

## **LP 25/2025 Preventing Drug Trafficking via Maritime Routes**

On 16 December, Hong Kong Customs reported a major cocaine-smuggling case involving a large container vessel that had departed from Brazil, called at Singapore, Shanghai and Ningbo, and entered Hong Kong waters on 4 November. During an operation on 5 November, Hong Kong Customs seized about 417 kilograms of suspected cocaine with an estimated market value about \$256 million and arrested two Indian crew. It is the first drug trafficking case where an underwater robot was used to identify the compartment for drug concealment. The incident again highlights the continuing escalation in scale, reach and methods of drug trafficking via maritime routes and sounds a fresh alarm for ships.

### **I. Challenges to drug trafficking via maritime routes**

According to the UN World Drug Report 2025, it's hard to control drug trafficking via maritime routes mainly because global geopolitics have been more tumultuous; the national laws and regulatory standards are divergent, and the shipping operation is in nature vulnerable to exploitation by criminals.

- Conflict and instability continue to offer fertile ground for the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs.
- Criminal groups are adept at innovating drug production, which results in higher outputs, increased potency or purity, and a broader range of consumer products. They also innovate in the chemical concealment of drugs, which significantly complicates detection and interdiction.
- Criminal networks leverage advances in digital technology and technological opportunities to conceal communication, improve drug distribution models and reduce risk, like selling drugs through social media and instant messaging apps.
- As macroeconomic conditions worsen and development aid shrinks, countries are struggling to sustain investments in public health – including in response to drug use.
- Regulated access by adults to non-medical cannabis in the European and American jurisdictions brings more challenges.
- Drug trafficking groups are highly resilient to competition and law enforcement pressure.

- Weak maritime governance and corruption in ports offer opportunities to drug trafficking groups to move large volumes of drugs via maritime routes.
- The complex structure of oceangoing vessels – featuring numerous compartments and surveillance blind spots – makes them vulnerable to exploitation for drug smuggling.

## **II. Maritime drug trafficking routes**

During 2024, a drug trafficking route (particularly cocaine hydrochloride) has become the main expansion corridor for transnational criminal organisations seeking a path from producer countries (mainly Colombia and Peru) to Europe. The route crosses Southern Cone countries by air, land (Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil and Venezuela), or via waterways (through the Paraná waterway involving Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina), and crosses the South Atlantic from ports in Brazil and Argentina toward African countries in the Gulf of Guinea and North Africa (including Morocco, Nigeria, Liberia and Senegal, among others).

Within this context, European, Latin American and African criminal organisations operate in a coordinated manner at low operational and logistical cost. The presence of European groups in Latin America is steadily increasing, while Latin American criminal networks expand into Africa to facilitate logistical, storage and transport needs for the transit of illicit goods to Europe. All of this occurs with low visibility and limited territorial rivalry, strengthening transnational cooperation between criminal networks and ensuring that drug shipments reach their final destination in Europe.

In this reality of continuous innovation in territorial movements — with routes designed to evade land, sea and air controls, alliances between countries from different continents, and complex networks in Atlantic and Pacific departure ports — the European SEACOP project develops its strategies to identify the movements of international maritime smuggling networks, disrupt the consolidation of criminal structures, and prevent drug shipments from reaching their final destination.

## **III. Common hiding places on board**

Traffickers now shuffle cargoes through multiple routes and transshipment points to obscure origin, exposing virtually every port – especially those in drug-producing countries – to the risk of carrying narcotics. They either board vessels in plain sight, or secrete drugs indirectly, or collude with crew members, or even dive underwater to attach packages to the hull. Typical ways to conceal drugs on ships include:

- with the visitors or boarding personnel or in their luggage (rare);
- in the luggage of crew members or passengers (rare);

- within ship's stores or spare parts (rare);
- among loaded cargo or in its packaging (common);
- in hull structures or machinery – now popular, particularly magnetically attached to the bottom plating or hidden in sea chests.

#### **IV. Measures against maritime drug smuggling**

UNODC stresses that the control of pharmaceuticals is rapidly becoming a multifaceted challenge. Improved analysis, international judicial cooperation, corruption reduction efforts and the development of skilled law enforcement and criminal justice professionals are key to strategic planning. For ships, however, the only effective line of defence is to strengthen ship security.

Before arriving at a high-risk port:

- man the vessel with crew members with integrity and trustworthy to prevent collusion;
- obtain up-to-date information from the port security officer on the local threat levels and recent smuggling trends to take targeted counter-measures;
- consider engaging licensed local watchmen or security guards to reinforce protection.

While in a high-risk port:

- refuse all non-essential visitors and search every item of boarding luggage;
- raise the Ship Security Level and post extra deck lookouts and patrols;
- maintain uninterrupted bridge communications and establish scheduled check-in calls;
- switch on overside searchlights, high-intensity deck lighting and CCTV coverage;
- keep controlled spaces locked or under dedicated guard;
- arrange a full ship's search and, where appropriate, an underwater hull inspection before sailing.

If drugs are found on board:

- seal off the area immediately, photograph the evidence and preserve all records;

- notify the competent authority through the port agent immediately, and inform company management, the P&I Club and the flag State;
- give the port authorities complete cooperation in their investigation and evidence collection;
- compile thorough written statements and logs of every related action.

*For more information, please contact Managers of the Association.*