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Official Responses to Panama's Security Challenges



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Source: Ministerio de Seguridad Pública de Panamá.

Panama's security forces are considered to be capable and professional relative to many other countries in the region. Although Panamanian President Guillermo Endara formally disbanded its military in February 1990 following the 1989 ouster of Manuel Noriega, the author and defense sector colleagues with whom he has interacted over the past 20 years generally concur the Panamanian Public Forces and its national police forces compare favorably to many Latin American militaries relative to Panama's small size.

Panama's Public Forces, led by Juan Pino Forero, are currently under the Ministry of Public Security and consist of the National Police, the national border protection service (SENAFRONT), the Aeronaval Service (SENAN), and the immigration service, among others. Personnel in all of the agencies have training and authorization such as detention corresponding to law

John Dornheim Castillo, has approximately 20,000 members and is generally the first line of defense at the community level, including community policing and combatting gangs.

Panama's National Border Service, SENAFRONT, under Director General Oriel Ortega Benitez, has approximately 4,500 persons, divided into five brigades, including a special forces brigade. Reflecting the historic confront with the 57th Front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the Darién Gap—which was the primary security challenge for Panamanian forces in the region prior to the formal disbanding of the FARC pursuant to the 2016 peace accords—SENAFRONT maintains a significant portion of its force there, including a conventional brigade plus its special forces brigade at the base in Meteti. Moving from East to West, SENAFRONT also has brigades based in Guna Yala, on the Atlantic side, in Chepo on the Pacific side, and in Bocas del Toro and Chiriquí, on the border with Costa Rica, including a base near the Panamanian portion of the international city of Paso Canoas. According to SENAFRONT's figures—provided to the author for this work—from 2010 to 2022, between 620 and 2,600 packets of cocaine were captured per year.

SENAFRONT's priorities currently include the registration of irregular migrants at the border through biometrics, developing a cyber defense capability, more intelligent border surveillance, and possibly creating a small “center of excellence” training unit. The U.S. State Department International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) organization and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) are currently working with SENAFRONT and other organizations to support its implementation of more capable border control systems. Experts consulted for this work also noted that SENAFRONT needs a significant increase in personnel relative to the scale of its challenges. However, such an increase may not be forthcoming.

Due to the high number of rivers and other water-covered terrains in Panama, SENAFRONT brigades have a modest boat capability. Given the need to respond rapidly to threats and the difficulty of Panama's terrain, particularly in the Darién Gap—where some areas are impassable for portions of the year—SENAFRONT's mobility is principally provided by Panama's National Aeronaval Service, SENAN.

Under [Director General Jeremias Urieta Quintero](#), SENAN is a force similar in size to SENAFRONT, with 4,200 persons, of which approximately 3,600 are uniformed personnel. A major current of their focus is its "Zone 7," where they hold responsibility for the Panama Canal. As noted by Panamanian security officials consulted off-the-record for this work, SENAN is working to integrate more effectively with the Panama Canal Authority and other local entities to protect the canal. More specifically, the aim is to curb criminal organizations that smuggle drugs and conduct other illicit operations in the international commercial hub.

Through an expanded set of air and maritime assets, SENAN is also developing its air and naval capability to maintain an effective presence in the country's 200 nautical miles Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) on the Atlantic and Pacific sides of the country. Missions such as the protection of Panamanian waters against illegal fishing aggregate to those against smugglers of drugs to expand the demand on the force.

SENAN is acquiring three near coastal patrol vessels (NCPV) through the U.S.

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one soon to be delivered, and one that authorities have already formally requested. The organization has used repurposed speed boats to conduct operations in its EEZ as well as an amphibious ship to refuel and resupply an NCPV to sustain a presence far out at sea for extended periods.

To control its airspace and patrol to the limits of its EEZ, SENAN uses a Beechcraft King Air 350, which it obtained from the United States in 2019, as well as a King Air 250, [donated through the U.S. FMS program in 2022](#). The two aircraft and their sensor packages represent a substantial improvement in capability beyond the sharing of U.S. assets operating out of Panama or in its airspace to detect and intercept targets of interest, which it did previously.

To provide mobility support to SENAFRONT, as well as search and rescue and other operations in the Darién Gap, SENAN is in the process of replacing six single-motor UH-1H helicopters that it [obtained from the U.S. State Department International Narcotics and Law Enforcement \(INL\)](#) organization, with eight new bi-motor UH-1Ms, also from the United States. Not only were the older U.S. helicopters approaching the end of their service life, but the dual motors powering the new helicopters will eliminate certain restrictions of the existing fleet, such as over-water operations. SENAN built new hangars with associated capabilities to maintain the new helicopters and is awaiting the arrival of the first three in April 2023.

Both SENAN and SENAFRONT use vehicles abandoned by or seized from criminal groups to augment their fleet. Due to the time and complexity of obtaining legal title to assets acquired from criminal groups under Panamanian law, SENAN most frequently uses boats abandoned by narcotraffickers and other smugglers rather than assets seized from them in the course of a confrontation, which might be later contested.

Under [Director General Samira Gozaine](#), Panama's migration service has

immigration and customs processing rather than enforcement functions. Panama also faces an immigration crisis. As noted in [part one of this article](#), a record of 1,000 to 2,000 immigrants from Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, and other destinations enter the country daily. To help remedy that, the agency deployed some personnel to the border with tasks that include registering incoming immigrants through biometric data and thereby detecting persons of interest to law enforcement in other countries. SENAFRONT provides security and other additional support. However, their small numbers and inability to redeploy a significant number of their staff to the Darién Gap limits their ability to register the overwhelming number of immigrants coming in.

Beyond Panama's security forces, local governments and the private sector are also working to address the country's security challenges. In the port city of Colon—which, as Panamanian security officials note, has long been one of the most crime-ridden parts of Panama with some 30 gangs operating in the town—the local government is working on the “Colon Freeport Special System.” The project is being conducted in partnership with the business community and aims to transform a 16-block area into a renovated retail shopping mecca. Previously, displacing marginalized individuals to develop Colon commercially compounded the problem by expelling them to the nearby slum of Altos de Los Lagos. However, those involved in the current effort are hopeful that a combination of planning, opportunity creation, and investment in the local community will help turn the area around.

While Panama's government and security forces are responding constructively to the simultaneous challenges of narcotrafficking, crimes related to Panama's role as an international logistics and finance hub, gang violence and insecurity, and massive migration flows, matters are arguably not getting better. Panama's strategic position in global commerce means that the cost of the country deteriorating in economic and political terms is unacceptably high. It is imperative for the United States and for the world to continue working with

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