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Costa Rica Sees Increase in Airborne Drug Trafficking, Illegal Runways

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Makeshift runways have appeared along Costa Rica’s coasts, opening a new front in this Central American nation’s struggle against drug trafficking (NotiCen, Feb. 4, 2016).

Dozens of illegal airstrips have been spotted during flights over the western Pacific coast and the eastern Caribbean coast by personnel of the Security Ministry’s Servicio de Vigilancia Aérea (Air Surveillance Service, SVA). The vast majority of these structures—36 have been detected so far, stretching 500 to 1000 meters on an average—are located on the Pacific side, some inside private farms close to the coastal area, while others are in clearings made within state wildlife protection zones.

Drugs bound for the U.S.

According to Costa Rican Security Minister Gustavo Mata, the emergence of illegal airstrips is a result of the increase in US-bound drug trafficking through Central America and Mexico, and the more frequent use of air routes by drug organizations.

In press statements made as recently as April, Mata warned that an increase in cocaine production in South America would mean more of the drug would illegally flow through Costa Rica and the rest of Central America. The statement was released during the annual Central American Security Conference (CENTSEC 2016) held by the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) at a luxury hotel on the outskirts of San José, the Costa Rican capital (NotiCen, May 12, 2016). According to Mata, about 1,400 to 1,600 tons of cocaine will go through Costa Rica this year, mostly by sea and land.

A ministry press release issued on April 12 reported that as a result of Costa Rica’s constant struggle against organized crime—mainly drug trafficking—personnel from the Policía de Control de Drogas (Drug Control Police, PCD) had confiscated, as of that date and since Jan. 1, 3.4 tons of cocaine and approximately 885 kilos of marijuana. This comes after last year’s capture of 16 tons of cocaine and 4.8 tons of marijuana, plus the destruction of around 1.8 million marijuana plants, and the confiscation of 178,000,000 colones (US$329,000) and US$3.7 million, as well as 1,350 firearms.

Police authorities also dismantled 134 drug networks last year—34 international structures and 100 local groups, including 20 “narcofamilias” (“narco families”).

The increasing air option has been revealed, in part, because communities have reported incursions by low-flying aircraft—helicopters and light airplanes—into the country’s air space. Also, several small airplanes transporting cocaine have crashed in Costa Rican territory, in some cases due to excess loads. In one of the incidents, on April 7, a light airplane crashed while attempting to touch down on one of the clandestine runways close to the coastal town of Nosara, 200 kilometers northwest of San José. Two crewmembers died in the crash. Among the remains, police authorities found 150 kilos of cocaine and US$45,000.
In two other cases, small airplanes left Costa Rica and crashed in other countries. On Feb. 28, an aircraft took off an airstrip in Sámara Beach, 30 kilometers southeast of Nosara, transporting 33 cocaine packages. It crashed in the western Guatemala province of San Marcos, bordering Mexico. Just over a month earlier, a light airplane left the Tobías Bolaños International Airport, on the western outskirts of San José, bound for Punta Islita, about 20 kilometers southwest of Sámara. The aircraft was then stolen. It was later found abandoned, with 89 kilos of cocaine, in Nicaragua’s northwestern Pacific department of Chinandega, bordering Honduras.

‘Mysterious aircraft’

As Mata told NotiCen, since last year, Costa Rican security authorities have been handling information and alerts “about mysterious aircraft that are seen, and then disappear, in our air space.”

Having detected the clandestine runways, authorities are following a procedure that includes warning farm owners of the presence of such structures inside their properties, and neutralizing the airstrips, he said. During contact with farm owners, the authorities draw up a record and instruct them to either destroy the runways or, if they are unable to do so, request official assistance to that effect, he said. Often, the farmers’ initial reaction is to deny knowledge of the presence of illegal airstrips, after which some of them request assistance, and others assure the authorities they will destroy the runways. In Mata’s view, failure to do so could indicate involvement with the drug traffickers who are using the landing strips.

Meanwhile, ministry personnel have been rendering useless several airstrips found in wildlife areas under state protection. “In some cases, natural blockades are placed on the runways, such as tucas (logs),” some of which measure six to eight meters in length, “because that, logically, prevents landing,” Mata explained. “And trees are being planted to quickly grow on the runways, to recover the natural state” where vegetation was cut down. In other cases, “holes are drilled, and other obstacles are placed along the landing strips, so they won’t be used,” he said.

Mata pointed out that the media also play a role in the ministry’s action to neutralize the illegal runways. “It’s important to channel information, in a dissuasive way, through the media,” Mata said, to have drug traffickers know the authorities have pinpointed dozens of clandestine airstrips. “That’s why I’m doing this with the media, because somehow the information is passed on to [the drug traffickers], thus keeping them from landing on those runways, because they know we’ve discovered them.”

Regarding the useful life of the clandestine runways, Mata said, “If they use them once, and it goes okay, I’d imagine they’re going to keep using them.”

The problem has a regional reach, Mata said, and regional coordination is a must.

“I know there are aircraft arriving in Honduras, in El Salvador, in Guatemala, in Mexico, and in the US as well,” he said. “I’ve been talking with Colombia and with Panama about the situation, and with the United States, to see if we manage to fine-tune operations.”

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