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# Emerging Security Challenges in Panama



Evan Ellis | April 6, 2023  
Global Americans Contributor



*Source: John Moore/Getty images.*

Panama faces an increasingly grave, multidimensional security challenge, driven by the interacting dynamics of gangs and criminal insecurity, drug trafficking, money laundering, contraband goods, and migrant flows. These phenomena are fed, in part, by the damage wrought on the economic, social, and political fabric of Panama and the region by COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They include new patterns of criminality and the interplay between the policies of new leftist leaders in neighbors like Colombia, as well as the entrenchment of deeply criminalized populist dictatorships in nearby Venezuela and Nicaragua. In the context of the country's role as a key logistics, financial, and strategic hub for the Western Hemisphere, the interplay of the associated criminal threats and other security challenges in Panama affects the governance and political dynamics of the country and the rest of the region.

Regarding narco trafficking, Panama, its surrounding waters, its canal, and its ports have become an increasingly important part of illicit drug routes. In 2022, Panamanian authorities interdicted a record 138 tons of drugs, of which 109 tons were cocaine, 10 tons more than the prior year, illustrating the magnitude of the problem. The December 2022 case of a "super cartel" operating across Europe and the Middle East, using the Colon Free Trade Zone to load drugs and move them through the Panama Canal, illustrates how Panama's role as an international logistics hub also makes it a nexus for international crime, including the movement of drugs to both the United States and .

In the context of drug flows and economic hardship, gang violence has also become an increasingly serious problem. In 2022 there were over 500 homicides in a country of just over four million, or 11.5 per 100,000 people. Panama's most powerful gang federations, 'Bagdad' and 'Calor Calor,' are increasingly connected to the drug trade, although principally make their

presence felt through extortion and other forms of crime. In March 2023, Bagdad leader Cholo Chorrillo was extradited to the United States. The move and others by authorities against Bagdad weakened the gang to some degree relative to its rival Calor Calor, according to gang experts interviewed for this work. Still, overall gang strength and coherence remains high. Although Panama's homicide rate has actually fallen modestly, a series of recent, high-profile crimes have led Panamanians to feel more insecure.

Complimenting drugs and gangs, Panama faces a problem of irregular migration flows of unprecedented proportions. The migrants come from a range of Caribbean, South American, and extra-regional countries, including Venezuela, Haiti, and a small but notably expanded number of persons from China. According to Panamanian security experts, their arrivals, which began to expand most significantly in 2021, now vary between 1,000 and 2,000 per day. Over 200,000 crossed into Panama from Colombia in the first nine months of 2022 alone. Immigrants cross through the Darien Gap, principally on the Atlantic side, and principally by foot, although some wealthier migrants take boats to avoid all or part of the dangerous jungle region.

The Darien Gap has become a hotbed of criminal activity, with Colombia's 'ELN' and 'Gulf Clan,' as well as remnants of the '57th FARC Front,' among others, operating there. The Atlantic coast is dominated more by the Gulf Clan, which is engaged in a broad array of illicit activity in the area. According to Panamanian security experts interviewed for this work, the Gulf Clan is

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estimated to be responsible for approximately 70 percent of the drugs moved through the area. Nonetheless, some reports suggest the ELN is trying to rebuild its once significant presence on the Pacific side of the Darien Gap. By contrast to their disposition in Colombia, insurgent and criminal groups tend to behave in a less combative fashion on the Panamanian side of the border than on the Colombian side.

Contrary to press reports, Panamanian security experts note that it is relatively rare for criminal elements to integrate drug smuggling and migrant smuggling through the Darien Gap by using migrants to smuggle drugs. Rather, many of the guides who smuggle migrants, because of their knowledge of routes through overland routes, are the same ones used by criminal groups to smuggle drugs. Human smuggling is becoming the increasingly dominant form of criminality in the region, since it is far more lucrative than smuggling drugs, at \$70 to \$150 or more per person, with less risk if a shipment is lost.

The evolving security and political situation in neighboring Colombia has complicated security in the Darien Gap for the Panamanian security forces. While Colombia's 2016 peace accords with the FARC formally demobilized the guerilla group, its 57th Front regularly crossed over into the Panamanian side of the Darien, a number of its adherents have passed into the ranks of the ELN, Gulf Clan, or other criminal groups operating in the area.

At the same time, the expansion of coca production and the Colombian government's intermittent "ceasefires" with the ELN and criminal groups in search of "" has facilitated expanded criminal activities on the Colombian side of the Darien Gap. Panamanian security experts speaking off the record also noted that the past ties of the current Colombian government and its intelligence services with leftist terrorist organizations have also impeded intelligence sharing, although formal state-to-state relations and the personal relationships of military commanders on both sides of the border remain strong.

With respect to Panama's unprecedented migrant flows, aside from their significant impact on the remote Darien region, their perceived effect on the rest of the country has been disproportionately low. Migrants are transported in buses from communities receiving them at the end of the Darien Gap, to the town of David, on the other side of the country near the Costa Rican border, and from David, to Paso Canoas on the Costa Rican border. Although Panama has a modestly-sized Venezuelan community from prior flows of migration, the rapid transit of the current waves of migration via bus, sometimes at the rate of 30 or more buses per day, has minimized the expansion of the migrant population in Panama City and other parts of the country, while also restricting the growth of Venezuelan criminal and human trafficking groups such as 'Tren de Aragua,' which have spread in other countries where large-scale Venezuelan migration has occurred. There has been some accumulation of migrants near the Costa Rican border, including in David and Paso Canoas, but checkpoints set up along the Pan American highway and other parts of the country by SENAFRONT and immigration authorities help prevent the migrants from returning back to Panama City once they have transited the country.

Finally, illicit activity related to Panama's role as a regional banking and logistics hub continues to demand the attention of the Panamanian government. In February 2023, the Financial Action Task Force Panama on its "gray list," increasing the costs of local banks and companies to do international business. Still, some Panamanians regard the treatment as unfair, given that the FATF gave Panama credit for addressing 13 of 15 previously identified concerns.

In the domain of IUU fishing, in December 2022, the Panama Maritime Authority recently acted to cancel the registry of thirty-two Chinese deepwater fishing vessels operating under the country's flag while violating international fisheries laws.

While security is arguably not the most politically salient issue in Panama, there is a growing generalized sense of frustration in the country, fed by the combination of economic difficulties, crime, and violence, as well as perceived public corruption and the sense that matters have worsened under the current government. The [serious protests of July 2022](#) evince these underlying frustrations, though as they dissipated, so too did fears that they could bring down the Cortizo government.

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