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Costa Rican Security Initiative: A “Southern Bloc” to Fight Against Crime

by George Rodríguez

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Costa Rica is leading a security initiative to combine efforts with Colombia and neighboring Panama to fight organized crime, particularly drug trafficking.

Costa Rican Security Minister Gustavo Mata is an enthusiastic promoter of the newly established Bloque Sur (Southern Bloc) or Triángulo Sur (Southern Triangle), which builds on the bonds Costa Rica has developed with its two partners and includes equipment and other logistics support as well as training for its police forces.

The idea is for the Bloque Sur to work together with the US, the biggest market for the drugs being channeled through this region. The Bloque is open for other Central American nations to join.

The group’s name highlights the difference between Central America’s safer southern region (Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, which borders Colombia) and the crime- and violence-ridden Triángulo Norte (Northern Triangle), which comprises El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and is one of the world’s most violent regions.

On the southern tip of the Central American isthmus, Costa Rica and Panama, which share a lightly-guarded, 330-km land border, show violence rates that are in stark contrast with those of their neighbors up north. The 2016 numbers for the Northern Triangle showed critical levels of homicides: El Salvador was first, with 81.7 homicides per 100,000 population; Honduras ranked second with 58, followed by Guatemala with 27.3. In contrast, Costa Rica saw 11.8 homicides per 100,000 in 2016, Panama 10, and Nicaragua 9. ([NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015](#), [Feb. 18, 2016](#), and [Jan 5, 2017](#)).

But regardless of higher or lower homicide figures, the entire region has become the setting for a massive land-sea-air flow of drugs, mostly destined for the US. According to the latest estimates by the US State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “approximately 90% of the cocaine trafficked to the United States in 2016 first transited through the Mexico/Central America corridor.”

Some drugs stay in the region

Once simply a transit route between South America’s major producers and the US market, Central America is now also a place for storage and re-shipment—both to the US and to a lesser but increasing degree, European destinations. Within this framework, international narcotics networks have built local structures responsible for guarding the tons of stored drugs and ensuring they are shipped.

Local collaborators who used to be paid in cash now receive drugs in exchange for their services, a method that has broadened each country’s market for cocaine, marijuana, and increasingly, synthetic drugs.

In its 2017 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, the State Department's specialized agency pointed out that "Costa Rica's strategic location, porous borders, limited security forces [Costa Rica abolished its Army almost 70 years ago], and thinly patrolled waters make it a major transit and storage country for illicit drugs." But it noted that in 2016, Costa Rica seized 24.5 metric tons of cocaine, a 44% increase over 2015 ([NotiCen, Jan. 12, 2012](#), [July 10, 2014](#), and [Sept. 8, 2016](#)).

Bulk cash seizures from drug proceeds totaled over US\$9.8 million, according to the report.

The report described Panama, which shares its 225-km southern border with Colombia, as a country that "remains a major transshipment crossroads for illicit drug trafficking due to its location and logistics infrastructure. It noted that "transnational drug trafficking organizations, including Mexican and Colombian groups, move illegal contraband through Panama's remote Darién region and along its coastline and littoral zones."

Drug traffickers use Panama's transportation infrastructure, it said, "including the second largest free-trade zone in the world, four major container seaports, airports, and the Pan-American Highway."

Meanwhile, Colombia remains the "world's top producer of cocaine," and "a source country of heroin and marijuana," the report said. It added: "Although the Colombian government continues to counter the production and trafficking of illicit drugs through eradication operations, aggressive interdiction, and law enforcement activity, potential pure cocaine production in 2015—the most recent year for which data is available—surged 60% to 495 metric tons, 185 MT above 2014 production."

The report attributed the rise "to the largest single-year increase of coca cultivation in Colombia ever recorded—immediately following the second largest single-year increase in more than a decade."

According to US estimates, coca cultivation increased 42% in 2015 to 159,000 hectares from 112,000 ha in 2014, a nearly 100% increase since 2013, while "the Colombian government reported seizing 421 MT of cocaine and cocaine base in 2016, a 124MT increase over 2015," the report said.

The Southern Bloc was formally announced during a visit by Costa Rican security authorities to Colombia in March. "The interest of the three countries to shield the sea, the air space, and the borders is totally evident, and this is the line to follow," Mata told reporters in Bogotá. "The Southern Triangle is the new overwhelming answer in the anti-drug fight."

The three-sided alliance, which has been functioning for some time, is based on coordinated police work that includes intelligence and training, he said.

"To fight off this scourge of organized crime and of criminal structures devoted to cocaine trafficking, storage, and consumption, we have to work together, and this is the idea we've been selling," Mata told LADB.

Besides its successful operational component, the initiative has reached top political decision-making levels, Mata added. The three countries' presidents—Luis Guillermo Solís of Costa Rica, Juan Carlos Varela of Panama, and Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia—recently agreed to have their respective foreign affairs ministers "come up with policy to strengthen security operations aimed at intelligence exchange and joint operations ... along with the United States."

Summit meeting

The three leaders met during the summit gathering of the Mecanismo de Diálogo y Concertación de Tuxtla (Tuxtla Dialogue and Agreement Mechanism) held March 29 in Costa Rica. The forum is a Mexico-Central America cooperation vehicle launched by Mexico in 1991 in the southern Mexican city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, after which it was named.

“We’ve been fine-tuning, consolidating the Southern Bloc for two years now,” Mata said, with the aim of strengthening the exchange of information and intelligence, and of moving to concrete operations.

“The trust among us—Panamanian, and Costa Rican, and Colombian authorities—has allowed for information to be immediately conveyed and translated into what Costa Rica is witnessing right now,” he said, pointing out that Costa Rican police are confiscating drugs at an average of 2.5 tons per month.

The fact that Nicaragua does not appear in the bloc is by no means an indication that it is being excluded, Mata said. “We’re inviting the rest of the [Central American] region to join this new vision of a structural security bloc against organized crime,” he said. “The idea is to work together, but in a formal and overwhelming way.”

On how the US has reacted to the bloc’s consolidation, Mata said that during this year’s Central American Security Conference (CENTSEC), organized by the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and held April 23-25 in Mexico, the US showed full support.

“They’re completely backing the effort. They see an extraordinary effort,” Mata said. “As I told them, we [the Bloque Sur] must be regarded as a ... strategic partner.”

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