

Panama's Borders- Hotspots for Organized Crime

Manoj Jhangimal¹

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Resumen

En las fronteras de Panamá hay grandes organizaciones criminales que vienen del lado de Costa Rica y Colombia, debido a su posicionamiento global. Esto ha creado grandes problemas dentro del país dando a los traficantes para ir de la manera más rápida a Norte América, procedente de la región central de Colombia. Por otra parte, Costa Rica se utiliza como el segundo punto de la transición hacia el norte en lugar del sur, pero a veces el tráfico hacia el sur existe. Esto se hace mediante el uso de los tres forma de transporte: marítimo, terrestre y aéreo; y la utilización de rutas estratégicas y ciertos métodos con el fin de tener una forma más segura para transitar. Sin embargo, la frontera de la policía de Panamá está haciendo todo lo posible para disminuir esta actividad ilícita, pero hay soluciones alternativas que se pueden utilizar para reducir el tráfico que está contaminando nuestro país.

Palabras clave

Rutas, Dominios, Crimen organizado, SENAFRONT, Actividades ilícitas.

Abstract

On the borders of Panama there are vast criminal organizations coming from the side of Costa Rica and Colombia, due to the country's global positioning. This has created major problems within the country giving the traffickers the fastest way to go to North America, coming from the main region of Colombia. On the other hand, Costa Rica is used as the second point of transitioning going north rather than south, but sometimes trafficking

¹ Estudiante de licenciatura de Quality Leadership University. Correo electrónico: manoj_0611@hotmail.com

towards the south also occurs. This is done by using three means of transportation: sea, land, and air; and utilizing strategic routes and certain methods in order to have a safer way

for transiting. However, the border police of Panama are doing their best to diminish this illicit activity, but there are alternate solutions that can be implemented to reduce the trafficking that is contaminating our country.

Keywords: *Routes, Domains, Organized Crime, SENAFRONT, Value, Illicit Activities*

Introduction

The borders are considered the weakest points in a country where organized crime persists, but they are also one of the primary places where it can be prevented. Organized crime refers to highly incorporated organizations that take part in illicit activities with the objectives of obtaining monetary profit. These organizations continue to grow at a fast rate as they primarily act in countries that are influential on the basis of consumption and active economic standards. However, the most important situation is the transiting of production throughout the world. The primary countries for transits can be based on the global position that the country stands, the weakness of the borders, and the fastest ways of transportation.

Panama is considered one of the places that fits this criteria as it connects the American continent, North and South America; it is of high relevance for organized crime, transportation being one of the main concerns for those involved in these activities. There are three alternate domains: maritime aerial, and terrestrial. The connections of the borders between Colombia and Costa Rica are considered a hotspot where illicit activities persist, this being drug trafficking, gun trafficking and human trafficking. Additionally, there is an explicit consideration on the blind points taken within Panama's frontier that helps deviate the security within the borders.

Both borders pose problems, but Colombia rather than Costa Rica is the source of more trouble since it can be stated that Colombia is the major provider of cocaine and it is considered a place of maximum vulnerability with Panama. In both areas there are substantial issues based on the amount being transited and the routes taken to accomplish these activities. Therefore, throughout this study, we will analyze the situations happening between the borders and offering alternate solutions in order to lower the organized crime in such areas.

Panama- considered as a hotspot for organized crime

Connection between North and South America

Panama's global position makes it a primary use for organized crime, as it connects with North and South America. It is considered as the point of transition; in this case South America is the major starting point for human, gun and exclusively drug trafficking. On the other hand, North America, primarily the United States, is considered the point of consumption, hence, making Panama and Central America the bridge connecting these two places. According to researchers, "90% of the drug trafficking and other types of organized crime coming from South America pass through Central America, including Panama" (Ventura, 2014).

Weakness on the Borders

There are a lot of weaknesses on the borders; most of them come from the area of Darien where there is a high extension of forest. On the other hand, there are a lot of blind points, hills and rivers throughout the border of Costa Rica, which makes it a substantial place to hide and transit most of the illicit production. Additionally, there is a major amount of poverty around the borders that contribute to making it an easier target to trespass these areas.

The Fastest Way of Transportation

Panama is one of the places that gives a lot of advantages for traffickers due to two main infrastructures of transportation that it possesses, the Panama Canal and the Tocumen airport. The canal is a place where shipments to and from all over the world circulate. Even though it has the necessary security to prevent these actions, there is always a margin of error where some shipments will be part of organized crime. Also, there is Panama's national airport, which, according to the department of state of the United States, is considered the fourth airport with an overwhelming quantity of trafficking.

Panama and Colombia

The frontier between Panama and Colombia extends to approximately 263km. This is considered a place that possesses severe economic and environmental features; creating an absence of security and other migratory authorities, hence, making it a place of high advantage for criminal organizations. In addition, Colombia is one of the major providers of cocaine in the world and the first point where the transiting of organized crime begins to the north.

Why is it considered as a Place of Maximum Vulnerability?

According to the IEEPP (Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas), this border has three major vulnerabilities:

- The Darien Gap or “El Tapon de Darien” is a relatively high extension of forest that is located within the borders of Panama and Colombia. It is considered a place that is very difficult to access, even for migration authorities. Due to this situation, there have been reports of violent criminal activities such as drug smuggling and human trafficking as they cross this area either by land or sea.
- The amount of poverty prevalent in the area, which is basically in relation to the indigenous people of Guna Yala and Embera-Wounaan.
- An absence of means of communication and infrastructural development; hence, creating a lack of control within those areas.

Drug & Gun Trafficking: Panama-Colombia

Strategies & Main Routes

Panama serves mainly as a point of disembarkation and storage for a period of time that is later forwarded by land, sea and air to the north. The strategy used, according to the United Nations Office of Drug and Crime (UNODC), is that the traffickers essentially wait for a rupture in security before making the trip, utilizing an extensive variety of marine vessels, most of the time through speedboats with a motor of 200 horsepower, on the Caribbean side. On the Pacific side, they incorporate slower crafted boats. Later, the cargos are stored in areas that aren't accessible by road for a period of time, before being sent to the north.

In relation to drug and gun trafficking, the main routes that traffickers utilize are through the oceans due to the Region of Darien. Based on figure 1 we can say that the two main departures from Colombia come from “El Golfo de Uraba” on the Caribbean side and “Jurado” on the Pacific side; “55% of the cargos come from Uraba and 45% from Jurado” (UNODC,2012). Accordingly, we can see that most of the areas of disembarkation are in poor areas and national parks that are near the coast, and the areas of storage are located in islands rather than the coastal sector.

The main routes in the Caribbean Coast are from:

- Golfo de Uraba to Archipelago of Guna Yala
- Guna Yala to some areas in Colon such as Chagres National Park, and near the rivers of Belen and Cocle del Norte

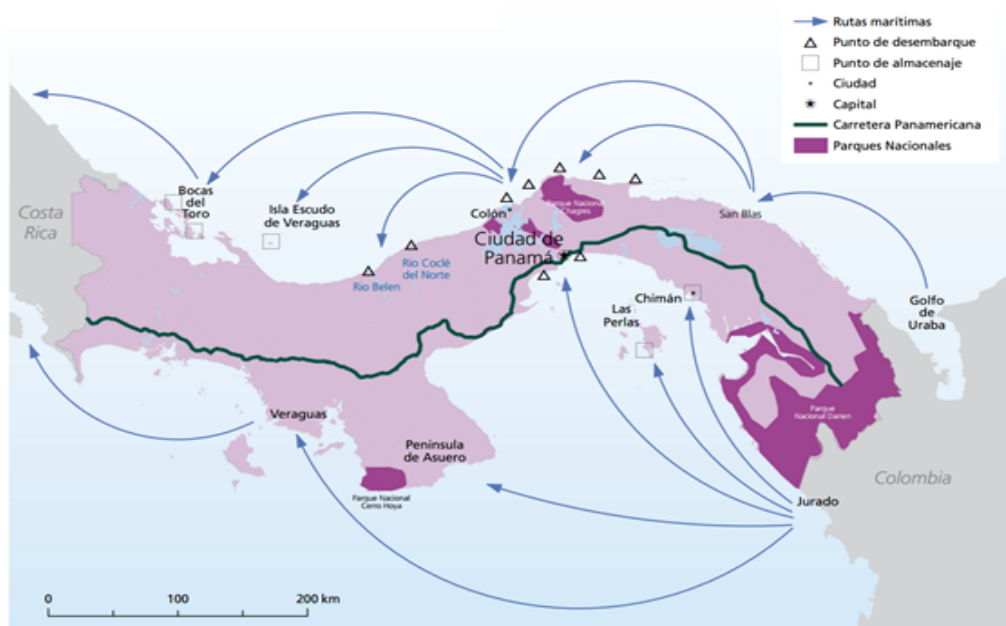
- From the areas of Colon they are taken to storage in islands such as “Archipelago de Bocas Del Toro” and “Isla Escudo de Veraguas”

The main route from the Pacific coast travels from Jurado directly to five distinct destinations; these are:

- Chimán district
- Isla del Rey
- Coast of Peninsula de Azuero
- Coast of Veraguas
- Puerto Piña (new route discovered in 2014)

From the two coasts the merchandise can be transported from the Caribbean to the Pacific side and vice versa.

Figure 1



Source: UNODC, *Delincuencia Organizada Transnacional en Centroamérica y el Caribe*. (September, 2012)

https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_spanish.pdf

Relationship between the Gunas and Drug Trafficking

The Archipelago of Guna Yala is located in the Caribbean coast near the borders of Colombia, considered as a place that has extreme poverty and has experienced major

circumstances regarding the operations of international drug trafficking; it functions as a way of support for these organizations. This event affects their lifestyle in an involuntary way where most of the drugs coming from the borders are usually abandoned or thrown away in those areas due to unexpected situations.

On the other hand, most of the traffickers who use speedboats as a way of transportation, when going from the Caribbean coast there is a high possibility of accidents and due to this they create an alliance with the Gunas as agents of support by forcing the indigenous people to be used as mules, which is carrying the drug through the city. As a result, if the community guarantees safer and more convenient means for the transportations of the traffickers, they earn a form of income that might be difficult to gain in other ways.

According to the IEEPP, the Gunas in certain regions help, in an involuntary way, the traffickers in four major ways that protect the organizations from being caught; these are:

- Logistic support
- Drug warehousing
- Commercialization
- Returning back the drugs being abandoned

Nowadays, there are still controversies in some of the areas, but it has been decreasing due to the help given by the SENAFRONT.

The Average Weight and Value being trafficked

The average weight being trafficked is about 41 tons, according to the latest available data in 2013, where on a per kilo basis in “Colombia the value is about \$1700 and when entering Panama its value increases to \$2000” (Cañizales, 2015). According to chart 1, from 2011 to 2013 the amount of drugs being trafficked has been stabilizing. Additionally, it is considered by the authorities that 5% to 10% of the drugs is consumed locally, whereas the rest transits north.

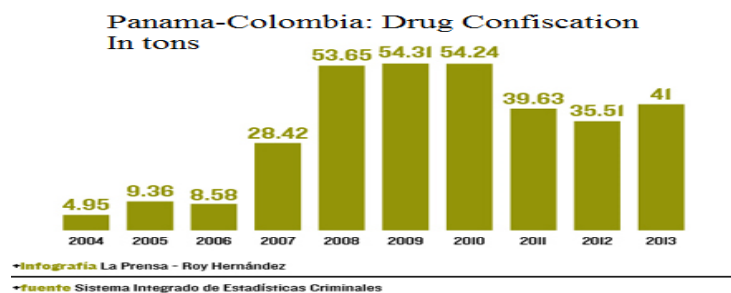


Chart 1

Source: Hernandez, R. (2014). Panamá: El oscuro camino de servir al crimen organizado. November 5, 2015, from <http://www.fnpi.org/seguridadciudadana/?p=315>

Human Trafficking: Panama-Colombia

Human trafficking is related to the use of forced labor and sexual exploitation; the traffickers deceive people using a promise of better opportunities. There are two types of human trafficking experienced in Panama. The first one is the trafficking that takes place within the same country, in this case Panama. The second one is considered the trafficking being made as a way of transit for illegal immigrants through Panama, that go to other places, most of the time to the north.

Countries of Origin and System Used to Enter

The main groups that pass through the borders, according to data from SENAFRONT of 2015, are from:

- Cuba- 1918 people
- Nepal -215 people
- Somalia- 47 people
- Bangladesh-38 people

These groups create a major interference in Panama, where the people that are foreigners and come from areas such as Asia and Africa usually utilize Panama as a “hub” where their priority is to travel to the north. Most of these foreigners come by airplane to South American places where the requests for visas are more flexible, such as Brazil and Ecuador. Later, they travel to certain regions of Colombia either by sea or by land, in order to cross the border to Panama.

Main Routes

The routes where human trafficking takes place tend to use the three domains as a way of transportation. First, the point of departure through the ocean would be by the Gulf of Uraba reaching the region of Guna Yala. Second, there are two terrestrial routes taken by traffickers in order to cross the borders; these are: coming from the Darien Gap, but this is a more dangerous route where “most of the people that passes do not survive through this path” (Daugherty, 2015) and the other route is through a populated area between Sapzurro located in Colombia and La Miel located in Panama, which is near the border line of Guna Yala. Lastly, there are a lot of immigrants coming through the airport basically from the areas of Brazil, Ecuador, and cities from Colombia as a way of staying or going northward.

The Use of “Coyotes” in Panama

The “Coyotes” are “people hired by immigrants that are undocumented to be transported without being caught to cross the border” (Parkinson, 2013). In this case, the immigrants hire the “Coyotes” in Colombia to cross the border of Panama and be taken near the coast of Darien. The immigrants are charged thousands of dollars to use this kind of services, due to the extent of forest in Darien, since they offer guidance by taking them to safer paths.

Panama and Costa Rica- Drug and Gun Trafficking

The border between Panama and Costa Rica stretches out to 363 Km; it is viewed as one of the regions that exhibits a deficiency of social advancements, since the border is

divided by one street. Additionally, it is considered the second position of transiting going north and within these borders the type of organized crimes that are exhibited are commonly drug and gun trafficking. Additionally, for the organized crime going from north to south the most common one is human trafficking.

Legal Points vs Blind Points

The frontier presents legal points, as well as blind points. The legal points are the areas that have migratory authorities and vast security. On the other hand, the blind points are the places that are not empowered, such as secondary roads, rivers, and beaches where security is limited, in regards to transportation. There are three important legal points within this border: Paso Canoas, Rio Sereno, and Sixaola.

On the other hand, there are several blind points across the border, but based on the evidence found by the IEEPP we can state that the most common areas are: Cuervito, La Cuesta, and Control; these are located near Paso Canoas; there different vehicles can pass from Costa Rica to Panama and vice versa without the necessity of customs or other migratory services. Other blind spots are located in the mountainous regions and rivers, which are of difficult access such as “Cerros” and rivers like Yorkin, Teribe, and Telire. These are rivers that run through both countries. According to the captain of SENAFRONT Frank Abrego, the most utilized areas of illicit activities are located in the province of Chiriqui (2015).

Routes- Way of Transportation

According to investigations being conducted in the borders, “Paso Canoas is considered one of the main terrestrial points of entrance going north and south and vice versa” (Perez, 2014). From southern regions and entering Panama, the cargos are transported by boat through the Panamanian Coast until they reach Colombia.

Nevertheless, the UNODC, states that most of the transiting comes from Panama to Costa Rica. Besides the terrestrial transportation using Paso de Canoas there is also the Pan-American Highway. Additionally, there is the aerial route that goes from Panama to San Jose. Furthermore, the most used way of transportation is the maritime route where the main destinations go from:

- Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro to Puerto Limón (Caribbean)
- Puerto Limones (in Punta Burica) to Golfo Dulce (Pacific)
- There are other areas of Panama going to Cabo Blanco and Puerto Quepos. (Pacific)

According to figure 2 we can see that most of the destinations are points of disembarkation.

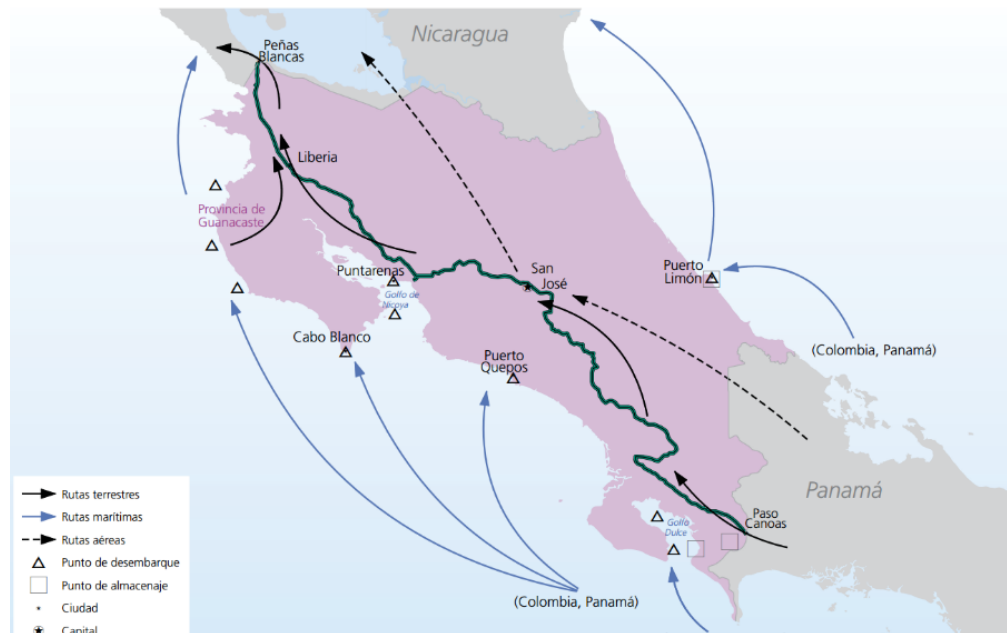


Figure 2.

Source: UNODC, *Delincuencia Organizada Transnacional en Centroamérica y el Caribe*. (September, 2012)

<https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and->

Systems Used to Pass through the Borders

There are several ways in which illegal activities can persist between the borders. According to several sources given by SENAFRONT, there are two main methods used to pass the borders. These are:

- There are people within the region that carry two national identifications and others forged documentation from Panama and Costa Rica, which allows the passing of criminals, drugs, or guns. Clearly then, once they cross the street of Paso Canoas they are not able to be detained due to jurisdictional reasons.
- In previous years within the border with Costa Rica there was a large production regarding fruits, mainly bananas; the company developed several internal places where they could transit easier. They had almost a hundred roads within the borders, and due to this situation there were a lot of illicit activities going around through these precise areas utilizing the shipment of fruit production for drugs and guns.

The Average Value being Trafficked

According to the UNODC the total average value, in relation to drug and gun trafficking that transits Panama is about \$200 million dollars per year. On the other hand, as it is transported from country to country its value increases. For instance, when the cargo is placed in Costa Rica the total average value changes to 890 million dollars. This can be based on the amount of money being spent on transportation, forged documents, and wages.



Figure 3

Source- Ventura, J. (2014, February 5). El camino de la droga - El orden mundial en el S.XXI

Panama-Costa Rica: Human Trafficking

The type of human trafficking going on from Panama and Costa Rica is based on the trafficking of labor force and sexual exploitation; most of the time it occurs due to the voluntary travel for a better lifestyle full of opportunities of people who are later deceived and unable to have a decent type of occupation. Furthermore, in relation to the trafficking moving from the north to the south there are three main Central American countries: Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. Additionally, going to the northern part of America, they are from other continents that utilize the borders to travel to places near Central America, therefore moving to Costa Rica as the second place of transition.

SENAFRONT- Methods Used for Protection

The SENAFRONT (Servicio Nacional Fronterizo) are the police force that serves and protects the borders of Panama, in regards to its connection to Colombia and Costa Rica. Their function is to fight against terrorism, the flow of drugs and guns, and other illicit activities that persist through those areas. They utilize various methodologies regarding the protection within the borders and are helped a lot by the United States, in regards to equipment, training and technological advances.

However, since the beginning of their training, which is about eight months, they are being subjected to the general assessments of the skills that are needed to work in the police force. Later on, they begin a four-month practice on the field, doing, most of the time, police work at the checkpoint. Finally, they are specialized in one particular area and are required to demonstrate the methodologies used for protection.

Methodologies Used for Protection

This police force, when they are finally trained, the methodologies that they use within the borders consist of using the three types of domains, on both sides of Panama. These are:

- They incorporate surveillance in the internal areas where most illicit activities transit; having about five-hundred police, patrolling by car, motorcycle, through checkpoints, trying to locate the traffickers.
- The surveillance made by them, particularly, in the areas of the Darien Gap and Guna Yala consist of a patrol within a week. In other words, they go to those areas for a week patrolling the sectors, but they need to report back by a specific time and if there are any activities going around.
- When they find a perpetrator, the action of attacking is not taken immediately as they are probably armed. The first tactic used is to know if these people carry drugs and given that they are armed, the police attack most of the time by night utilizing terrestrial and aerial techniques in order to trace them and arrest them.
- In regards to the trafficking of humans, there hasn't been any security approach at the border within the two countries, which has been emphasized by the promises of the government to make formative arrangements in the territory. Numerous migrants continue to occupy these areas without the legal and necessary arrangements to return to their daily life; people of both African and indigenous descent are confined in those areas without any real arrangement made by state organizations.
- According to some witnesses from the people that come from the region of La Miel, they are helped and given the services needed as a result of the situations they had to experience coming to Panama; most of them are helped with their documents and with anything they need.

Solutions to Enforce on the Borders of Panama

Based on the information gathered about organized crime within the borders, we are able to suggest some alternate solutions that can help prevent and even cause a substantial reduction of illicit activities persisting in those areas. The solutions that can be implemented are:

- The punishment for drug and gun trafficking should consist of a time of imprisonment between twenty five to thirty years. According to the current Penal Code of Panama, article 255 states “that the person that introduces drugs to the national territory...shall be punished by imprisonment of eight to fifteen years”. If the penalty is increased to more years, the amount of trafficking through the borders will be reduced.
- There needs to be an enforcement of control in all of the ports, mainly throughout the borders, but also in all of Panama's ports, trying to make inspections in most of the shipments that arrive.
- There should be better security, regarding its technological advancement, in order to recognize forged documentation, and have better inspections throughout the border of Panama.
- Intensify law enforcement to investigate and prosecute trafficking offenses and convictions. At present the government of Panama takes a long period of time to get a conviction for this type of crimes; it takes years.
- Patrolling near the routes of “Golfo de Uraba” and “Jurado”, which is where most of the organized crime transits from Colombia.
- Reinforce the relationship with the two countries, Colombia and Costa Rica, in order to intensify the security and be able to make satisfactory arrangements to deter and punish the activity of human trafficking.

Conclusion

Organized crime penetrates throughout the most vulnerable areas of a country, devaluating its constructive sectors. As per Panama being one of the main points of transition there has been various confrontations due to its global location between North and South America, creating a demand in regard to the facilitation of trafficking related to humans, drugs and guns. Consistently, the country has been used as a way of transit to the major places of drug consumption.

Due to the mass incorporation of illicit activities going on, the traffickers have established routes usually utilizing marine ways, from Colombia through Golfo de Uraba and in Costa Rica taking the Archipelago of Bocas Del Toro and Puerto Limones in Punta Burica. Additionally, in regards to the illegal operations regarding humans, most people come from Cuba and the three possible modes of transport, air, land, and sea, are used.

An influential approach that the government has taken is the border called SENAFRONT, which has elaborated strategic ways of diminishing the organized crime in border areas over the passing years. However, based on the information provided in this report, certain recommendations have been made for enforcing the law on the borders and having a comparative significance within the country, such as reinforcing the relationship

with the two neighboring countries in regards to the border police, especially with Colombia.

The illegal activities taking place on the borders have diminished over time, but illegal situations still persist, as the idea of generating money and profit through illegal activities still prevails. The central condition that must be developed is a sustainable and practical advancement for the community within the maritime and terrestrial border in order to combat the transnational criminal activity and insecurity. Thus, in this scenario, the only way of achieving good results is by offering the best security possible.

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