforcement agencies. Intelligence sharing, joint training and investigations, and establishing procedures to make it easier to conduct cross-border operations against drug trafficking networks are essential for improving policing in the Amazon.

The recent agreement signed by France and Brazil to share forensic technology and conduct joint operations to combat illicit gold flows across the Brazil–French Guiana border could serve as a model for international cooperation agreements on the Amazon drug trade. However, it is worth bearing in mind that recent agreements involving French Guiana may also exacerbate the criminal convergences between gold and drugs in the region. The June 2025 agreement to revoke visa requirements for Brazilians to enter French Guiana is likely to facilitate the entry of Brazilian criminal operatives looking to expand their footprint in the territory's illicit gold mining sites.¹⁵⁵ As noted in this report, several thousand operatives tied to Brazilian criminal groups had already migrated to French Guiana prior to this agreement with the goal of profiting from the local gold trade. A decrease in migration controls may serve as a further incentive for the expansion of criminal operatives into French Guiana.

It is therefore essential that local authorities take the threat of transnational criminal expansion and convergences between profitable illicit economies in the region seriously by continuously liaising with expert researchers on this topic and monitoring the movement of illicit operatives.

Improve oversight capacity at export hubs

Drug routes in the Amazon are constantly diversifying, as criminals adapt to market competition and changes in law enforcement oversight. The rerouting of cocaine exports through Amapá has been largely driven by deficient local state capacity to halt trafficking flows, including a lack of container inspections at the port of Santana and in the surrounding waterways of the Amazon Delta. These trends demand an immediate law enforcement response that is able to tackle increased drug exports through Amapá effectively. Setting up container scanners and increasing the amount of federal police and federal revenue personnel in the region would provide immediate improvements in combating cocaine trafficking in Amapá.

This is an especially pressing issue. The granting of a licence for Petrobras to conduct large-scale oil exploration in the waterways of Amapá in October 2025 will turn this region of the Amazon into an even more important trading hub for licit and illicit actors. Oil drilling in Amapá will lead to a dramatic increase in state and private investment, as well as a population increase that risks further boosting domestic demand for drugs and enhancing local criminal capacity to export drugs to Europe. The proliferation of oil tankers off the waters of Amapá will also provide criminal groups with a greater range of ships to stash drugs on. It is therefore crucial that the prospective boost in institutional presence in Amapá stemming from the oil boom is accompanied by improved oversight to deal with the drug trade.

Direct investigative resources to tackling cocaine–gold convergences

The infiltration of transnational cocaine trafficking groups in the illicit gold trade is expanding at an alarming rate across the Amazon, including in the Brazil–French Guiana border region. The persistently high demand for cocaine in Europe is increasingly linked to record-high international gold prices. As this report shows, the same criminal groups are engaging in the movement of drugs and the increase in illicit gold mining activity in the Amazon to profit from both.

These same criminal groups are also utilizing illicit gold as currency to purchase cocaine from suppliers. The convergences between gold and drugs need to be front and centre of the investigative priorities of local law enforcement and international partners in the Amazon. The immediate objectives should include mapping out the drug operatives that are setting up illicit gold mines, obtaining financial intelligence on how drug revenues are being used to purchase mining equipment and tracing how illicit Amazonian gold is entering the increasingly lucrative licit supply chain. Gathering this crucial intelligence will help the authorities to devise adequate responses to this growing threat.



NOTES

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- 2 Interview with police intelligence official, Macapá, June 2025.
- 3 Gabriel Funari, *Illicit frontiers: Criminal governance in the Amazon's tri-border region*, GI-TOC, November 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/illicit-frontiers-criminal-governance-in-the-amazons-tri-border-region/>.
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- 6 Interview with federal law enforcement official, Manaus, May 2025.
- 7 Brazilian Forum on Public Security, *Cartographies of violence in the Amazon 2025*, 12 December 2025, <https://publicacoes.forumseguranca.org.br/items/c86febd3-e26f-487f-a561-623ac825863a>
- 8 Ibid. Drug seizure data is a measure of law enforcement activity rather than a direct measure of drug production or trafficking volumes and should therefore be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, when assessed alongside other indicators, seizure trends can help illuminate changes in trafficking dynamics and illicit economies. In the Brazilian Amazon, seizure patterns broadly align with evidence of shifting trafficking routes and the expansion of local illicit markets.
- 9 Ibid.
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- 13 In 2024, Amapá had the highest homicide rate of Brazil's 27 states (45.1 per 100 000 people), substantially above the national average of 20.8. In 2023, Santana, Amapá's main port city, was the municipality with the highest homicide rate in Brazil at 69.9 per 100 000. See Brazilian Public Security Forum, *19th Yearbook of Public Security, 2025*, <https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/anuario-2025.pdf>; and Ítalo Lo Re, *Siege at Amazon port changes drug trafficking route and intensifies bloody war between criminal factions*, *Estadão*, 16 December 2024, <https://www.estadao.com.br/brasil/cerco-em-porto-na-amazonia-muda-rota-do-narcotrafico-e-acirra-guerra-sangrenta-de-faccoes-criminosas>.
- 14 GI-TOC, *Amazon underworld: Criminal economies in the world's largest rainforest*, November 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/amazon-underworld-economias-criminales/>.
- 15 Gabriel Funari and Gabriel Granjo, *Playing with fire: Criminal networks are driving the Amazon's climate emergency*, GI-TOC, 16 October 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/criminal-networks-driving-the-amazons-climate-emergency/>.
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- 23 Most of the local criminal groups that have emerged in the Brazilian Amazon between the 1980s and 2010s originate out of extended families coming together to organize the drug trade in their local neighbourhoods. This includes women members of these families, who often go on to take on leadership roles within the organization once the patriarchs have been sent to prison or killed in turf wars. The FDN, the largest criminal group to take root in the Brazilian Amazon, traces its origins to precisely these familial dynamics.
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- 25 Interview with police intelligence official, Manaus, May 2025.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Corentin Cohen, Development of the Brazilian drug market toward Africa: Myths, evidence and theoretical questions, *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 1, 2, 134–144.
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