

Expanding Drug Trafficking on Peru's Borders with Colombia and Brazil

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Global Research, September 08, 2023

[InSight Crime](#) 8 August 2023

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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Global Research Editor's Note

This is an important study, carefully documented.

What it does not address is that cocaine trafficking is supported by powerful financial interests. The so-called Narco-State plays a key role, namely the criminalization of politics, in Colombia but also in Peru during the Fujimori Era as well as in its aftermath.

The smuggling groups are also covertly supported. The government officials mentioned in this report are often complicit in the conduct of the drug trade.

M.Ch. Global Research, September 2023

The Amazon forest and watershed shared by Peru, Colombia, and Brazil provide ideal cover for coca cultivation and processing. As a result, a cocaine trafficking chain has emerged there — one that begins with coca grown in Peru. The criminal infrastructure created to feed this trade also protects and promotes environmental crimes, such as illegal deforestation, timber trafficking, and illegal gold mining. The remote areas have little state presence, and the dense forest canopy makes illicit activities and armed groups largely invisible.

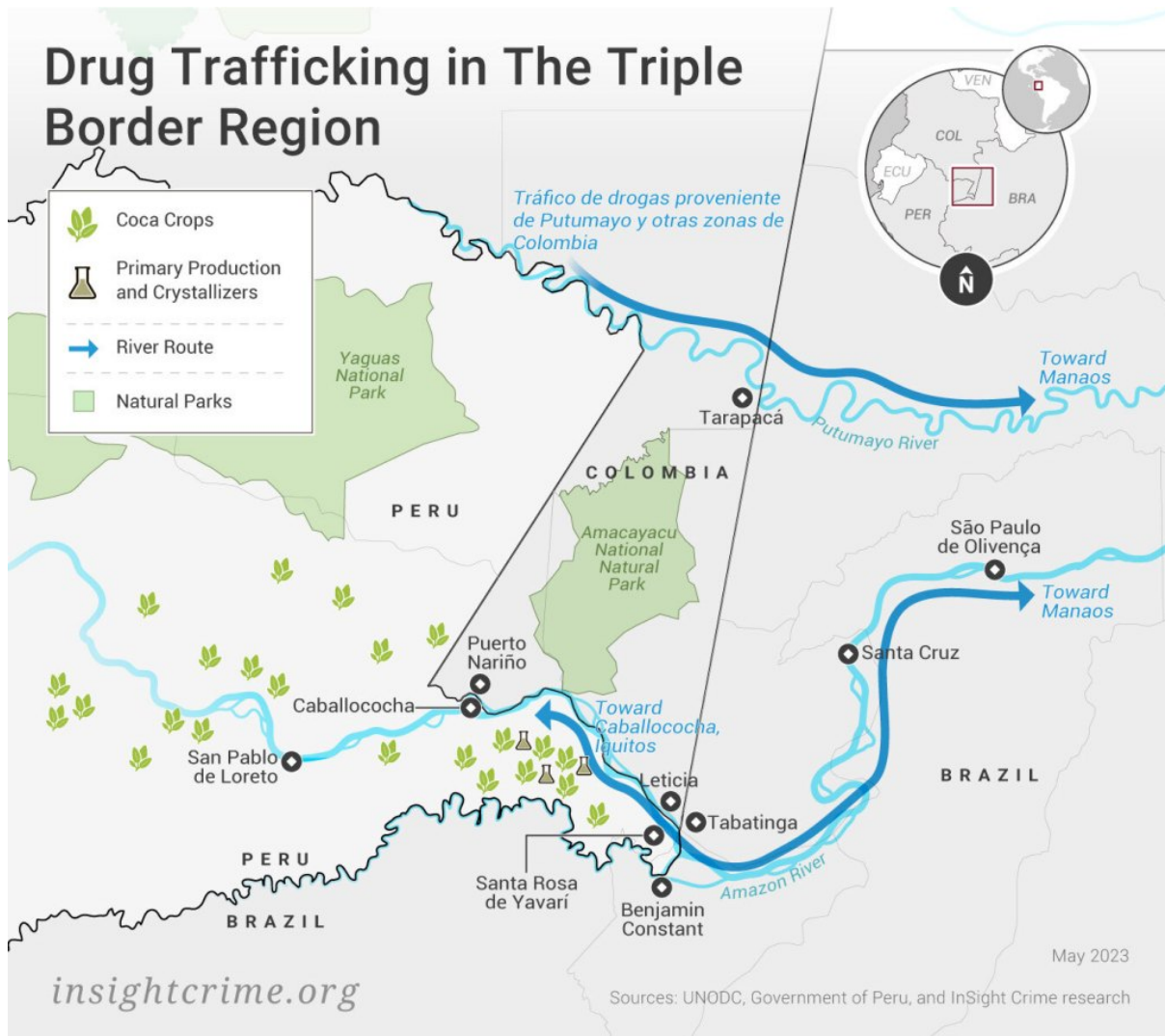
The tri-border where Colombia, Brazil, and Venezuela meet has continued to maintain its longstanding role as a transit corridor for cocaine. Though it's not known as a drug production hub, the Venezuelan side may be seeing new coca cultivation.

A pilot in Puerto Ayacucho, a city in Venezuela's Amazonas state, said he had observed coca cultivation in the northwestern municipalities of Autana and Maroa.

While the pilot could not provide more specifics about coca growing in that region, coca has been cropping up more and more along Venezuela's border with Colombia, a [2022 InSight Crime](#) investigation found.

A Burst of Coca Crops in Peru's Amazon

Until just a few years ago, Peru's tri-border region had been relatively free of coca. But now, criminals are clearing rich, verdant rainforest along the Amazon River to make way for the illicit crop.



Coca growing in Peru's Amazon first took hold further south of the tri-border, in the [Upper Huallaga Valley](#), which extends for 322 kilometers along the Huallaga River in central Peru. In the early 2010s, mass cultivation for the cocaine trade shifted southward to the Valley of Apurímac, Ene, and Mantaro River Valley, a mountainous jungle region slightly larger than Puerto Rico that is known by its Spanish acronym, [VRAEM](#).

The [corrupt] government has, at times, tried to eradicate coca in the VRAEM with little success, yet the [military presence](#) appears to have pushed coca cultivation to other parts of the country — most dramatically, the Amazon wilderness along Peru's tri-border with Colombia and Brazil. Previously, coca growing had been minimal there.

Loreto, the massive northeastern department that encompasses more than half of the country's Amazon, registered just 12% of the [coca cultivated](#) in Peru in 2004. The

department's Mariscal Ramón Castilla province, whose easternmost limits touch both Colombia and Brazil, registered only [440 hectares](#) of coca in 2012. By 2020, the area occupied by coca crops in Loreto's Bajo Amazonas region — comprising Mariscal Ramón Castilla as well as neighboring Maynas and Requena provinces — expanded to 4,247 hectares, according to a 2021 report by the [Peruvian Drug Observatory](#). The number increased more than 50% to 6,472 hectares in 2021, according to the [observatory's 2022 report](#).

Security officials in both Colombia and Peru agreed that coca cultivation is increasing in Peru's border region. Juan Mojica and Santos Mojica, leaders of the Colombian Indigenous community of Nazareth, about an hour up the Amazon River from Leticia, said that crops being grown on the Peruvian side of the river have become a problem for their community.

People, including school-aged adolescents, are crossing the river to work as raspachines, or day laborers hired to pick and process coca leaves, they said.



Poor Indigenous and rural communities in Peru's Mariscal Ramón Castilla province are being paid to sow coca, according to an investigation by Peruvian newspaper [La República](#).

Traffickers also pay communities for sacks of coca leaves, known as arrobas. In some cases, they negotiate with community leaders to set up monthly payments for access to their territories. Ledgers kept by community assemblies even contain line items for land rents from traffickers and projects financed by them, according to the La República report.

Gunmen linked to traffickers have also [invaded](#) Indigenous communities' lands to install coca farms.

An official from Mariscal Ramón Castilla's municipality mayor's office, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, said he feared that the Amazon province has become another VRAEM for traffickers. Coca cultivation has doubled there over the past four years, and its 6,362 hectares of coca accounted for nearly all the illicit crops in Bajo Amazonas in 2021, according to the [latest drug report](#). Bajo Amazonas was the third-largest area for cultivation in the country.

"We are in an area that for the state is not a priority," he said. "That is one of the reasons behind the increase in coca crops. We are on our own here."

For years Peruvian authorities [which are complicit] have focused their [alleged] counternarcotics efforts in the VRAEM. Meanwhile, authorities have ignored the tri-border while criminal networks have taken advantage of the area's natural infrastructure. Its numerous river arteries and thick jungle connect Colombia and Peru, the main drug-producing countries, with one of the major international cocaine exit points, Brazil.

Raids on primitive jungle laboratories in the Peruvian provinces of Putumayo and Mariscal Ramón Castilla reveal that coca is not only being grown but also processed there.

Authorities have announced [seizures](#) of gasoline drums, cement, and calc, all of which are used in the production of cocaine base.

For example, a [March 2020 raid](#) ended in the destruction of two laboratories near the Orosa River, halfway up the Amazon River from Leticia. The camp held half a dozen 2,000-liter tanks, which are used to mix coca leaves with solvents. In February 2021, 600 kilograms of processed cocaine were [discovered](#) at a camp on the Atucari River, along the Colombia-Peru border.

Drug and environmental crime also appear to be occurring in tandem. For example, a [2019 operation](#) carried out in Mariscal Ramón Castillo led to the dismantling of wooden buildings for storing coca leaves, cocaine, and illegal timber.

It is unclear who controls coca cultivation and processing labs in Peru's northeastern Amazon region.

Colombian law enforcement officials mentioned a group called Clan Chuquizuta. The Indigenous and rural communities in Mariscal Ramón Castilla described the traffickers who are paying them in general terms as "narco-benefactors."

The most likely scenario is that the Peruvian traffickers in this region are freelancers who supply Brazilian and Colombian groups.

Santa Rosa is a small island on the Amazon belonging to Peru that sits adjacent Colombia's Leticia and the Brazil border city of Tabatinga. Long motorboats with plastic canopies carry

locals to and from the island's port, which is nothing more than a wooden dock.



Along stretches of Peru's Amazon River, coca is being grown. Santa Rosa de Yavarí, Perú, August 2022.
Photograph by: Seth Robbins

A soldier standing guard at the port said smugglers mostly avoid the island. Instead, they pass at night, using smaller waterways to evade controls, he said.

Just north of the island on a wide stretch of river are the communities of Gamboa and Chinería. A senior Peru military official who asked for anonymity because he was not authorized to speak said he had heard of coca cultivation occurring there.

Armed Groups, Drug Routes, and Environmental Crime

The Amazon River and its vast network of tributaries and streams provide smuggling routes from Peru into Colombia and Brazil.

Groups' names change in this fluid criminal landscape. National and political allegiances are largely irrelevant. Alliances and enemies are made easily. Reaching deeper into this corner of the Amazon to control drug corridors, these armed groups have broadened into environmental crimes, particularly illegal gold mining.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Colombian government's security operations dropped by half, according to a report by the [Ideas for Peace Foundation](#) (Fundación Ideas para la Paz – FIP). With state authorities increasingly absent, Colombia's Amazonas department began to see a heavy presence of armed groups, particularly around the Putumayo River area, according to Jhon Fredy Valencia, agricultural and environmental secretary for the department.

Gunmen shut down villages, confining people to their homes, said an Indigenous leader who spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisals. At night, boats of all sizes, likely carrying drugs, can be heard along the waterways of Tarapacá.

“There are drugs, there is coca,” said the Indigenous leader. “They are in our territory, cutting down forest. There is the invasion of our rivers for mining.”

The Indigenous leader said the gunmen who threatened her community called themselves the Sinaloa. Human rights officials and the representative of the National Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon, said they had also taken declarations from people who had been threatened by representatives of the so-called Sinaloa group.

The name Sinaloa doesn’t appear to have any connection to the notorious Mexican cartel. Instead, it has been used at times by members of the [Border Command](#), a confluence of ex-FARC cells and remnants of the Colombian drug trafficking organization La Constru. The Border Command emerged in 2017 in the wake of the dissolution of the FARC’s Southern Bloc. Members have described themselves as opposed to injustices committed by FARC commanders, including not sharing wealth with the rank and file.

Ex-FARC Mafia Presence Near Tri-Border of Colombia, Peru, and Brazil



Carolina Ramírez Front

Faction of dissident FARC affiliated with Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández, alias "Iván Mordisco."

Leader



Yeison Alexis Ojeda Gilon,
alias "Danilo Alvizú"



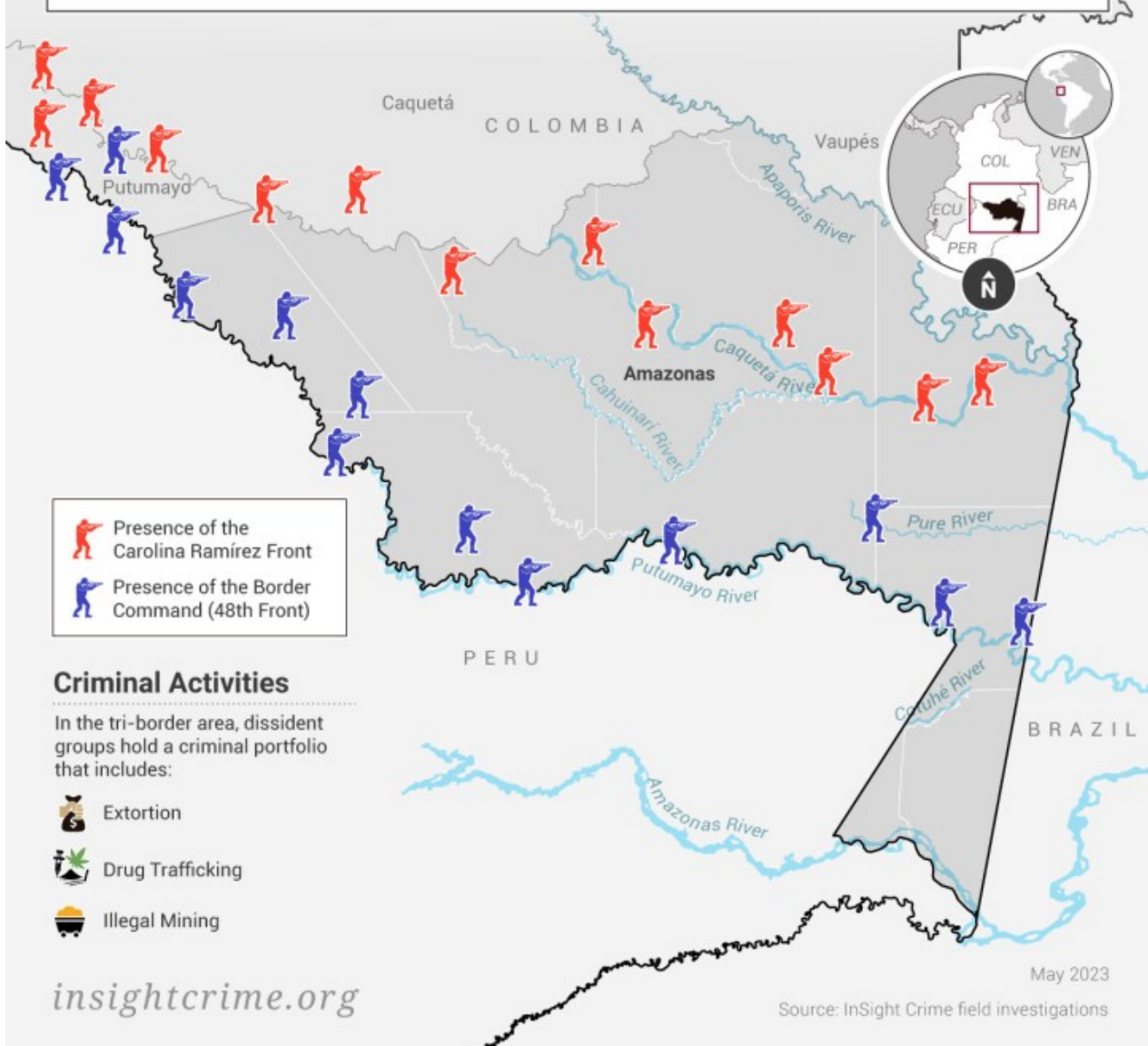
Border Command (48th Front)

Faction of dissident FARC affiliated with the Second Marquetalia, headed by Lucian Marín, alias "Iván Marquez."

Leader



Giovanny Andrés Rojas,
alias "Araña"



According to a report by think tank [A la Orilla del Río](#), which studies Colombia's Amazon region, the Border Command accepts "all types of combatants, regardless of their origin and armed history." Its foot soldiers are paid a monthly stipend of 2 million pesos (about \$450), double the Colombian minimum wage.

“Nobody knew what they did with all that money,” the member told investigators. “Here we decided that those resources go to those who are in the fight.”

The Border Command, which the Colombian military has dubbed “residual structure 48,” controls much of the corridor along the Putumayo River, according to officials. The group’s sway stretches to the western Colombian department of Nariño, a key cocaine production and trafficking center, via Putumayo.

At some 300-strong, the extent of the Border Command’s influence in the deep recesses of Colombia’s Amazonas department is unclear.

The human rights official who works with communities in Amazonas said the group operates more like a paramilitary drug clan, extending its reach by recruiting smaller groups and making alliances with Brazilian groups. Social control and youth recruitment are part of its modus operandi.

“They make every decision about these communities,” the human rights official said.

Brazilian Gangs Enter the Rainforest

Weak cross-border cooperation and a lack of customs and migration controls in the tri-border of Colombia, Peru, and Brazil has made it a magnet for Brazil’s drug gangs, which feed Latin’s America’s biggest domestic narcotics market and a cocaine pipeline to Europe.

In Tabatinga, Brazil, graffiti offers some insight into which gangs are dominant. A building at the city’s river port is scrawled “Os Crias” and “Voz Da Morte” (Voice of Death). The Crias appear to be a brazen new gang of which little is known. A July 2020 report in [A Crítica](#), a news outlet focused on Brazil’s Amazonas state, claims that the group is a [faction](#) of the Northern Family (Familia do Norte – FDN), and that it is allied with Brazil’s powerful PCC gang.



Graffiti of “Os Crias,” or “the Crias,” at river port in Tabatinga. Tabatinga, Brazil, August 2022. Photograph by: Seth Robbins

Officials in Colombia confirmed that the Crias splintered from the FDN, but made no mention of the gang’s connection to the PCC.

The Crias appear to have displaced the FDN in Tabatinga over the past three years. The group is believed to control street-level drug sales in the tri-border. The gang is also said to be behind an [armed assault](#) of the lone bank on Peru’s island of Santa Rosa, and a spate of killings in both Brazil and Colombia.

The gang’s wider involvement in the drug trade is unclear. The A Crítica report claims that the Crias have made alliances with Colombian and Peruvian groups to control trafficking in the region and to sideline the Red Command, the PCC’s main rival. Renato Sérgio Lima, president of non-governmental organization Brazilian Forum on Public Security (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública), said in a [June 6, 2022 tweet](#) that the Crias are seeking to control Brazil’s Javari Valley, a large swath of rainforest that lies along the Peruvian border.

While the upstart gang would only be able to control the critical drug corridor by forming alliances with powerful traffickers and larger criminal groups, its possible spread into the Javari Valley should raise alarm.

Fish poaching, drug running, illegal logging, mining, and ranching have proliferated in the Javari Valley, the second-largest reserve in Brazil and home to several isolated Indigenous groups. A surge in piracy attacking boats moving drugs in the region there has added a dangerous [transnational dimension](#) to these environmental crimes.

For example, the Javari Valley is where British journalist Dom Phillips and the Indigenous advocate Bruno Araújo Pereira were [murdered](#) in June 2022 while working on a report. Three fisherman were arrested and charged in the crime, including one who confessed and led police to their bodies.

A fourth man, Rubens Villar Coelho, who has admitted to having a commercial relationship with the fishermen, is also under investigation. Arrested on charges of possession of false documents, Coelho — who goes by the alias “Colômbia” but is from Peru — is suspected of running an illegal fishing operation, prosecutors say.

The federal police chief for Brazilian Amazonas state, Alexandre Fontes, said at a [press conference](#) in Manaus, the state capital, that investigators had concluded Colômbia had ordered the murders.

“I have no doubt that Colômbia was the mastermind,” Fontes said.

Prior to the killings, Pereira had been investigating illegal fishing and had been seen photographing the poaching of pirarucu, a massive freshwater fish, and tracajá, a river turtle whose meat and eggs are commonly eaten. Both are protected species in the Javari Valley reserve.

According to an associate of Pereira’s who knew of his investigation, one of the fishermen charged in the killings, Amarildo da Costa Oliveira, provided a steady supply of poached fish and turtles to Coelho, who sent them to fish markets across the border in Leticia. News outlets have reported that residents and investigators suspect Coelho’s involvement in drug

trafficking as well.

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