

1. Overview of Drug Trafficking via Maritime Routes in Brazil

Drug trafficking through Brazilian ports has increased significantly in recent years, particularly with respect to cocaine shipments. This surge is due to the rise in production across South America and the diversification of trafficking routes to reach new markets. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), cocaine production reached record levels in 2023, resulting in increased seizures at Brazilian ports and intensified vessel inspection efforts.

2. Routes and Modus Operandi

Drugs are typically concealed within containers of legitimate cargo, mixed with export products such as soybeans and meat, leveraging the high volume of commercial shipments from ports like Santos, Itajaí, and Paranaguá. The maritime drug trade in Brazil is connected to routes leading to North America and Europe, passing through countries like Mexico and other strategic points in the Caribbean.

The Port of Rio de Janeiro serves as one of the main transit hubs for drug trafficking, particularly for cocaine bound for European and Caribbean markets. The state has a significant port infrastructure, including the ports of Rio de Janeiro and Itaguaí, which are frequently used for large-scale shipments of narcotics concealed within containers. Criminal activities at these ports have intensified due to the presence of criminal organizations and militias that control certain aspects of port operations.

The most common method employed by traffickers in Rio de Janeiro involves loading drugs into containers, often concealing the substance within legitimate cargo or tampering with containers after customs inspection (known as the “rip-on/rip-off” method). Drugs may also be transferred during the voyage or at intermediate stops, making detection more challenging. Corruption and the collusion of port workers and logistics agents further facilitate these operations.

In November 2023, the federal government launched a **Guarantee of Law and Order (GLO) operation**, involving 3,700 military personnel, to strengthen security at the ports and airports of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The operation aimed to combat drug and arms trafficking, as well as to dismantle the financial networks of criminal factions and militias operating in these areas.

This operation included the participation of the Army, Navy, and Air Force and was concluded in May 2024 after a six-month period. During this time, numerous patrols, vessel inspections, and border controls were conducted, resulting in a significant increase in seizures and the disruption of criminal groups operating at the ports of Rio de Janeiro.

Although the operation has ended, continuous efforts and cooperation between security forces and port authorities are still required to ensure safety and reduce the impact of illicit activities in the region.

3. Guidelines for Shipowners and Operators

Although we do not have specific material published on our website regarding this subject, we always recommend that shipowners and operators implement preventive measures to prevent their vessels from being used for drug trafficking. This includes **additional inspections in high-risk areas** and **training programs for crews**. These strategies should involve enhanced collaboration with port authorities and ensure compliance with national and international regulations.

4. Recommended Best Practices

- **Continuous Monitoring:** Install security cameras and implement container tracking systems.
- **Crew Training:** Provide training to identify suspicious behaviour and know how to proceed if illegal substances are found.
- **Collaboration with Authorities:** Actively cooperate with local and international authorities for information sharing and best practices.
- **Use of K9 Detection Units:** Employ sniffer dogs for enhanced cargo inspections.

Underwater Inspections: Conduct underwater inspections to detect and prevent illicit cargo from being attached to the vessel's hull.