



LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION: A CASE STUDY OF GUYANA

Date: November 15, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On November 15, 2023, Major RNLMC (Ret) Charles Suilen presented *Lessons Learned about the Importance of Regional Cooperation: A Case Study of Guyana* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were Regional Triggers and Trends, Regional Actors, and Security Challenges.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Major Suilen discussed the three primary inter-regionally connected security issues of drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking. The trade of illegal goods by gangs and transnational criminal organizations is directly linked to the significant rise in homicide in the Caribbean region. These issues are further complicated by several challenges, such as the current oil and gas boom in Guyana (causing more opportunity crime), illegal migration from Venezuela, and the current border controversy over Essequibo. Major Suilen explained the variety of trafficking in and out of the region has spread illicit goods from South America to Europe (directly and via Africa) and the United States. The involvement of regional actors such as America, Britain, Canada, and the EU was highlighted, as well as several United Nations agencies and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), as well as the presence of proxies such as the Wagner group, Hezbollah, and Triad groups.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Major Suilen provided an overview of selected regional triggers and trends, outlining three main interconnected issues boosting crime in the region: narcotic/drug trafficking, small arms trafficking, and human trafficking. He explained that transnational criminal organizations are involved in all types of trafficking and this activity is further perpetuated by what seems to be a vicious cycle of supply fueled by incessant demand. Furthermore, these factors have become compounded and resulted in a significant increase in homicide rates in the region in 2022/2023.

Major Suilen suggested that drug trafficking from Latin America and the Caribbean to the US and Europe has increased, with law enforcement in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands consistently finding large cocaine shipments from these regions. These incidents highlight the growing boldness of traffickers and the importance of interagency cooperation in combating drug trafficking; cocaine is concealed in items like bananas, scrap metal, and rum containers. In September 2023, the Irish military intercepted the MV *Matthew* near Cork, Ireland, seizing 5,000 pounds of cocaine worth \$170 million, suspected to have originated from Guyana. In a similar incident, a joint Spanish operation, with international support, seized one tonne of cocaine on a fishing vessel also suspected to be from Guyana.

Major Suilen described an opposing trend with arms trafficking, where small arms, primarily arriving from the US and Venezuela and, to a certain extent, from Brazil, are being smuggled into the Caribbean region, facilitated by both individuals and transnational criminal organizations. It is no doubt an expanding area of concern, as evidenced by successful operations like Interpol's Trigger VII in 2022. In addition, the October 2023 seizure in Trinidad & Tobago by the local police service, Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS), and the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), where a large cache of sophisticated weapons and ammunition was discovered.

Major Suilen explained that in 2022, the CARICOM IMPACS launched the CARICOM Crime Gun Intelligence Unit (CCGIU) in association with US law enforcement agencies, aimed at assisting regional law enforcement authorities in their firearm related criminal investigations by utilizing modern intelligence tools and technology.

The CCGIU is solely established and dedicated to countering the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons. Through several partnerships, the centre is able to facilitate collaboration and cooperation among regional and international agencies.

Major Suilen highlighted that human trafficking in the region often targets migrants who are not criminals but may be forced into criminal activities due to lack of other prospects. While some migrations benefit local systems, like Ghanaian nurses aiding Barbados' healthcare, others, particularly female migrants from Haiti and Venezuela, fall prey to exploitation. Recent influxes of Cubans and Venezuelans in Guyana have also raised concerns about both humanitarian and security issues.

There is a wide range of countries and international diplomatic organizations that are operating in Guyana, as well as some perceived proxy groups such as the Wagner Group, Hezbollah, and Triads in neighboring Venezuela. Examining Wagner's involvement, Russia has formed a strategic alliance with illiberal leftwing regimes in Latin America like Venezuela and correspondingly deploys military equipment, troops, and mercenaries. Hezbollah's presence since the early 2000's had been recorded in Paraguay, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, involved in criminal activities to finance terrorist activities elsewhere. In 2012 an international ring selling Venezuelan visas and passports to citizens of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran, and Iraq was uncovered. Chinese Triad gangs operating in the region have specialized in four main criminal activities: shipping fentanyl precursors, money laundering, wildlife trafficking, and human trafficking.

Alongside the presence of these proxies, there exists various initiatives funded by the EU and other organizations to combat transnational crime, terrorism, and improve judicial efficiency in Latin America, the Caribbean, and West Africa—these include SEACOP V, Aircop, EL PACCTO, CT TECH, PACE Justice, and Support to regional bodies such as IMPACS, RSS and the CCJ. These programs focus on areas such as maritime illicit trade, airport security, cybersecurity, strengthening criminal justice systems, and enhancing the Caribbean Court of Justice, involving multiple countries and international agencies.

Major Suilen emphasized that trafficking is a regional problem for Guyana and the wider Caribbean, and ongoing intelligence gathering and sharing, mutual trust, and coordination and cooperation must be prioritized by international organizations and other security establishments. However, it is local institutions and organizations such as CARICOM IMPACS and the Regional Security

System that must take the lead in combating regional transnational organized crime, with support from international partners.

In April 2023, The Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) registered their grave concern at the increase in the illegal exportation of guns from the United States of America which is a direct threat to our democracy. They declared a War on Guns to combat the illegal trade, which provides the weapons that contribute significantly to crime and violence in the Caribbean Region causing death, disabilities and compromising the safety of our citizens. They called on the United States of America to join the Caribbean in the War on Guns and urgently adopt and take action to stop the illegal exportation of firearms and ammunition into the Caribbean. They also reiterated that the Caribbean must be a Zone of Peace, which will allow achieving the goal of a secure, stable, and prosperous Community for all their citizens.

Question and Answer

How can Canada, overall, in their policy, further assist initiatives in the Caribbean region?

The key issue is not just about Canada's contribution; it's about the plethora of diverse programs from various entities like the US, EU, UK, and Canada, as observed in Guyana. It is crucial to conduct assessments to avoid duplicating efforts and instead synchronize capacities and specialties, which would significantly strengthen the impact of the international community and the outcomes in the region, rather than merely adding similar, small-scale contributions.

What are the most important lessons we could learn from the current state of organized crime in Guyana? Are there any emerging trends or patterns we should be aware of?

Comparing Guyana to Trinidad and Tobago, the absence of a gang culture in Guyana makes it more challenging to tackle transnational criminal organizations there. While Guyana serves as a drug hub, this does not imply a significant local presence, indicating that issues like drug, human, and arms trafficking are not just Guyanese problems but regional ones. Therefore, addressing these issues requires a regional solution, with various countries in the area playing a role.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Regional cooperation comprises a critical role in tackling drug, arms, and human trafficking in Guyana, highlighting the involvement of

transnational criminal organizations and the resultant rise in regional homicides. It is crucial that international efforts to enhance security in the region are coordinated and specific to the issues at hand.

- In the case of Guyana, local problems require local solutions. While international support is greatly needed, it is those who understand the region best who must act as leading decision-makers on programs and initiatives.
- International organizations and law enforcement agencies have witnessed a rise in criminal activity stemming from the region and play a significant, supportive role in regional cooperation.
- The presence of numerous proxies and transnational criminal organizations in the wider region is driven by demand for illegal goods and services and a high potential for earning profits.



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