

The Battle Against Drugs Cartels and Organized Crime in Ecuador

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Ecuador, a country located on the northwest coast of South America, is facing several security challenges related to drug trafficking and organized crime. Its geographical location between Colombia and Peru, two major drug-producing countries, makes it a strategic transit route for drug traffickers. In recent years, criminal organizations, including Mexican drug cartels such as the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, use Ecuador as a transit point for cocaine shipments destined for international markets, particularly the United States and Europe. These cartels take advantage of Ecuador's porous borders, extensive coastline, and strategic position for drug transportation.

According to the last report that President Guillermo Lasso gave to the country on May 24: "3,000 criminal organizations have been dismantled and 16,000 firearms seized. A record 420 tons of drugs have been seized in two years"ⁱ. Ecuador is the non-cocaine-producing country in South America that seizes the most drugs. Contrastingly, current Ecuador has evolved into a transit hub for global drug trades with an increasing number of processing illicit drug laboratories. All this context attracts foreign cartels and transnational organized crime groups, a trend that was reinforced by other internal and external events.

Ecuador and Colombia

Ecuador's relationship with Colombia plays a crucial role in addressing security challenges, particularly related to drug trafficking. The shared borders between the two countries facilitate burgeoning criminal activities such as drug trafficking and selling weapons.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2022, Colombia produced approximately 1,400 tons of cocaine, with an estimated 700 to 750 tons being transferred to consumer markets through Ecuador. It is believed that 38% of the drugs leaving Colombia are destined for North America, while 62% are intended for Europe.

In Ecuador, the provinces most affected by drug imports are the border areas, such as Esmeraldas and Sucumbíos. On the other hand, the coastal provinces, including Esmeraldas, Guayas, Santa Elena, Los Ríos, El Oro, and Manabí, are the main export provinces for drugs.

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Notably, Colonel Mario Pazmiño, a security and defense analyst, states that around 21 tons are shipped through the port of Esmeraldas, approximately 245 tons through the port of Manta, 364 tons through the port of Guayaquil, and 70 tons through the port of Bolivar. While the key departure points for cocaine shipment out of South America from Colombia include the Pacific seaports of Buenaventura and the Atlantic seaports of Cartagena.

Zonas clave del narcotráfico en Ecuador



Image BBC (2021) Key drug trafficking zones in Ecuador

Colombia remains the largest supplier of cocaine in the region. In 2020, Colombia accounted for an estimated 61% of global coca bush cultivation, making it the country with the highest share worldwide. The UNODC reports that “the average yield of fresh coca leaf harvested per hectare under coca bush cultivation rose by 10 percent, from 5.8 tons in 2019 to 6.4 tons in 2020, while the overall quantity of cocaine hydrochloride obtained from one hectare under productive coca bush cultivation rose by 18 percent, from 6.7 kg in 2019 to 7.9 kg in 2020”ⁱⁱ. This increase led the Colombian government to strengthen its strategies for eradicating illicit crops, resulting in changes to the operations of organized crime. As a consequence, criminal groups have been compelled to relocate to countries such as Ecuador, Venezuela, and Brazil.

For instance, the demobilization of the paramilitary organization *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) in 2006, and the peace agreement signed between the Colombian government and the guerrilla group known as the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in 2016 have contributed the fragmentation of the drug monopoly and the emergence of various splinter groups exercising control over different regions and cocaine

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productionⁱⁱⁱ. Furthermore, these developments have allowed the expansion of Mexican groups in the region, including the Sinaloa Cartel.

According to Colonel Mario Pazmiño, a security and defense analyst, the Sinaloa Cartel is estimated to traffic at least 300-350 tons, with the Mexicans finding an ally in the national territory through the Los Choneros cartel. These new alliances between major cartels and local groups have led to novel forms of cooperation, such as the exchange of weapons using coca as a payment currency, as it is more challenging to trace the origin of a kilo of coca compared to a currency bill.

But there are still some local Colombian organized crime groups that continue to operate actively in Ecuador such as the Oliver Sinisterra Front (*Frente Oliver Sinisterra* - FOS), a dissident faction of the FARC. Alongside the FOS, several other ex-FARC mafia factions also maintain a presence in the country. These groups, stemming from the fragmentation of the FARC, contribute to the ongoing security challenges related to drug trafficking and organized crime in Ecuador.

Furthermore, the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* - ELN), another Colombian group, has utilized Ecuador as a safe haven. The ELN's presence further exacerbates the security situation, adding to the complexities faced by Ecuador in addressing and combating criminal activities associated with these groups.

The continued activities of the FOS, ex-FARC mafia factions, and the presence of the ELN highlight the ongoing security challenges posed by Colombian groups operating within Ecuador's borders.

Sinaloa Cartel in Ecuador

To comprehend the expansion of the Sinaloa cartel in Ecuadorian territory, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the country's role since the 1980s when drug trafficking emerged as a national security concern. During the 1990s, Ecuador primarily served as a transit country. From 2004 to 2013, it transitioned into a significant collection center. Between 2014 and 2017, Ecuador assumed the role of a processing country, albeit without being a direct producer. Presently, it has become the primary global hub for narcotics.

International criminal organizations have maintained a presence in Ecuador from the early stages. However, around 2012, the Sinaloa cartel recognized Ecuador as an ideal location to expand its illicit operations. The cartel sought a country with porous borders, where identity changes could be easily facilitated, money laundering could occur with relative ease, the security forces were not robust, the judicial system was accessible, and where authorities could be influenced – and if the country were dollarized, even better. Ecuador met all these criteria, ticking all the boxes for the cartel's requirements.

Since 2008, Ecuador has undergone a series of changes and events that have contributed to the creation of a perfect scenario for the expansion of drug trafficking activities. Some

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attribute this to the dismantling of the US military base in Manta in 2009, which previously served as a tracking center for aircraft used by drug traffickers. The closure of the base generated tensions with the United States. Additionally, the demobilization of the FARC, as mentioned earlier, has also played a role in creating favorable conditions. Furthermore, corruption cases that came to light following the arrest and trial of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán in 2019 have further highlighted the issue.

One notable example is the case of Captain Telmo Castro, who allegedly acted as a link between Ecuador and the Mexican cartel. According to Jorge Cifuentes, a Colombian drug trafficker, he claimed to have bribed members of the Ecuadorian Army to transport cocaine shipments in military trucks from the border between Ecuador and Colombia to clandestine warehouses in Quito and Guayaquil, and eventually to Sinaloa, Mexico^{iv}.

The Mexican group has successfully established routes and contacts in Ecuador^v. And its activities go beyond drug trafficking. According to Fernando Carrión, (a professor and expert in social analysis), the cartel operates "in 51 countries worldwide and has significant investments in legal markets amounting to \$3.7 billion. The extent of money laundering in Ecuador alone is estimated at \$3.5 billion. To put this into perspective, the budgets of major cities in Ecuador such as Quito and Guayaquil do not even reach half of that amount"^{vi}. Hence the presence of the cartel in Ecuador has many purposes.

Ecuador and Peru

Peru is ranked among the top three global producers of coca bush, with approximately 62,500 hectares of land dedicated to its cultivation in 2011. Peruvians play a significant role in the supply chain of illicit drugs, particularly in the provision of coca leaves and coca paste, which are subsequently processed and distributed by Colombians in the production of cocaine. Consequently, Ecuador often becomes a crucial transit point for drugs originating in Peru, as they make their way to other destinations.

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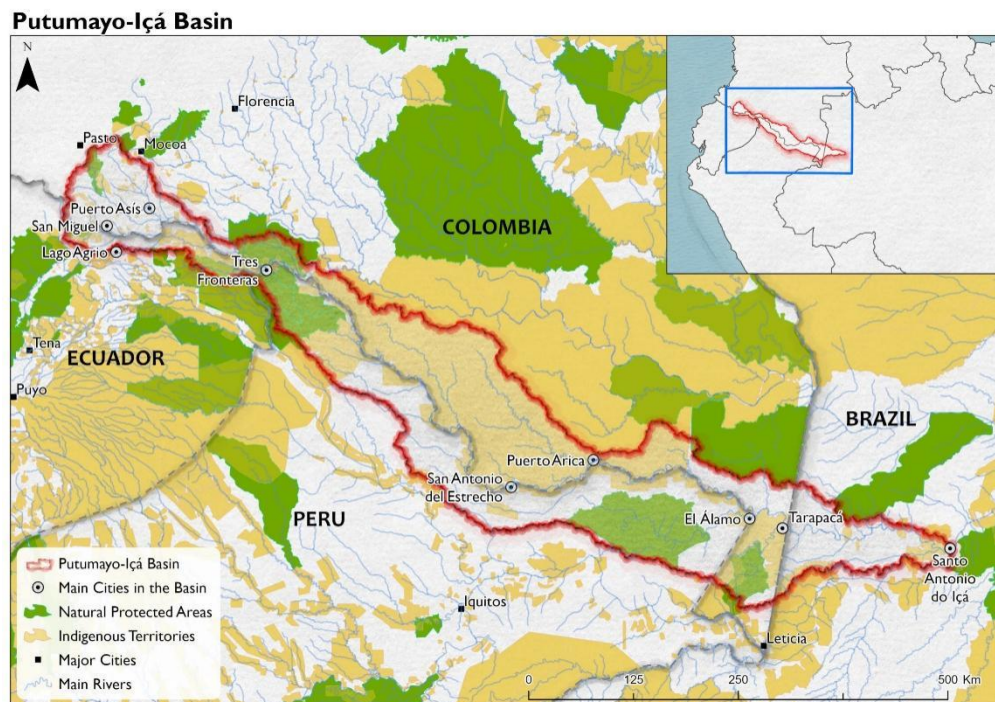


Image Mongabay (2022)^{vii}

One of the hotspots is the region of the Putumayo River that links two drug trafficking routes: one to Brazil, which continues on to Europe and Asia, and another, which travels through Ecuador occasionally but more frequently via the Pacific Ocean, to Mexico and the United States. The river is divided into three parts, upper Putumayo, middle Putumayo, and lower Putumayo. It was in 2018-2019 that the authorities of Peru and Colombia deployed their armed forces to tackle groups that were cultivating and processing cocaine in their borders, including the Ecuadorian border. This operation was known as Armageddon and was one of the biggest drug busts in Peruvian history.

The successful execution of four operations targeting the destruction of over 40 drug labs has led to the apprehension of more than 50 individuals involved in illicit drug production. These operations indicate a substantial step towards dismantling drug manufacturing networks and disrupting the illegal drug trade. The arrests not only remove key actors from the criminal equation but also serve as a deterrent to others involved in similar activities. Such law enforcement efforts contribute to enhancing public safety and reducing the impact of drug-related crimes.

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Social and Economic Implications in Ecuador

The presence of drug cartels and organized crime has far-reaching social and economic implications for Ecuadorian society. The violence associated with these criminal activities has instilled fear among the population, negatively impacting public safety and community cohesion. Violence has increased as drug movements through Ecuador have increased. For the second year in a row, the country's homicide rate nearly doubled in 2022, and according to Crisis Group, police believe that most of these killings were caused by fights between rival drug trafficking gangs.^{viii}

InsightCrime identifies Guayaquil as a significant hub of violence in Ecuador, primarily due to frequent clashes between rival gangs. These criminal groups have escalated their brutality, transitioning from street and familial homicides to an alarming increase in kidnappings and targeted killings. The root cause of this violence stems from territorial disputes arising from the drug trafficking trade. Additionally, the issue of violence extends to the prison system, where multiple criminal gangs vie for supremacy and maintain connections with Mexican narco cartels. Moreover, the influence of criminal organizations on the local economy, particularly through money laundering and extortion, hampers legitimate businesses and stifles economic growth.

According to Colonel Pazmiño, the growing level of insecurity in Ecuador is a cause for concern, as it has the potential to spread to other Latin American countries. He emphasizes the need for regional cooperation as a collective society to combat organized crime effectively. It is crucial for nations to work together and coordinate their efforts in the fight against criminal networks and to ensure the safety and security of the entire region.

Government Response and Security Initiatives

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, the Ecuadorian government has embarked on comprehensive security initiatives to combat drug cartels and organized crime. The establishment of specialized law enforcement units, such as the *Anti-Narcotics Police* and the *Specialized Transnational Organized Crime Unit*, showcases the government's commitment to tackling these issues head-on. Furthermore, the government has forged partnerships with international organizations and neighboring countries to enhance intelligence sharing and strengthen border control measures. Through partnerships with organizations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Interpol, Ecuador seeks to leverage shared expertise, resources, and intelligence to disrupt criminal networks and dismantle their operations.

Ecuador, in collaboration with the United Nations (UN), has successfully adopted an innovative approach to the destruction of cocaine, distinct from conventional methods such

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as cremation. Through the implementation of the UN's destruction protocol, Ecuador has embraced encapsulation as a means of rendering the drug inert, effectively transforming it into a cement-like substance. This groundbreaking project has been replicated on a large scale in Ecuador, enabling the country to destroy an impressive quantity of up to 1.8 tons of drugs per hour. By achieving such a remarkable feat, Ecuador has positioned itself at the forefront of global efforts in combating drug trafficking through effective narcotics destruction.

In summary, Ecuador faces significant challenges in maintaining domestic security and ensuring political development in the face of drug cartels and organized crime. However, the government's concerted efforts, ranging from security initiatives and criminal justice reforms to international cooperation and community engagement, demonstrate a commitment to tackling these issues head-on. By prioritizing these areas and addressing the root causes, *Ecuador can pave the way for a safer, more prosperous future for its citizens and reinforce the foundations of its democratic system.*

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