

## An Alternative Perspective on the Illegal Drug Trade in Latin America (Part II)

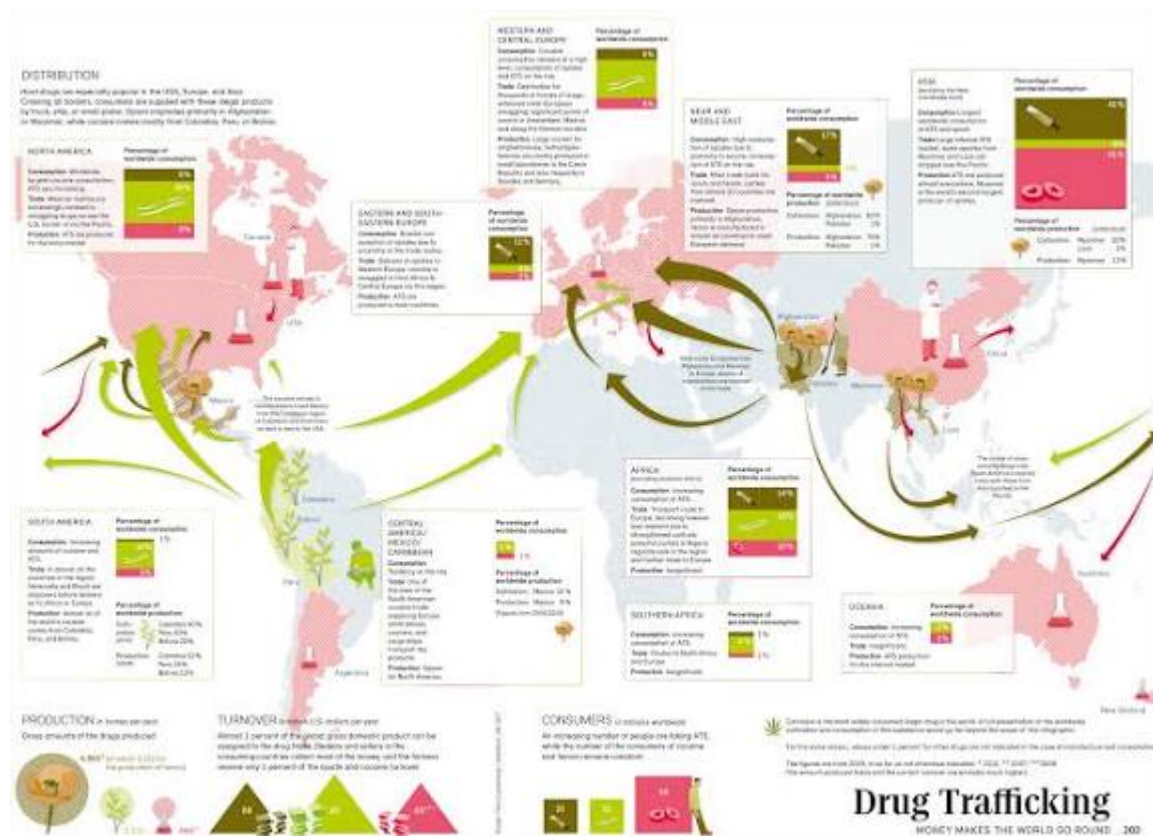
### The Supply Chain behind the Cocaine Industry: Major Trafficking Routes and Distribution Networks

Due both to its strategic importance to the emergence and explosive expansion of the illegal drug trade and associated violence in Latin America, as well as its direct relevance in terms of geopolitical developments in the region generally and ongoing events specifically – including the latest efforts by the Trump regime to overthrow the Venezuelan government – some of the core transnational structural components and dynamics behind recent trends and developments in the global cocaine market will be examined in Part II.

A brief survey of some of the estimates that have been made of the market value of the illegal drug trade immediately demonstrate the strategic and economic importance of the cocaine market (even more so when considered in a historical context, when the overarching transnational superstructure and respective components of the supply chain were being constructed). In 2003 the UNODC estimated that the retail value of the global illicit drug trade was around US\$320 billion (amounting to almost one percent of global GDP), of which the markets in the Americas accounted for \$151 billion (47% of the total). Overall, the largest markets worldwide were North America (44%) and Europe (33%). (Cited in OAS, 2013) Although the global marijuana market was the largest overall according to official estimates in 2010 (\$141 billion, with the US accounting for almost half of the total as calculated by market value), the supply chain is much more diverse and the technology required for production and processing is very basic, hence much of the market can be supplied by independent local producers (and in more recent times, the consumption and production of marijuana has been legalized in an increasing number of jurisdictions).



Of the overall trade in illegal drugs worldwide as of 2009, the cocaine market was worth between \$75-\$100 billion (averaged to \$85 billion), of which North America accounted for 47% of the global market and Europe 39%. (OAS, 2013) The next largest sector in 2009, the global heroin market, was estimated to be worth around \$55 billion (in this instance Europe and Russia accounted for half of the global market and North America 'only' 13%). Earlier estimates for the global methamphetamine market were even more imprecise and unreliable than those for the other main sectors, but in 2003 the UNODC determined an approximate value of \$28 billion (60% of which was in North America). Although the markets for synthetic drugs have increased significantly over the last two decades, the cocaine market remains extremely lucrative and is still one of the lynchpins of the international drug trade (indeed, the World Drug Report published in 2025 states that: "Most indicators – those for production, seizures and use, and related treatment and deaths – point to 2023 being a record year for the global cocaine market"), while it would appear that the elaborate international criminal structures and networks that were established for cocaine trafficking from Colombia to the US during the 1980s and 1990s still provide the core superstructure for a host of other illegal activities in the region and beyond.



The major trends and developments reviewed in Part I with respect to the main countries serving as major production centres, as well as in terms of the main international trafficking routes and criminal syndicates involved in the international drug trade, demonstrate a remarkable consistency and continuity over time notwithstanding the constants shifts and adjustments in terms of the main personalities or corporate and public characterization of major players involved in any given instance or at any particular point in time. From this

perspective, Colombia and Mexico have consistently provided the primary operating base and central axis for the supply of cocaine to the US market (Medellin & Cali Cartels, Sinaloa & other Cartels in Mexico, the FARC and the AUC in Colombia and their successors or ‘dissident groups’).

This continuity and consistency is also clearly apparent in terms of the most lucrative stages or components of the supply chain – the international trafficking syndicates transporting the cocaine from Colombia, Peru and Bolivia to the main consumer markets in North America and Europe, and the distribution networks within those regions, are where the overwhelming majority of the profits are made (for example, one recent estimate was cited to the effect that one kilo of cocaine in Guayaquil is worth approximately \$2,000, whereas upon delivery to Europe the value jumps to \$40,000).



Hence, although the structural significance or strategic importance of particular distribution networks and international trafficking routes between the producer countries (mainly Colombia) and the US has fluctuated over successive periods since the 1970s, the central structural components of the main trafficking routes, logistical centres and transshipment points have consistently been located throughout Central America and Mexico. Almost all detailed investigations and estimates have concluded that, between them, the drug-trafficking syndicates and logistical networks based in or simply passing through Central America and Mexico and adjacent areas have consistently accounted for at least 80% (usually up to 90% and possibly more) of the total volume of cocaine passing from Colombia to the US, whether via maritime routes in the Pacific and island-hopping through the Caribbean, by air, or by land). (OAS, 2013)

This extraordinary continuity (given the huge amount of resources that have been thrown into the war on drugs) is particularly apparent in terms of the location of the main territorial operating bases and logistical structures used by many of the most powerful criminal networks associated with the cocaine industry. Throughout the entire period, Mexico and Colombia have been the lynchpins for the production, supply and shipment of cocaine to the US market (as mentioned in Part I), with other countries and alternative transit routes being incorporated into the extended supply chain and trafficking networks according to prevailing conditions (particularly Honduras, Guatemala and Brazil, and in more recent times Costa Rica and Ecuador).

For example, in 2010 US officials reported that approximately 95% of the cocaine seized by authorities in the country that year was of Colombian origin (and almost a decade later Colombia still accounted for at least 90% of the retail market in the US). According to their investigations and estimates as of 2010, over 90% of this had passed through the ‘Mexico-Central America Corridor’, while approximately 5% was shipped via the ‘Caribbean Corridor’ (which apart from Venezuela, included ‘Hispaniola’ and other islands in the Caribbean). However, it appeared that the latter corridor (through Venezuela and the Caribbean) also served as a trafficking route to the European market. (OAS, 2013)

Over successive periods this core activity (international shipments of cocaine) has provided the basis for an immense regional superstructure that now includes the production and distribution of other illegal drugs and contraband of all types, with the existing transnational logistical networks being readily adapted and diversified for the incorporation of new products and markets (as well as for an almost infinite variety of other criminal activities). The incredible long-term resilience, adaptability and continual diversification and modernization of the underlying geography and logistical structures and networks involved has persisted, notwithstanding relatively short-term fluctuations in the significance of other countries’ involvement in (or role as staging posts for) different components or stages of and activities related to the international supply chains and distribution networks of cocaine and other contraband in the region.

Meanwhile, Panama is another jurisdiction which has repeatedly been found to have played a variety of strategically or structurally important support roles and logistical or financial services to both the illegal drug trade and arms smugglers in Central America and Colombia since the 1970s. Although the most outstanding event was the dramatic and hugely destructive military invasion to capture Panama’s president in 1989 (Manuel Noriega, of whom among many other things it is widely rumoured and generally accepted that he had been on the CIA payroll as a paid informant for many years prior to his arrest – possibly including during the period that George Bush was the director), there are many indications that the country has been a key structural component of and logistical centre for a wide range of activities that are organically connected to the illegal arms and drug trades in some way, an aspect which is explored further below and in Part III.

### **Secondary Regional Trafficking Routes and Distribution Hubs since the 1990s**

The consolidation of and modifications to the core supply chains and trafficking routes involved in the cocaine industry make it clear that although the central components have demonstrated a high degree of continuity,

there is also an enormous array of peripheral structures and networks which can be activated or relocated at a moment's notice, the most powerful criminal groups and syndicates shifting and diversifying specific activities and functions among a variety of secondary transshipment points and trafficking methods, adapting their activities to the international security climate and local conditions while constantly on the lookout for new opportunities or emerging threats.

Some examples of this were mentioned previously, such as when the demise of the highly centralized cartels in Mexico and Colombia simply cleared the way for a host of smaller cartels and syndicates (as well as the illegal armed groups involved in the interminable armed conflict in the latter country), while much of the established superstructure and facilities for production, supply and distribution appear to have remained largely intact (or were almost immediately replaced) given that there was no long-term disruption to the global market. Honduras, Guatemala and Panama in particular appear to have performed a significant secondary role as alternative transshipment points and trafficking hubs for most of the period since the 1980s, the latter also serving as a major logistical and support centre for the organization of related activities and financial transactions throughout the region as well as for their interconnectivity with the global market.

There are a multitude of more recent instances demonstrating the incredible resilience of the core structures and networks: for example, as had occurred in the 1980s, when there was another major crackdown on the most powerful cartels in Mexico during the presidency of Felipe Calderón (2006-2010), the role of Central American countries as transit and storage hubs for cocaine shipments from Colombia to the US once again increased dramatically (particularly Guatemala and Honduras). (ICG, 2025: European Drug Report, 2025) The comparative and structural analysis of the history of the modern illegal drug trade and related patterns of violence in Latin America by the International Crisis Group also emphasizes the importance of the central underlying or embedded tendencies and characteristics noted above, strategic logistical and operational features of the illegal drug trade which have persisted since the 1980s in many key respects notwithstanding enormous changes both in the trade itself as well as in terms of the external operating environment and geopolitical conditions generally (such as the dismantling or dismemberment and reconfiguration of the Guadalajara Cartel in Mexico and the Medellin and Cali Cartels in Colombia).

Another notable example of the extraordinary flexibility and resilience of the transnational superstructure underpinning the illegal drug trade is the alterations and adjustments that occurred following the disarmament and demobilization of the FARC in Colombia in 2016. The ICG report identifies this as a pivotal event for the cocaine trade which produced a succession of profound secondary shifts in the international supply chain, given that up until that time the FARC had controlled several major production zones and strategic distribution networks within Colombia (all of which were thoroughly integrated into broader trafficking networks to the main consumer countries). Nonetheless, even this dramatic development doesn't appear to have interrupted the supply of cocaine shipments significantly, as several 'dissident' FARC groups refused to participate in the peace process and remained in control of key regions, while in other major production centres that had been

controlled by the FARC other illegal armed groups quickly moved in to take over the territories and resume production activities.

In this respect, later media reports in Colombia (based on a filtration of confidential files from the Office of the Prosecutor-General) noted that several FARC dissident groups in the south of Colombia had apparently established very profitable relations with the most powerful criminal syndicate in Brazil (Primer Comando de la Capital in Spanish) for cocaine shipments. (La Silla Vacía, 2023) It was also around this time that Ecuador became a major international trafficking hub for the international cocaine market, apparently centred around the shipping port at Guayaquil on the Pacific coast (which is connected to major international shipping routes to the United States, Europe and Asia). Another more recent illustration of this phenomenon is Costa Rica, which has also registered a large increase in homicides since 2023 when the country became a significant transshipment point for international trafficking syndicates. (ICG, 2025: European Drug Report, 2025)

The latest European Drug Reports provide many more details on recent trends and developments in the cocaine trade and the wide variety of trafficking routes and methods that are used to transport the product from the producer countries to the European market. Returning first to the starting point for the present study – contrary to Trump's most recent barrage of allegations and bluster, as of 2022 Venezuela remained well down the list of major transit points as indicated by the origin and destination of major cocaine shipments that were intercepted by authorities in Europe over the preceding period. Meanwhile, according to the World Drug Report for 2022, in 2018 authorities reported that around 90% of the cocaine seized in the US originated from Colombia, while in 2019 it was estimated that approximately 74% of the cocaine shipped from Colombia to North America had passed via the Eastern Pacific (most of which was presumably shipped from either Colombia, Ecuador or Peru). That Venezuela's role in the regional supply and distribution networks for the global cocaine market is generally very limited (notwithstanding its proximity to the main source country) is also suggested by the list of major points of departure for cocaine shipments to Europe – the three largest origin countries for shipments to Europe by far were Brazil, Ecuador and Colombia, followed by Costa Rica (20.4 tonnes), Paraguay (13.3t), Guyana (13t), the Dominican Republic (7.2t), the United States (5.5t), Chile (5.1t) and Venezuela (5t).

Another indication of the continued vitality of the 'Central American Corridor' (broadly conceived to include adjacent maritime routes in the Pacific and the Caribbean) and the relatively insignificant role of Venezuela in regional trafficking routes, in 2018 it was estimated that 210 tonnes of cocaine passed through Venezuela (of the 2,370 tonnes that were produced in neighbouring Colombia), while Guatemala was estimated to have 'produced or traded' approximately 1,400 tonnes. Numerous other reports from around the same period (2010-2020) also concluded that Honduras and Guatemala appeared to have regained their status as major transit hubs. (Arlacchi, 2025) Indeed, towards the end of this period the president of Honduras from 2014 to 2022 (Juan Orlando Hernández) was extradited to the United States and convicted on drug trafficking charges shortly after his term ended (Insight crime, 2022) – whereas his distinctly authoritarian (and widely-considered illegitimate) regime enjoyed excellent relations with the US (and Israel) throughout his tenure as president.

## **Recent Trends and Developments in International Trafficking Routes and Shipment Methods**

The most powerful criminal syndicates that control the most strategic and profitable activities related to the international trade in illegal drugs have developed an enormous variety of methods and forms to avoid detection. A useful starting point in this respect is to identify the distinct stages and processes of the supply chain and the multiple structure and networks involved in each instance. With respect to the first stage (the production of cocaine or coca base and delivery to international shipping points in or adjacent to the producer countries):

**In the case of plant-based drugs, the first step in this part of the chain is purchasing the product from a supplier. South American providers move their product into the custody of Mexican international traffickers at maritime ports, airports or on the high seas, including in Colombia and Ecuador. In the case of synthetics like fentanyl, international traffickers such as the (Sinaloa Cartel) both control their own labs and also buy from cooks and smaller criminal groups. International traffickers arrange bulk purchases of drugs through emissaries, who explain the conditions to national-level criminal groups. (ICG, 2025)**

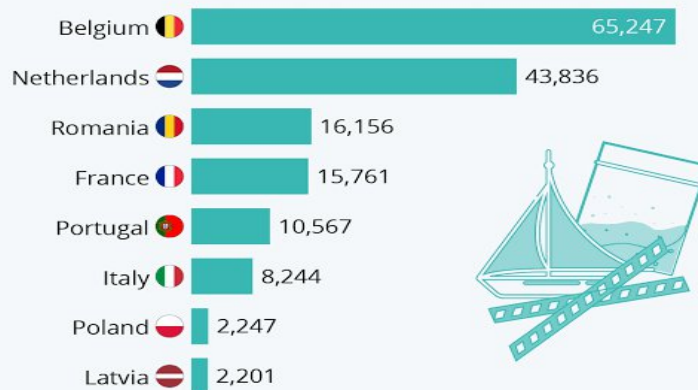
Once the drugs have been delivered by the domestic producers and suppliers, international traffickers “use a sophisticated array of methods to deliver their product across borders.” (ICG, 2025) Apart from exploiting countries with weaker inspection and enforcement capacities, the development of increasingly sophisticated technology capable of neutralizing the most common detection methods, and rapidly relocating activities whenever extant criminal structures or trafficking networks are dismantled by authorities, there are a huge variety of secondary trafficking routes and alternative shipment methods available to international traffickers.

More generally, these include a wide range of modalities and smuggling ploys associated with the three main forms of international transport and trade (by air, land or sea), each of which can be incorporated into the broader trafficking networks according to local conditions and the perceived risks and opportunities involved. Whichever modality is used, in each instance there are innumerable schemes which can be put into use, for example: hiding shipments in the superstructure of the planes, vehicles and vessels themselves; concealing the product in the cargo; in the case of international shipping, arranging for shipments to be loaded and unloaded by smugglers in international waters, or dispersing shipments among large numbers of pleasure craft (or, as in the case of international air travellers, inside the bodies of the passengers and crew).



## The Cocaine Capitals of Europe

Estimated quantity of cocaine seized by authorities per country in 2019 (in kg)



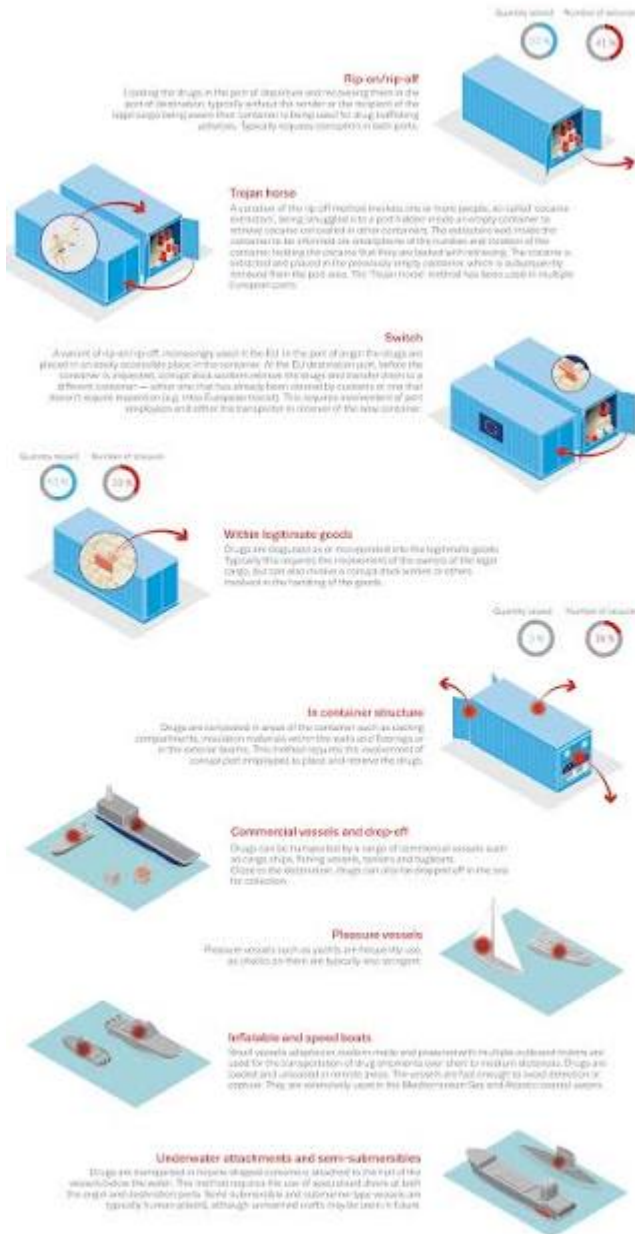
Source: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction



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The European Drug Report for 2022 pointed out another more advanced form of concealment that has been developed by some trafficking syndicates: mixing liquefied coca base in with other ‘carrier materials’ (conventional goods, substances and products – in this instance, the report mentions charcoal, coconut pulp and certain plastics) from which the coca base can then be extracted and processed into cocaine at facilities in the destination market (or at an intermediate location for transshipment). Although the basic concept has been in use for a long time, the methods have become much more advanced and are used on an industrial scale, with an increasing number of extraction and processing facilities having been discovered by authorities in Europe in recent years (mostly in the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain). As of the time the report was published however, authorities had still not managed to identify how the coca base was being shipped into Europe, with no major interceptions having been announced (notwithstanding that scientific analysis had determined that the coca leaves were probably from Peru and Bolivia).



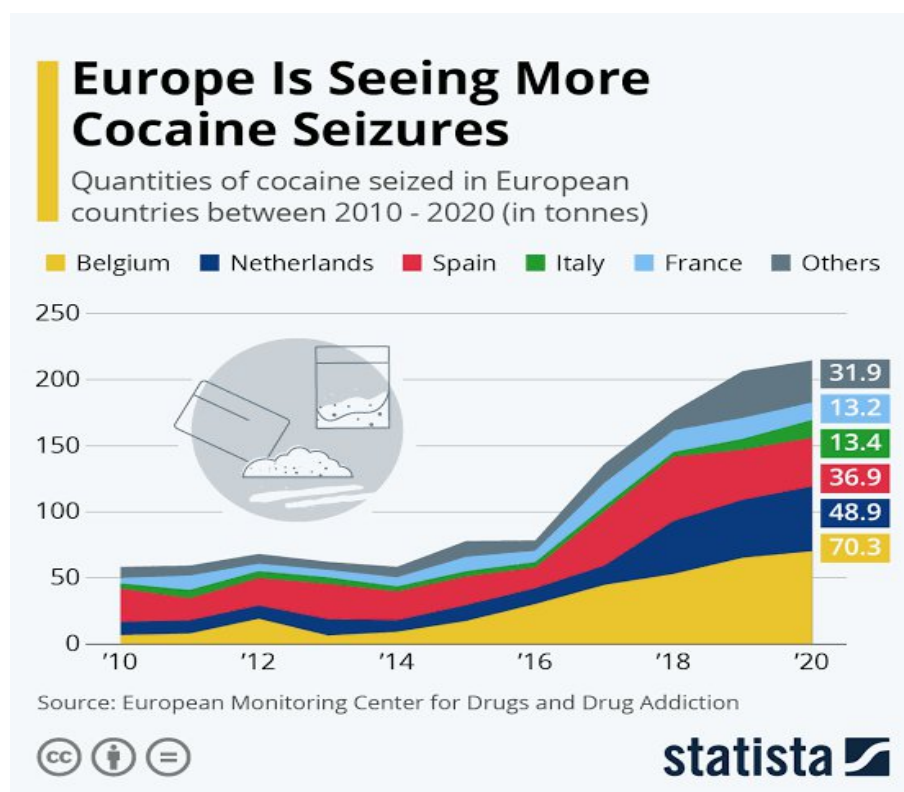


More generally, after a comprehensive analysis of publicly available information as well as consultations with relevant law enforcement officials in Latin America and Europe, the European Drug Report determined that approximately 282 tonnes of cocaine destined for Europe had been intercepted in 2020 (171 tonnes in or on route to European ports, and 108 tonnes at major international shipping ports in Latin America). Consistent with a trend which had become apparent over preceding periods, most of the cocaine shipments were intercepted in Belgian ports (69 tonnes), followed by the Netherlands (45t) and Spain (26t) – between them, the ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam accounted for 65% of the shipments. In Latin America, most of the intercepted shipments were en route from major ports in Brazil (45 tonnes), Ecuador (24t) and Colombia (18t). Overall, the report states of the main departure points and transshipment points between Latin America and Europe:

Most of the cocaine seized in the EU is transported by sea, primarily in maritime shipping containers. Cocaine is shipped to the EU directly from countries of production but also from neighbouring countries of departure in South and Central America as well as the Caribbean. Based on quantities of cocaine seized in European ports and in ports elsewhere destined for Europe, Brazil (71 tonnes), Ecuador (67.5t) and Colombia (32t) were the main departure points in 2020, as they have been for some years.

The next largest origin countries or points of departure in the Americas for cocaine shipments to Europe were Costa Rica (20.4 tonnes), Paraguay (13.3t), Guyana (13t), the Dominican Republic (7.2t), the United States (5.5t), Chile (5.1t), Venezuela (5t), Peru (4.8t) and Panama (4.4t). In terms of global trends, the main countries identified as point of departure for maritime shipments of cocaine worldwide in 2020 were Colombia (23 shipments intercepted) and Brazil (21), followed by Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.

In terms of the total amount of cocaine intercepted on major shipping routes from South America to Africa from 2015 to 2021, the main departure points were Brazil (70%), Ecuador (14%), and Colombia (11%), while the main departure points for shipments en route to Asia were Brazil (46%), Peru (24%) and Ecuador (14%). And as mentioned previously, US authorities estimated that in 2019, 74% of the cocaine shipped from Colombia passed along the Eastern Pacific, whether hidden on maritime bulk shipping vessels, on smaller boats (whether commercial, technical or private), or even on submarines in some instances.



In terms of other recent trends and developments in the main international trafficking routes, trafficking methods and emerging transshipment points for cocaine in Latin America, a steadily increasing number of other detailed investigations and media reports have similarly pointed out that international maritime transport routes appear to have increased greatly in importance (particularly bulk container ships), appearing to provide

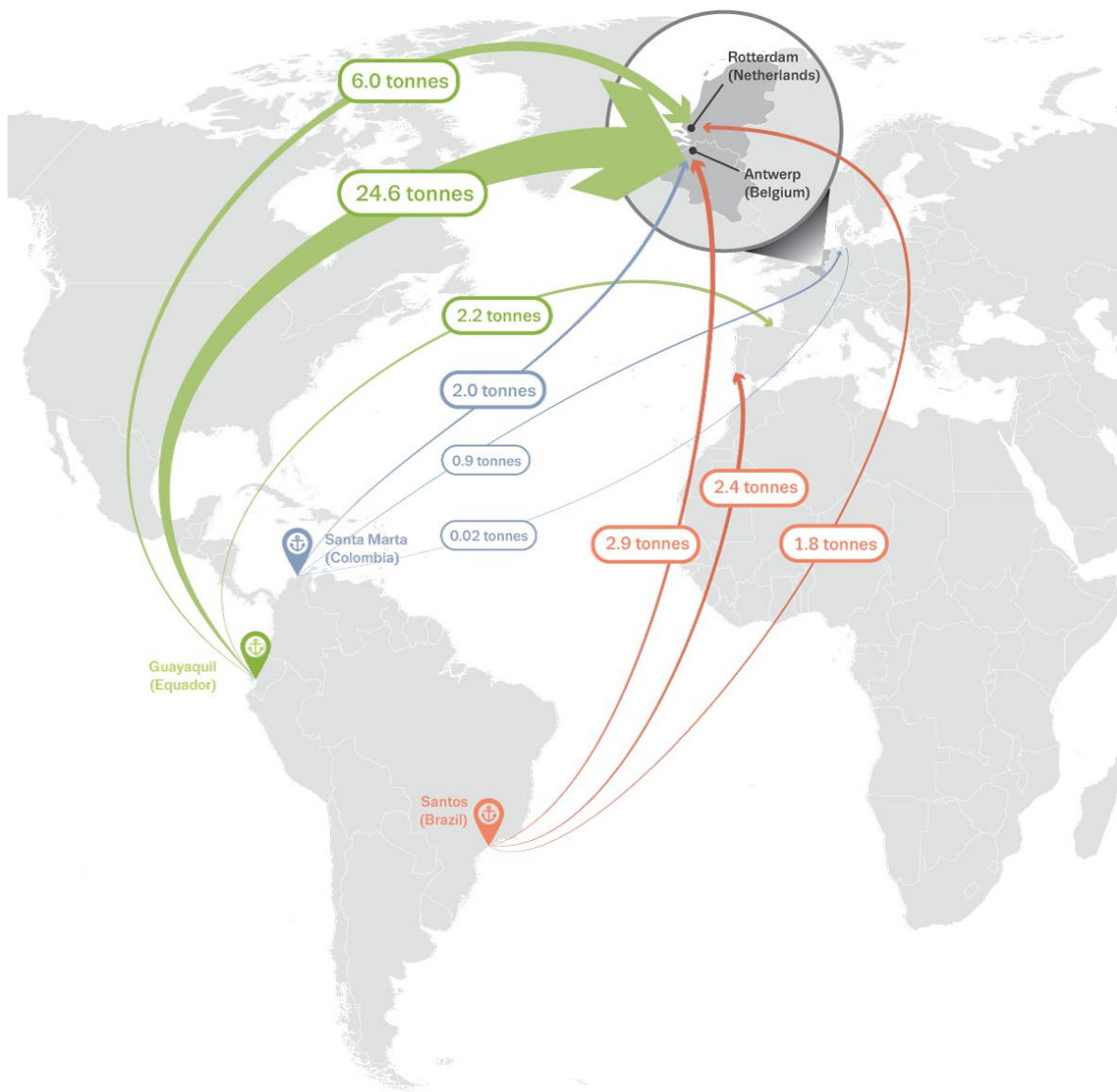
a perfect cover for cocaine shipments to the lucrative European and North American markets on an industrial sale:

**Traffickers have also turned increasingly to container shipping for the international movements of cocaine (either processed or coca paste), particularly to European ports. All manner of ruses can be used: hiding the drugs inside products, containers or the ship's superstructure; 'contaminating' legitimate shipments during loading, or transferring the product onto the ships on the high sea (and removing the drugs before the ships arrive to the destination port). (ICG, 2025)**

The authors further note in passing that: "In Ecuador, (cocaine) shipments are often hidden inside shipments of bananas – a product chosen because it can be loaded into the container on the farm and must move quickly through ports to avoid spoiling." (ICG, 2025) Apart from the information cited previously concerning the main international shipping points of departure in Latin America (Brazil, Ecuador and Colombia) and arrival points in Europe (Antwerp and Rotterdam) for intercepted cocaine shipments between 2020 and 2022, the European Drug Report provides some additional details on this particular point (the sudden emergence of Ecuador as a major regional and international trafficking hub):

**A striking development has been the increase in the quantities shipped from Guayaquil, the largest container port in Ecuador, from 6 tonnes in 2018 to almost 56 tonnes in 2021. The reasons for this are unclear and require additional research and closer monitoring. That said, Ecuador, which shares borders with both Colombia and Peru, seems to have transformed in the last decade or so from a transit country to a major trafficking hub. Furthermore, it is now also reportedly emerging as a cocaine producing country. Such transformation is thought to have fueled recent violence between local gangs rumoured to be used by important cocaine trafficking networks from Colombia and Mexico. (European Drug Report, 2022)**

In 2022, authorities in Spain intercepted one shipment of 13 tonnes on a container ship which had also departed from Guayaquil. Most of the official reports appear to be somewhat reticent in terms of providing specific details of the specific companies and individuals that have been most heavily implicated (as the above report comments, "The reasons for this are unclear and require additional research..."). Meanwhile, a supplementary report by the ICG noted that security conditions at the Guayaquil port facilities are highly vulnerable to infiltration and cooptation, being dispersed over a large area in a densely populated urban area that has been overrun by local criminal bands which appear to have developed tactical alliances or agreements with powerful criminal groups in other countries (ICG, 2022).



As another example of the apparent inability of anti-drug officials and authorities to pinpoint the identities of the real kingpins behind the scheme, Arlacchi (2025) refers to an investigation into activities at the port by authorities in the European Union which ended up centering around the usual suspects, concluding that many of these activities could probably be attributed to “Colombian, Mexican and Albanian mafia groups”, all of which “operate extensively in Ecuador”. In a similar vein, a follow up news report in Ecuador discussing the findings and conclusions of the investigation by the European Union states that ‘delinquents threaten, extort and blackmail port employees’ into providing information on the port’s security measures and to gain access to certain areas. (Primicias, 2024; European Union, 2024) However, Arlacchi also added another possibly very significant detail – the port facilities where trafficking activities have been detected on several occasions: “are controlled by companies that are protected by Ecuadorian government officials.” Meanwhile, a number of

independent investigations provide corroboration for this hypothesis, scratching beyond the surface in order to identify some of the main actors and specific localities and installations involved.

In this respect, several independent media outlets and investigative journalists have managed to trace other aspects related to the sudden emergence of Guayaquil as a major trafficking hub, including several key corporate figures and political connections implicated in the cocaine smuggling scheme centred round the port facilities. Among other details, the respective investigations determined that the entire supply chain for many of the banana shipments that were ‘contaminated’ with large amounts of cocaine were controlled by one conglomerate, a sprawling corporate empire whose principal holding company (Noboa Trading) just happens to be owned by the family of the current president of Ecuador, Daniel Noboa.

The journalist who first revealed the information to the public (Andrés Durán) had to leave Ecuador shortly thereafter, having received death threats and being subjected to an intense campaign of legal persecution and harassment. (The Gray Zone, 2025) Several subsequent reports reviewed key aspects of related events and developments as of early 2025. According to one of these, approximately 700 kilos of cocaine were seized by authorities in Ecuador (la Unidad de Inteligencia de Puertos y Aeropuertos) between 2020 and 2022 from the installations of Naportec located within the international shipping terminal in Guayaquil. Official documents obtained by investigative journalists “describe how the cocaine was hidden in banana containers owned by Noboa Trading, and that the only suspect who was subsequently detained was represented in legal proceedings by the current Minister of Health (Edgar José Lama von Buchwald).” (Revista Raya, 2025)

The first shipment (consisting of 151 packets of cocaine) was discovered in August 2020 during an inspection of cargo at the Naportec facility. The cocaine was found in a container of bananas whose declared destination was Croatia. As a result of follow up investigations one suspect was detained, a contractor who had been hired by Noboa Trading to implement anti-narcotics control measures for the company’s exports (José Luis Rivera Baquerizo). The suspect was however reportedly released from custody shortly thereafter following the timely intervention of his legal counsel, Edgar José Lama von Buchwald, who was at the time also serving as a legal advisor to Daniel Noboa (then a representative in the National Assembly) before being promoted to the post of Health Minister a couple of years later.

A second shipment was reportedly intercepted at the same facilities at Naportec in June 2022, this time consisting of 260 packets of cocaine (amounting to 260 kilos) which had been concealed in the refrigeration system of one of the shipping containers, also owned by Noboa Trading. The same suspect was again detained (and again, was the only suspect to be detained) by police pending the results of further investigations (in this instance, it turned out that the person who hired him was the president’s cousin, Roberto Ponce Noboa, who also acted as Noboa Trading’s legal representative). The third shipment was detected in April 2024 at the same facilities, when 76 kilos of cocaine were found concealed in a false roof in the shipping container. Sole responsibility for the entire elaborate trafficking operation was again attributed to Jose Rivera Baquerizo.

Meanwhile, over the same period (between 2020 and 2022) other large cocaine shipments were intercepted in Europe. One of these (intercepted at the port of Mersin in Turkey) contained 600 kilos of cocaine which had been concealed in banana containers belonging to the company Banana Bonita, which is also reportedly affiliated to the Noboa family's corporate holdings. Specifically, Banana Bonita has dealings in various countries including Morocco, Serbia and Germany, and is owned by another company with close ties to the Noboa family and registered in the Bahamas (Fruit Shippers Limited). According to another investigation by the European Commission, in 2022 over 110 tonnes of drugs were confiscated at Amberes (Belgium), over 60% of which had departed from Ecuador.

A report by *Revista Raya* further pointed out that “the Noboa family controls the entire circuit of businesses involved in the export of bananas, from planting and harvesting to transportation, including privately owned port facilities.” More generally:

**In Ecuador, companies and affiliates centred around the holding company Noboa Trading (owned by the Noboa family) control the entire supply chain for the cultivation and export of bananas. Through these extended holdings, the Noboa family owns the farms where the fruit is cultivated, as well as the containers the bananas are shipped in and the company that makes the carton boxes they are packed in prior to shipping. The family even owns some of the bulk cargo ships the products are carried on – the freight company Ecuadorian Line is an integral member of the extended corporate group and exports products to several ports in Europe. (Revista Raya, 2025)**

During the presidential debate in 2024, Noboa claimed that the company's officials and legal representatives had fully cooperated with prosecutors during the investigations and that the cases had been clarified and resolved to everybody's satisfaction. It is however possible that the tendency mentioned in Part I – practices of selective enforcement and strictly prescribing the initiation of investigations into powerful political or military figures and corporate interests – was also involved. Several common techniques and methods for preempting and obstructing the detection and prosecution of criminal activities are mentioned in the Ecuadorian context, including: funding to the country's customs inspection and investigation unit have been slashed over the last few years (and disbursement of the very meagre funds that have been approved for the agency is routinely delayed and deferred for extended periods); the Office of the Prosecutor General has been flooded with political appointees who are well positioned to deflect, stall and obstruct all investigations into members and associates of the most powerful political factions and corporate groups (with the additional benefit of being able to devote much of the agency's resources to investigating and persecuting political opponents and dissident or restive social movements). (The Gray Zone, 2025)

Basically similar tactics and ploys have been systematically applied in Colombia for many years, whereby the most powerful political and corporate factions and vested interest groups in the country compete fiercely among themselves for control over key State institutions and law enforcement agencies (such as the offices of the Prosecutor General, Inspector General, Ombudsman and Auditor General), while at the same time collaborating among themselves to exclude all other social sectors from participating in or influencing the selection process for new appointments and promotions. (Edgar, 2024)

## **The Banana Industry & the Drug Trade – A Long History of Intelligence Gaps & Selective Enforcement?**

As mentioned previously, in its discussion of a related phenomenon in neighbouring countries, the European Drug Report for 2022 noted that although an increasing number of sophisticated extraction and processing facilities for turning coca base into cocaine had been detected in Europe during the preceding period (mainly in the Netherlands, Spain and Belgium), no major interceptions of coca base originating from Bolivia and Peru had been reported over the same period (scientific analysis of the coca leaves used to make the coca base had identified those two countries as the most likely source), all of which suggested that at least one major trafficking route had still not been identified (raising the further possibility that other major trafficking networks have similarly managed to evade detection over long periods of time).

The authors of the report described the failure of customs inspectors, law enforcement agencies and investigators to detect the trafficking of very substantial quantities of coca base using a particularly advanced variation of the basic method (concealing drugs in ‘carrier materials’) for at least several years as an ‘Intelligence Gap’. It was further argued in Part I that in some cases such failures to detect major drug trafficking routes and networks might be more accurately described as some type of covert or rogue Intelligence Operation.

At the same time, there is another phenomenon which is not always mentioned in official reports and investigations: the fact that widespread practices of selective investigation, prosecution and enforcement permeate all levels and aspects of the illegal drug trade. Notwithstanding that many such reports note the existence of widespread corruption in ‘Third World’ countries, they usually tend to imply or assume that such practices do not occur in the ‘First World’ (other than occasional cases involving a few ‘bad apples’ in State agencies or ‘rogue traders’ in the corporate sector).

Considered from a broader historical, geopolitical and structural perspective on the cocaine trade between Latin America, the United States and Europe, these distinct but interconnected features appear time and again in the illegal drug trade and the war on drugs – the occasional revelations concerning the participation of prominent global banks and transnational corporations in activities closely related to drug smuggling and laundering drug money, the selective investigation of suspects depending on their economic, social or political status and resources, the instances of secret collaboration between intelligence agencies and certain drug cartels.

It is possible that many or even all of these factors may have contributed in varying degrees to the exponential increase in widespread violence and drug trafficking that has occurred in Ecuador over the last five or ten years: although numerous official investigations have reported that international shipments of bananas from Ecuador have been heavily targeted by major cocaine trafficking syndicates, they tend to be decidedly evasive in terms of providing specific details (beyond the usual vague allusions to Colombian, Mexican, and in some cases Albanian cartels and mafias, or local ‘criminal bands’ and delinquents). Meanwhile, it would appear that authorities in the US, Europe and Ecuador are also still at a complete loss to identify and dismantle the criminal networks that have been organizing the regular flow of large shipments from Guayaquil since at least 2020.



Moreover, it is far from clear that the particular ploy involved (concealing cocaine aboard ships exporting bananas from South or Central America to Europe and the US) is a recent phenomenon, a potentially very significant point that is also not mentioned in most official investigations and reports. The scheme has a number of very significant precedents, with a string of allegations having been made from a wide variety of sources against several other major banana exporting companies in the region for more than twenty years. One notable example of credible (or at the very least decidedly consistent and plausible) allegations about very large cocaine shipments being hidden on cargo ships carrying bananas from Latin America to Europe and North America has been in the public domain since at least 2010, in this instance involving banana shipments by Chiquita Brands from its extensive plantations in northern Colombia in the late 1990s. The case also included subsequent revelations that Chiquita had been financing and even actively collaborating with illegal armed groups in northern Colombia for many years. More recently, there have been similar allegations of large amounts of cocaine having been concealed in banana shipments owned by Banacol and Banadex.

A number of media reports in Colombia in 2023 commented that it has been common knowledge in the country since at least around 2010 that the major banana exporting companies had had extensive relations with paramilitary groups in the 1990s. Moreover, that drug traffickers had probably been hiding large amounts of cocaine in shipments of bananas bound for Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s (the drugs having been supplied by the commanders of several of the most powerful paramilitary groups that were active in northern Colombia at the time). (La Silla Vacía, 2023)

Two of the most important sources of information and testimony concerning such cocaine shipments have been, first, statements by paramilitary commanders made in hearings and investigations related to the disarmament and demobilization of the paramilitary groups between 2005 and 2010 and, second, a large batch of documents which were leaked from the Prosecutor General's Office involving investigations into numerous large cocaine shipments which were intercepted by authorities in Colombia and Europe.

One paramilitary commander from the regions where Banadex (Chiquita's main Colombian subsidiary) operated stated that he had regularly supplied large amounts of cocaine (up to four tons per month at the height of the scheme) which were subsequently concealed on ships carrying bananas being exported to Europe (usually from the company's private port facilities in Turbo on the north coast of Colombia). The allegations were subsequently corroborated by information from several other sources, including evidence discovered several years later related to investigations into more recent shipments which had been intercepted:

**A document obtained from the Prosecutor General's office refers to a computer belonging to Jorge 40 (one of the most powerful paramilitary commanders in Colombia in the late 1990s) which contained files listing shipments of cocaine to Europe on boats loaded with containers of bananas, and further notes that: 'According to our intelligence reports, the company involved in the shipments is called Chiquita'. In other proceedings, another very senior former paramilitary commander who was active in the region (Éver Veloza García, alias HH) claimed that many of the banana ships departing from northern Colombia were also carrying large amounts of cocaine. He further stated that in some cases divers contracted by the drug traffickers secured tubes containing drugs to the hull of the ships while they were at sea in order to avoid security controls, and that: 'Every month, 4,000 kilos of drugs left towards Panama and Central America just from our zone.' (CAJAR, 2008)**

Another independent investigation published in 2016 (by the Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz, a civil society organization with long standing in Colombia) pointed out that other criminal proceedings involving cocaine shipments in which Banacol was heavily implicated had been in course since at least 2010, and urged authorities to continue their investigations after many years of interruptions and delays:

**In 2010, the Anti-Mafia Unit of the Prosecutor General's Office ordered the detention of two Navy officials and five Banacol employees ('technicians') for belonging to an organization that concealed drugs in containers of bananas located on premises owned by Banacol. This organization has been implicated in the shipment of more than 9 tonnes of cocaine to the United States and Europe which were intercepted by authorities. (El Diario, 2023)**

More recently (following the abovementioned leak of a large number of documents obtained from the Prosecutor General's office and subsequently disclosed by Irpimedia, among others), it became known that some of the documents referred to investigations being conducted into shipments of cocaine to Europe which had been hidden among containers of bananas and plantains owned by CI Banacol SAS (having departed from the company's facilities in Turbo in northern Colombia) since around 2014. (La Silla Vacía, 2023) Other investigations mentioned in the files from the Prosecutor-General's Office involved similar shipments to Belgium in 2016 in containers which were also owned by Banacol (and which were reported to have been destined for the port of Amberes in Belgium).

Another media report from around the same time (Colombia Informa, 2023) adds further details from the files leaked from the Prosecutor General's Office and other sources. According to the documents, between 2020 and 2022 three cocaine shipments (amounting to 3.4 tonnes) were intercepted by Italian authorities (in the port of Gioia Tauro). The cocaine was hidden in containers of bananas shipped by Banacol. Italian authorities concluded that the cocaine shipments were probably intended to be received by the Ndrangheta organized crime syndicate (alleged to control up to 80% of the European cocaine market at the time). This could tie in with information from earlier proceedings in Colombia, in which one of the most powerful paramilitary commanders in Colombia during the 1990s (Salvatore Mancuso) claimed that he personally met with leaders of the Ndrangheta clan in the early 2000s to discuss the organization of cocaine shipments from Colombia to Europe. (Colombia Informa, 2023)

Proceeding further along the extended transnational network(s) of corporations and individuals that were implicated in transactions and activities related to the shipments, Italian investigators traced some of the legal and financial transactions related to cocaine shipments to Italy between 2020 and 2022 as having been arranged by Transfurt Express Limited, a company reported to have been registered in Bermuda and whose largest shareholder at the time was another US agribusiness giant with substantial investments in Colombia and Central America, Dole Fresh Fruit International (Colombia Informa, 2023).

Among its many assets and commercial activities in Colombia, the corporate group or conglomerate of which Banacol is a part owns over 5,000 hectares of banana plantations and related processing, transportation and export facilities in the country's northwest. Banacol has consistently been among the two or three largest exporters of bananas from Colombia ever since it acquired Banadex (Chiquita Brands' subsidiary in Colombia)

in 2004. The ownership and corporate structure of Banacol itself has been altered on numerous occasions, with closely related entities in the extended corporate group being reorganized and registered in different tax havens at different times (including the British Virgin Islands, Belize and Panama). The cluster of holding companies, affiliates and associates with close legal or commercial ties to Banacol include Greenland Investment, Invesmar International Limited and Greenplus Investment Limited.

The principal direct link or common thread between the ownership and governance structures of the companies at the centre of the vast transnational conglomerate or financial/ corporate combine of which Banacol is a part is Victor Manuel Henriquez Restrepo, who in recent years has been reported as being the president of Banacol and Greenland Investment and the CEO of Invesmar, among other senior executive positions in related affiliates. He had also served on the board of directors of Banacol previously (including during part of the period when Banadex and Banacol were providing financial and other support to the AUC, while Banadex was still owned by Chiquita Brands). (Colombia Informa, 2023)

Finally, as in the case of Noboa Trading's banana and cocaine shipments from Guayaquil, the clusters of companies owned by Banacol's parent company are active along the entire supply chain for the exportation of bananas and other products from Colombia including shipping and the production of 'certain plastics' for use in packaging (among many other commercial and strategic assets and capabilities): "Apart from bananas and plantains, Banacol also produces and commercializes plastic or corrugated cartons (used for packing and transporting fresh fruit products). On its web page, Banacol's owner (Greenland) describes itself as 'a Colombian agro-industrial group with the capacity to create and manage commercial activities in agriculture, industrial, service and real estate sectors.'" (El Diario, 2023)

The failure to launch a thorough official investigation into the preceding cases strongly suggests that corruption is also deeply entrenched in at least some of the countries that the shipments were destined for (given that the international smuggling rings appear to have been operating on an industrial scale for many years, and it would appear that in none of the cases have the authorities in Ecuador, Colombia, Europe or the US been able to definitively identify the leadership of the international smuggling rings involved and dismantle the logistical networks and trafficking methods that they have devised). It is distinctly possible that the types of techniques and methods mentioned in the previous section for the preemption and obstruction of investigations and criminal proceedings (in the context of the persistent failure to identify and prosecute the ringleaders behind the massive cocaine shipments that have departed from Guayaquil for the last five years at least) have been involved in the generalized failure to definitively identify and dismantle the networks behind the shipments on other bulk banana shipments from Colombia.

The failure to report even one such major interception of cocaine concealed among bulk banana shipments to the US and the UK raises the question: are there no such shipments, or are the organizers of the shipments better at avoiding detection by authorities and customs inspectors in those countries? (The main destinations for exports from Colombia in 2023 were: the US (\$195m), the UK (\$137), Belgium (\$136m), Italy (\$112m) and Germany (\$77m). Moreover, there is the further possibility that similar shipments could be sent from (or

rerouted via) other countries in the region: Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica and Guatemala are all among the five largest exporters of bananas in the world market, and Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte have a major presence in most if not all of these countries (and, as noted in the following section, all three companies were found to have been collaborating with the paramilitary groups in Colombia in the late 1990s).

The apparent ability of the ringleaders of the banana and cocaine shipping consortiums to continually slip under the radar of the authorities, repeatedly avoiding detection and serious investigation for (at least) twenty years, raises the question whether there might be other industrial scale enterprises and international trafficking routes operating beyond the visible panorama, and whose ringleaders are simply too powerful to investigate and prosecute. These recent developments in the global cocaine market have clearly demonstrated that one of the cheapest, simplest and most secure methods to smuggle large quantities of contraband is undoubtedly concealing the goods in bulk cargo carriers (for those who have the means to do so). In this respect, bulk shipments of other products and materials (such as minerals, other agricultural products and petroleum), and also large technical service vessels (such as dredges and the vessels servicing offshore oil platforms), offer essentially the same theoretical and practical advantages over all other forms of trafficking, particularly when the cargo(s) are loaded at privately owned and managed port facilities in remote (and dangerous) areas.

### **The Paramilitary Strategy, the Corporate Sector and the Colombian Armed Conflict**

As several details from the preceding discussion suggest, apart from the possible drug trafficking nexus, the extensive relations that developed over a considerable period between paramilitary commanders, Chiquita, Banacol and other banana-exporting companies in Colombia (including Dole and Del Monte) demonstrate the complexity of the dynamics within and relationships between the international drug trade, the agribusiness sector and the armed conflict more generally, with each activity sustaining and in turn being sustained by the others in different ways and varying degrees throughout the period. The following sections examine these developments in the Colombian context, including the wide range of opportunistic tactical alliances and commercial relationships that numerous foreign companies and Private Military Companies (PMCs) have had with major drug cartels, paramilitary groups and others, and how these have influenced or impacted upon the broader social and economic conditions and security environment in the country.

The Chiquita case in particular is illustrative of how both the war on drugs and the commercial activities of major ‘foreign investors’ have overlapped with or merged into the armed conflict in Colombia, creating additional layers of secrecy and complexity and greatly increasing the range of available options and alternatives for the compartmentalization and specialization of specific tasks and functions that is so common among the most powerful and belligerent external actors and criminal syndicates. Chiquita Brands International was one of the largest banana exporting companies in Colombia during the 1990s, however it sold its main Colombian subsidiary (Banadex) to Banacol in 2004 after it was discovered that the company had maintained close relations with paramilitary groups for most of this period.

Nonetheless, through a variety of interconnected corporate structures, personal relationships and commercial networks the company may have maintained some of its commercial interests in Colombia, and the company also owns extensive plantations and installations in Guatemala and Costa Rica (which are also among the five largest banana exporting countries in the world). In this respect, an article in the Spanish media reporting on the apparent relocation of Banacol's head office to Madrid in 2023 noted the troubled and controversial history of the banana industry in the region, and of Chiquita's long tradition of active involvement in these events:

**Chiquita had to exit from Colombia in 2004 after it was accused of having links with illegal armed groups. Up until that time it had been a dominant player in the banana industry in the region, part of a broader legacy of the monopoly built up by its predecessor (United Fruit Company) in Latin America since the 1920s, developments which include a dark history of violence and the facilitation or encouragement of military coups throughout the region.**

As the authors note, Chiquita is a direct descendent of United Brands and United Fruit Company (the same corporate dynasty whose plantations were affected by a strike by plantation workers in Colombia in the late 1920s that ultimately resulted in the massacre of over one thousand unarmed workers when the military opened fire on the unarmed demonstrators). The company was also one of the main beneficiaries of the US-instigated military coup in Guatemala that ousted the country's first democratically elected president in 1954. With respect to more recent events in Colombia:

**In 2007 the company was found guilty of having made payments totaling \$1.7 million to paramilitary groups (the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) in the regions where the company had significant commercial operations. After reaching an agreement with the Department of Justice Chiquita paid a fine of \$25 million, the largest penalty that had been imposed under US anti-terrorism legislation up to that time. Later, the company successfully contested a petition to US courts lodged by Colombian victims which included accusations of complicity in the perpetration of grave human rights abuses committed by the AUC against more than 4,000 civilians in the regions where Chiquita operated. (El Diario, 2023)**

Although numerous other major banana exporting companies in northern Colombia were clearly also involved, Chiquita Brands was the only company to have been found guilty in formal proceedings for having provided funds and other forms of material and logistical support, first to armed insurgent groups (during the 1980s and early 1990s – basically as a type of tax and permission to operate that was commonly imposed by armed insurgent groups on companies in regions where they had a significant degree of territorial control), and then to the paramilitary groups that ousted them from the region after a period of intense clashes and widespread violence, massacres and other atrocities committed against civilian populations (most of which – possibly around 80% - have been attributed to the paramilitary groups).

One of the reasons why the Chiquita case is so exceptional is because many documents related to the company's dealings and agreements with the paramilitary groups were disclosed in legal proceedings related to the company's operations in Colombia. In return for a guarantee that they would not be subject to criminal proceedings (and that all related investigations would be terminated), Chiquita Brands signed a plea agreement with the US Department of Justice pursuant to which senior executives acknowledged that one of the company's subsidiaries in Colombia (Banadex S.A.) had paid \$1.7 million to paramilitary groups between 1997 and 2004 (including after the US government had designated them as a terrorist organization in 2001). Meanwhile, a

great deal of other information and testimony concerning relations between the paramilitary groups and the agribusiness industry was produced in the course of the Justice and Peace Tribunal hearings in Colombia (a transitional justice system created to process former members of the paramilitary groups that agreed to disarm and demobilize pursuant to an agreement between the AUC and the Colombian government signed in 2003).

Detailed testimony from former paramilitary commanders in the regions where Chiquita Brand's subsidiary (Banadex) owned large plantations (as well as a private port and numerous other industrial facilities) emphasized that most of the agribusiness companies were willing if not enthusiastic financiers of – and in some cases were active collaborators in – the activities of the paramilitary groups, also describing some of the collateral benefits that the companies received from their enduring commercial and 'security' relationships with and corporate sponsorship of the paramilitary groups (and the devastating impacts these relations had on plantation workers, trade unions and rural communities throughout the region). Following an exhaustive analysis of the paramilitary commanders' declarations related to Chiquita's commercial operations and cross-checking them with related official investigations, judicial proceedings and other sources, a Colombian civil society organization (Corporación Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo - CAJAR) produced a series of detailed reports which included the following key findings and commentary:

**Apart from being documented in the Colombian and United States judicial systems, the evidence concerning the relationship between Chiquita Brands International and the paramilitary structure in Colombia – and thereby the company's complicity in the perpetration of multiple crimes against humanity and human rights abuses – has been corroborated during the last year by numerous paramilitary commanders including Salvatore Mancuso Gómez (alias Santander Lozada), Freddy Rendón Herrera (alias El Alemán), Rodrigo Tovar Pupo (alias Jorge 40), Nodier Giraldo (alias el Cabezón or Jota), and Éver Veloza Garcia (alias HH).**

**In an interview on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2007 Salvatore Mancuso claimed that: "All of the banana producers paid us. All of them. A pact was made with Chiquita Brands, Dole, Banacol, Uniban, Proban and Del Monte. They paid us one cent per dollar for every box that left the country. The companies made a monthly payment, while Dole took responsibility for receiving the money and finalizing the payments which were qualified as a contribution to the Convivir organization Papagayo. (Mancuso further stated that) there was no need to exert pressure, blackmail or threats against the banana companies so that they would pay those percentages. The truth is we never thought what would happen if they didn't pay us, because the companies' representatives did it gladly."**

**(In other proceedings), Éver Veloza Garcia (alias HH) declared in open testimony before the Justice and Peace Tribunal on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2008, "it was the banana companies that paved the way for the arrival of the paramilitary groups to the region in order to combat the guerrilla groups. The strikes by the workers were very damaging for them (the banana companies), they lost a lot of money when the workers protested, and after we arrived to the zone (in 1995) there was not one more strike. With the war that took place in Urabá, the only winners were the banana companies." (CAJAR, 2008)**

Notwithstanding the disclosure of so much detailed and verified evidence and information concerning the illegal agreements and extensive business relations between the major banana producers and exporters in northern Colombia and the AUC, related legal and criminal investigations and proceedings were never pursued by prosecutors in the United States or Colombia. In the former jurisdiction, such proceedings were preempted by the generous plea bargain agreement mentioned previously; in Colombia, the Prosecutor General refused to initiate proceedings and the case remained dormant for many years until the proceedings were reluctantly

reopened in 2018 due to increasing public pressure (particularly the persistent efforts of families of the victims with the support of civil society organizations such as CAJAR, among others):

**Despite the Prosecutor General's Office having detailed knowledge of the payments that Banacol made to the Convivir (a type of front company created by the paramilitary groups) and of the regular meetings that took place between the company's senior executives and paramilitary commanders between 1997 and 2004, formal investigations were not opened until 2018. Once again, the Office was being accused of complicity by omission for failing to investigate cases implicating powerful political clans and economic interests in the crimes committed by a variety of mafia and paramilitary groups throughout the country, cases which have been archived for over a decade. (Colombia Informa, 2023)**

Another report (by Vorágine and the Organized Crime and Reporting Project) investigating the ongoing links between Banacol and international drug trafficking (due to the repeated interception of large amounts of cocaine concealed in the company's banana shipments to Europe, as noted previously) suggests one possible reason for or contributing factor in the tardiness, negligence or incompetence of the Prosecutor General, disclosing that Banacol made large political donations to the campaigns of numerous politicians from powerful political factions and dynasties in Colombia (through a closely related company, Greenland Investments), all from far right-wing political factions (which between them effectively controlled the appointment of the director of the Prosecutor General's Office for most of this period), including Federico Gutierrez (mayor of Medellín and presidential candidate in 2022) and several members of the national Congress from the political party founded by Alvaro Uribe (Centro Democrático). (La Silla Vacía, 2023)

### **The Privileged Status of Third Parties and External Actors in the Armed Conflict**

Although it is quite exceptional in several respects, the Chiquita/ Banacol case is just one of thousands of such cases in Colombia, where investigations into the participation of so-called 'third parties' in the armed conflict have been routinely if not systematically blocked (third parties are people or companies who have been implicated in commissioning, facilitating or benefiting from severe human rights abuses and crimes against humanity committed in the course of the armed conflict by either of the three primary parties or belligerents, the paramilitaries, the guerrillas, or members of the State security forces).

In both of the major peace agreements in recent times (providing for the disarmament and demobilization of the AUC in 2003 and the FARC-UP in 2016), 'third parties' have been explicitly excluded from the jurisdiction of the respective transitional justice tribunals and hearings (that is, individuals, companies and other non-State actors or organizations who may have had extensive relations with and participated in or supported and benefited from criminal activities committed by the belligerent parties, but were not themselves members of the illegal armed groups). For many years, neither the executive, legislative nor judicial branch demonstrated the slightest interest in defying the status quo. On this point, a report by a group of Colombian civil society organizations (Mesa Nacional de Garantías, 2018) states:

**The Justice and Peace Tribunal (established pursuant to the 2003 agreement with the AUC) issued orders directing the ordinary justice system to open investigations into more than 15,000 cases related to third parties who had been implicated in financing or**



actively supporting criminal activities perpetrated by the illegal armed groups, many of which involve the relations that developed between local and foreign companies and businessmen and the commanders of the various paramilitary groups.

(Recent initiatives by the Executive and the Congress concerning the paramilitary groups) appear more like a project to thwart the judicial processing of the groups and perpetuate the pseudo-confrontation that the State says it is maintaining against them. They appear to reflect a fear that the groups could be de-activated, and that they might begin to reveal the truth about who have been the main financiers, promoters and beneficiaries of their crimes. The Prosecutor General still has not investigated the confessions made by senior paramilitary commanders in the Justice and Peace jurisdiction providing evidence concerning their alliances and collaboration with more than 120 companies, including Drummond, Chiquita Brands, Postobón, Ecopetrol, Termotasajero and the National Cattlemen's Union, among many others.

The privileged position of 'Third Parties' is often even greater in the case of foreign companies and other external actors, who are in a relatively advantageous and privileged position with respect to the armed conflict in Colombia: they don't usually have to face many of the dangers and risks faced by local actors, and on the occasions when such dangers and risks cannot be avoided entirely, external actors usually have a much wider range of alternatives and escape clauses at their disposal. In effect, their participation is essentially voluntary and they can practice a type of 'selective engagement', unlike most Colombians who remain trapped in the dynamics of the armed conflict and have to cope with them the best they can. In this respect, the authors of one report into the paramilitary phenomenon point out that although the activities of foreign companies with major development projects or commercial investments occur "in the midst of an armed conflict, they are not an integral part of the conflict as such, and they are not generally subject to or constrained by the internal dynamics and tensions of the conflict. Rather, they respond to foreign motives and interests which are uniquely situated to benefit from the conflict." (Sinaltrainal, 2015)

More generally, most major companies in the agribusiness, mining and energy sectors (among others) have built up very advanced and diverse capabilities in numerous countries, and many have been heavily implicated in covertly participating in and supporting either armed insurgencies and military coups (to overthrow a government deemed to be inimical to the interests of 'foreign investors'), or of providing military assistance and supporting major counterinsurgency operations to prop up a government facing widespread rebellion and unrest (but which provides a favourable climate for foreign investors), depending on their particular corporate interests and strategic calculations. Some examples of this are noted in the preceding sections, whereby on numerous occasions during the 1990s foreign companies in Colombia were widely reported to have provided substantial financial payments and other forms of material support to illegal armed groups (including facilitating clandestine weapon shipments to paramilitary groups, and in some instances hosting clandestine training camps and logistics hubs on their properties for the conduct of a wide range of military/ intelligence/ paramilitary counterinsurgency operations and related activities).

Although many of the details remain unclear, a considerable amount of information has emerged indicating that while the agribusiness companies in the north of Colombia were aiding and abetting the most powerful paramilitary blocks in the region, the properties of other major foreign companies (mostly in the mining and energy sector) located in other rural and remote areas of the country also hosted covert paramilitary training camps, logistical centres and operational hubs for major counterinsurgency operations, and 'joint liaison'

centres to coordinate activities and launch targeted operations which in any given instance might include any or all of the following – paramilitary commanders, military and intelligence units of the Colombian public security forces, major agribusiness or mining and energy companies, as well as other foreign military/intelligence personnel, ‘private military contractors’, technical experts and ‘security consultants’ of all types.

As time has passed, a limited but increasing amount of information has emerged concerning the activities of several foreign companies with major development projects in the mining and energy sectors who are alleged to have hosted training camps for paramilitary groups and facilitated weapons shipments, or whose extensive properties and estates served as logistical bases and transport hubs for counterinsurgency operations in rural and remote areas. One of the earlier investigations of this phenomenon reviewed some of these allegations, in this instance concerning the activities of several foreign petroleum companies during the 1990s:

**In 1987, under the approving gaze of the Government, large rural landowners and drug traffickers linked to the Medellín cartel secured the services of the Israeli security company Hod He’ Hanitin (Spearhead Ltd) to train paramilitaries. Some of the training programs were realized at installations and properties owned by Texas Petroleum Co. and were directed by ex-officials of the Israeli army and Mossad – such as lieutenant colonel Yair Klein – and former members of the British SAS.**

**These mercenaries taught ‘anti-subversive techniques’ that would then be used to ‘cleanse’ the banana plantation and petroleum zones, eliminating people suspected of supporting the guerrillas. Between 1987 and 1992, the skills taught at the training camps were also used to carry out the assassinations of Jaime Pardo Leal and Bernardo Jaramillo (Union Patriótica), Carlos Pizarro (M-19) and Luis Carlos Galán (Liberal), all of whom were presidential candidates opposed to the Establishment.**

**The guerrillas were obstructing the production and transportation of petroleum, considering that this activity only benefited the multinationals and a small number of Colombians. The first company known to have utilized mercenaries to protect its infrastructure was Texaco. In 1997 and 1998 the British company Defence Systems Ltd conducted security-related activities together with the Colombian army, at the same time as it was reported to have been training paramilitaries on behalf of British Petroleum, Total and Triton. The companies reportedly turned to the Israeli firm Silver Shadow (founded by Yair Klein) for some of their arms purchases. (Ospina, 2004)**

Around the same period, one of Occidental Petroleum’s properties was also reportedly used as a logistics base and staging ground for other private sector military contractors conducting aerial anti-narcotics fumigation missions and counterinsurgency surveillance operations. (Vega, 2015) Such activities became standard practice for the imposition of mega-projects in some rural and remote areas in Colombia during the 1980s and 1990s, as the corporate infrastructure and facilities were fused into logistical hubs and operational platforms for the conduct of major counterinsurgency operations in strategic zones, whether by the State, paramilitary forces, foreign intelligence services, local landlords and other business interests, or quite often most if not all of them, working together in secret collaboration to organize major counterinsurgency operations, conduct reconnaissance missions, and launch high tech ‘search and destroy’ missions against the guerrilla groups.

Thus, even before they began to perform a wide variety of strategic security roles and functions in direct collaboration with all major branches of the State security apparatus (military, intelligence, police and law enforcement agencies), numerous foreign companies and other private sector contractors and counterinsurgency experts had been actively participating in and benefiting from the armed conflict(s) and the activities of the paramilitary groups in a variety of ways.

The multiple roles and capabilities of the corporate sector in the era of maximum privatization in the Colombian context demonstrates the many different ways in which the corporate sector has become increasingly involved in the armed conflict, and of how foreign companies and service providers have become thoroughly integrated into the armed forces, the national security apparatus, critical infrastructure and key economic sectors throughout the country.

The outsourcing of core military/ intelligence tasks and functions to foreign companies and consultants in Colombia accelerated dramatically following the adoption of 'Plan Colombia' by the US and Colombian governments in 1999. All of the different geopolitical factors and local elements mentioned in previous sections were present in the drafting of 'Plan Colombia' (including strategic subordination and structural dependence; the prioritization of military programs over negotiations and social programs; the flagrant violation of fundamental constitutional requirements and principles; privileged status, selective enforcement and preferential treatment for US officials, military personnel and companies), a bilateral project which would shape the future course of the armed conflict(s) in the country for many years to come:

**The original version of Plan Colombia was elaborated in English, only becoming available in Spanish several months later. In the best civic-military tradition, the social aspects of the plan were put at the service of a militarist strategy formulated under the notion of a 'War on Drugs', explaining the fact that almost 80% of the programs were oriented to military and security spending.**

**After the breakdown of the peace process in February of 2002, Plan Colombia was amended to include as a central objective the territorial occupation of the entire national space by the armed forces of the State, converting the anti-narcotics fight into an anti-terrorist fight. As a direct result of Plan Colombia, from 1998 to 2005 the size of the Armed Forces increased from 249,833 to 380,069 while the proportion of GDP spent on 'defence' during this period increased from 3.5% to 4.23%.**

**Staff from the US Southern Command participated extensively in the design and implementation of *Plan Patriota*, another military-dominated program to which the US contributed one billion dollars annually over three years. Pursuant to the plan the US military gained operational control over all of the main radar installations located in and satellites covering Colombian territory; that is to say, the United States Armed forces gained direct control over most strategic surveillance and intelligence installations and activities in the country.**

**In 2004 George Bush raised the official number of US military personnel in Colombia from 800 (400 soldiers and 400 contractors) to 1,400 (800 soldiers complemented by 600 contractors). In reality however, as of 2003 there were approximately 4,500 US military personnel in Colombia, with 1,000 soldiers operating in just one of the US military force structures based in the country (the Special Command of Joint Operations). (Vega, 2015)**

Although the provisions and programs established pursuant to the massive bilateral anti-drug/ military assistance agreement served to consolidate the military supremacy and de facto strategic control of the United States over Colombian territory (in effect, constituting a continuation and deepening of the doctrines of strategic subordination and structural dependence mentioned previously), in practical terms the operational management of many of the most strategic military/ intelligence functions and installations that passed to US control during this period was subcontracted to major foreign companies (most of which were of course based in the US, though companies based in the UK and Israel have also been prominent in many security-related sectors).

Consequently, alongside the dramatic expansion in the number and size of official US military deployments and missions sent to Colombia pursuant to Plan Colombia and later agreements, private sector weapons manufacturers and a plethora of ‘security industry’ companies and contractors have in effect taken over responsibility for the management and maintenance of the most advanced weapons systems, databases and surveillance platforms at many of the most strategic military installations and command centres throughout the country. A brief overview of such projects and related activities in the country as of 2004 included the following:

**Lockheed Martin offers – among other services – technical assistance to maintain the combat helicopters and aircraft for transporting troops. Northrop Grumman installed and manages seven powerful radar systems, coordinated with a sophisticated aerial surveillance and espionage system. This company also trains military personnel and paramilitaries for ‘special operations’. Other firms such as MariTech, TRW, Matcom and Alion utilize advanced technologies to take photographs from space, intercept communications, and analyse the data obtained. This information is transmitted to the Surveillance System of the US Army’s Southern Command (SouthCom) and the CIA, which review the information and redistribute it as they see fit. The Colombian armed forces are usually the last to be informed. (Ospina, 2004)**

Two detailed reports by Privacy International published in 2015 describe the development of a similar degree of structural dependence on foreign companies in the telecommunications surveillance, interception and monitoring systems and operating platforms used by several other (non-military) Colombian security and law enforcement agencies (the national police, the office of the Prosecutor General and other specialized law enforcement and investigation units). In this instance, the State employees and officials are entirely dependent on companies and technicians from the US, Israel and the UK for the operation and maintenance of the relevant surveillance equipment and interception platforms:

**Over the past decade, the Colombian government has primarily looked to private companies locally, as well as companies from the UK, the US and Israel to supply surveillance equipment. These companies have provided technologies that enable both network surveillance (the monitoring of communications data and content from service providers’ networks) and tactical surveillance (the monitoring of communications data and content from targeted devices).**

The two reports outline the installation, operational management and maintenance of two of the main interception platforms used (‘Esperanza’ and ‘PUMA’), their extensive capabilities, and the near impossibility of ensuring effective oversight of their use by the respective law enforcement agencies and criminal intelligence and investigation units. The Esperanza system formed the backbone of a joint targeted surveillance and interception program developed for use by the Office of the Prosecutor General, the Police and the national intelligence agency, with financial and technical support also provided by the DEA:

**Esperanza was connected to at least 20 rooms in 2012 identified by colours. At least six of these rooms received financial and technical support from the DEA, and DEA analysts share workspace with their Colombian colleagues. The US embassy is metres away. STAR engineers (the company that installed the surveillance operating system – STAR Inteligencia y Tecnología, a Colombian-registered company that is the exclusive representative in Colombia for several security and intelligence products provided by British and US companies) made dozens of visits to DAS monitoring rooms in 2009 and 2010 to fix problems and make improvements to the platforms on which data intercepted in the Esperanza system was analysed.**

The PUMA system is much more powerful than the Esperanza targeted surveillance and interception platform, and was installed, operated and maintained by a local subsidiary of Verint Systems:

PUMA, the Single Monitoring and Analysis Platform (operated by the national police), relies on technologies significantly more powerful and invasive than those of Esperanza. Esperanza is a 'switch' that requires a Fiscalía agent to remotely request and receive from the service provider information from a specific tapped line.

PUMA, by contrast, intercepts and stores potentially all communications transmitted on the high-volume cables that make up the backbone on which all Colombians rely to speak to and message each other. Its limitation is not the number of analysts available to 'task' service providers to send information, or quotas for interception per provider. PUMA's technology is only limited by the capacity of the storage of its monitoring centre servers and the capacity of the probes that are put on the backbone cables.

After the Police concluded the initial contracts with Compañía Comercial Curacao de Colombia ('La Curacao'), the legal representative and only authorized distributor for Verint Systems in Colombia, Verint engineers placed 16 'IP-PROBER' probes on the trunk lines. Service providers knew of their existence and helped to install the connections but were not involved in their day-to-day operation, according to former Verint employees. \*\* \*\*

With respect to the modern era of the corporate-sector owned and operated technological superstructure used by the State security apparatus, Ospina points out that the active participation of foreign companies and contractors in the performance of core security-related functions and in the armed conflict generally was not something new – the deepening of the neoliberal paradigm in the routine 'privatization' or outsourcing of military and security tasks and programs simply provided official acknowledgement of and legal sanction for what had already been happening for many years:

In order to avoid inflaming public opinion or the other negative psychological impacts of an obviously substantial foreign intervention, the number of US military personnel authorized to participate in 'anti-narcotics' operations in Colombia was limited to 400. When it approved Plan Colombia in 2000, the US Congress also authorized the presence of up to 400 private sector 'contractors', numerical limitations that subsequently would easily be exceeded.

As the law only mentioned contractors from the United States, the Department of State and companies like DynCorp contracted people from Guatemala, Honduras or Peru, thereby tranquilly surpassing the established limit. In effect, Plan Colombia merely legalized activities that several of these companies were already undertaking.

Before the attacks on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 in New York, the Colombian guerrilla groups were considered belligerent armed political forces. From that moment on the Department of State began to call them 'terrorist' organizations. In 2002, the US Congress approved an increase in the number of special forces troops sent to Colombia and authorized the use of the US military's 'anti-narcotics' capabilities in Colombia to support counterinsurgency operations. Such support also implied the involvement of subcontractors and PMCs (Private Military Contractors).

In reality, Washington finally stopped trying to avoid the topic gave official recognition and approval to what was already happening (foreign companies participating in the counterinsurgency war financed by the US). This change that consecrated continuity has a name – Plan Patriota – and also signals a fundamental readjustment of the priorities and focal points of the war, shifting them to the petroleum zones near the Venezuelan border. (Ospina, 2004)

In more general terms, these aspects or dimensions of the armed conflict (the privileged status of third parties and external actors, selective investigation of criminal activities and preferential treatment) are also related to the systematic repression and terrorization of the judicial branch mentioned in Part I: magistrates and prosecutors were heavily targeted by the organizers of the counterinsurgency war during the 1980s and 1990s to prevent any investigation of the massacres and other atrocities being committed by the paramilitary groups with the active connivance and support of sectors within the public security forces, leading to a condition of almost complete paralysis until around the period 2005-2010 (though even since then, it has usually been

extremely difficult to initiate criminal investigations into powerful Establishment figures, companies and interest groups). This is not to suggest that the guerrilla groups were not also responsible for the perpetration of many similar atrocities and crimes against humanity, however the most detailed investigations and estimates have concluded that on average the paramilitaries and public security forces were responsible for at least 80% of these activities throughout the country during the 1980s and 1990s (on average – the proportions vary enormously depending on the specific time and place and the actors involved). (GMH, 2013)

Another illustration of both the privileged position of ‘foreign investors’ in the Colombian armed conflict and the ‘neutralization’ of the judicial branch in proceedings involving powerful political figures, companies and other vested interest groups is legal proceedings involving Nestlé operations in the country. One of numerous incidents in which the company’s main Colombian subsidiary has been implicated is the murder of Luciano Romero, a leader of the trade union Sinaltrainal (overall, more than twenty of the trade union’s leadership and members working for Nestlé and Coca Cola have been assassinated in suspicious circumstances since the 1980s). There was some early success in the Colombian courts, including the conviction of several of the suspects involved in the planning and perpetration of Romero’s murder.

The preliminary investigations also resulted in the promulgation of a court order demanding the immediate initiation of a formal investigation into evidence suggesting that Nestlé executives knew of the plans and may have participated in their elaboration and implementation. However, the case file has been dormant for many years as prosecutors have refused to open an investigation into the evidence suggesting collaboration between the paramilitaries, officials from the State security apparatus, and Nestlé executives. An article published in *El Espectador* in 2008 commented of the case:

**Late last year (in 2007), while the country’s attention was riveted on the announcement that several high profile public figures who had been kidnapped by the FARC were still alive and no one in the media was talking about anything else, a transcendental judicial decision passed unnoticed: the sentencing of two demobilized paramilitaries for the assassination of trade union leader Luciano Romero Molina on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2005.**

**The court’s decision would not be of great significance in itself – being just one more conviction for the systematic extermination of trade unionists that has taken place in Colombia in the course of the armed conflict – were it not for the fact that, in the opinion of the presiding magistrate (José Nirio Sánchez), the person who ordered the crime was former paramilitary commander Rodrigo Tovar Pupo (alias ‘Jorge 40’) and that, worse yet, there was evidence indicating that executives from the multinational Nestlé were involved in organizing the homicide. The court’s 110-page judgment ordered the investigation of Nestlé-Cicolac’s directors to analyse ‘their presumed interference in the assassination of the trade union leader and in particular the request made by Carlos Alberto Vélez in his capacity as head of security for the Latin American operations of the multinational.’**

Some years later (in 2015), another news article reported that:

**Judge José Nirio Sánchez, of the Second Criminal Circuit Specialized Tribunal, convicted a DAS informant (of the national intelligence agency) and a paramilitary as the material authors of Luciano Romero’s assassination. The court further stated that ‘other trade unionists and former Nestlé employees – such as Victor Micles, Alejandro Martínez Toribio and Harry Laguna – shared the same fate as Romero on account of their dedicated battle on behalf of the trade union: all perished at the hands of the paramilitaries’, ordering that an investigation be opened against the directors of the company Nestlé-Cicolac with the objective of ‘elaborating upon the possible participation of the multinational in the systematic persecution of the trade union leaders’.**

**Judge Sánchez subsequently received death threats and was forced into exile to the United States. While he was there, he declared in hearings before the Education and Labour Committee in 2009 that those who ordered and financed the executions – the intellectual authors of the crimes – are more responsible than the material authors for the persistence of violence against trade unionists in Colombia, and that the violence will not end until the intellectual authors are also prosecuted. (Otramérica, 2015)**

Having failed to obtain a detailed investigation in Colombia, Sinaltrainal and Luciano Romero's family were assisted by several NGOs in Europe (including Multiwatch, a Swiss coalition of civil society organisations, and the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights) in an attempt to get justice in the jurisdiction of the parent company. The Office of the State Prosecutor in Switzerland accepted the file, then failed to commence investigations for over a year (by which time prosecutors could claim that the Swiss statute of limitations precluded any formal investigation). Subsequently, the European Tribunal of Human Rights refused to consider whether the Swiss judicial system had not contravened their obligation to conduct an impartial and comprehensive investigation into the crime. (Edgar, 2018)

This is entirely consistent with a common feature of the 'war on drugs' mentioned previously, widespread practices of selective enforcement and preferential treatment for the privileged members of certain social sectors and interest groups. Similarly, a detailed report on violence related to the illegal drug trade in Latin America noted that representatives of the victims of crimes in which powerful vested interest groups have been implicated often face immense obstacles (including death threats and persecution) when they have tried to get authorities to investigate the crimes: "communities that are poor or remote from centres of political power consistently find themselves exposed to the greatest harm. Often, the onus of demanding an adequate response from authorities falls on the shoulders of victims, such as relatives of the disappeared in Mexico or the incarcerated in Ecuador." (ICG, 2025)

### **The Chiquita Case and International Weapons Shipments to the AUC: Where Arms and Drugs Meet?**

There is one other exceptional aspect related to the Chiquita Brands case: not only did its main subsidiary in Colombia (Banadex) make regular financial payments to the paramilitary groups, with whom they enjoyed mutually beneficial dealings for many years (allegedly including regular large cocaine shipments concealed aboard container ships exporting the company's produce to Europe). It was also determined in related legal proceedings and investigations that the company's private port facilities in northern Colombia had been used by the AUC for a very large shipment of military grade weapons from Central America in 2001, at the height of the Colombian armed conflict. The authors of an independent investigation (CAJAR, 2008) into this succession of interconnected dealings and events state:

**(The regular payments to the paramilitaries) converted Chiquita Brands into one of the most important financiers of the AUC in the regions of Urabá and Santa Marta, at a time when the paramilitary groups were committing horrendous atrocities against civilian populations throughout the region (including the forced displacement of entire communities, massacres, targeted assassinations, torture and forced disappearances). In this broader context, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2001 an arsenal of weapons that included around three thousand AK-47 rifles and 5 million rounds of ammunition, and which was being transported on the merchant ship Otterloo, was smuggled into Colombia. The ship was unloaded in the port of Zungo, at docking facilities belonging**



**to Banadex S.A., where the weapons were loaded onto fourteen trucks to be delivered to the paramilitary organizations in Córdoba and Urabá. The commander of the national paramilitary association or umbrella group (the AUC), Carlos Castaño, later publicly stated that the elaborate arms smuggling operation constituted one of his ‘greatest achievements’.**

Another paramilitary commander who had knowledge of the operation testified that there had been four other comparable arms shipments. The investigations into the foreign participants who had arranged the large illegal weapons shipment(s) to the AUC via Chiquita’s facilities in northern Colombia followed a similar course to other (non-)investigations of powerful actors accused of drug trafficking and other crimes connected to the armed conflict. Forced into reluctant action following a formal petition lodged by the foreign ministers of Colombia, Panama and Nicaragua, in 2003 the Organization of American States initiated a formal investigation into the arms traders, intermediaries and transport companies involved in procuring the weapons and transporting them to Colombia.

The investigators determined that the arms were purchased from the Nicaraguan police by Shimon Yalin Yelinek, an Israeli citizen resident in Panama (using falsified documents claiming the arms were for the Panamanian police). According to the final report on the key findings of the investigation (OEA, 2003), Shimon Yalin Yelinek was acting on behalf of a company domiciled in Guatemala (GIR S.A.), whose owner and general manager (Ori Zoller and Uzi Kissileveich respectively) were also Israeli citizens (as well as former members of the Israeli military). It was further determined that Ori Zoller had also previously served as a commercial agent and intermediary in Central America on behalf of Israeli Military Industries for other transactions. The arms were transported on a vessel registered in Panama. Although the investigators did not examine what occurred in Colombia in any detail, the final report stated of this aspect of the transaction:

**Colombia is the primary victim of the diversion of the arms shipment. However, some Colombian customs officials were probably accomplices or bribed by the AUC in order to permit the unloading of the arms and ammunition from the Otterloo in the Port of Turbo. What really occurred in Turbo is still a mystery. The signing of an official form issued by the Antioquia Section of the Department of Administrative Security in Port Turbo to the captain of the Otterloo clearly demonstrates that the ship arrived to Turbo. But, beyond that, all that is known is that the weapons somehow ended up in the hands of the AUC. This would signify that someone in Colombia associated with Yelinek (who acquired the arms), Onatopp Ferriz (the owner of the Otterloo) or, maybe even the captain of the Otterloo (Iturrios Maciel), was definitively responsible for the entry of the illegal arms to Colombian soil.**

Thus, Chiquita was in effect exonerated from any involvement in the scheme, by omission rather than from the results of an active investigation. Meanwhile, in Panama, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2004 the Supreme Court closed the investigation into Shimon Yalin Yelinek, primarily on the basis that as none of the relevant criminal events or physical transactions occurred in Panama the court had no jurisdiction. The case has never been thoroughly investigated by the authorities in Colombia, Guatemala or Nicaragua either. It was reported in 2017 that the efforts to hold the executives of Chiquita Brands accountable for some of their crimes (after several unsuccessful legal petitions in the US and Colombia by groups representing victims of the crimes) would include an application to initiate proceedings before the International Criminal Court (an effort which ultimately was not successful). However, in mid-2025 Colombian prosecutors finally opened a criminal investigation into the possible culpability of Chiquita executives for their role in providing financial and other support to the

paramilitary groups over a long period of time (from at least 1997 until 2004) with full knowledge of (and possible complicity in) the crimes that were being committing against civilians by the paramilitary groups.

### **Regional Convergence: The Drug Trade, Armed Conflicts and Covert Counterinsurgency Operations**

There are then a multitude of loose ends and tangled threads associated with the dealings between many of the most powerful paramilitary commanders in northern Colombia and the major banana companies operating in the region – particularly Chiquita and Banacol, but also the other major producers and exporters in the region including the other US-based agribusiness giants Dole and Del Monte, who together with Chiquita also dominate the banana industry in Guatemala and Costa Rica (two of the five largest banana exporters in the world, along with Colombia and Ecuador).

One of these unresolved dimensions is the persistent accusations made under oath in the transitional justice proceedings and elsewhere that large cocaine shipments were regularly transported to Europe (and possibly North America) concealed among bulk shipments of bananas owned by the companies (which were often loaded from the companies' private port installations) or in the vessels' superstructure. Accusations which were followed by the succession of interceptions of large quantities of cocaine concealed among Banacol's banana shipments to Europe from around 2015 to 2022 (maybe there were no similar shipments to North America, or maybe they just weren't detected by authorities?). As well as the shipments discovered between 2020 and 2022 in Guayaquil using the same ploy (concealing large quantities of cocaine among banana shipments to Europe), albeit through an apparently autonomous financial/ corporate combine (Noboa Trading), which also just happens to have a highly integrated production, processing and transportation operation (including the use of private port facilities in Ecuador as well as an affiliated shipping company).

There is the further question as to exactly what the agribusiness companies' relations and cooperation with the paramilitary groups in Colombia entailed – for example, did they include privileged access to and use of the companies' plantations, other properties and installations, vehicles and other equipment on a regular basis? And finally, the large shipment(s) of military weapons to the AUC – were their others, and who else may have been involved in facilitating their entry into Colombia apart from some Chiquita employees and DAS officials? As well as the many other major foreign companies which performed a variety of roles and functions related to the Paramilitary Strategy and benefited from it in some way, particularly in the mining and energy sector. These activities were a prelude to but are fundamentally distinct from the immense range of central security-related tasks and functions that the corporate sector has taken over from the State since the adoption of Plan Colombia in the late 1990s and the wholesale outsourcing or privatization of core military and intelligence infrastructure and activities.

But there were many other major developments taking place – both within Panama as well as in the wider region (Central America, Colombia and Mexico) – about which very little can be stated with a high degree of confidence, such as: the long succession of military regimes and unconstitutional changes of government that

occurred in most countries in the region during the second half of the twentieth century (particularly the role of external actors in such events); the vast arms (and drugs?) smuggling networks established to supply the Contras, support massive counterinsurgency operations, or that were established by the belligerent parties in the civil wars that broke out in the region; the mega-Cartels that suddenly emerged almost out of nowhere in Colombia and Mexico to become a regional powerhouse in their own right, before their equally rapid demise or reconfiguration in the late 1980s and early 1990s; the types of interactions and impacts that occurred in Panama connected to or influenced by the armed conflict(s) in Colombia; Panama's role as a major secrecy jurisdiction and tax haven for the international financial system, and also the activities of Mike Harari in Panamanian politics, business and the security apparatus.

It was noted above that many of the threads examined by the OAS investigation into the shipment(s) of arms to the AUC led to Central America (specifically Nicaragua, Guatemala and Panama), where the relevant arrangements for the acquisition and transport of the weapons were made by a group of Israeli 'former' (off-duty?) military or intelligence officers and businessmen. However, all formal investigations into the arms shipment were closed without any convictions being recorded against any of those involved. The role of Panama as a logistical centre appears to have been particularly significant, having served as the host country for several of the Israeli operatives involved as well as for the merchant ship that was used to transport the weapons to Colombia.

Panama has repeatedly been found to have played a variety of strategically or structurally important support roles and logistical or financial services to both the illegal drug trade and arms smugglers in Central America and Colombia since the 1970s, and there is no compelling reason to assume that this is no longer the case – that at least some and perhaps many of the international trafficking routes and networks for smuggling arms and drugs that were established during the 1980s and 1990s remain active, or that other transnational criminal syndicates haven't taken advantage of the favourable conditions to establish their own networks and infrastructure. The revelations concerning the regionally-embedded network that arranged the international logistics for the arms shipments to the AUC in 2001 provide further corroboration of this hypothesis or supposition, suggesting that some of the relevant regional infrastructure and trafficking networks have not been abandoned by their owners and operators or identified and dismantled by authorities.

## **Conclusion**

It is worth repeating the caveat from the conclusion of Part I: none of the preceding information is offered as conclusive proof of anything given the complexity of each of the individual topics and factors involved, rather, they are covered as they constitute relevant sources of information and details that require much more investigation and analysis in each instance. Also, they are reviewed from an alternative (or dissident) perspective or contextual and analytical basis from conventional investigations and reports in order to identify and elaborate upon some of the inherent assumptions, biases and prejudices which tend to produce or favour certain findings and conclusions while ignoring or peremptorily dismissing other possible factors and explanations which could arguably be no less valid.

Part III will take a step back from more recent events and ongoing developments to explore how these may be directly connected to (or constitute indirect consequences of) the many ways in which the war on drugs converged and overlapped with the numerous armed conflicts and counterinsurgency warfare operations throughout Central America and Colombia during the preceding period (the 1980s and 1990), and the immense variety of covert and criminal arms and drugs smuggling operations and networks that were established by a variety of both local and foreign operatives and interest groups. These aspects will be examined in the broader geopolitical context of the integrated regional system of strategic subordination and structural dependency developed by the US over many years, as well as the ways in which Israel came to assume a major secondary role in Central America as the exigencies of the semi-covert Contra armed insurgency against Nicaragua and the simultaneous counterinsurgency programs in neighbouring El Salvador and Guatemala increasingly exceeded the capacities of the Reagan administration.

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