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SHIP SECURITY ADVISORY NO. 08-25

To: Owners/Operators, Masters, Company Security Officers, Recognized Security Organizations

Subject: DRUG TRAFFICKING FROM SOUTH AMERICA

Date: 21 July 2025

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) Maritime Administrator (the “Administrator”) hereby draws attention to the ongoing and escalating prevalence of commercial vessels being used to transport illicit drugs, particularly from South America.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 Global instability, including conflicts and economic disruptions, has compounded the social, economic, and security costs of the world drug problem, empowering organized crime groups and pushing drug use to historically high levels.
- 1.2 While the Coronavirus pandemic initially disrupted some trafficking routes, illicit drug trafficking on maritime and waterway routes has since accelerated in Europe, Latin America, North Africa, and Southeast Asia.
- 1.3 There has been significant growth in the size of drug shipments, with organized criminal gangs becoming more innovative, including the use of advanced concealment methods and expanded routes. Although long-range [narco-submarines](#) continue to be used for transatlantic crossings, most illicit narcotics, particularly cocaine, are smuggled via commercial ships.

2.0 Drug Trafficking Trends

- 2.1 According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [World Drug Report 2025](#), cocaine production reached a new record high, with global seizures also at unprecedented levels in 2023 and 2024. Preliminary data indicates that quantities seized in seaports increased by over 20% in recent years and the global use of illicit drugs continues to rise.
- 2.2 Colombia remains the largest grower of coca leaf, accounting for around 70% of global cultivation, followed by Peru and Bolivia. Cocaine traffickers are expanding into new markets in Asia and Africa, with violence spreading from Latin America to Western Europe as organized crime groups, including from the Western Balkans, increase their influence.

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- 2.3 It is estimated that over 90% of the world's cocaine is smuggled by sea, with record production levels leading to larger shipments and more sophisticated tactics.

3.0 High-risk Countries and Ports

- 3.1 Port operations in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean regions remain subject to rigorous precautionary measures and vigilance. Larger ports continue to be attractive transit points due to the quick movement of products, with smuggling volume proportional to port size. Based on recent seizure data, high-risk countries for cocaine trafficking include Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Argentina. Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, and Lebanon remain hotspots for heroin trafficking.

3.2 Brazil

Organized criminal gangs continue to target Brazil's ports, with a shift toward northern ports like Manaus, Salvador, Vila do Conde (Barcarena), Pecem, and Suape, in addition to southern hotspots such as Santos, Paranaguá, Itajai/Navegantes, Rio Grande, and São Francisco do Sul. Drug smugglers are increasingly targeting bulk carriers at northern ports, using hiding places on decks.

3.3 Colombia

- 3.3.1 Colombian authorities remain vigilant, frequently conducting onboard and underwater searches. Underwater inspections (UWIs) are mandatory at certain ports, including:

- .1 Cartagena (Ecopetrol Terminal);
- .2 La Guajira (Puerto Bolivar);
- .3 Riohacha (Puerto Brisa); and
- .4 Santa Marta (Puerto Drummond, Puerto Nuevo, Ecopetrol Terminal).

- 3.3.2 In Buenaventura, where UWIs are not mandatory, hiring private companies for inspections upon arrival and departure is recommended. The effectiveness of these measures has influenced Peru and Ecuador to adopt similar practices.

3.4 Ecuador

Ecuador has become a primary exit point, with record seizures of 252 tons in 2024. The port of Guayaquil is a major hotspot, with violence escalating due to competition among trafficking groups. Vessels calling at Ecuadorian ports should implement heightened security measures to mitigate these risks.

4.0 Drug Trafficking Methods

4.1 Over the past decade, container shipping remains the most common form of trafficking into Europe, with less than 2% of the 750 million annual containers inspected globally. Traffickers have adapted with innovative methods, including chemical concealment to evade detection by scanners and dogs.

4.2 Specific strategies include:

- .1 attaching "torpedoes" or "parasite" packages to the ship's hull using scuba divers;
- .2 inserting bags into sea chests or other underwater structures;
- .3 collaboration with local stevedores, crew members, or port officials;
- .4 hiding drugs in remote locations onboard (e.g., cabins, funnels, decks, storerooms, or engine rooms);
- .5 concealing drugs within sealed containers before loading, often by breaking seals and replacing them (rip-on/rip-off method), sometimes involving terminal operators; and
- .6 the use of narco-submarines for direct transoceanic shipments to Europe and beyond.

4.3 For details on drug trafficking methods, click on the InSight Crime infographic below:



5.0 Preventative Measures

5.1 International Maritime Organization (IMO) Guidelines

Operators and Masters of vessels trading to and from high-risk ports should familiarize themselves with, and ensure their Ship Security Plans take into account, the IMO's *Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Suppression of the Smuggling of Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals on Ships Engaged in International Maritime Traffic* (IMO Resolution [MSC.228\(82\)](#) and IMO Resolution [FAL.9\(34\)](#)).¹

5.2 International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code

5.2.1 Under the ISPS Code,² port authorities, shipping companies, and seafarers must prevent unauthorized access, implement security plans, and ensure training. Best practices for high-risk ports include:

- .1 conducting voyage-specific threat assessments via local port agents;
- .2 reviewing Ship Security Plans, limiting access to single entry points, registering visitors and packages, placing watchmen in work areas, monitoring CCTV, illuminating accessible areas, and maintaining vigilant lookouts for suspicious activity (e.g., small boats or divers);
- .3 advising crew against carrying packages from ashore;
- .4 performing full vessel searches post-cargo operations and requesting comprehensive inspections, including underwater hull checks, if suspicion arises; and
- .5 contacting P&I correspondents for guards, sniffer dogs, and UWIs, focusing on bilge keels, sea chests, thrusters, anodes, and rudder compartments.

5.3 Refer to NorthStandard's [comprehensive list of preventative measures](#) to implement before arriving at port and during a port call.

6.0 Incident Reporting

6.1 Any attempt or suspected attempt of drug smuggling must be reported to the Administrator by submitting a Report of Contraband Smuggling ([MI-109-6](#)) to marsec@register-iri.com. Inform local authorities, vessel agents, and P&I correspondents. If drugs are found, do not touch them; photograph or video the area, and seal it off.

¹ Note: Amendments to these guidelines are under development, with a target completion year of 2027.

² See RMI Marine Notice [2-011-16](#), *International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code*

7.0 References

- .1 RMI Marine Notice [2-011-16](#), *International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code*
- .2 IMO Resolution [MSC.228\(82\)](#) and IMO Resolution [FAL.9\(34\)](#), *Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Suppression of the Smuggling of Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals on Ships Engaged in International Maritime Traffic*
- .3 International Chamber of Shipping, [Drug Trafficking and Drug Abuse on Board Ship: Guidelines for Owners and Masters on Preparation, Prevention, Protection and Response](#)
- .4 UNODC, [World Drug Report 2025](#)
- .5 World Customs Organization, [Illicit Trade Report 2023](#)
- .6 InSight Crime Investigation, [Hide and Seek: How Drug Traffickers Get Creative at Sea](#)
- .7 InSight Crime Investigation, [The Cocaine Pipeline to Europe](#)
- .8 Britania, [North/Northeast Brazil Maritime Drug Trafficking](#)
- .9 Steamship Mutual, [Drug Smuggling and Preventative Measures](#)
- .10 NorthStandard, [The evolving threat of illicit drug trafficking at sea](#)