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Drug Traffickers Thrive, Branch Out in Porous Paraguay

by Andrés Gaudín

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In an episode that seemed to be drawn from a Hollywood script, a powerful Brazilian businessman who was living large in Paraguay while on the lam from authorities in his home country was gunned down June 15 by assailants wielding military-grade weapons.

The attack took place near Paraguay’s porous eastern border, where Jorge Rafaat Toumani, a suspected drug trafficker and smuggler, had taken refuge despite being convicted in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul and sentenced to 47 years in jail.

The killers reportedly used an anti-aircraft gun to pierce Rafaat’s bulletproof pickup truck multiple times. Police found the powerful machine gun at the scene of the crime, along with ammunition and bulletproof vests presumably left behind by the attackers, the Spanish news agency EFE said.

The case is significant for two reasons: First, as a demonstration that the Brazilian crime war—involving the two leading drug cartels, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Vermelho (CV), along with dozens of other criminal groups—is making its way into Paraguayan territory; and second, as a reminder of the deep-seated corruption that exists within Paraguay’s armed forces: The government itself admits that the weapons used in the attack were likely taken from the state arsenal and sold by unscrupulous military officials.

Strategic position

Paraguay isn’t a major producer or consumer of cocaine and marijuana, but its geographical location has made it a strategic logistical center for drug traffickers. It is also a deeply corrupt country and lacks the infrastructure needed to adequately control the drugs mafias. As a result, the five departments along the eastern border with Brazil—Amambay, Concepción, San Pedro, Alto Paraguay, and Alto Paraná—have become overrun by cartels.

On the other side of the country, in the north, Paraguay has an extensive border with Bolivia, the world’s third leading coca grower, with an estimated 20,400 hectares of plantations, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The US Department of State puts the number even higher: 35,000 ha. Brazil is the region’s principal consumer of coca base (also known as cocaine paste, the first step in the process of making cocaine powder) and occupies a huge chunk of the continent, with borders that connect it to every South American country except Chile. It’s also the country best suited to act as a springboard for drug shipments to the top cocaine consumer areas, the US and Europe. In the case of the latter, drugs can either go from Brazil directly, or through Africa.

A detailed investigation by the independent Paraguayan journalist Paulo López published June 29 on the alternative news site E’a found that traffickers working in the departments that border Brazil have expanded their chain of operations by setting up their own laboratories. Rather than use Paraguay simply as a way station for transporting coca base from Bolivia to Brazil, they’re now buying the material—for US$2,000 per kilogram—and turning it into cocaine hydrochloride (cocaine
powder) themselves. The cocaine can be sold in Brazil for US$7,000. When it reaches the US or Europe, consumers pay as much as US$100,000, according to López.

Most of the coca base enters Paraguay on small planes, each carrying between 300 and 600 kilograms, the journalist reported. “The principal receiving zones are wooded areas in Amambay, where there is a network of clandestine landing strips in clearings between the hills, or in more developed spaces on the area’s large landholdings,” he wrote.

Another way to bring in drugs is the so-called “bombing” technique, whereby small planes use Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment to make targeted drops in areas with heavy vegetation. From there they continue on to Pedro Juan Caballero, the capital of Amambay, where there are workshops for repairing and maintaining the planes.

**A Cartes connection?**

Most of the aircraft used are four-seater planes made in Wichita, Kansas, by the US manufacturer Cessna Aircraft Company. The company that represents Cessna in Paraguay is owned by President Horacio Cartes. The president’s connection to the company is particularly interesting in light of information López included in his E’a article. The information is backed by various studies on the topic but has not been commented on by members of the government.

Without mentioning Cartes by name, the journalist wrote that “in Paraguay, there is a network that provides Cessna planes to regional traffickers though a process that involves altering registration information, reusing defunct planes (units that, for different reasons, were taken out of circulation by their original owners), and falsifying flight plans.”

The information is startling because it implicates the president in various ways. Cartes is Cessna’s representative in Paraguay; one of his companies operates the repair workshops; and finally, he’s been accused of playing a dominant role in the contraband industry (basically cigarettes) and engaging in money laundering through Banco Amambay, which he also owns ([NotiSur, Sept. 11, 2015](#)). On Oct. 29, 2011, ABC Color, Paraguay’s most widely circulated daily, published cables—dating from Jan. 5, 2010, and released by the whistle blower group WikiLeaks—revealing that the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) was investigating Cartes for using Banco Amambay to launder drug trafficking money.

In an attempt to safeguard its image, the Paraguayan military issued a report explaining that the country only has two radars to monitor its entire airspace, and that both have a limited operating range (no more than 100 kms). The military also said that the radars are used only when intelligence alerts are given, not on a continuous basis. The Secretaría Nacional Antidrogas (SENAD), the government’s special drug-fighting agency, used the report to justify its ineffectiveness in what is nevertheless “a costly and violent war against drugs trafficking,” López wrote in a follow-up article, published June 30.

Seizure numbers underscore SENAD’s limited impact on the organized crime groups. In 2005, the agency decommissioned just 2,230 of the estimated 48,000 kilos of cocaine thought to have entered the country. Its seizure rate, in other words, was less than 5%. SENAD claims that it is now taking a quieter approach that “skips the media fanfare” and focuses instead on destroying the infrastructure of the cartels. As evidence, the agency said that in 2015 authorities confiscated 28 small planes, compared to just three the year before.
More corruption claims

In addition to their core business of cocaine and marijuana, the cartels have branched out in an area that, while small in comparison, may still bring in as much as US$320 million annually, López wrote. Their strategy has been to turn Paraguay into a center for triangulating the sale of chemical components used to make synthetic drugs. The materials are imported legally, but then moved to other countries as contraband—at a considerable markup.

The cartels also carry out so-called “two for one” deals whereby traffickers move the chemicals into Bolivia in exchange for coca base or cocaine. Controls tend to be lax, the journalist wrote, since the chemicals in question—things like acetone, lidocaine, potassium permanganate, phenacetin and sulfuric acid—have many legal uses (in the pharmaceutical industry, for example, or for producing batteries). The companies that import them need to be registered and to declare how the chemicals are to be used, but the documents can easily be manipulated, López reported.

Complaints about the rapid development of the drug cartels intensified starting in 2013, when Cartes came to power. Since then, five journalists who investigated drug trafficking operations have been killed (NotiSur, March 20, 2015), and with each case come fresh accusations of involvement by the three branches of government.

In November 2014, the then head of SENAD, Luis Rojas, told the Associated Press (AP) news agency that “more than 100 marijuana trafficking gangs, in association with similar groups in Brazil, coexist violently” in Paraguay’s northern departments. Without naming names, Rojas said that the groups “have an intimate relationship with the political leadership.”

Days later, Interior Minister Francisco de Vargas caught many people off guard when, in an interview with Radio Ñandutí, he said: “There is sustained activity in the country by groups tied to drug trafficking that have taken control of various zones.” And in May 2015, the president of the governing Partido Colorado, Lilian Samaniego, said she had been told by De Vargas that “a good number of Colorado affiliates or sympathizers are involved in business linked to drugs.”

Shortly after that, the AP’s Asunción correspondent, Pablo Servín, released information about a recording two senators supposedly made while visiting a jailed Brazilian drug trafficker (NotiSur, July 3, 2015). In the recording, the trafficker claimed that he had moved freely around Paraguay for years thanks to the bribes he handed out. “They all charged,” he supposedly said. “Police, prosecutors, judges, politicians, soldiers. I don’t recall any that I didn’t pay every month.”

Later that year, Enrique Riera, who until May served as head of the Consejo de la Magistratura, a national council of judges, didn’t mince words when he said that at least 25% of the country’s judges, including some members of the Supreme Court, have some type of connection with drug traffickers along the border with Brazil.

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