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## **Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador Launch Initiative to Fight Organized Crime in the Pacific**

*by George Rodríguez*

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Costa Rica and Panama have teamed up with Ecuador to protect security and the environment in the vast portion of the Pacific Ocean they share. Colombia is expected to join them.

The initiative was launched by Costa Rican Security Minister Gustavo Mata in bilateral meetings during which he underlined the threat posed by organized crime to both security and the environment. The talks, held throughout last year, led to a meeting in November 2017 between environment, defense and security ministers from these countries.

At the gathering in San José, the Costa Rican capital, were Mata and Environment and Energy Minister Edgar Gutiérrez of Costa Rica; Panamanian Security Vice Minister Jonattan del Rosario and Environment Minister Emilio Sempris; and Ecuadoran Environment Minister Tarsicio Granizo and Defense Minister Patricio Zambrano. Pacifico, a foundation made up of Costa Rican, Colombian, and Panamanian environmental fund organizations, acted as the meeting's facilitator.

### ***Defining lines***

"The aim of the meeting is for the countries to define the lines of a joint control and surveillance strategy to guarantee the protection of sea spaces," a press release issued on Nov. 22, 2017, by the Costa Rican government explained.

The vast area the meeting focused on is known as Pacífico Este Tropical (Tropical Eastern Pacific, PET), covering 2.2 million sq. km that contain about 92% of the Pacific coral reefs, close to 50% of the Pacific mangroves in the Americas, and 72 coastal marine protected areas.

It also comprises islands that the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared World Heritage Sites—Costa Rica's Coco, Panama's Coiba, Colombia's Malpelo and Gorgona, and the Galápagos in Ecuador.

The richness of the marine life the area hosts and the vastness of its waters provide economic and social benefits to all four countries though fishing, tourism, and intense port activity. But PET is also the stage of increasing unlawful activities such as drug trafficking and illegal fishing, which pose a growing security as well as environmental threat.

Naval or police units patrolling those sites regularly intercept fishing vessels operating in violation of these countries' environmental legislation—the islands and much of the marine areas around them have been declared protected zones, in some cases labeled as marine parks.

In the case of Costa Rica, a recently-installed radar on Coco Island has enhanced surveillance over a wide area that has often been invaded by illegal fishing vessels and crossed by fast boats transporting narcotics.

Cocaine super-highway

The entire PET region is a wide freeway for speeding powerboats and rustic submarines carrying cocaine from the producers in the south, mainly in Colombia, to their top consumer market, the US, and also delivering large volumes along the Central American and Mexican coastlines for land smuggling northward.

Land transportation has meant that the countries along the route, originally territories used only for passing shipments through, have become places of storage and smaller-scale markets. With time, transnational narcotics networks began paying their local support structures with cocaine instead of cash, which has opened the way for the creation local drug-dealing gangs that have started their own businesses and engage in constant territorial wars with rivals. The end result is the erosion of the region's security ([NotiCen, June 16, 2016](#), and [Sept. 8, 2016](#)).

After the San José meeting, the participants issued a statement saying they had proposed the creation of a joint control and surveillance strategy to be developed by a commission (Comisión Interministerial Marítima de Seguridad y Ambiente) made up of one delegate appointed by each country. The ministers also agreed to hold the second meeting this year with Colombia, whose ministers were not present in the first gathering because of conflicting engagements.

Gutiérrez, the Costa Rican environment and energy minister, said the participating governments had made a commitment to "seek the necessary solutions to cleanse our seas of so many ills that hit us all." And he added, "Scourges such as drug trafficking and illegal trafficking in animals ... are very serious problems that we have to work together to solve as fast as possible."

Granizo, his Ecuadoran counterpart, defined as "fundamental" that the defense, security, and environmental sectors are brought together.

"We can't do environmental work if we don't have the safety to do it," he said. "We believe in coordinating actions to achieve this."

## *Political will*

Summing up the meeting, Mata underlined that "agreements between countries allow us to strengthen the struggle against all that which affects security and the environment ... the agreement we reached today reaffirms we're stronger in the region and we guarantee safer surroundings."

Mata told the Latin America Digital Beat that it's necessary, inside each country, to bring together the environment and security ministers, "so they can somehow support one another ... what needs to be done now is to coordinate all the countries."

Zdenka Piskulich, president of Pacífico, said the political will seen in the San José gathering would make it possible to lay the foundations for a regional strategy.

"As of this moment, actions will focus on a comprehensive management of sea and coastal ecosystems, which know no boundaries," she said. "This opportunity is a show of political will to find solutions to a problem that affects ... a wide region of the Pacific, where those damaged, besides natural resources, are the people who live on coastal zones."

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