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DRUG SMUGGLING IN THE BRAZILIAN PORTS 2024



CIRCULAR 002/25

IN 2024, MORE THAN 5 TONS OF COCAINE WERE SEIZED AT THE PORT OF SANTOS

DESPITE A DECLINE IN VOLUMES INTERCEPTED AT THE SANTOS DOCK, THE FEDERAL REVENUE SERVICE TIGHTENS EXPORT CARGO SCANNING RULES

More than 5.2 tons of cocaine were seized in 2024 at the Port of Santos. This figure represents the sum of 13 enforcement operations carried out by the Federal Revenue Service at the Santos dock. While drug traffickers seek new ways to conceal criminal exports, authorities are tightening regulations and using technology to combat crime.

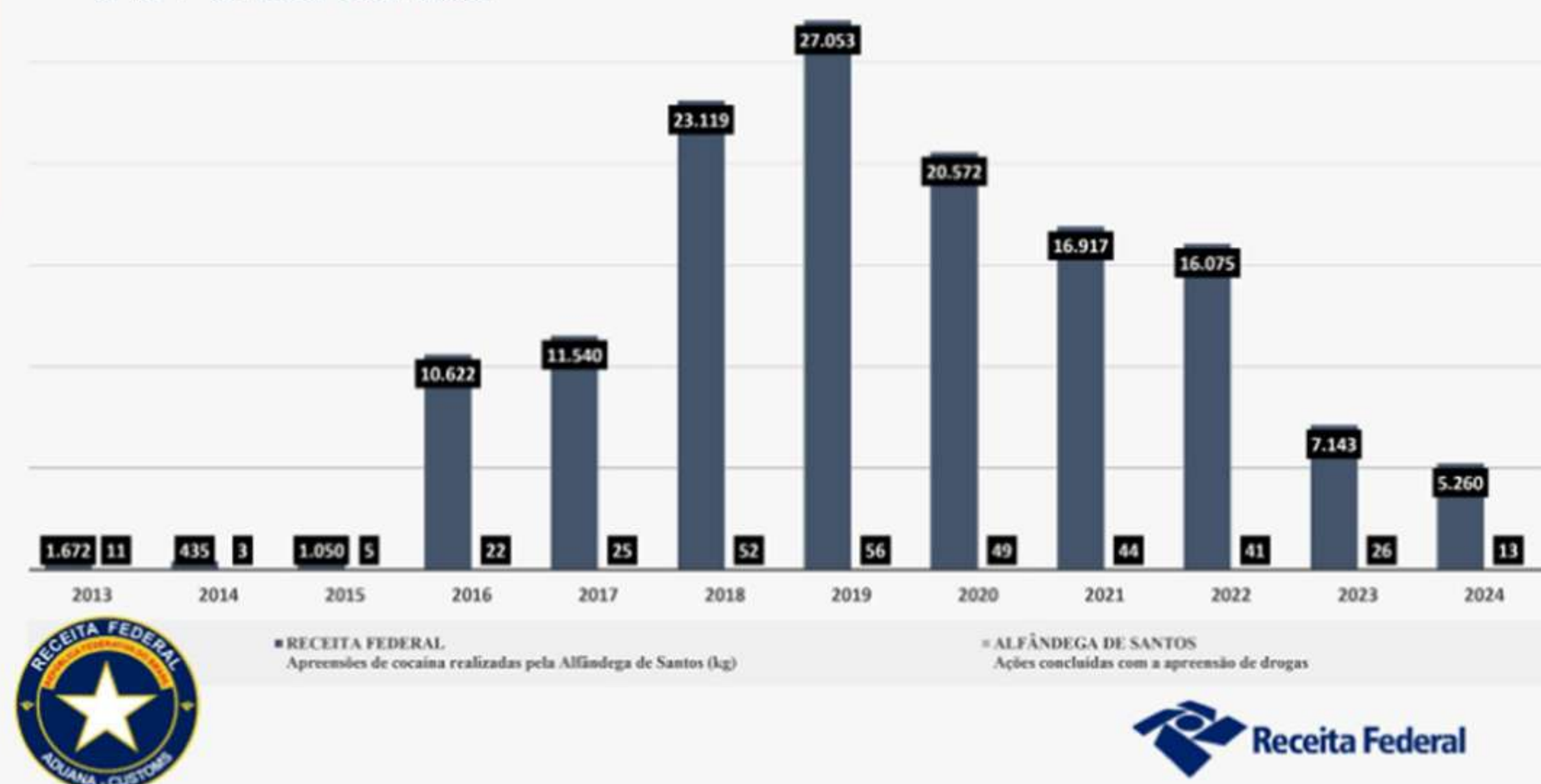
According to the Federal Revenue Service, from January to December, 5,260 kilograms of cocaine were seized during Surveillance, Repression, and Inspection actions at the Santos port complex. Although significant, given the high value of the illicit cargo, the volume seized has been decreasing over the years.

In 2023, 7,143 kilograms of the drug were intercepted at the Port of Santos. In 2022, the figure was 16,000 kilograms, indicating that criminals are increasingly using other ports to ship drugs to the international market.

"We continue to seize a significant quantity of drugs due to the characteristics of the Port of Santos itself—a hub port with vessels departing for the main destinations sought by traffickers (Europe and Africa) and with a high volume of container and bulk cargo movements," highlighted Richard Neubarth, the Customs delegate of the Federal Revenue Service at the Port of Santos.

FEDERAL REVENUE

Cocaine seizures at the Port of Santos



SANTOS CUSTOMS

COCAINE SEIZURES EM 2024



In October 2024, in the largest drug bust at the Port of Santos, 1,201 kilograms of cocaine were seized hidden in a shipment of scrap metal. The cargo was destined for the Port of Malaga in Spain.

The same route would be taken by a coffee shipment in which 763.7 kilograms of cocaine were discovered in October. In November, 491 kilograms of the drug were seized in a mortar shipment. This cargo was destined for Sierra Leone, Africa.

Other cases also drew attention due to the volume seized. In July, 882 kilograms of cocaine were found hidden in a sugar shipment. This cargo was destined for a port in Guinea but would transship at the Port of Antwerp in Belgium.

At the beginning of December, Federal Revenue agents seized 221 kilograms of cocaine in a frozen ginger shipment. The narcotics were bound for the Port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands but were intercepted before leaving the Port of Santos.

DRUG SEIZURE THE PORT OF SANTOS 2024

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
08/02/24	Bathroom Ceiling	Sugar	Not Available	Nigeria	31
20/03/24	Container on the pier	Orange juice barrels	Not Available	Sidney	46
02/04/24	Vessel-Seachest	Not Available	Not Available	Germany	211
26/04/24	Bagpack on board the vessel with stevedore	Not Available	Not Available	South Africa	10
05/06/24	Container on the pier	Paper	Not Available	Europe	270
24/06/24	Container on the pier	Refrigerated Juice	Not Available	Roterdam	44
02/07/24	Container on the pier	Sugar	Antwerp	Guinea	882
04/07/24	Container on the pier	Coffee Beans	Antwerp	Gotemburg	380
15/07/24	Terminal	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	15
24/08/24	Vessel-Seachest	Not Available	Not Available	Europe	114
30/08/24	Vessel-Seachest	Not Available	Not Available	Europe	124
20/09/24	Terminal	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	110
03/10/24	Vessel-Seachest	Not Available	Not Available	Europe	114
14/10/24	Container on the pier	Coffee	Not Available	Europe	792.5
21/10/24	Container on the pier	Scrap	Not Available	Malaga(Spain)	1.201
07/11/24	Container on the pier	Frozen Açai	Morocco	Portugal	605
12/11/24	Container on the pier	Sugar in Bags	South Africa	Ghana	186
27/11/24	Containers on the pier	Mortar	Not Available	Sierra Leone	491
06/12/24	Container on the pier	Not Available	Not Available	Netherlands	221
18/12/24	Vessel-Seachest	Not Available	Not Available	Morocco	134.4

Total: 5.982

SOURCES: FEDERAL POLICE, FEDERAL REVENUE, GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION SERVICES, MEDIA, INDEPENDENT CONSULTANTS.

Remark : The total quantity of cocaine seizures varies based on data collected from Federal Revenue and exclusively includes seizures reported by the Federal Police.



MODUS OPERANDI

According to the Customs chief at the Port of Santos, the 2024 seizures uncovered drugs hidden in various ways, including in frozen shipments. In these cases, the narcotics were concealed within the cargo or the structure of refrigerated containers. Cocaine packages were also frequently found in the sea chest and in goods such as sugar, coffee, paper, and mortar, as reported by anti-trafficking teams.

Among the drug's destinations, the Federal Revenue Service identified Australia, France, the Netherlands, Guinea, Sweden, Turkey, Spain, Portugal, Ghana, and Sierra Leone. Two cases involved drugs destined for the Port of Sydney in Australia, while in two others, the narcotics were bound for the Port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

CHALLENGES

"With the intensification of inspections, traffickers attempt to hide drugs more carefully, making detection more challenging by sending smaller quantities, using new concealment methods, and so forth," explained Neubarth.

The delegate stated that the Federal Revenue Service's primary goal is to ensure the Port of Santos is used exclusively for legitimate operations while maintaining its efficiency. At the same time, it works to secure these operations by monitoring thousands of containers in import and export processes, as well as transit and bulk cargo.

In the case of exports, thousands of Single Export Declarations (DUE) and container transportation documents are analyzed daily, filtering high-risk cases. The selection and blocking of cargo occur after a detailed analysis of the entire export operation, monitoring images, non-invasive inspection images (X-ray), and information from other customs agencies (domestic and international). This risk management work is carried out by teams of specialists from the Federal Revenue Service in Santos, who work on both import and export activities.



HIDE AND SEEK: DRUG TRAFFICKERS GET CREATIVE AT SEA

1. Anchor

Drugs have been stored in the compartment where the anchor is kept, but this maritime tool has also been used to throw them overboard.

2. Containers

Traditionally, drug traffickers have smuggled illicit substances in among supplies onboard, often in the ship's principal hold or hull.

4. Funnel

A far less common method used by smugglers has been to conceal drugs close to a ship's funnel.

3. Captain's Cabin

Drugs have previously been found among the personal belongings of captains.

5. Vents

Traffickers have been known to weld packages of drugs to vents below deck, which can affect a ship's operating systems in some cases.

6. Water Inlets

Divers working for drug traffickers have used water inlets to subtly conceal drugs.

7. The Hull

Smugglers have been searching for a watertight method to evade authorities, increasingly concealing drugs within or attached to ship hulls.

8. Fuel Tank

Drugs have been commonly smuggled in car fuel tanks, but what about ships?

9. Torpedoes

Traffickers have been attaching so-called 'torpedoes' to ship hulls, allowing them to cut away illicit loads at high sea, if necessary.

10. Engine Room

Illicit substances have been seized from ship engine rooms occasionally, to which a select few have access.

11. Propellor

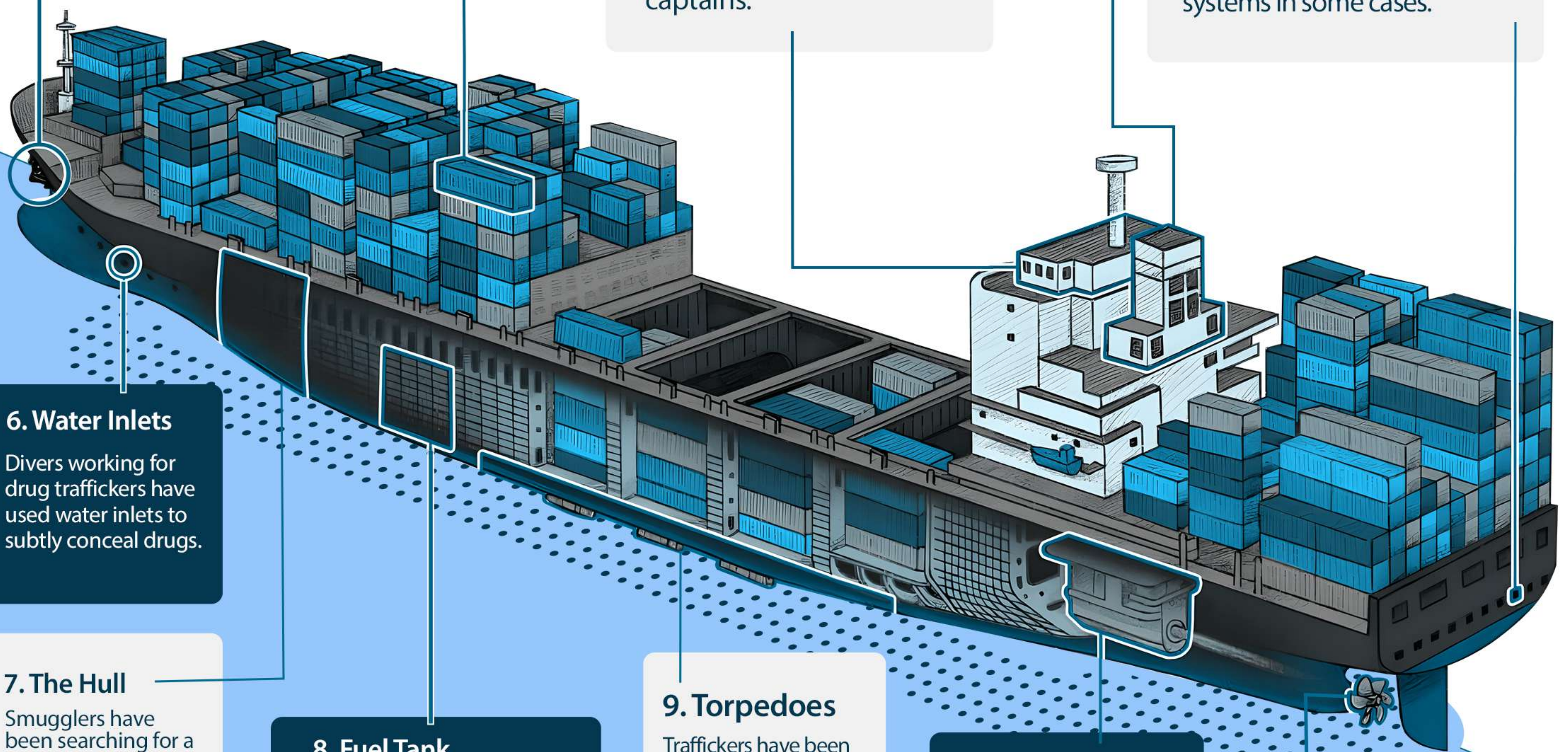
Smugglers have been known to use a vessel's propellers to conceal drugs in a rather unexpected place.

12. Store Room

A ship's sail store room is out of bounds for most, but traffickers have found a way to use it to their advantage.

13. Fishing Nets

Fishing Nets have been used to bring drugs aboard ahead of departure.





NEW REGULATION

According to Neubarth, 2024 did not see the introduction of new technologies to combat drug trafficking. However, existing systems were enhanced.

“We can highlight the transmission of information collected in control systems through the Application Programming Interface (API) of the Single Foreign Trade Portal, called API-Recintos, and the issuance of ordinances mandating container scanning for specific destinations beyond Europe and Africa,” explained the delegate. Based on international statistics, risk management, and information exchange, inspection on the Mediterranean route—at the border between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia—was intensified. This was made possible by the issuance of Ordinance ALF/STS No. 188 on December 20, 2024.

The regulation mandates the scanning of export cargo bound for the following destinations: Australia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

“The selection of these destinations was based on international statistics and risk analysis. The Ordinance made minor changes. All routes to Europe and Africa were already being scanned. It merely confirmed that countries along the Mediterranean route—on the border between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia—should be considered part of the ‘Europe route,’ as they are frequent destinations for transshipments and cargo transfers to target countries for drug trafficking,” explained the Customs delegate at the Port of Santos.



INTEGRATION

The Federal Revenue Service in Santos works collaboratively with other national agencies, other units of the Federal Revenue Service at Brazilian ports, and exchanges information with customs agencies from other countries, as well as reports from the World Customs Organization (WCO) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

It is worth noting that each seizure may result in the opening of an investigation or add information to ongoing ones by the Federal Police.



There is no record of drug seizure in 2024. On April 2024 the Federal Police launched an Operation with the aim of dismantling a criminal organization specializing in international drug trafficking by sea, through the Port of Rio Grande. Federal police officers, with the support of the Federal Revenue Service, the Navy and the Military Brigade, carried out 12 preventive arrest warrants and 26 search and seizure warrants in the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná. The actions also rely on international police cooperation, with the participation of Europol and the German Police to execute an arrest warrant abroad.

The investigation began in 2022 after receiving information that a group with members from the city of Rio Grande and the states of Santa Catarina and Paraná were carrying out activities related to drug trafficking from the Port of Rio Grande. After investigations and surveys carried out, the Federal Police verified that the group was sending cocaine to other countries, using divers to hide the drug in the sea chest of the vessels.

Warrants issued: Rio Grande/RS : 5 ; Florianópolis/SC: 1; Curitiba/PR: 1; Paranaguá/PR: 3; Bremerhaven/Germany: 1.



PORTS OF ITAJAÍ, NAVEGANTES, ITAPOÁ AND IMBITUBA

STATE OF SANTA CATARINA

The main ports of the state of Santa Catarina, in southern Brazil, are the Itajaí and Navegantes Port Complex, the Port of Itapoá, and the Port of Imbituba. In 2024, the Port of Itapoá had three drug seizures in containers and one case within a vessel's compartment, amounting to 1,656 tons of cocaine (compared to two cases in 2023, amounting to 0,098 tons).

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
30/01/24	Container on the pier	Chemical Products	Morrococ	Antwerp(Belgium)	58
02/07/24	Container on the pier	Frozen Chicken	Not Available	Spain	33
04/11/24	Refrigerated Containers (Hull Structure of Container)	Pork Meat	Not Available	China	20
12/12/24	Vessel's compartment	Not Available	Not Available	Morrococ	1.021

Total: 1.656

The **Port of Imbituba** had just one drug seizure case in 2024, similar to the previous year, involving the sea chest. In 2024, 0.124 tons were seized, while in 2023, 0.300 tons were seized.

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
23/02/24	Vessel-Seachest	Not Available	Not Available	South Africa	124

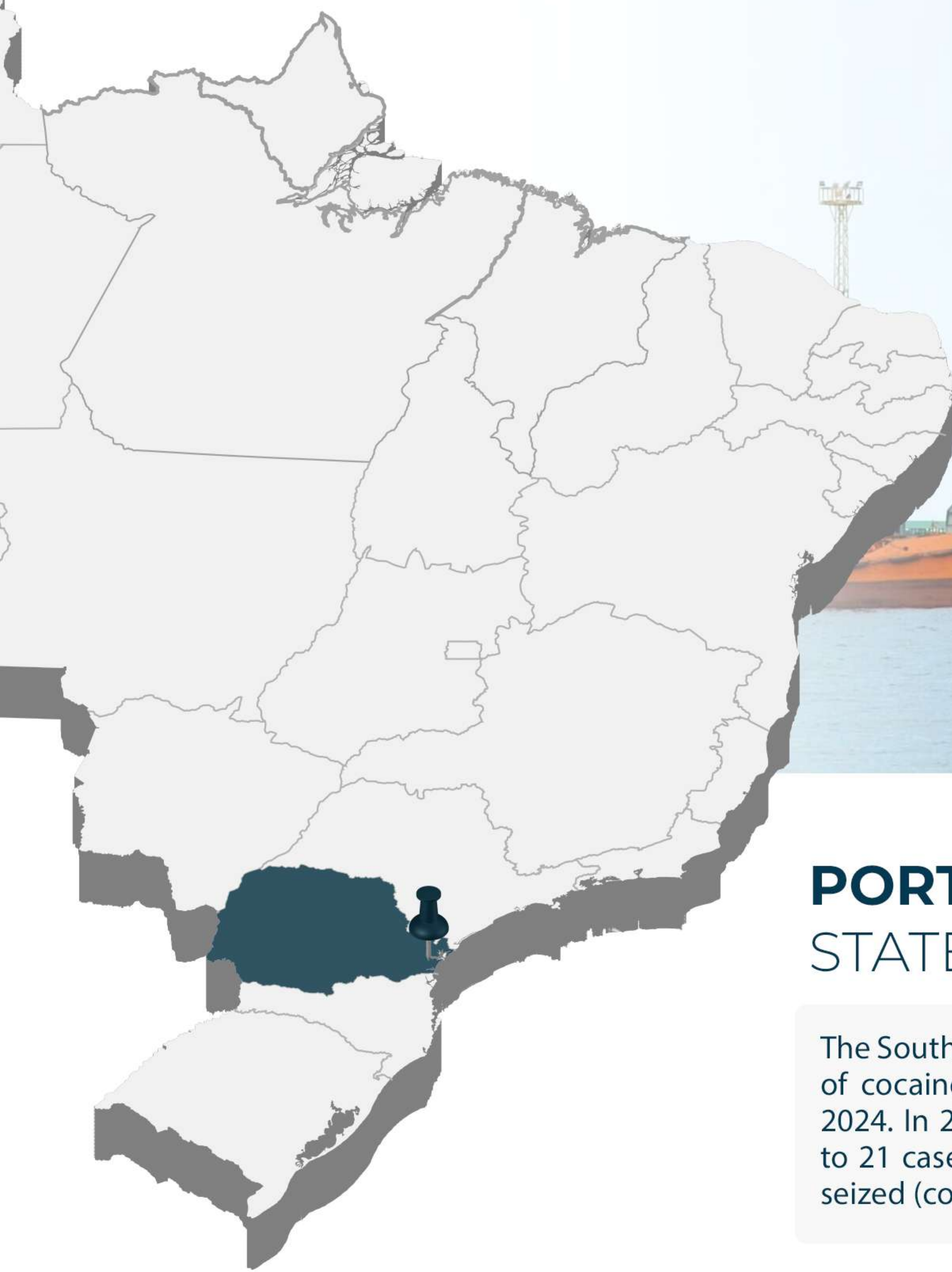
Total: 124

The **Port of Navegantes** had just one drug seizure in container in 2024 amounting to 0,438 ton, compared to four drug seizures in 2023, amounting to 1,56 ton.

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
11/10/24	Container on the pier	Frozen Ducks, Birds	Not Available	Hong Kong	438

Total: 438



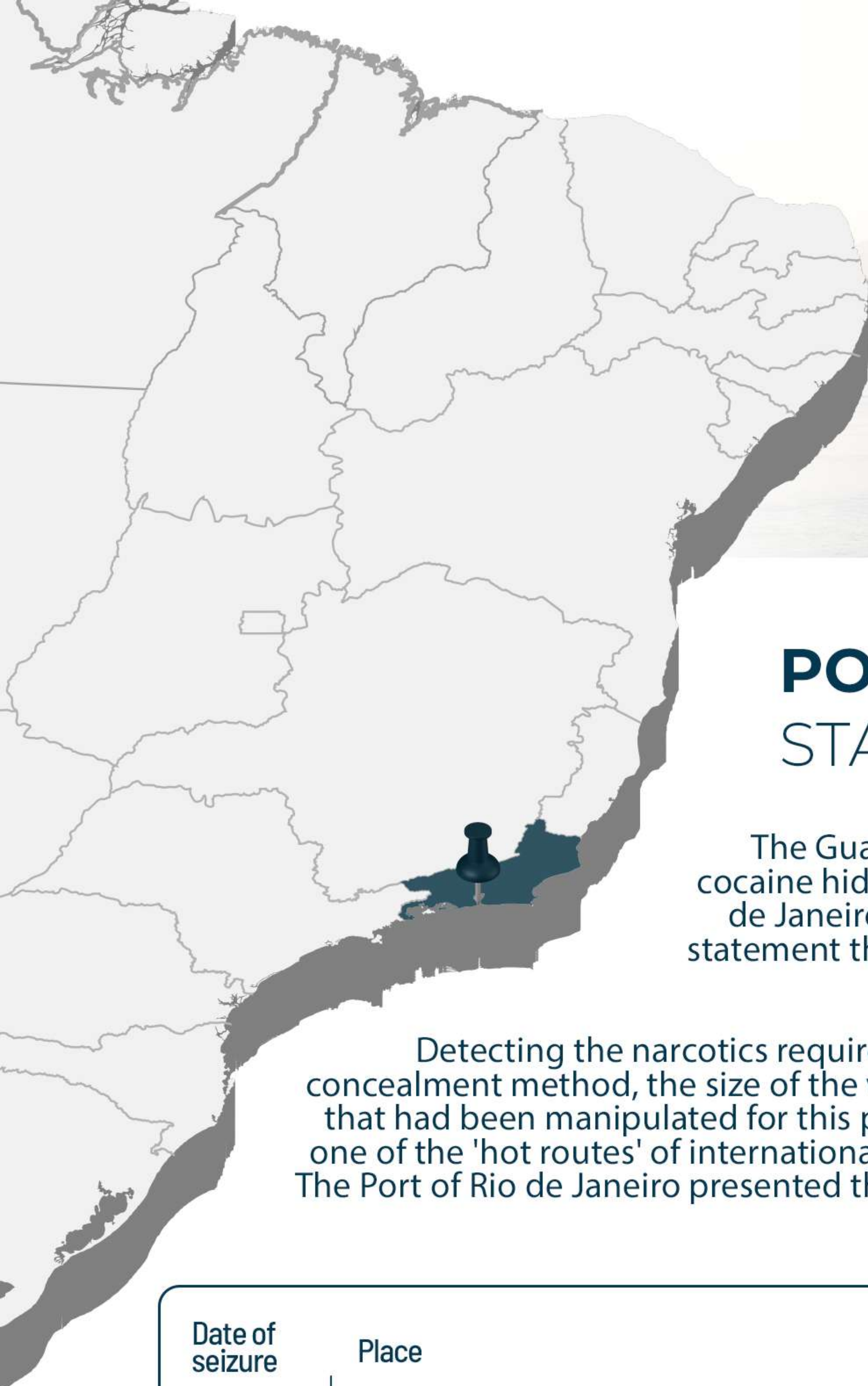


PORT OF PARANAGUÁ STATE OF PARANÁ

The Southern Port of Paranaguá experienced various cases of cocaine transportation to Europe between 2019 and 2024. In 2024, drug seizures reached 20 cases (compared to 21 cases in 2023), amounting to 2.301 tons of cocaine seized (compared to 1.81 tons in 2023).

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
09/01/24	Refrigerated Containers (Hull Structure of Container)	Frozen Meat	Not Available	Las Palmas	22,5
13/01/24	Refrigerated Containers (Hull Structure of Container)	Frozen Chicken Meat	Las Palmas	Rotterdam	36
14/01/24	Vessel-Seachest	Not Available	Not Available	Africa	75
29/01/24	Refrigerated Containers (Hull Structure of Container)	Frozen Chicken Meat	Not Available	Moracco	22
08/02/24	Container on the pier	Woden Plywcod	Not Available	Antwerp	415
07/05/24	Container on the pier- Two man with backpacks to rip on-rip off	Not Available	Not Available	Las Palmas	34
08/05/24	Refrigerated Containers (Hull Structure of Container) coming from Belgium	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	51.5
29/05/24	Container on the pier- Two man with bags to rip on-rip off	Not Available	Not Available	Europe	34,6
10/06/24	Refrigerated Containers (Hull Structure of Container)	Frozen Chicken Meat	Not Available	Netherlands	46
10/06/24	Refrigerated Containers (Hull Structure of Container)	Frozen Chicken Meat	Not Available	South Africa	40
24/06/24	Two Containers o the pier	Not Available	South Africa	Liba	100
25/06/24	Vessel deck bag	Not Available	Not Available	Italy	27
02/07/24	Refrigerated Containers (Hull Structure of Container)	Frozen Chicken Meat	Not Ayailable	Netherlands	30,5
12/07/24	Refrigerated Containers (Hull Structure of Container) coming from Valencia[Spain]	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	71,5
05/08/24	Container on the pier	Frozen lemon juice barrels	Not Available	Spain	315
14/08/24	Container on the pier (backpacks inside)	Woden plywood	Not Available	France	56,5
23/08/24	Container on the pier	Cellulose	Spain	Lebanon	171
23/08/24	Container on the pier	Coffee	Not Available	Europe	217
14/11/24	Container on the pier	Pallets	Not Available	Europe	209
19/12/24	Teninal (false bottom truck)	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	327

Total: 2.301



PORT OF RIO DE JANEIRO

STATE OF RIO DE JANEIRO

The Guardia Civil and the National Police of Spain in a joint operation, seized 2 tons of cocaine hidden in the ballast tank of an Italian-flagged merchant ship that came from Rio de Janeiro, at the port of Santa Cruz de Tenerife. The Spanish Guardia Civil reported in a statement that during the operation carried out on December 18th, 2023, six people were arrested, five of whom were crew members of the ship.

Detecting the narcotics required an exhaustive inspection of the merchant ship for over 15 hours due to the concealment method, the size of the vessel, and the difficulty of the search. The drugs were hidden in a ballast tank that had been manipulated for this purpose. The merchant ship came from Rio de Janeiro and was traveling along one of the 'hot routes' of international drug trafficking, with its next destination being the port of Marseille, France. The Port of Rio de Janeiro presented three cases (five cases in 2023) of drug seizures on containers/terminal in 2024, amounting to 2,669 tons (1,747 tons in 2023).

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
27/03/24	Container on the pier	Coffee	Not Available	Belgium	1.300
17/07/24	Container on the pier	Sea Salt	Not Available	Belgium	330
29/11/24	Vessel-Seachest	Mortar	Not Available	Sierra Leone	1.039

Total: 2.669



PORT OF SALVADOR

STATE OF BAHIA

The port of Salvador presented three cases of drug seizures on vessel/container/truck in 2024 , amounting to 3,469 tons.

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
10/03/24	Fishing Boat alongside Aratu	Fishing	Not Available	Not Available	1.800
17/10/24	Terminal (false bottom truck)	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	550
17/10/24	Container on the pier	Cotton	Not Available	Algeciras	15
05/11/24	Container on the pier	Iron Ore	Not Available	Belgium	969

3.469





PORT OF FORTALEZA STATE OF CEARÁ

Federal Revenue, in joint action with the Federal Police, seized, on November 13, 2023 in Porto do Pecém/CE, in the Metropolitan Region of Fortaleza, 600 kg of cocaine that were hidden in a load of fiber kiosks for export. The joint action began following a risk analysis by the Federal Revenue Service and routine inspection, in November 2023, of shipments destined for the city of Sydney, Australia, described as beach kiosks, where cocaine was found on the walls and floors of each of the units.

Federal Revenue officers and PF agents removed the illicit drugs and sent the load to the intended address in Sydney. Australian police were informed by Brazilian authorities. The shipment arrived in Australia via sea freight on February 8, 2024 and was collected and delivered to an industrial storage warehouse in the suburb of North Rocks, in western Sydney, on Wednesday March 6, 2024, and was accompanied by Australian police, at which time a 25-year-old Dutchman and a 49-year-old Australian were arrested. The seizure was not publicized at the time so as not to hinder the Australian Federal Police's investigations. In 2024 only one case (three cases in 2023) of drug seizure of cocaine found at a vessel's seachest destined to Barcelona, amounting to 0,029 tons (0,339 tons).

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
15/11/24	Vessel-Seachest	Not Available	Not Available	Barcelona	29

Total: 29



PORT OF SÃO LUIS STATE OF MARANHÃO

In 2024 the port of São Luis presented one case of drug seizure. The cocaine was found at the vessel's boatswain's store, destined to Cartagena(Spain) amounting to 0,5 tons.

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
05/10/24	Vessel's boatswain's store	Soya Beans	Not Available	Cartagena(Spain)	500

Total: 500



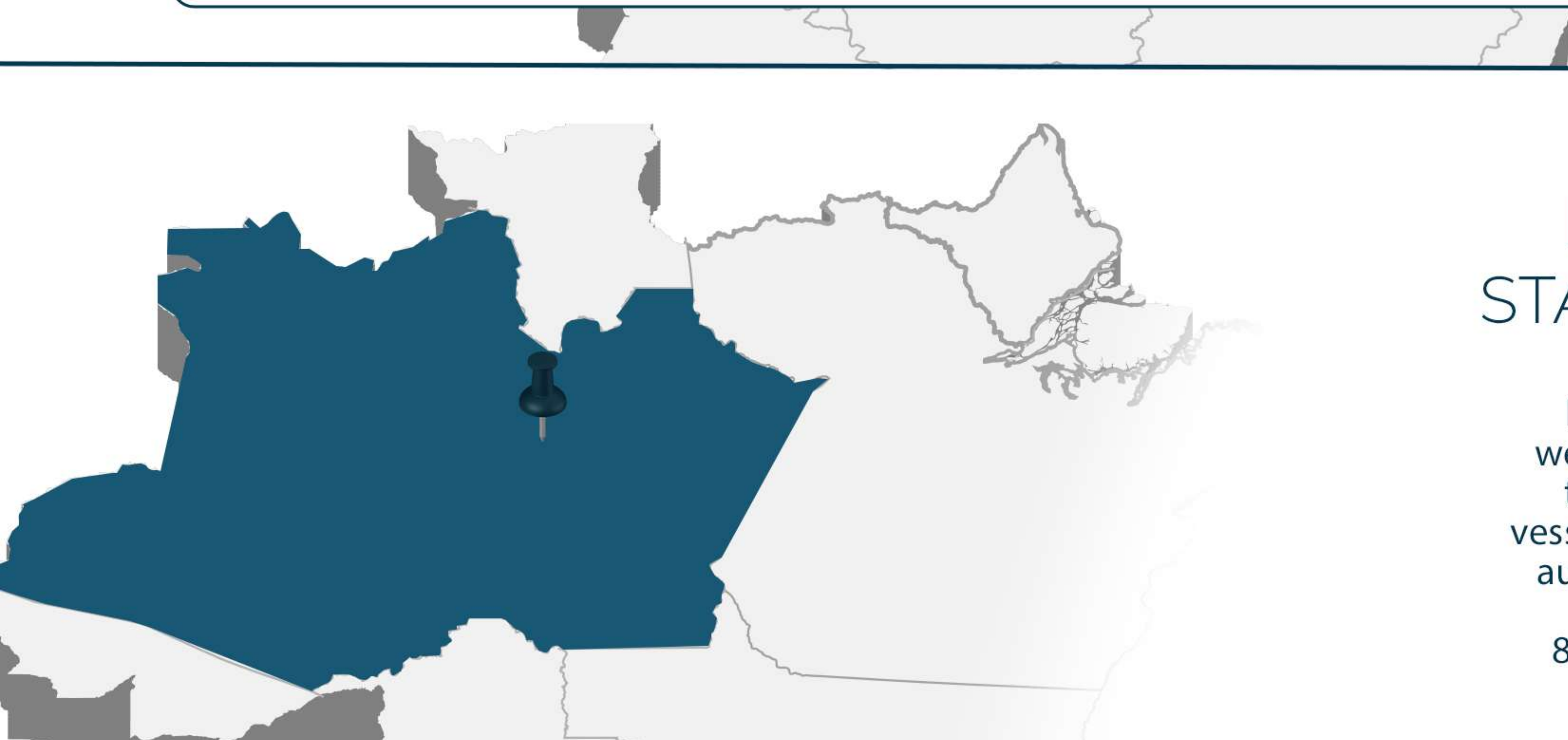


PORT OF BELÉM STATE OF PARÁ

In 2024, there were three drug seizures. One was found on the vessel's seachest, while the remaining two were on a fishing boat and an oil barge. The total quantity of cocaine seized amounted to 3,778 tons.

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
13/04/24	Fishing Boat (near Tocantins river and city of Abaetetuba)	Fishing	Not Available	Not Available	3.200
25/05/24	Oil Barge	Ballast	Not Available	Not Available	539
13/09/24	Vessel's seachest (livestock carrier)	Cow	Not Available	Europe	39

Total: 3,778

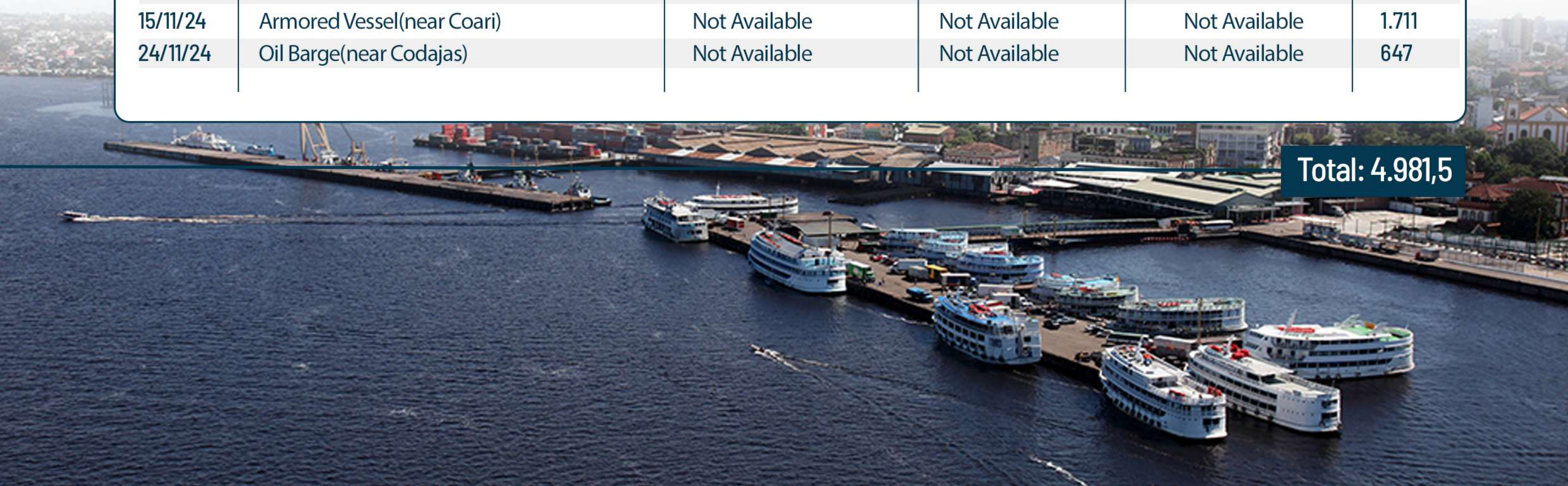


PORT OF MANAUS STATE OF AMAZONAS

In Manaus, seven cases of drug seizures were recorded, totaling almost 5 tons. On two occasions, traffickers used armored vessels. There was a confrontation with the authorities, and the criminals abandoned the location. These incidents represent 84.53% of the amount of cocaine seized.

Date of seizure	Place	Cargo	Intermediare Destination	Final Destination	Weight (Kg)
10/02/24	Boat	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	18
05/05/24	Armored vessel	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	2.500
13/06/24	Boat	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	10,50
20/07/24	Passenger Boat	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	77
05/08/24	Boat	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	18
15/11/24	Armored Vessel(near Coari)	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	1.711
24/11/24	Oil Barge(near Codajas)	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	647

Total: 4.981,5



NEW TRENDS AND OLD CHALLENGES

Every year we realize how drug smuggling is a complex and challenging issue. New strategies that traffickers are constantly developing and new methods to evade detection are always noticed. Criminal organizations build submarines, armored vessels and frequently change their methods to insert drugs on board the vessels and terminals. On the other hand the Governments and local authorities use sophisticated equipments and technologies to combat drug smuggling.

In Brazil's north region, where the major ports of São Luis, Belém, and Manaus are located, there are indeed significant challenges in monitoring and tracking all the vessels. The vast and often remote areas make it difficult to maintain effective surveillance. Additionally, Brazil's triple frontiers with neighboring countries that are also combatting drug trafficking add another layer of complexity to border control efforts.

"An important aspect is that drug trafficking in the Brazilian Amazon continues to have consequences not only for public security in the region, but also has a significant impact on the environment and local communities. Several studies have shown that drug trafficking is associated with deforestation, river contamination and loss of biodiversity in the region (UNODC, 2022). Furthermore, drug trafficking has a negative impact on the local economy by promoting corruption, violence, lack of economic opportunities, social instability and the presence of illegal armed groups according to the Brazilian Centre for Studies on Drugs and Community Social Development " state CDESC report on Drug Trafficking in Amazon 2024.

POSSIBLE DRUG TRAFFICKING ROUTES IN RIVERS IN THE AMAZON REGION SOURCE:



Source: CDESC report 2024.

"Regarding cocaine trafficking, criminal organizations mainly travel along the Amazon/Solimões river, sailing from Peru, entering Brazil through Tabatinga and passing through several municipalities in the state of Amazonas and Pará, with different destinations and forms of trafficking. The presence of cocaine in hydrochloride and base paste format was also reported. The drug reaches the Atlantic Ocean via the Amazon River" state CDESC report on Drug Trafficking in Amazon 2024.

COMMON STRATEGIES USED BY CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS

Drugs are often concealed in hidden compartments within containers or the vessel itself. These compartments can be in the hull, rudders, anchors, propellers, and vents. Divers attach bags of drugs to the sea chests or other underwater parts of the vessel while it is docked or at the anchorage area.

Drugs are also hidden inside sealed containers before loading. Sometimes, traffickers break container seals, hide drugs inside, and then replace the seals (rip on -rip off). Packages of drugs are buried inside bulk cargo, allowing large amounts of illegal substances to be transported discreetly.

Smaller vessels like fishing boats and private yachts are used to blend in with regular maritime traffic and operate in areas less scrutinized by authorities, like Brazil's North region. The semi-submersible or fully submersible vessels are built specifically for drug trafficking. They are designed to evade radar and sonar detection and can carry several tons of narcotics.



Image for illustrative purposes only



PREVENTIVE MEASURES

The vessels can implement several measures to prevent drug smuggling, such as:

- Conducting thorough inspections of the vessel before arriving at ports known for drug smuggling activities. This includes checking hidden compartments, cargo holds, and other areas where drugs might be concealed.
- Implementing strict access controls to prevent unauthorized personnel from boarding the vessel. This includes using security cameras, alarms, and regular patrols.
- Training the crew on the latest smuggling tactics and how to identify suspicious activities. The importance of reporting any unusual behaviours;
- Check with the Club and the local P&I Correspondent, the background of the intended port of arrival. Working closely with local authorities and port officials to share information and receive updates on potential threats. This can help in identifying high-risk areas and implementing appropriate measures.
- Utilizing advanced technology such as underwater drones, sonar, and X-ray machines to detect hidden compartments and contraband.
- Plan and effect regular audits and inspections of the vessel's security measures to ensure they are up-to-date and effective.
- Ensuring that all containers are properly sealed and monitored throughout the journey. Any broken or tampered seals should be reported immediately.
- Ensure that all holds are monitored during the loading operation. Any package or material other than the intended cargo must be checked and avoided during loading.
- Performing random searches of the vessel, including crew cabins and cargo areas, to deter smuggling attempts.
- Monitor unfamiliar or unauthorized personnel seen around the vessel, especially near cargo areas.

CONCLUSION

By implementing the preventive measures, vessels can significantly reduce the risk of drug smuggling and ensure the safety and security of their operations. However if these measures prove insufficient and there are indications of suspicious activities, please contact your P&I Club and your local P&I Correspondent for immediate assistance. Brazil P&I works 24/7 in all the Brazilian Ports.