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# ATLANTIC CONNECTIONS

THE PCC AND THE BRAZIL-WEST  
AFRICA COCAINE TRADE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cocaine trafficking through West Africa, following the well-established route from Latin America to the European consumer market, appears to be in a phase of sharp growth.<sup>1</sup> Since 2016, the majority of consignments transiting West Africa begin their journey in Brazil. The Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) – the largest criminal organization in Brazil – is pivotal to understanding Brazil's newfound importance for cocaine in West Africa.

Cocaine trafficking between Brazil and West Africa stretches back at least to the 1980s, but as cultivation in Latin America continues to increase and consumption in Europe has grown, more and more cocaine is being moved along this path.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, only one West African country – Senegal – was in the top 10 destinations for cocaine seized in Brazilian ports; by 2019, after a bumper year of seizures in Brazil, Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone had also pushed their way onto the list.<sup>3</sup> Cultivation in Latin America reached record levels in 2021, and in the following year an unprecedented 24 tonnes were seized across West Africa.<sup>4</sup>

In this report, we focus on the flow of cocaine between Brazil and West Africa, which largely supplies the lucrative European consumer market, and in particular on the role of the PCC, which straddles various illicit supply chains.<sup>5</sup>

Brazil operates as a transit point in cocaine value chains, since it does not produce the raw coca plants. Cocaine is imported – either in the form of a crude base paste extracted from coca leaves or as processed cocaine hydrochloride – from producers in Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela and Colombia, or from other transit countries such as Paraguay. The paste is consumed in the Brazilian domestic market in different forms and mixtures, while most of the imported cocaine hydrochloride is exported to other continents via Brazilian seaports and airports. Criminal networks exploit these official trade channels to move large amounts of cocaine concealed within the enormous flow of legal commodities to other continents. Brazil's highly developed maritime, air and road infrastructure has given it a comparative advantage over its neighbours and it now occupies a pivotal position as a major logistical hub in international trafficking routes. The Port of Santos in São Paulo state is one of the largest in the world – handling 4.2 million containers in 2020 – far outstripping its South American peers.<sup>6</sup>





View of *favelas* in Paraisópolis, São Paulo. © Frédéric Soltan/Corbis via Getty Images

Brazil has also spawned a sophisticated criminal infrastructure that specializes in the international cocaine trade.<sup>7</sup> What was once a fragmented market has been driven increasingly into the hands of larger enterprises; a trend that was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as larger criminal organizations with more resilient logistics and supply chains were better equipped to bounce back from restrictions than smaller operators.<sup>8</sup>

The PCC is the most powerful player in Brazil's domestic cocaine market, with an estimated 40 000 members and hundreds of thousands of allies, as well as the most prominent supplier of cocaine moving through West Africa. Analysis of the PCC has lagged behind its development, often failing to grasp its global reach. In 2021, the US Treasury's inclusion of the PCC in its global drugs sanctions regime – the first ever designation of a Brazilian criminal network by the United States – signalled a greater recognition of its international influence.<sup>9</sup>

The year 2014 marked a critical turning point for the PCC as it pivoted away from domestic sales and set its sights on the more lucrative export market. Key to this strategic shift was cementing its influence over the all-important Port of Santos.<sup>10</sup> The group has evolved rapidly, from a prison-based network in the 1990s, involved in robberies and domestic drug sales, into a multinational organization with a presence and influence across five continents through its alliances with other major players in international crime – including the Italian 'Ndrangheta mafia and Mexican, Colombian, Russian and African criminal networks. This report argues that the PCC's key regulatory role of the Brazilian cocaine trade has had an impact on the wider international trafficking ecosystem, which now appears to be operating with reduced costs and greater efficiency. Evidence drawn from field-work conducted in countries throughout the Brazil–West Africa network has highlighted how the value chain often starts not with cocaine, but with stolen or second-hand vehicles exchanged for drugs in South American borders. Understanding the Brazilian PCC is therefore critical to understanding the place of West Africa within the international cocaine trade.

## Methodology

The research for this report has drawn on various data collection techniques but rests primarily on field observations of the retail trade and transit of illegal goods in South America, West Africa and Europe between 2015 and 2022. These observations, described in detail in the authors' field notebooks, were supplemented by formal and informal interviews with those involved in the cocaine trade, from the South American borders to the retail trade spaces of Europe, allowing us to trace the journey of cocaine through the different nodes of the value chain.

The literature on illegal markets often presents a dichotomy between state agents and organized crime. Our relational approach avoids this by highlighting what is actually happening on the ground to make illegal commodities travel around the world. This includes state corruption, including protection rackets operated by police officers, alongside the professional criminal actors. We worked through reliable intermediaries, introduced ourselves as researchers and guaranteed the anonymity of our interlocutors. We never used hidden devices or false identities, and all efforts were made to form respectful and professional relations with the interlocutors we met during our fieldwork.<sup>11</sup>

We also analyzed customs seizure data. We know that seizure statistics say much more about police activity, and the protection infrastructure around criminal markets, than about the structure or dynamics of illegal markets themselves. However, they reveal the origins of the vessels on which the seizures were made, which sheds light on the variety of journeys taken by cocaine from Brazilian ports and airports to reach various countries around the world, including West African nations.

## Cars for cocaine

It is 2021 on the border between Brazil and Bolivia. Four armed young men on motorbikes surround a new Toyota Hilux SW4 on an empty street. They threaten the driver, who immediately gets out of the truck. One of the boys jumps off the motorbike and into the car. The entire robbery takes about a minute before the car and motorbikes disappear. Four young Brazilians from very poor neighbourhoods now drive a Toyota SUV worth US\$60 000, around 300 times the local monthly minimum wage. In reality, they will together earn the equivalent of one Brazilian minimum wage, about US\$250, to carry out the robbery and deliver the truck to a receiver. For these four boys were not working in isolation. They were hired by an older criminal, highly regarded in local networks. Horácio, not his real name, is a burly dark-skinned man, aged around 40. A long-time drug trafficker, Horácio works



A Toyota Hilux in Rurópolis, Brazil. © Tarcisio Schneider/Getty Images



with a number of middle-men every week to pass Brazilian cars to the Bolivian side of the border, moving through farms and side roads in the region to avoid state inspections. On the Bolivian side, state agents will prepare fake or even official papers for this Toyota, and the police turn a blind eye. Horácio does not expect to receive money for the Toyota. The car – prized in Latin American and West African car markets for its reliability – will be exchanged for cocaine.

Horácio had already negotiated the exchange. The stolen Toyota Hilux equates to 5 kilograms of cocaine hydrochloride (a regular car would yield 3 kilograms; a motorbike 1 kilogram). Brazilian exporters from São Paulo that he has never met, more than a thousand kilometres from the border where Horácio lives, will get the package. He nevertheless trusts them because they belong to the same criminal brotherhood: the PCC.

By 2023, the PCC had operations in several cities along Brazil's 7 000-kilometre border with Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay, as well as in Atlantic ports and airports stretching around the vast Brazilian coastline. As illustrated by this case study, exchanging cars stolen in Brazil for cocaine imported from its neighbours is a highly lucrative market that has been undergoing a transformation.<sup>12</sup> As the trade has intensified, demanding dedicated supply chains and professional logistics, it has favoured more established criminal organizations like the PCC.

In 2021, over 47 000 vehicles were stolen in São Paulo City alone according to the city's security secretariat – more than 30% of the number of car thefts in the whole of Mexico in the same year.<sup>13</sup> A specific characteristic of Latin American vehicle thefts is the regularity of violence – with aggressive seizures accounting for around half of vehicle thefts.<sup>14</sup> The response to car theft has been similarly brutal.

In São Paulo, 59% of people killed by the police in 2018 were perpetrating a vehicle theft at the time.<sup>15</sup>

Vehicle theft is well-known to be a significant driver of violence in many parts of Brazil, with state agents calling for tighter enforcement to curb the epidemic. Yet in public debate it is rarely linked to the international drugs trade, despite the fact that, once stolen, thousands of cars are transported to Brazil's borders with Bolivia, Paraguay, Venezuela and Colombia, where they are converted into cocaine for domestic consumption and export.

For cocaine distributors in Bolivia, Colombia and Paraguay, stolen Brazilian cars are the payment of choice, as luxury foreign cars sell locally for far more than cocaine. For Brazilian car thieves, it is exactly the opposite: cocaine yields much more than reselling stolen cars in their country.<sup>16</sup>

From the moment a car is exchanged for cocaine, several actors start making money – thieves, low-level traffickers and corrupt police and customs officials – but sitting above all of these is the PCC. The syndicate links criminal actors in different markets with its branches in the official economy. The PCC knows, like many other criminal outfits, that dirty money earned from cocaine, robberies, stolen cars and smuggling has to be cleaned, and it has become increasingly sophisticated in doing so. Laundering its cash has presented the group with opportunities to diversify its revenues at the same time, investing in real estate, tourism, gambling, football, art, restaurants, cars, universities, digital currencies and gold. As one of the big names in the early days of the organization once said, 'the PCC has learned how to keep and multiply its dirty money'.<sup>17</sup>

City where the exchanged cocaine was made	Amount earned from the cocaine exchanged for the Toyota Hilux (5kg of hydrochloride or 7kg of base paste in US\$)	Value as a multiple of Brazilian minimum wage (2021)	Relative profitability of the value chain (%)
Riacho Largo, border zone (fictitious name)	21 000	70	530
São Paulo	140 000	467	4 100
Berlin	933 330	3 111	27 900

**FIGURE 1** Profitability along the value chain of a Toyota Hilux exchanged for cocaine hydrochloride or cocaine base paste (retail prices).

SOURCE: Gabriel Feltran (ed.), *Stolen Cars: A Journey Through São Paulo's Urban Conflict*, John Wiley & Sons, 2022



## ORIGINS OF THE PCC

**T**he Primeiro Comando da Capital, also known as *Partido, o Crime, Quinze and Família*, was founded in 1993 a year after the Carandiru prison massacre in São Paulo in which 111 prisoners were killed in a single military police operation to quell an inmate riot. The initial goal of the PCC was to prevent similar massacres by forming a collective to improve conditions in the prison environment and fight oppression whether perpetrated by prisoners themselves or by the prison authorities.<sup>18</sup> In order to protect its members from attacks and rape by guards and other prison gangs, the PCC established itself as the mediator of daily conflicts. Negotiations were then opened with prison officials: the PCC would curtail inmate unrest on the condition that daily conditions improved.

As it evolved, the group developed a sophisticated informal justice system with codes to regulate prisoner behaviour and declared war on all those who did not follow its stated principles of 'justice, peace and freedom'.<sup>19</sup> Styling itself as a 'brotherhood', it also formed a support network for 'brothers' and their families to provide them with goods and services paid for by the financial contributions of the members. Through this strategy, the PCC achieved a hegemony in the prison system – only a few prisoners were members of the PCC in each prison, but the others agreed to play by the PCC's tune.

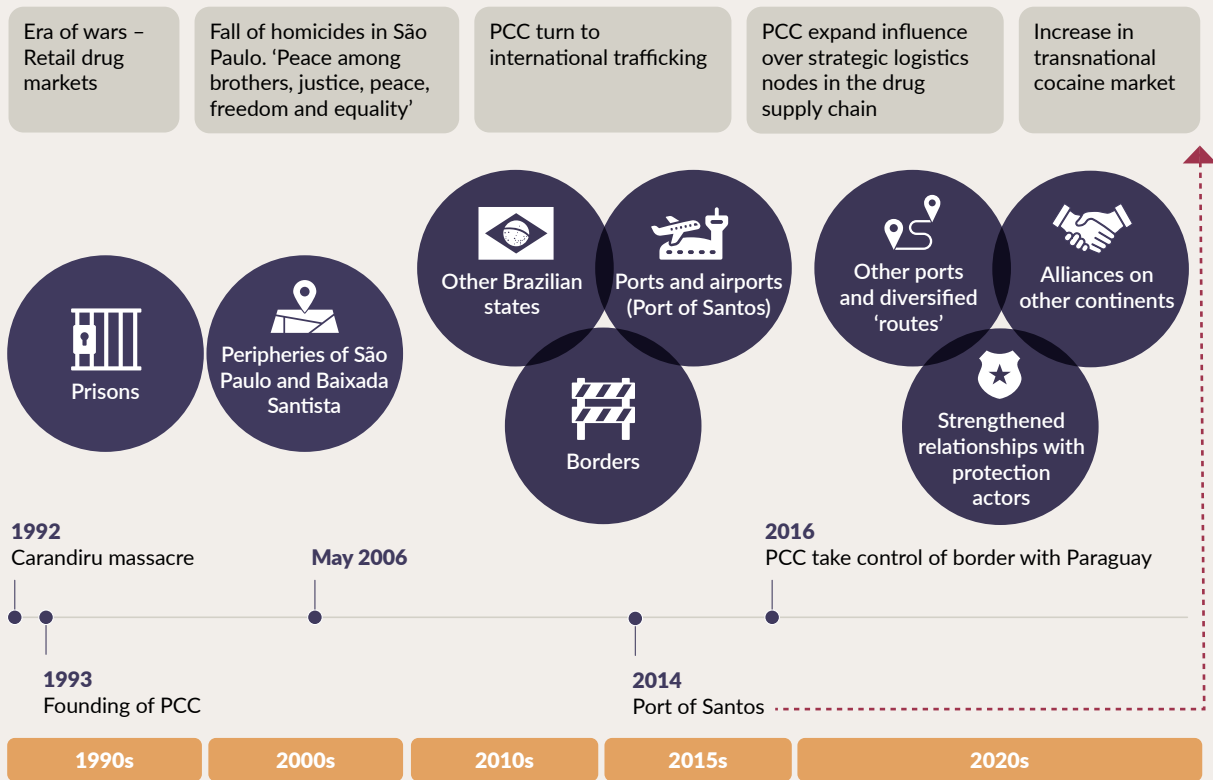
### From prisons to the *favela*

At the same time as the PCC was consolidating its influence inside prisons, intense violence was breaking out in the poor peripheries of São Paulo. This period in the 1990s, known as 'the era of wars' in the *favelas*, was driven largely by disputes over the most lucrative territories in retail cocaine trafficking, as the product arrived on an industrial scale in large Brazilian cities for the first time. This was partly the result of the geopolitical shifts in the cocaine market that were set in motion by the Reagan administration's expansion of the US 'war on drugs' to target Colombian traffickers in the 1980s.<sup>20</sup>

By the late 1990s, gun violence was rampant in Brazil. The state response to this intense violence – mass incarceration, including for low-level drug offences – channelled more and more poor young men from the *favelas* into the arms of the PCC. This influence did not wane after these men left prison and returned to their home neighbourhoods and the PCC's influence, including, importantly, its regulatory code, began to spread to the outskirts of São Paulo.



## EXPANSION OF THE PCC



**FIGURE 2** Timeline of the PCC's origins and expansion.

In doing so, the PCC's influence changed criminal practice, just as it affected the daily interactions for urban businesses and neighbourhoods.<sup>21</sup> During the early 2000s, the PCC came to hold a monopoly of violence in poor neighbourhoods at the urban periphery, where the retail cocaine, crack cocaine and cannabis markets were concentrated. It began to regulate the trade by setting prices to avoid unfair competition and resulting violence between individual dealers and *favelas*. The PCC also began to enforce strict gun control. Members were given exclusive rights to firearms and guns were seized from the hands of small dealers and thieves. The impact was significant and weapons became far less visible in the *favelas* across São Paulo. From 2001 to 2010, homicide rates decreased by 70% in São Paulo state.<sup>22</sup> There are many explanations given for the reduction but the most convincing is that the PCC's regulation of the retail cocaine trade and its provision of an alternative system of governance (including strict regulation of when homicides were acceptable) dramatically reduced violence.<sup>23</sup>

In May 2006, the PCC demonstrated its power beyond the prisons, by launching attacks against the police in various public places, paralyzing the city and state of São Paulo for four days and killing 45 police officers. In the crackdown, military police killed at least 493 young people from the *favelas* in a single week.<sup>24</sup> By this point, it was clear that the PCC controlled different prisons and urban communities throughout São Paulo state. Less clear at that time was the extent of the PCC's control of various illegal



The former Carandiru prison complex in São Paulo, May 2006.

© Mauricio Lima/AFP via Getty Images

markets such as drugs, weapons and stolen cars. Although the PCC was already present in border regions and was busy negotiating its international expansion in alliance with other international organizations, the Brazilian authorities still considered it a local group.

From 2011, the PCC's historically conflictual relationship with law enforcement evolved more into a negotiated settlement at the local level, with the PCC appearing to reach financial settlements with law enforcement in many of its territories.<sup>25</sup> Criminal money was therefore not only being distributed among members of the PCC, typically from lower socio-economic strata, but was also feeding police corruption, a phenomenon closely linked to the rise of authoritarian political movements in Brazil.<sup>26</sup> Criminal money was also infiltrating legal sectors – with the PCC making ample use of the services of lawyers, accountants, and other licit service providers and leveraging increasingly sophisticated money laundering.<sup>27</sup>

## Going global

Over the following decade (2011–2020), the PCC's influence spread throughout Brazil's 27 states, especially at national borders, ports and airports. Brazilian federal police started to focus on the PCC's export activities from 2013, and quickly recognized ports as central to the group's strategy.

There were two critical stages in the PCC's expansion – taking control of the Port of Santos in 2014 and the border with Paraguay in 2016.

Gaining influence over the Paraguay border was crucial as it is a primary corridor into Brazil for cocaine produced in Bolivia, Peru and Colombia, and for arms trafficked from Paraguay and the United States.<sup>28</sup> This was achieved in 2016 when the group carried out the brutal murder of Jorge Rifaat, a Brazilian of Lebanese origin who was sentenced to 47 years in prison for drug trafficking and money laundering in Brazil. Rifaat had been living freely in Paraguay, contesting the PCC's growing hold over the border area and presented himself in Paraguay as defending the country from dangerous Brazilian influence. His murder triggered a spate of revenge killings, which claimed the lives of at least 38 individuals associated with Rifaat and the PCC.<sup>29</sup>

Having recognized that cocaine export markets are far more profitable than domestic retail markets,<sup>30</sup> the PCC was committed to going global with its trafficking business and, by 2018, had become a major player across the primary cocaine trafficking routes to Europe and Africa.<sup>31</sup> The Brazilian Public Prosecutor's Office estimated that in 2018 the PCC had reached over 30 000 'baptized' members across Brazilian states, with at least 2 million more allied to the group.<sup>32</sup>



The model of the PCC's criminal syndicate was well adapted for this expansion, avoiding both economic centralization, by allowing its members to keep the vast majority of their wealth, and the personalization of leadership, with authority resting in titles and roles rather than individuals.

In its traditional social bases – prisons and marginalized elements of society – the authority of the PCC coexists with the state. The PCC offer an alternative criminal justice system and a regulatory framework for breaches of the group's code of conduct. In parallel, citizens living in these areas continue to rely on state justice systems for other grievances falling outside this regulatory sphere.

In its mercantile wing, the organization is comparatively decentralized and operates as a more fluid network, with more limited socio-economic influence on communities. Different divisions or *sintonias* are responsible for trafficking, discipline and legal and financial support for members. This enormous organizational flexibility, combining a high degree of commercial autonomy for its members with a centralized system of behavioural regulation in the communities under its control, has underpinned the PCC's huge expansion.

By 2022, the PCC had become one of the world's most complex criminal organizations, operating across different illicit supply chains – including drugs, firearms, stolen vehicles, gold mining and others – rooted in an extensive financial infrastructure.

One of the most striking features of the PCC has been its ability to create ad hoc and structured business partnerships with other Brazilian groups and with foreign criminal networks including Nigerian, Cape Verdean, Mozambican, Lebanese, Russian, Italian and Eastern European mafias.<sup>33</sup> According to the Brazilian federal police, in 2023 the PCC had a presence in England, Suriname, British and French Guiana, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, the United States, France, the Netherlands and Italy.<sup>34</sup>

The PCC has forged deals with other major criminal players, including Western European mafias, to facilitate exports into Europe, including via West Africa. The most important of these being its alliance with the 'Ndrangheta mafia clan from the late 2010s, through which the PCC has become a central player in feeding Africa's cocaine market, as well as those of Europe and Asia.<sup>35</sup>



The Brazil–Paraguay border. Gaining influence over the Paraguay border was critical for the PCC's expansion into the global cocaine trade. © Helissa Gründemann/Alamy Stock Photo

## The PCC's transatlantic alliances: the 'Ndrangheta

The Calabrian-based 'Ndrangheta mafia has operated in Brazil since the 1970s, however, an alliance between various 'Ndrangheta clans and the PCC appears to have strengthened from the mid 2010s.<sup>36</sup> The arrest of senior 'Ndrangheta figures in São Paulo in 2019 provided more evidence of their close relationship. Cooperation between the two groups appears to underpin the large market shares they hold in the Brazilian and European cocaine markets.<sup>37</sup> A reliable stream of cocaine from Brazil is crucial to the 'Ndrangheta's grip on the European cocaine market, of which it is estimated to influence a significant proportion.

A share of the cocaine stream coordinated by the PCC and the 'Ndrangheta moves through West Africa, as reflected in international and regional law enforcement investigations, which indicate that elements of the 'Ndrangheta appear to have been implicated in cocaine trafficking in countries across West Africa, including Senegal, Niger, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and potentially Cape Verde.<sup>38</sup> The 'Ndrangheta operate in West Africa through two main mechanisms: through the stable presence of 'Ndrangheta elements in certain countries in the region and through trusted brokers established through visits by 'Ndrangheta clan family members.

Existing evidence points to Côte d'Ivoire as a 'Ndrangheta stronghold in West Africa, both as a transit point for cocaine, but also a money laundering hub and key point for establishment of elements of 'Ndrangheta clans. Prominent among investigations supporting this analysis was the Italian police's 2018 'Spaghetti Connection'. This unearthed a well-established 'Ndrangheta ring, which had been importing cocaine from Brazil since 2014 using a number of front companies.<sup>39</sup> In September 2018, 1 tonne of cocaine was seized at the Port of Santos hidden in a consignment of heavy machinery due to be exported to a company in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>40</sup> According to investigative journalist sources, the trafficking scheme was orchestrated by an 'Ndrangheta member from the



A luxury hotel is seen under construction in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. The construction sector is vulnerable to money laundering and involvement of the 'Ndrangheta. © Joe Penney/Reuters

Romeo-Staccu clan from San Luca, with the support of several individuals based in Abidjan, including Italian businessmen with links to the Neapolitan Camorra mafia. Meanwhile, the arrangements on the Brazilian side to supply the cocaine may have involved an individual with ties to the PCC as well as an 'Ndrangheta broker.<sup>41</sup> Other Italian investigations had also identified evidence of other clans operating in Abidjan, including through the apparent establishment of family members in the city.<sup>42</sup>

The 'Ndrangheta therefore appears to be an important player in the bulk transit of cocaine through West Africa towards Europe, with significant laundering of profits also in the region, including in the construction sector in Abidjan. Notably, although not explored above, there are many indications of the 'Ndrangheta's presence in other regions of Africa, and in other sectors, including gold and toxic waste disposal. These are not explored in depth here, but contribute to a picture of extensive 'Ndrangheta embeddedness on the continent.

The PCC's increasing role in international cocaine trafficking has had an impact far beyond Brazil. While this report focuses on the PCC's expansion in West Africa, the group has operated for a long time in eastern and southern Africa. This was highlighted by the arrest of the Brazilian drug trafficker Gilberto Aparecido Dos Santos, alias 'Fuminho', on 13 April 2020 in Maputo, Mozambique, where he appears to have been operating for many years.<sup>43</sup> Although Fuminho's exact status within, or relationship to, the PCC remains the subject of debate, it is clear Santos was closely linked to senior figures in the PCC. Unsurprisingly, given their alliance with the PCC, Santos reportedly worked with the Italian 'Ndrangheta mafia to transport cocaine into Europe.<sup>44</sup> While some of the cocaine exported to southern and eastern Africa feeds regional consumption, a significant proportion is transported onwards to Europe.

Since 2015, European cocaine markets have undergone significant changes, as a dramatic increase in supply has caused retail prices to plummet. Data tracking the 'affordability' of cocaine in European retail markets – what 1 gram of a pure, uncut drug costs to buyers in the context of their national standard of living – points to a staggering 38% increase in affordability between 2015 and 2020.<sup>45</sup>

The prevailing view is that this increased affordability is attributable to a surge in Latin American cultivation and production, and resultant glut in supply. Reports also point to the proliferation of Albanian trafficking networks since 2012.<sup>46</sup> However, one factor that has been overlooked is that the PCC's growing prominence across a number of illicit supply chains and its practice of enhancing alliances between criminal networks all over the world has produced greater economic efficiency.

The PCC's business model favours the quiet expansion of markets rather than through violent and expensive turf wars. Its encouragement of peaceful cooperation between criminal groups, as well as with the state, has significantly decreased operational costs.<sup>47</sup> Notably, homicide rates in São Paulo, where the PCC has consolidated its control over the last 20 years, remain the lowest in Brazil. Homicide rates are also falling in areas of Brazil where the PCC is stabilizing its influence.<sup>48</sup> Negotiating with rivals rather than expelling them and seeking to exert complete territorial control is thus a key element underpinning the PCCs expansion both within Brazil and internationally. Similarly, the decision not to extort money from civilians and businesses in areas under its control has helped to increase its popularity on the ground.



**Gilberto Aparecido Dos Santos, known as Fuminho, was arrested in Maputo, Mozambique, in 2021.**  
© Westend61/Getty Images





## THE BRAZIL–WEST AFRICA SUPPLY CHAIN

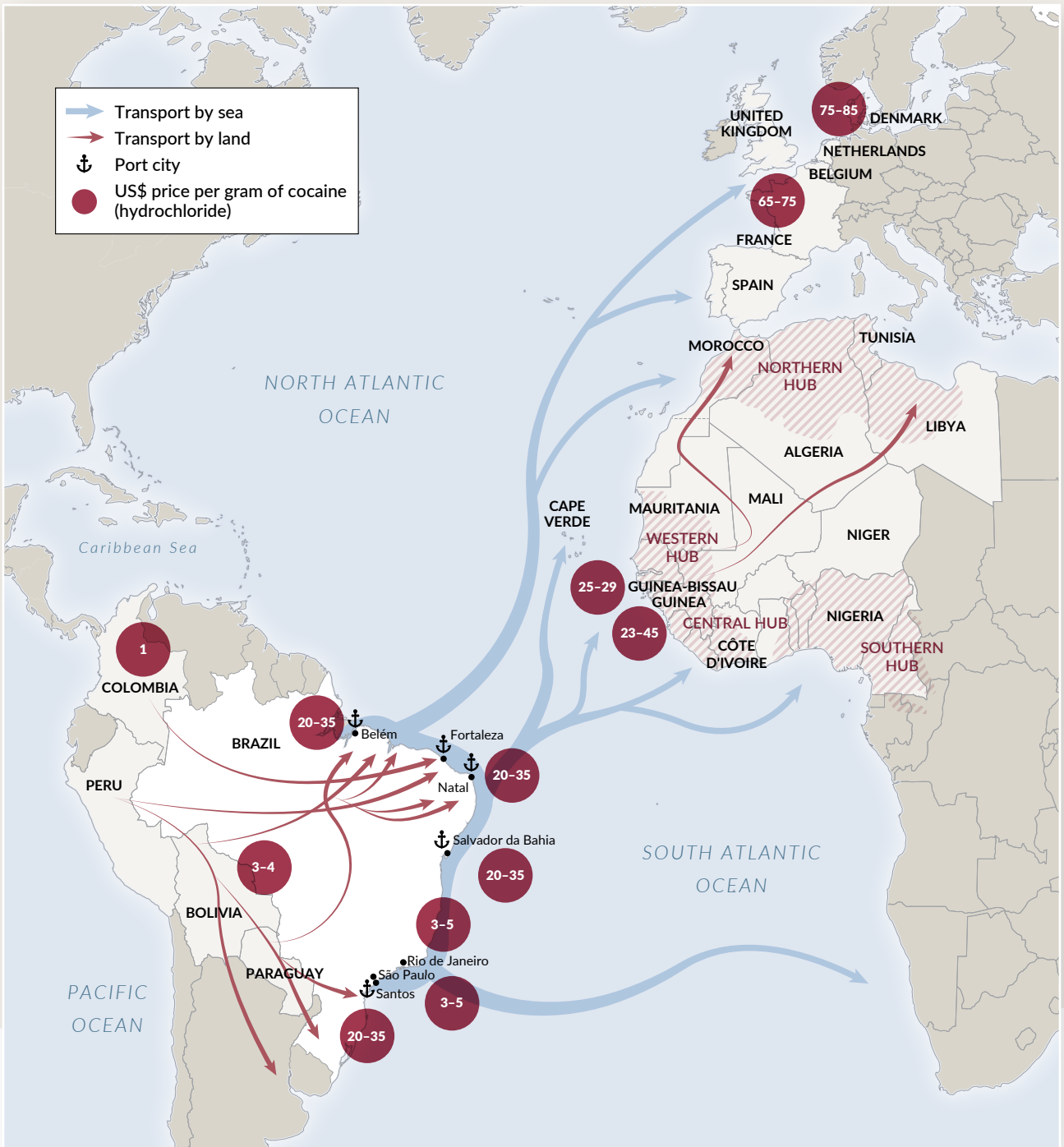
**H**orácio, our protagonist from earlier, has exchanged the Toyota Hilux at the Bolivian border for 5 kilograms of cocaine hydrochloride. He passes the consignment to a truck driver he knows who then ferries the drugs to São Paulo – more than 1 000 kilometres away.

Arriving in the city, the consignment changes hands once again. Another friend makes his way to Santos by bus, with a full backpack. An hour later the bag falls into the hands of Carlos, who lives in a *favela* on the coast near the city's port. Carlos is not a PCC member but he has neighbours who are. Carlos does not consider himself a drug dealer but tries to make some extra cash by taking a consignment every few months.

Carlos is looking for his PCC contact in a Santos *favela*. His colleague is preparing a 330-kilogram cargo shipment leaving by sea next week, to which he will add an extra 5 kilograms. There are dozens of small traffickers like Carlos who take the opportunity to make money informally, using the PCC's established network and logistics at the port. The 5 kilograms transported by Carlos will generate US\$125 000, enough to pay all those who participated in the trafficking. Once on board the ship, the first stage of the journey is complete. It will be picked up for the next leg by other members of the network once it reaches the other side.

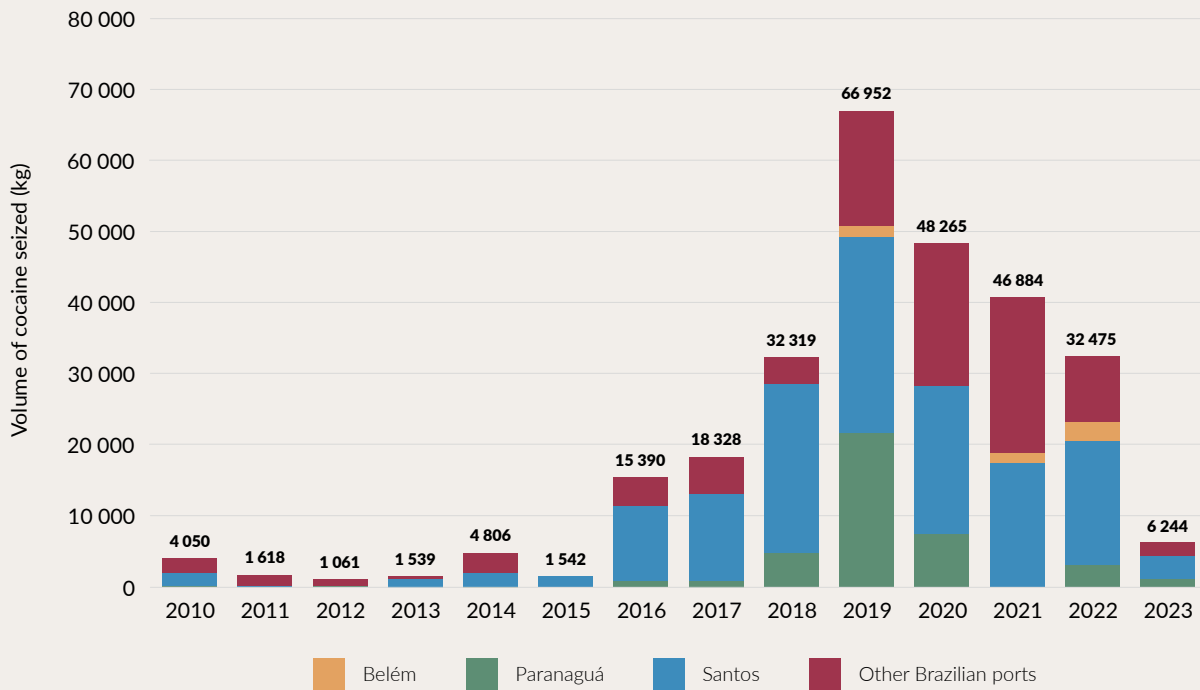
Cocaine trafficking from Latin America through West Africa is not new; seizures have been made since the 1980s, with the route starting to receive international attention in the early 2000s. However, Brazil's importance to the supply chain is more recent – emerging in the mid 2010s alongside other international trafficking markets. Brazil now plays a prominent and growing role in the logistics of the Latin American cocaine trade through West Africa, with the PCC playing a pivotal role as coordinator (not unlike Mexico's role as gatekeeper for cocaine moving into the US).

Cocaine moves from Latin America through West Africa via two principal routes: by air, in smaller volumes, and by sea. São Paulo operates as one of the major stockage and redistribution hubs for cocaine imported from Brazil's western border and moved on through maritime or air routes.<sup>49</sup> São Paulo Airport is the most common point of origin for air-trafficked cocaine across many countries in West Africa, despite limited direct flights. Analysis of official seizure data by Brazilian authorities identifies Benin, Nigeria, Guinea and Cape Verde as the most common destinations.<sup>50</sup>



**FIGURE 3** Cocaine shipment routes and prices.

NOTE: Prices cited were collected by authors in 2022 and 2023, with the exception of EMCDDA data sourced, which is for 2020. Retail figures for Europe (/g) were taken from author interviews, cross-checked with EMCDDA 2020 data (with the EMCDDA median falling within the ranges cited for France, and not available for 2020 in Denmark).



**FIGURE 4** Cocaine seizures in maritime ports in Brazil.

NOTE: 2023 data includes the period January 2023 to 30 May 2023. Seizures at Brazilian ports have decreased sharply since 2019. While decreases in 2020 and arguably 2021 can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, by 2022 the impacts of the pandemic on law enforcement operations are believed to have waned.

SOURCE: Data reported by the Federal Police

Seizure data from West Africa itself also links back to Brazil. In Guinea-Bissau, a country with long-standing cultural and linguistic ties to Brazil, analysis of seizures at Oswaldo Vieira International Airport between 2018 and 2020 indicated that 80% of journeys had originated in Brazil, with all but one originating in São Paulo.<sup>51</sup> Analysis of seizures between 2020 and 2022 confirmed the continuing importance of this route, generally travelling via Lisbon using the Portuguese flag carrier airline TAP.<sup>52</sup>

Nigerian trafficking networks are particularly important for the movement of cocaine out of São Paulo airport on commercial air couriers. Mules tend to be Brazilian citizens, followed by Nigerian nationals, although other African nationals are also a significant proportion.<sup>53</sup> Recent research has tracked how mules became important commodities for Nigerian criminal networks as the focus turned to cocaine exports and West Africa grew as a transit point for cocaine of Brazilian wholesalers.

Nigerian trafficking networks, reportedly including some confraternities, such as the Black Axe, Supreme Eiye or Maphite, operate from São Paulo as partners to some Brazilian businessmen who have relations with the PCC and other Brazilian criminal networks. These relationships emerged in parallel to the significant increase of Nigerian nationals establishing themselves in São Paulo since the 1990s, a dynamic that boomed with the 2016 Olympic Games and 2014 FIFA World Cup, both of which drew significant inwards migration and investment, opportunities capitalized upon by illicit operators.



The widespread use of drug mules to traffic cocaine by air by Nigerian networks has also been identified in Venezuela and in the north of Brazil. The 2020 arrest of two Nigerian nationals alongside PCC senior operator Gilberto Aparecido Dos Santos in Maputo, Mozambique, provided further insights into the ongoing partnerships between the PCC and Nigerian trafficking networks.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to some shifts in market dynamics, but does not appear to have dented the PCC's influence. In the wake of the pandemic in 2020, there was an increase in Brazilian nationals operating as mules on flights to West Africa, followed by Nigerians as it became more difficult for foreign nationals to obtain visas.<sup>54</sup> Across the same period, seizure data indicates that cocaine trafficking from Brazil to West Africa by air was increasingly concealed in luggage, and in larger quantities (up to 9 kilograms).<sup>55</sup> Prevailing analysis suggests that limited flights due to COVID-19 restrictions forced criminal networks to risk moving fewer, larger consignments.<sup>56</sup> A similar trend has also been identified for maritime trafficking, which has seen a spate of bumper seizures from larger consignments, partly as a result of the growing supply.<sup>57</sup>

Privately owned airplanes have also been used for trafficking cocaine from Brazil via West Africa. As far back as the mid-1990s, Brazilian drug trafficker Mario Serio Machado Nunes transported at least 3 tonnes of cocaine by seaplane from the Brazilian state of Maranhão to Cape Verde, from where it was moved onto Europe by ship.<sup>58</sup> There is some evidence that small planes are still being used to move drugs between Latin America and West Africa.<sup>59</sup>

The vast majority of cocaine is imported into West Africa via maritime trafficking routes and, according to available seizure data, Brazil is the most common point of origin. Vessels using this maritime route are increasing in size and number, with large vessels (some with 20 000-container capacity) able to navigate the crossing in about 10 days.<sup>60</sup> Some cocaine is trafficked in smaller boats, including sailboats, which are not subject to the same controls as larger commercial ships. Significant volumes can be trafficked in this way. The Brazilian federal police estimates that this method can transport around 500 kilograms of cocaine per journey.<sup>61</sup> In 2015, a 581-kilogram shipment was seized on a sailboat off the Fernando de Noronha archipelago. This was found to be just one of a number of consignments coordinated by a Brazilian and Slovenian outfit that was moving cocaine from Pernambuco state to Cape Verde.<sup>62</sup>



The port of Cotonou, Benin, one of the maritime entry points for cocaine from Brazil into West Africa.

© Fran E.Q. Friesen/Alamy Stock Photo

Law enforcement in Cape Verde believe the PCC has ramped up its use of this route. One of the seven people arrested in April 2022 when 5.4 tonnes of cocaine were seized on the Alcatraz 1 – a fishing vessel stopped off the coast of Cape Verde – was Magno de Paula Trindade, a Brazilian national with links to the PCC in Baixada Santista on the São Paulo coast.<sup>63</sup>

Larger volumes, of course, are transported in containers or on bulk cargo vessels. A number of Brazilian ports operate as export points to West Africa and the trend has been towards greater dispersion across Brazilian ports. However, this paper will focus on the Port of Santos – the site of more cocaine seizures than at any other port in 2022 and an important territory for PCC operations.<sup>64</sup>

## The Port of Santos

The Port of Santos plays a fundamental role in the journey of cocaine hydrochloride across the Atlantic towards West Africa. This is highlighted by the high number of seizures, which, as port authorities acknowledge, represent only a fraction of the total volume of cocaine circulating through Santos.

In terms of cargo handling, the Port of Santos is the largest in the Southern Hemisphere. In 2022, the port moved a record 5 million units of cargo.<sup>65</sup> This means that over 9 000 containers circulate every day, posing enormous challenges to maintaining effective controls over what exactly is passing through. According to data from customs authorities, seizures increased dramatically from 435 kilograms in 2014 to more than 27 tonnes in 2019, a historic record.<sup>66</sup>

Most of the cocaine trafficked from Santos Port, including into West Africa, is concealed inside containers of legal goods, especially sugar consignments.<sup>67</sup> Smaller quantities of cocaine hydrochloride have been found hidden inside container cooling structures and attached to the hulls of ships by divers.<sup>68</sup> Another common strategy is ‘hoisting’, whereby small boats approach the ship once it is at sea and the drug is loaded on with the help of crew members. Smaller volumes are also transported by mules on ships with passengers or cargo.

The port’s location is strategic – a mere 70 kilometres of highway connect it to São Paulo, the largest metropolis in the country – but its position is not the sole reason for Santos’ importance as an export point for cocaine. This has also been shaped by the entrenchment of the PCC in nearby São Paulo and at the port itself.<sup>69</sup>

The PCC’s involvement in the cocaine base paste retail market in Santos dates back to the early 2000s, when it adopted a quasi-regulatory role in the outskirts of the coastal city, promoting stability in the criminal order from below. Like almost all cities in São Paulo state, Santos experienced an important reduction in homicide rates during the 2000s. The ethnographic literature has since confirmed that these homicides fell thanks to the avoidance of revenge chains by the PCC’s informal justice system.<sup>70</sup>

The 2010s saw the group expand from this domestic cocaine base paste retail market into the transnational cocaine hydrochloride value chain. Its area of influence spread from the city out to the port as the PCC began to export for a range of affiliates, including the ‘Ndrangheta.

While some commentators have labelled the PCC’s Santos operation a monopoly, this masks the PCC’s coexistence with other networks.<sup>71</sup> In Santos city and port, as across its territories more broadly, the PCC coexists with other regimes, including the state, private companies based at the port as well as other illicit operators. Indeed, despite being a key player in trafficking cocaine out



The Port of Santos plays a vital role in cocaine trafficking from Brazil to West Africa. © FG Trade/Getty Images

of Santos, the PCC are by no means the only large operator.<sup>72</sup> But, as we have seen, the PCC does not seek to establish exclusive control in the territories under its influence. Even in the peripheral areas of São Paulo – where the group is strongest – individuals participate in the drugs trade independently of the PCC and are not compelled to share their profits with the group. They do, however, abide by its regulatory regime.

The fact that other operators use Santos Port is not, therefore, evidence of splintered influence, but rather is a function of the PCC's particular style of operating. The port's position as a critical node in the cocaine value chain is shaped not just because a key trafficking route flows through it, but because it is home to well-established logistics and highly integrated criminal networks. These logistics depend on thorough knowledge of police infrastructure and barriers, built up over the last 20 years.

West Africa's growth as a trans-shipment point for cocaine exported from Santos destined for Europe may in part have been the result of regulations introduced in 2016 that required every European-bound container to be scanned upon leaving the port (rather than only upon entry).<sup>73</sup> According to the drug enforcement division, this is when they 'began to notice that some ships leaving Brazil for Spain, England, France, the Netherlands and Belgium stopped off on the African coast'.<sup>74</sup>

A significant proportion of cocaine seizures in the Port of Santos between 2016 and July 2022 were destined for, or transited through, Africa, as shown in the Annex. Over 60% of these African shipments were either destined for, or shipped through, countries in West Africa. The growing prominence of Africa as a transit point was quickly recognized in Brazil with the 2016 ordinance superseded in 2019 by a new ordinance mandating the screening of all cargo destined for Europe and Africa – by 2022, all cargo leaving the port, regardless of destination, required inspection.<sup>75</sup>





## CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**T**he PCC's pivot from domestic retail markets to international cocaine exports, and its hold over the Port of Santos from 2015, has positioned the group as a central upstream player in cocaine markets in West Africa. As the international expansion of the PCC operation is a relatively recent phenomenon, its broader social and political effects will still take some years to be fully understood.

Pigeonholing the PCC as a simple domestic criminal gang ignores the significance of its transnational reach and particular organizational style. In the first place, it does not seek conflict with or between other criminal groups but instead looks to forge profitable alliances between the various international organizations involved in the value chain. Secondly, it exerts a powerful influence across a diverse range of illegal economies by fostering collaborative criminal networks that are bound together by a strict regulatory framework.

In this report, we have shown how a seemingly isolated carjacking in a Brazilian border town feeds into the international cocaine trade. But this is just one of many possible examples, as a multiplicity of crimes committed at all levels of the PCC's sprawling network converge in this same direction. The PCC represents a new generation of criminal organization, spread across myriad transnational illicit markets, and is likely to become ever more prominent in high-value international trafficking.

Already there are concerns that the PCC has begun to establish cells in Portugal and other European countries, although the true extent of its involvement there is unknown.<sup>76</sup> If true, it means the PCC is now positioned at both ends of the cocaine supply chain – creating not only a lusophone corridor but a spread web of illegal business into Europe. West Africa lies in between, poised to expand its role as a strategic transit point.

Given the focus of the report on the operations of the PCC, the following recommendations are primarily targeted at stakeholders within Brazil rather than West Africa.



Street view of a neighbourhood in São Paulo's periphery. © Alf Ribeiro/Shutterstock

- Challenging the PCC's local legitimacy is key to weakening the organization and halting its transnational expansion. Strengthening formal criminal justice systems, which would make the alternative regulatory frameworks offered by the PCC less attractive, is crucial. This includes, in particular, enhanced state prevention of, and successful investigation into, homicides that typically remain unsolved.
- Brazil's approach to imprisonment – including for petty drug offences – requires a review. As has been outlined in this report, widespread imprisonment of youth from marginalized communities in urban areas was central in enabling the PCC to build its influence. The PCC, and other criminal networks, continue to use prisons as spaces to establish connections and alliances. Indiscriminate imprisonment is a significant financial burden to the state and devastates the lives of many already marginalized youth.
- Finally, part of the PCC's mode of operations is reaching financial settlements with law enforcement officers. This undermines the extensive work of significant elements of the force to counter the impacts of criminal organizations. While steps taken to enhance transparency of regional law enforcement are to be lauded, greater emphasis on rooting out collusion with the PCC, and other criminal organizations, is required.





## ANNEX: COCAINE SEIZURES AT THE PORT OF SANTOS, 2016–2022

Date of seizure*	Weight (kg)	Final destination		Trans-shipment	
22/03/2016	110.46	Tin Can Island	Nigeria	Las Palmas/Canary Islands	Spain
02/09/2016	602	Unidentified Port	Tunisia	Gioia Tauro	Italy
18/10/2016	224.2	Abidjan	Côte d'Ivoire	Dakar	Senegal
07/03/2017	581.82	Unidentified Port	Djibouti	Antwerp	Belgium
12/04/2017	421	Praia	Cape Verde	Tanger-Med	Morocco
18/04/2017	212.38	Luanda	Angola	Algeciras	Spain
10/08/2017	584	Banjul	Gambia	Algeciras	Spain
14/08/2017	326	Banjul	Gambia	Algeciras	Spain
11/09/2017	109	Latakia	Syria	Tanger Med	Morocco
23/04/2018	344	Matadi Port	Republic of the Congo	Algeciras	Spain
09/05/2018	319	Tema	Ghana	Antwerp	Belgium
14/05/2018	327	Banjul	Gambia	Algeciras	Spain
10/09/2018	79	Las Palmas/Canary Islands	Spain	Hardcourt	Nigeria
17/09/2018	1 195.40	Abidjan	Côte d'Ivoire	Dakar	Senegal
31/10/2018	551	Tema	Ghana	Antwerp	Belgium
12/06/2019	699.95	Tema	Ghana	Antwerp	Belgium
07/11/2019	345.5	Tema	Ghana	Santa Cruz de Tenerife/ Canary Islands	Spain
26/11/2019	1 347.00	Tanger-Med	Morocco	////////	////////
21/05/2020	146	Unidentified Port	Côte d'Ivoire	Antwerp	Belgium
06/08/2020	219	Unidentified Port	Somalia	Gioia Tauro	Italy
15/12/2020	360	////////	Nigeria	Las Palmas/Canary Islands	Spain
20/01/2021	460	Tanger-Med	Morocco	////////	////////
23/02/2021	501	Tema	Ghana	Antwerp	Belgium
31/03/2021	24	Beirut	Lebanon	Tanger-Med	Morocco



Date of seizure*	Weight (kg)	Final destination		Trans-shipment	
23/07/2021	1 854.00	Tema	Ghana	////////	////////
20/08/2021	154.48	Lagos	Nigeria	////////	////////
20/08/2021	39.22	Lagos	Nigeria	////////	////////
20/08/2021	135.25	Lagos	Nigeria	////////	////////
18/09/2021	155	Lagos	Nigeria	////////	////////
28/12/2021	504	Tema	Ghana	////////	////////
29/12/2021	715	Durban	South Africa	////////	////////
08/03/2022	612	Abidjan	Côte d'Ivoire	Tenerife/Canary Islands	Spain
27/05/2022	172	Unidentified Port	Cameroon	Unidentified Port	Angola
30/06/2022	498	Toamasina	Madagascar	Antwerp	Belgium
07/07/2022	968	////////	Lebanon	Tanger-Med	Morocco

SOURCE: Santos Customs, 2022 (\*data as of 7 July 2022)



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# GLOBAL INITIATIVE

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
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