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ECUADOR'S BATTLE AGAINST INTERNATIONAL DRUG TRAFFICKING¹

Ecuador's coastline has become a key despatch point for international drug traffickers exporting cocaine that has been produced in Colombia and Peru. As a result, Ecuador, and its port city of Guayaquil in particular, have become the latest epicentre of the world's drug violence as local gangs battle for supremacy to impress international traffickers and assume a larger share of the country's lucrative cocaine industry.

Key points

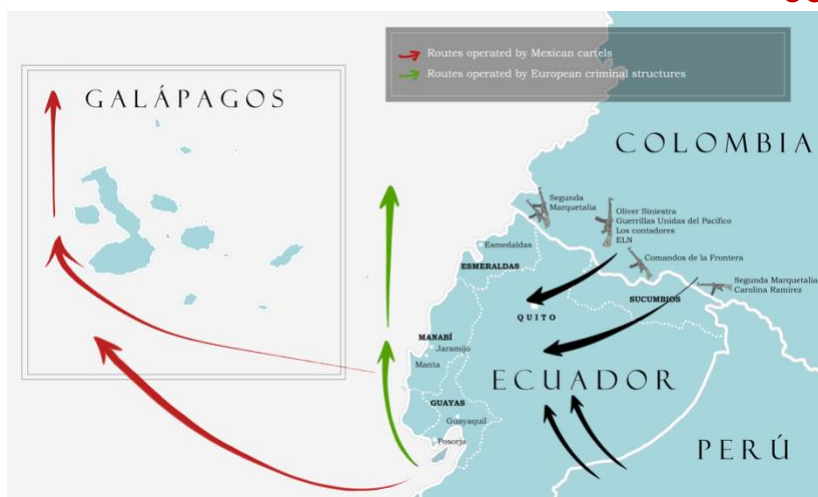
- The Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) cartels from Mexico use maritime routes and a network of [“go-fast” vessels](#) (GFVs) and fishing boats to ship cocaine to Central America and the USA.
- International traffickers, including Albanian gangs and other criminal structures from the Balkans, contaminate international shipping at the port of Guayaquil in Guayas to ship cocaine to Europe.
- In 2021, the police say they seized a record 210 tonnes of cocaine in Guayaquil, up from 128 tonnes in 2020.
- In 2021, the province of Esmeraldas [registered](#) its highest murder count for seven years with a total of 79 homicides. In the first 8 months of 2022, the number has increased to 304.
- In the city of Guayaquil, the homicide rate has [doubled](#) to 34.1 per 100,000 inhabitants in the past 12 months, making it one of the world's most dangerous cities.

Context

There are two principal supply chains of cocaine into Ecuador, one from southern Colombia and the other from Peru. In Colombia, the cocaine is mainly purchased from dissident factions of the FARC and shipped southwards through the regions of Esmeraldas and Sucumbios. In Peru, the drug is purchased from one of the country's many family clans that now control the cultivation and production of cocaine in the country.

The cocaine arrives in Ecuador at various clandestine distribution centres, from where it is then transported to the coast and shipped internationally.

¹ This document provides a summary of the key findings of a six-month OCCO investigation in the country, during which more than 50 officials, residents and gangsters were interviewed.



International drug trafficking routes from Ecuador

The Mexican [Sinaloa](#) and [CJNG](#) cartels are known to have a large presence in Ecuador. They ship cocaine mostly to the USA and rely on a network of GFVs. Miles of isolated coastline provide perfect cover. Officials say the Mexican cartels also regularly contract fishing boats (sometimes by force) from small towns like Jaramijó, a few miles north of the city of Manta or [Posorja](#), south of Guayaquil. These boats are used to ship drugs to the GFVs waiting at sea to transport the cocaine northwards, usually via the Galapagos islands. Traffickers do not always use the shortest route. Their priority is to arrive without detection, rather than arrive at their destination quickly.



A fishing boat docked in Jaramijó, Manabí. Foto: Mathew H. Charles

In contrast to the secluded beaches of Manabí and Esmeraldas, the sprawling port in Guayaquil sits on the river Guayas. It has become a place of strategic importance for international organised criminal structures seeking to traffic cocaine mainly to Europe.

Police say there are four principal techniques used by traffickers at the port. The first involves the running of front companies, which they either set up by themselves or buy so they can be the owners of businesses with a long history of clean exports. They then hide the cocaine in their ostensibly legal exports.

An alternative is the so-called “rip-on/rip-off” technique. Traffickers break open containers of legitimate exports to ship the drugs, then use cloned customs seals to conceal the tampering. The cocaine is then removed by gangsters in Europe, who

intercept the containers at their destination. Most of the containers leaving Guayaquil arrive in Antwerp in Belgium or Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

Ecuadorean officials also report how traffickers conceal drugs in the structure of the container itself, but a relatively new trend has required significant investment in new security measures, and the training of divers specifically, according to the police, who say that traffickers are increasingly using underwater techniques to strap drugs to the hulls of the ships docked in the port.

Authorities in Ecuador have reported the presence of criminal structures from Croatia, Serbia, Russia and Montenegro, among others. They are often referred to as the “Balkan Clan,” but there is little evidence these structures work together. Instead, these groups work individually, each running their own routes from South America to various ports and cities in Europe.

In Ecuador, much [attention](#) has been paid to the presence of Albanian criminal structures, in particular. Although these are often referred to as mafia groups, in reality, they are much more disparate and fragmented, and no longer reliant on family bonds.

The traffickers present in Ecuador are mainly brokers rather than kingpins. They provide a bridge between the criminal masterminds in Europe and the drugs producers in Colombia and Peru. These brokers organise shipments, security and launder the profits.

These international traffickers rely on local gangs in Ecuador to help them transport their cocaine and provide security. It has created a bitter territorial rivalry to become the biggest and the best among Ecuador’s street gangs. Working with the traffickers from abroad brings profit and helps the gangs grow, meaning they can create networks of extortion and sell drugs in their communities.

The [Choneros](#) used to dominate Ecuador’s criminal landscape, but the murder of the gang’s leader last year sparked infighting and a series of prison [riots](#) in which more than 300 inmates have been killed, many of whom were beheaded.

As a result, the *Choneros* fragmented into several smaller factions, each driven by greed and criminal ambition, which has brought [pandemonium](#) to the streets of Guayaquil.

In August, a car bomb exploded in the city killing five people. The president immediately declared a state of emergency, effectively militarising the city and imposing curfews and checkpoints.

Province	2021	2022 (Jan-August)
Guayaquil	377	888
Esmeraldas	79	304
Manabí	137	268

Table 1: The total number of homicides (Source: Policía Nacional del Ecuador)

As the new gangs vie for control and what's left of the *Choneros* cling to their power, the need to recruit foot soldiers has become more important than ever. Teenagers living in deprived communities have become obvious targets. Some teenagers are recruited to collect extortion payments or ferry drugs and weapons around the country, but most teenagers are employed as [sicarios](#) or hitmen.

Province	2021	2022 (Jan to August)
Guayaquil	15	45
Esmeraldas	5	22
Quito	4	3

Table 2: The number of under 18s murdered (Source: Policía Nacional del Ecuador)

The number of under 18s murdered in Guayaquil so far this year has tripled since 2021, according to police figures. The province of Esmeraldas also reports high teenage murder rates.

Analysis

Ecuador's position on the frontline of the war on drugs is largely a result of the fragmentation of the illicit cocaine market. This is a process that began with the dissolution of the infamous Medellín and Cali cartels in Colombia in the 1990s, but has accelerated in the past five years with the demobilisation of the FARC guerrillas and the appearance of various smaller criminal factions. This has served to open up illegal trade and cut out the middle man.

Likewise, in Peru, the decline of the [Shining Path](#) guerrillas from the criminal landscape means the country's cocaine production is now controlled by smaller family clans, creating more business opportunities for international traffickers. This has had a distinct impact on the European criminal landscape, in particular.

Until recently, importers of cocaine worked separately from the wholesalers and the Italian mafia, who have traditionally transported the cocaine and provided security from South America to Europe. But the market fragmentation combined with increasing demand for cocaine has created opportunities for other criminal groups like the Albanians, who are now able to negotiate directly with the South American producers and deliver drugs straight to their dealers on the streets of major towns and cities across Europe.

The Italian mafia has been unable to meet this growing demand. Strict rules on mafia membership, which is usually based on family blood ties mean groups like the ['Ndrangheta](#) are not flexible organisations. Although they maintain an important influence and continue to control significant aspects of the cocaine market, organised structures based on looser criminal bonds have been able to expand at a more rapid rate and form their own routes that no longer rely on Italian involvement.

For Mexican cartels, Ecuador provides a safer alternative to Colombia. For both the Sinaloa and JNG cartels, Ecuador constitutes prized turf to guarantee their cocaine pipelines to the USA and bypass increasing [interdiction](#) efforts in the Caribbean.

Much of the escalation of the violence in Ecuador has been blamed on these Mexican cartels. In February, two bodies were found hanging from a pedestrian bridge linking Guayaquil to the nearby town of Durán. Police say the killings were linked to the seizure of over 7 tonnes of cocaine. Such executions, imitating infamous Mexican cartels, send a clear message of defiance.

Local gangs also reported to OCCO how they have been frequently been paid by Mexicans with weapons, instead of cash, for their services. This has increased their violent capabilities and made their rivalries bloodier.

Authorities believe the Sinaloa cartel has close ties with *Los Choneros*, [Los Águilas](#) and *Los Gánsters*, while their CJNG rivals have formed alliances with [Los Tiguerones](#), [Los Lobos](#) and [Los Chone Killers](#). It is this rivalry, which is fuelling much of Ecuador's violence.

In contrast, other international traffickers cooperate with various domestic gangs at different points in the supply chain, rather than rely on a single partner, but those with most turf, most weapons and most control become the most suited partners for the criminal masterminds. Unlike their Mexican counterparts, European traffickers tend to prefer a low profile and according to intelligence sources are being put off by increasing disruption due to gang rivalry. The chaos of Ecuador's violence could therefore be increasingly forcing some traffickers southwards to the relative stability of Peru, where cocaine production is controlled by smaller, more peaceful, family clans.

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