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by George Rodríguez

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Within a month's time, six clandestine airfields for helicopters were discovered during police operations next to makeshift camps inside sprawling rural properties in a mountainous sector in Costa Rica’s northeastern Caribbean area, close to the border with Nicaragua. Costa Rican authorities said investigations are focused on the structures being a part of an international organized-crime network’s operation in Central America—trafficking drugs northward, money and weapons southward.

The findings took place from Oct. 8 through Nov. 8, after members of communities in the area reported having repeatedly sighted at least one helicopter, flying just above treetops, coming from the border area.

Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla said organized crime has thus been exposed in this country, and it makes them nervous.

In statements to NotiCen and other international and local media, security authorities have said that, despite successive efforts to make arrests, personnel in charge of the camps and the heliports have fled the grounds before the arrival of officers of the Fuerza Pública (FP), Policía de Control de Drogas (PCD), and Policía de Fronteras (PF)—all part of the Ministry of Security—and agents of the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ).

Sites abandoned before authorities arrive

Authorities were not able to find drugs during the search operations. They say organized-crime structures usually have local paid informants who warn when police are approaching, and, when television stations send units for live coverage, the vehicles are spotted from afar by the people operating the illegal installations. As they hastily abandon whatever facilities they have built—most not completely—they usually leave objects behind, in these cases ranging from helicopter spare parts and repair tools to national and foreign currency—Costa Rican colones, US dollars, Mexican pesos, Guatemalan quetzales—and military camouflage uniforms made in Honduras.

During the searches, police personnel also found two Honduran passports, five AK-47 rifles, a .40 caliber pistol, a .38 caliber revolver, and 31 plastic containers for fuel. At one site, they found 20 empty containers with residue from acetic acid, a component for processing cocaine, which has led authorities to suspect that a laboratory may have been operational there. All items found during the searches were confiscated for the investigation and as proof for eventual legal proceedings.

 Authorities have also said the reported helicopter flights could mean Costa Rica’s territory is being used for refueling aircraft loaded with drugs or weapons and headed for unknown destinations.

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Rich cache of evidence confiscated
Although no arrests were made during the operations, after the second search, a Costa Rican national and a Colombian pilot and aircraft mechanic were detained.

The searches took place in three spots in Costa Rica’s northeast. The first, on Oct. 8, was carried out near the village of Cutris, in the cantón (municipality) of San Carlos (also known as Ciudad Quesada), some 70 km northeast of San José, the capital. A clandestine heliport was found, and authorities confiscated weapons, aircraft fuel, Mexican and Guatemalan currency, and the Honduran-made uniforms.

In the second search, on Nov. 2, in Las Asturias, in the cantón of Pococí, some 60 km northeast of San José, the acting officers discovered another helipad and impounded more weapons, more money—including almost US$50,000—the two Honduran passports, plus fuel containers, food, a small gas stove, mattresses, and an electricity generator.

In the third, six days later in Pocora, in the cantón of Guácimo, police found four more heliports and confiscated 84 fuel containers, 25 of which were loaded with A-1 aircraft fuel while the others were empty, plus 10 empty boxes for Beretta pistols.

Vice minister of public security warns of ties to international crime
Three days after the second police operation, Celso Gamboa, vice minister of public security, told NotiCen that the findings point to what he described as transnational organized crime. He also warned of the risk Costa Rica could face, as have other Central American nations, of organized-crime structures trying to recruit police officers—in this country whose army was abolished more than 60 years ago.

Gamboa, who also serves as the Comisionado Nacional Antidrogas and head of the Dirección de Inteligencia y Seguridad Nacional (DIS), said his concern stems from the fact that former military are part of drug cartels, and he mentioned, as examples, the cases of Guatemala and Mexico.

"We must have something very clear" regarding those two countries’ drug-trafficking structures, and that is "former kaibles, former military, who are now at the service of organized crime, so it shouldn’t be strange that they would try to recruit former police in Costa Rica," Gamboa explained.

Gamboa referred to the Guatemalan Army’s élite force known as kaibles. These troops—considered in Guatemala as "killing machines"—are trained at the Escuela Kaibil, a name taken from the Mam indigenous Mayan language word in Guatemala meaning "he who has the strength and the cunning of two tigers."

Kaibil soldiers undergo an extremely harsh two-month training, covering aspects such as survival and combat tactics, and their motto is: "If I move forward, follow me; if I stop, press me; if I step back, kill me."

Guatemalan and international human rights organizations have repeatedly pointed to the kaibles as responsible for human rights violations committed during the 30-year internal war (1960-1996) that caused hundreds of thousands of casualties—mostly civilian—and disappearances, wiped out villages, and displaced thousands of people (NotiCen, May 9, 2013).
Gamboa pointed out that some cases of police officers and judicial officials linked to organized-crime activities have occurred in Costa Rica and arrests have been made, adding that "there’s penetration by these groups, mainly aimed at people with special skills."

On Nov. 14, nine days after Gamboa’s statements, and as a result of simultaneous operations carried out that day by some 240 OIJ agents in four points of the country’s northeast, six people were arrested, including a PF officer.

President Chinchilla, a former minister of security, who has also been a congresswoman, a minister of justice, and a vice president, said that the police findings up in northeast have exposed organized crime, and the country’s different police forces have the order to continue investigating, since it is possible more such infrastructure exists in Costa Rica.

"The important thing is that we’ve already exposed them … and let me tell you that if there is something that makes them nervous, it’s precisely that, and they’ve been exposed, so these people are going to have to be a little more careful," Chinchilla told a Nov. 12 press conference. "And they know this isn’t going to stop."

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