

Drugs, International Challenges



FRENCH ANTILLES AND GUIANA: ON THE INTERNATIONAL COCAINE TRAFFICKING ROUTES

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2015 was marked by record cocaine seizures – close on 11 tonnes – on French territory¹. The scale of these seizures is largely due to the operations performed in the Caribbean zone with a high degree of French activity due to the presence of two French overseas departments, Martinique² and Guadeloupe, and the collectivity of Saint-Martin (see box) [1]. At the same time, the rise in cocaine seizures in Guiana, or originating from this territory, suggests that this French department in South America is in the process of becoming a major cocaine transit zone targeting not only France, but the Northern European market.

These developments – although not a new phenomenon insofar as trafficking has existed there since the 1980s, even if only to meet local demand for crack (freebase cocaine) – are nonetheless a sign of several recent phenomena. These are due to the role of Venezuela as the epicentre for international cocaine trafficking [2] and the rapid development of shipping routes. Hence,

the natural arc – from Trinidad to Haiti via Martinique and Guadeloupe – which demarcates the eastern limit of the Caribbean sea, owing to the difficulty in terms of surveillance of the maritime area, conducive to traffickers. As regards Guiana, the increase in trafficking originating from Colombia, Bolivia, Peru and Venezuela, which affects its neighbours, Brazil and Suriname, is a growing concern [3] as traffickers exploit its geographical location which makes it a prime route, via the Atlantic Ocean, towards West Africa, a zone which acts as a springboard to European and Asian markets. Moreover, the new deve-

1. Compared to 6.8 tonnes in 2014 and 5.6 tonnes in 2013 (OCRTIS). Customs statistics, which take into account seizures occurring outside French territory, but in which these services are stakeholders, as is particularly the case in the context of partnerships with foreign services such as the US DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), with a high degree of activity in the Caribbean region, report seizures amounting to 17 tonnes.

2. The largest seizure ever made by French customs moreover took place in Martinique, in April 2015, amounting to 2.25 tonnes.

lopment stems from the fact that these overseas regions no longer merely represent transit zones. In fact, for certain mainland traffickers, these represent major, or indeed strategic markets destined to meet French and European demand.

New shipping routes in the Caribbean

The Caribbean sea has always been a strategic zone for cocaine traffickers. In the 1970s and 1980s (see box), this area was, in fact, a major transit point in order to access the US market, which at the time represented the main outlet for cocaine produced in Colombia [4]. From the 1990s, to disrupt drug flows, the US law enforcement services set in place detection systems in the region which significantly affected trafficking. Cocaine produced by the Medellín cartel was sent to Florida mainly via tourist aircraft. Moreover, the growing military cooperation between the United States and the country, formalised

by the signing of Plan Colombia in 2000, and the subsequent success achieved in dismantling criminal organisations, caused a shift in trafficking. The use of cocaine routes along the isthmus of Central America thus intensified.

This region, which spreads from Panama to southern Mexico (Isthmus of Tehuantepec), has the distinctive feature of being made up of somewhat vulnerable states, a number of which (Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua) had barely recovered from civil wars which plunged them into chaos particularly conducive to all kinds of trafficking³ [5].

A Pacific route developed at the same time, from the western coasts of Colombia and Ecuador to North America. Lastly, cocaine trafficking via commercial airlines intensified, especially from the main airports in producer countries. Several factors have at least partly implicated this new organisation.

From the second half of the 1990s, the Antilles region saw renewed interest from traffickers with a view to

conquering the Western European market. Hence, the so-called "northern" route, from the Caribbean via the Archipelago of the Azores to reach, via container ships, major ports such as Rotterdam [6] and Antwerp, over the years has become one of the three main routes⁴ of cocaine exports destined for Western Europe. In recent years, another aspect, political in nature, has consolidated the strategic importance of the Antilles for traffickers: the security crisis in Venezuela [7].

Given this country's vast coastal stretch along the Caribbean sea, some drug flows are increasingly taking the Antilles route, predominantly via the maritime route, in contrast to the 1980s. Furthermore, this phenomenon not only affects Europe, as the United States are also affected by the development of maritime trafficking. Hence, in 2013, according to DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) estimates, the proportion of cocaine imported by sea via Caribbean islands has quadrupled in the space of three years, from 4% in 2011 to 16% in 2013⁵.

Hence, like Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, Guadeloupe and Martinique are increasingly becoming "warehouse" states [8] where cocaine is stored. This situation is also affecting Guiana as some drug flows transit towards the south via Suriname and, to a lesser extent, Guiana, to reach the French department and mainland France. Within the space of a few years, the French Antilles and Guiana have thus become corridors

Caribbean sea: air route to maritime route

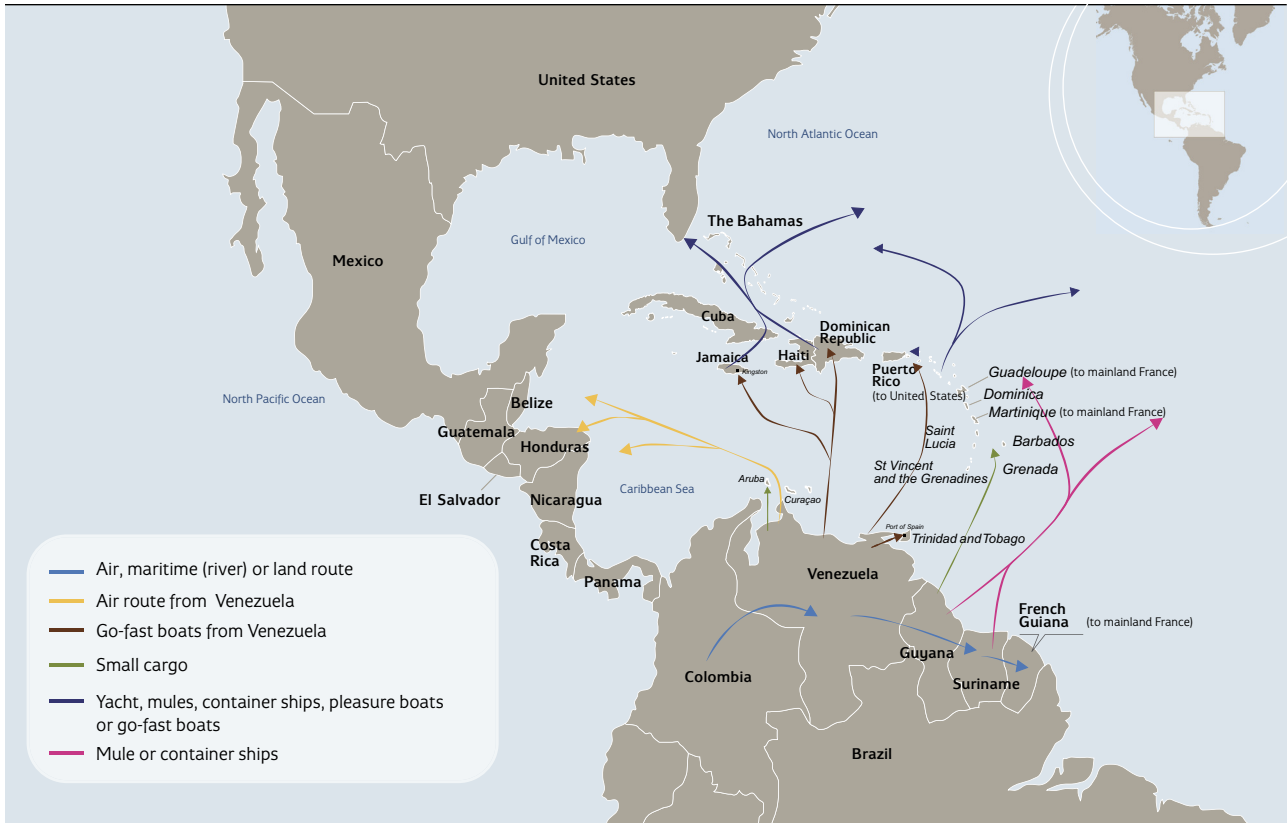
International cocaine trafficking started to develop significantly from the second half of the 1970s, with the rapid expansion of the cocaine market in the United States. The increase in demand boosted the development of a growing supply from Colombia. In the 1980s, cocaine cargo was transported via the Caribbean sea, mainly by small aircraft, and transferred mainly in the archipelago of the Bahamas, where traffickers were established, before continuing on to Florida. At the time, the power of the Colombian criminal organisations was clearly illustrated by a member of the Medellín cartel, Carlos Lehder, who bought Norman's Cay island, located 200 km from the Florida coast, the main doorway for cocaine onto the US market. The creation of an air trafficking detection programme, ABDP (Air Bridge Denial Program), by the United States in Colombia in 1995 led to a shift in trafficker activity towards Venezuela. Furthermore, the cessation of security cooperation between the United States and Venezuela and, by extension, the freezing of cooperation in drug prevention, gave traffickers another opportunity to move their air shipments to Venezuela. The extension of this programme to the Dominican Republic since 2009 and the decision by Honduras in 2012 to shoot down aircraft suspected of drug trafficking has now undoubtedly prompted the switch to the maritime route.

3. In Central America, drug and migrant trafficking are completely interlinked (UNODC).

4. The two other routes are: the «central» route from South America via Cape Verde, Madeira and the Canary Islands, and the «African» route via West Africa to southern Spain.

5. Until recent years, a primary cocaine route destined for the US market went from Venezuela via small passenger aircraft with a stop-off in Honduras where Mexican organisations took receipt of the cargo. The recent increase in cocaine seizures in Honduras is said to have prompted traffickers to take other routes and carriers; see «Full circle, an old route regains popularity with drugs gangs», The Economist, 24 May 2014.

Cocaine flows in the Caribbean sea and to Guiana



Source: OFDT

highly frequented by traffickers, an "intense" trafficking zone, according to the terms used by the OCRTIS, as shown by the scale of seizures in recent years. According to UNODC

(United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), 30% of the 250 tonnes of cocaine destined for the European market now pass through the Antilles⁶.

Situation in the French Antilles...

Martinique and Guadeloupe are now not only areas of freebase cocaine (crack) use, but also play an increasingly important role in supplying the mainland market. According to police departments, in fact, between 15% and 20% of the 5 tonnes of cocaine seized on average each year on French territory since the early 2000s are said to originate from the two French departments [9]. Cocaine reaches the Antilles predominantly via the Venezuela coast from where lanchas (speed boats), fishing boats or yachts (slow-movers) depart, with their cargo being unloaded directly in Guadeloupe or Martinique, or on neighbouring islands such as Saint Lucia. Over the past three years however, law enforcement services

The Antilles, the United States and crack

In 1984-1985, cocaine arriving in French overseas departments was mainly destined for the local market. It is consumed in the «free-base» form. Crack emerged on the market in large American towns at the end of the 1970s. Immigrant users, of West Indian origin, mainly Jamaican, appear to be behind the development of this substance which became established on the North American market seemingly as a result of changes in the cocaine production line. Due to the shortage of precursors, primarily ethyl ether, in Colombia, traffickers decided to move the coca base paste (CBP) refining operations to the Antilles, or indeed to export it directly to Florida with a view to developing local CBP (basuco) use similar to that in current use in Latin America. Some West Indian cannabis users got into the habit of smoking CBP and, after emigrating to the United States, helped expand the specific demand for smokable cocaine. As CBP use failed to catch on, dealers managed to produce crack, by adding sodium bicarbonate or ammonia bicarbonate, which then dramatically took off in poverty stricken urban districts in the United States in the 1980s [10].

6. 50% of these drug flows are said to be transported directly to Europe, and 20% via Africa.

have observed changes in practices with maritime transfers on the open sea. For greater discretion, traffickers use fishing boats which set off from the Venezuelan coast to meet small boats originating from islands of the Antilles.

Fort-de-France/Le Havre axis

In view of the large seizures, it appears that transit via container ships between Fort-de-France and Le Havre is becoming a significant mode of cocaine trafficking destined for mainland France. This *modus operandi*, which until now has mainly concerned only Rotterdam⁷ and Antwerp, the two major outlets on the Northern route [11], is in the process of turning Le Havre, the main French port for container ship traffic, with 68 million tonnes of goods in transit in 2013, into a major gateway for cocaine destined not only for France, but also for Western Europe⁸. In 2014, it was the site of the largest cocaine seizure ever in France, with 1.4 tonnes [12]. For criminal networks, this mode of transit has major advantages in

French drug prevention system in the Antilles sea

With its national and international competence, the OCRTIS (Central office for the repression of drug-related offences) has been the main French anti-drug trafficking organisation in the region since the «Caribbean» branch was created in Fort-de-France in 2004. Like its metropolitan counterpart, this is an interministerial organisation, made up of representatives from the gendarmerie, the navy, customs and police, together with liaising officers from three foreign countries (Great Britain, United States and Spain). This branch notably works with other anti-trafficking organisations, such as the JIATF-S (Joint Inter-Agency Task Force-South), based in Key West, Florida, an American interministerial entity for the prevention of maritime and air trafficking which covers the Caribbean sea, the Pacific coast of the American continent and a large part of the Atlantic. Given the essentially sea-based nature of trafficking, the French Navy is the major operational armed branch.

terms of the quantities transported and costs owing to the resulting economies of scale. The third advantage is the difficulties faced by law enforcement services in detecting cocaine in the immense cargo of goods circulating daily. All this in a context in which concealment techniques are becoming increasingly sophisticated from one year to the next. Although the conceal-

ment of drugs in transported cargo is well known, law enforcement services are reporting a growing number of seizures of plastic items (tables, chairs, etc.) containing cocaine hydrochloride. This substance is also often inserted into the actual structure of the containers (walls, freezer packs). However, trafficking is not limited to large cargo. Traffickers also tend to fragment cocaine shipments, using the rip-on/rip-off technique, which involves loading sacks of cocaine holding a few dozen kilograms, with the assistance of a few complicit port staff [3]. On 18 March 2016, six dock workers at the port of Le Havre were arrested by the police departments for their presumed participation in a vast network which managed to import several hundred kilograms of cocaine from Martinique.

Mules and air carriers

However, cocaine trafficking from the French Antilles is not limited

The drug-related money laundering issue: Saint-Martin

The island of Saint-Martin is located 235 kilometres north of Guadeloupe. Its territory is divided into the French part in the north, and the Dutch part. Until July 2007, Saint-Martin was an integral part of Guadeloupe. Since that date, the island has had «French overseas territory» status which allows it considerable autonomy, especially in terms of taxation. In the 1990s, due to its promising geographical location, the island became a hub for regional cocaine trafficking destined for Europe and the United States. It was also a forwarding centre for crack headed for the French Antilles, particularly Guadeloupe. Today, the island is a major tourist destination, which has led to an economic boom in the property sector, apparently considerably fuelled by drug money. Moreover, the island, like Martinique and Guadeloupe, although to a lesser extent, has been affected by intensified regional cocaine trafficking and has tended to serve as a storage platform for traffickers; it is also a meeting place for negotiating contracts. The Dutch part, also called Saint-Martin (Sint-Maarten), which constitutes one of the four states of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, owing to its tax haven status has become a cocaine-related money laundering site, via a bloated banking sector and powerful gambling industry controlled by the organised crime network [10]. This is mainly made up of gangs, in contact with Colombian and Venezuelan traffickers, some of whom are located in the Netherlands where they import cocaine.

7. The port of Rotterdam, ahead of Antwerp, is seemingly the leading site of transit with 25 to 50% of cocaine destined for the European market passing through the port, according to data from 2013 [11].

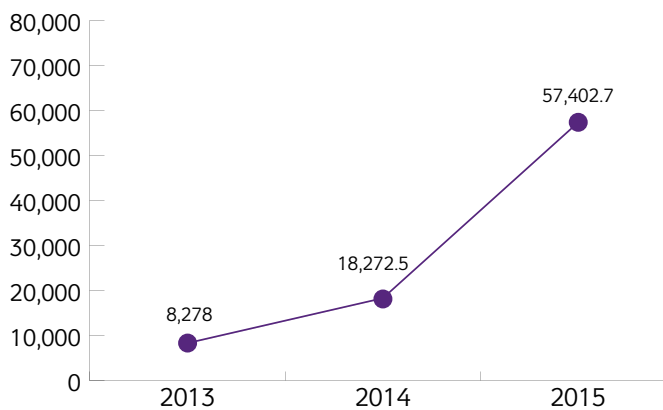
8. This phenomenon affects the major European ports to varying degrees. Hence, Algeciras and Valencia (Spain), Gioia Tauro (Italy) and even Piraeus (Greece) are concerned.

to the maritime route. Like other regions throughout the world, air carriers, via general and commercial airlines, are also mobilised. This mainly occurs through mules transporting the substance either in corpore or in luggage. Mules are generally recruited by organisations operating in mainland France⁹. The recruits are usually young women, lured by the prospect of an all expenses paid week's holiday in a luxury hotel and paid 1,000 to 7,000 euros according to the departure point to bring back "small" quantities (3 to 5 kilograms). According to the seizures performed by the OCRTIS branch at Roissy airport, Martinique is the second region of origin of cocaine arriving via this airport, behind Brazil and ahead of Guiana [9]. This phenomenon, which is constantly growing in scale, evidenced the increasing interest of the French Antilles as a secondary wholesale market for cocaine used in France. Current prices there, are in fact, lower than those in mainland France. Whereas, in Europe, the wholesale price per kilogram of cocaine reaches 30,000 euros on average, it can fall to 10,000 euros in Martinique or Guadeloupe [13].

Another trend, increasingly observed by police departments, reveals the dynamism of the Antilles as a secondary wholesale cocaine market: bartering of cannabis resin of Moroccan origin for cocaine, at a rate of two kilograms of resin for one kilogram of cocaine. This exchange is proving highly profitable for traffickers because, given the wholesale price of cannabis resin in mainland France, i.e. approximately 2,500 euros per kilo, the wholesale price of cocaine in reality amounts to 5,000 euros. The dynamic nature of this trafficking was evidenced in August 2015 with the record seizure of more than 400 kilograms of cannabis resin by customs at the port of Fort-de-France on a container ship from Le Havre. This episode confirms that there is a demand in French overseas departments for cannabis resin to the detriment of herbal cannabis grown locally or imported from Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent.

Quantities of cocaine seized (grams) by the Guianese police criminal investigation department between 2013 and end of November 2015

Seizures



Source: OCRTIS

... and in Guiana

A department bordered by Suriname and Brazil, with which it shares more than 1,200 km of land frontiers, Guiana, located not far from Colombia and Venezuela, with a vast maritime coast running along the Atlantic, has been affected by the development of cocaine trafficking in the region.

The topography of the department moreover has numerous advantages for traffickers, especially an extremely dense river network, the traditional medium for commercial and human exchanges in the region, as is the case with Suriname via the Maroni river. In addition, the equatorial forest – covering nearly 90% of the surface area of the territory – is an ideal location for building clandestine airfields. All of these factors are considerably complicating the work of the law-enforcement services. As for Martinique and Guadeloupe, cocaine trafficking emerged in the early 1980s with the aim of meeting the demand of a somewhat marginalised population mainly using the "free-

base" form [14], known as "crack", primarily produced in Suriname. It was only from the early 1990s that cocaine trafficking destined for Europe slowly developed, and has accelerated in the past five years. This appeal for cocaine traffickers has been confirmed by the substantial and consistent increase in seizures conducted both locally (see Figure) and in mainland France. Between 2012 and 2014, seizures from Guiana rose by 64%, from 86 to 141 kilograms [10].

These developments can be explained by two key changes. Firstly, at the end of the 1990s, the emergence of the West African route to Europe [15]. Secondly, the intensified control of the air route connecting Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname,

9. In 2014, the police criminal investigation department arrested three members of the «Chiens La Ri» gang in Guadeloupe and mainland France for cocaine trafficking. This gang, located in the Guadeloupean town of Baie-Mahault, is said to have nearly 70 members. It exerts its influence in certain French towns (Orly, Toulouse, Clermont-Ferrand) where it exports cocaine mainly via mules and parcels sent through the post (DCSP).

and Amsterdam, via Schiphol airport¹⁰. The proximity of Suriname is playing a fundamental role in current developments as the country has acted as a significant springboard for cocaine produced by the Colombian cartels since the end of the 1980s. Benefiting from high levels of corruption, the criminal organisations, grouped together under the generic term "Suricartels", have long been established and import produce from Andean countries to the former Dutch colony via small aircraft and fishing boats¹¹.

Although, at the time, cocaine was forwarded to the United States, it now tends to be shipped to Europe and, more recently, to the southern tip of the continent for use in Brazil¹² and Argentina. Today, the organised crime networks in Suriname perceive Guiana as a strategic point for cocaine exports, via Cayenne and its international airport. Mainland France, particularly the Paris region, is a temporary point of arrival before transfer to the Netherlands and Belgium. These developments are confirmed by the growing number of arrests of traffickers from Suriname and Guiana at Gare du Nord in Paris, the point of departure for Brussels and Amsterdam.

Trafficking by small-time drug runners

Most seizures take place on commercial flights carrying cocaine smugglers [9]. Many of these individuals come from a town in Suriname, Albina, located on the frontier with Guiana, opposite the town of Saint-Laurent du Maroni. The modus operandi is invariable: an individual, usually of fairly modest social origins, often very young, even a minor, is recruited. A ticket for mainland France is purchased. The cocaine is transported in corpore.

However, this type of trafficking is not limited to Dutch-speaking groups. Criminal gangs in French

Guiana have, in the past few years, started to become more autonomous, no longer content to work for the Surinamese. With their experience in recruiting French mules to leave from Felix-Eboué airport in Cayenne for Paris, certain criminal groups, mainly from the Bushinengue ethnic group, also known as "people of the forest", living on the Suriname frontier, are rapidly expanding. They are notably bringing about horizontal growth by creating Guianese distribution networks in mainland France. To avoid direct clashes with other cocaine wholesalers in France, they are opting to establish themselves in small- or medium-sized towns rather than Paris or Marseille. The cocaine is purchased in Suriname where it trades at around 5,000 euros per kilogram on average, according to police and customs sources. Hence, with over 70% purity, the cocaine transported via Guiana has equivalent quality and is half the price of cocaine purchased in the Antilles or in the Dominican Republic.

In view of the price, Guianese channels could increase in scale in the coming months and years. According to the Guianese authorities, more than 10 mules are thought to leave Guiana every day. Traffickers do not appear to have any problem finding recruits. They target the unemployed – more than 25% of the active population –, for whom payment of 3,000 to 7,000 euros per flight completed is a by no means inconsiderable amount. The most recent big case goes back to April 2014, with the dismantling of the "Taki Taki" network which imported cocaine destined for western France (Deux-Sèvres department) and south-western France via smugglers recruited in Guiana. Be that as it may, the statistics on arrests demonstrate the major development of cocaine trafficking via air travel: "Hence, 40 mules (including 23 in corpore) were arrested at Orly in the first semester of 2015, compared

to 39 (including 26 in corpore) in 2014 as a whole. On the Guianese side, 127 mules were arrested in the first six months of 2015 (with 139 kg of cocaine seized), compared to 114 over 2014 as a whole." [10].

Although trafficking by small-time drug runners is predominantly observed via air travel, the record seizure, which took place in March 2016, involving three travellers destined for Marseille, with 53 kilograms of cocaine at Félix-Eboué airport in Cayenne, demonstrates the diversification of trafficking methods, which is also evidenced by the development of cocaine exports by express freight and by post.

Furthermore, the OCRTIS reports similar phenomena to those currently observed in Martinique with the emergence of cannabis resin/cocaine bartering. It is nonetheless important to point out that trafficking does not only target mainland France or other European countries. The growing availability of cocaine in Guiana, circulating on the local market at prices ranging from 10 to 20 euros per gram for approximately 70% purity, shows that traffickers are interested in a local market which is no longer reduced to crack.

Conclusion

Since the early 2000s, with the restructuring of cocaine trafficking headed for Europe, the French Antilles has acted as a springboard for cocaine destined both for France and the rest of Europe. This situation has further deteriorated with the changes

10. With the implementation of a routine passenger checking policy at Schiphol.

11. See report by Arnaud Jouve: *Suriname et cocaïne*, in *Pour-Suites*, the RFI investigation web magazine, <http://webdoc.rfi.fr/pour-suites/enquete-suriname-plateforme-cocaine-desi-bouterse/index.html>

12. Now the second largest national market after the United States (UNODC, 2015 World Drug Report).

in regional geopolitics which have seen Venezuela, a country very close to the Antilles arc, become a major transit and forwarding space for cocaine mainly produced in Colombia.

Hence, a large number of boats (fishing boats, go-fast boats, yachts) leave the coast of Venezuela regularly to supply Guadeloupe and Martinique with cocaine. As a result, Pointe-à-Pitre and Fort-de-France have now become not only strategic forwarding points for cocaine destined for Europe, but also second-

dary wholesale markets which are a meeting place for local criminal networks and gangs from mainland France. Guiana, which until now has been somewhat overlooked by large-scale trafficking owing to its position on the outskirts of the major trafficking routes, is becoming increasingly attractive. The increase in airport checks between Suriname and the Netherlands, and the growing autonomy of criminal groups in French Guiana explain the spectacular development of this overseas department, which is an increasingly important

source of cocaine consumed in mainland France¹³. The French Antilles and French Guiana thus illustrate the at times unexpected effects of repressive action on drug geopolitics and trafficking routes.

13. An estimation (INHESL, DCPJ) of the quantities imported into mainland France, based on average seizures from mules and the number of flights between Cayenne and Paris each year, carried out by the police criminal investigation department, apparently shows that Guianese criminal organisations would currently be able to account for between a tenth and a fifth of cocaine use in mainland France.

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This analysis received financial support from the Ministry of Overseas France.

DRUGS, INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES

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Coordination and editing: Michel Gandilhon (OFDT), Julie-Émilie Adès (OFDT)

Editorial Committee: Laurent Laniel (EMCDDA), Jean-Pierre Daval (OCRTIS), Stéphane Quéré (CrimOrg.com), David Weinberger (INHESJ)

Documentation: Isabelle Michot, Anne de l'Eprevier

Graphic designer: Frédérique Million

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