Spain Targets the Cocaine Trade - With International Support, The Government Cracks Down on Drug Trafficking Routes

The notification was received by Spanish authorities on May 22, 2009: A container of industrial cleaning equipment, possibly loaded with cocaine, was on an inbound flight. The plane was headed to Madrid from Bogota’s El Dorado International Airport. Colombian authorities first suspected the shipment and reported it to the European Police Office, or Europol, headquartered in The Hague, Netherlands. From there, the information was transmitted to liaison officers in Spain, who quickly passed the secret report to the Spanish Civil Guard in Madrid. Rapid information sharing from source country to interdiction point while the drug flight was still airborne spurred Spain to move beyond preparing for a single bust, instead working to dismantle the traffickers’ infrastructure altogether.

The information arrived and analysts who interpret the movements of drug traffickers took charge. Pieces of information from the Colombian authorities were carefully reviewed in the hopes of reaching a more specific conclusion about the nature of the shipment. “We began to analyze the details of the incoming flight with the cargo, the arrival airport, and we analyzed the corresponding data for the destination,” Lt. Miguel Ángel Botello García, chief of the cocaine section of the Spanish Judicial Police Technical Unit, told Diálogo. His unit, among other duties, coordinates relations with foreign police forces.

After studying details of the suspicious shipment, Lt. Botello’s division sent the results to the Spanish Civil Guard unit that deals with street operations. When the cargo arrived at the Madrid-Barajas Airport, members of the Spanish Gendarmerie used X-ray machines and an anti-narcotic canine unit to identify where the cocaine was being hidden. Their final goal was not to seize the cargo at the airport, but to discover its intended recipient. On June 2, 2009, authorities followed the shipment to its final destination in the Cantabria region, in the north of Spain, where a Spanish citizen was arrested. Later in the investigation, a Colombian was also arrested. The Colombian authorities’ initial tip was accurate: 46 kilograms of cocaine were concealed in packages within the industrial machinery.

It was not the first time Lt. Botello was notified that illicit drugs were coming from Latin America, especially from Colombia. The operation is an example of how Spain has become a destination for the narcotrafficking business. “Spain is the transit country and the final destination of the cocaine produced in South America,” Lt. Botello said in an interview from Madrid, clarifying that cocaine is not just coming from Colombia, but
from “many, many different countries: Colombia, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Argentina, Costa Rica, Peru.”

Even though the confiscation of less than 50 kilograms of cocaine and two arrests is small in proportion to the global narcotrafficking industry, it is notable as an example of international law enforcement collaboration. Spanish authorities recognize drug trafficking is not only a national security threat but a transnational crime that can be defeated only by a shared commitment to international cooperation.

Drug Usage - Cocaine user population in Europe / 2007-2008

- United Kingdom ...................................................23%
- Spain .................................................................21%
- Italy .................................................................19%
- Germany ................................................................9%
- France ..................................................................5%
- Other EU Countries ................................................13%
- Other European Countries ......................................8%
- European Free Trade Association countries ...........2%

Source: 2010 U.N. World Drug Report

The Trans-Atlantic Business

Cocaine use in Europe has been on the rise since the mid-1990s, creating new markets that attract traffickers to the region, as noted in the study “The Trans-Atlantic Cocaine Business” by researchers Daniel Brombacher and Günther Maihold. Their investigation found that cocaine value depends on a simple price curve: the further the cocaine is from the producing country, the higher its market price will be. In 2009, for example, a kilo of high-purity cocaine had a street value of nearly 80,000 euros ($107,500) in Spain whereas the same quantity in Colombia was valued at 1,200 euros ($1,600).

The 2010 report “Cocaine: a European Union Perspective in the Global Context,” prepared by Europol and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, or EMCDDA, argues that cocaine remains the second most used illicit drug in Europe, after cannabis. An estimated three million Europeans age 15 to 34 used cocaine in 2009, according to the joint report. The report also noted that cocaine is shipped by air or sea from South America to European Union countries across three main corridors: the Northern route, the Central route and the West African route.

The Northern route operates from the Caribbean Sea to Spain and Portugal. The drugs are transported from a Caribbean island directly by air or are shipped to neighboring nations such as Venezuela and from there to the Iberian Peninsula. Traffickers use recreational boats, cargo freighters and container ships to move their product. Another technique used in international waters, along this route, is to drop cocaine packages from an aircraft into the water where they float until a vessel picks them up. To smuggle cocaine through European airports on commercial flights, traffickers use air couriers known as drug mules, who transport drugs inside their bodies, luggage or other items.

The Central route leads from Brazil to the Iberian Peninsula. The Europol and EMCDDA report shows that traffickers employ a combination of large cargo boats and go-fast boats to move drugs into transit areas off the African coast. In islands like Cape Verde, the Azores, Madeira or the Canary Islands, fishing and speed boats then quickly retrieve the drugs to avoid the maritime authorities.

The passageway most recently identified is the West African route, mainly from countries along the Gulf of Guinea and off the coast of Cape Verde to Europe. According to the report, cocaine is also transported by air from West African nations to Europe by small aircraft, illegal couriers or via air-freight. Europol officers have found that Colombian criminal organizations, as well as groups from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru
Senior analyst Carlos Malamud from the Madrid-based think tank Elcano Royal Institute has been investigating long-established cocaine routes. “We were confronting routes that came directly from Latin America to Spain, Galicia being one of the preferred ports of entry,” Malamud told Diálogo. “Colombia and above all Venezuela have become important points of departure.”

In his interview from Madrid, Malamud said the West African route shows how the success of Spanish and European law enforcement confiscation and rigorous maritime and customs patrols have forced traffickers to find new drug passageways further south. “We find ourselves with a more complicated situation, where West African countries are playing an important role, where Morocco has also become another stop en route to Spanish ports,” he said.

Points of Departure - Departing locations of identified drug trafficking shipments by sea from South America to Europe / 2006-2008

- Venezuela ..........51%
- Brazil ...............10%
- Caribbean ...........11%
- Colombia ..........5%
- West Africa ......11%
- Other ...............12%

Source: 2010 U.N. World Drug Report

By the Numbers, Spain 2009

- 21.7% ......................Increase in the confiscation of illegal drugs from 2008
- 25,349 kg ..................Cocaine seized
- 444,581 kg ..................Cannabis seized
- 388,702 kg ..................Other illegal drugs seized
- 19,399 .......................People arrested on drug trafficking charges

Source: Ministry of the Interior of Spain

The “Blind Hook”

Law enforcement officers working to uncover the latest techniques used by drug traffickers recently detected a twist on a usual practice. International narcotrafficking organizations are sending shipping containers “to different parts of Spain to diversify their risk,” said inspector Antonio Duarte, Galicia’s chief of the Special Response Group Organized Crime, or GRECO. He added that through this technique, 3,000 kilograms of cocaine per year have been confiscated.

In his interview from Pontevedra, he explained how narcotraffickers have begun using a system called “blind hook.” It is based on traffickers hiding small quantities of narcotics inside shipping containers without the knowledge of the sender or receiver. The victims are usually legitimate companies that have unwittingly been used by criminal organizations and corrupt airport or port employees to smuggle narcotics. In Spain, the most vulnerable harbor destinations for this type of illicit action are the ports of Algeciras, near Morocco; Marin, north of Portugal; Valencia, the largest national seaport; and Barcelona, Europe’s ninth largest container port.

To counter these criminal techniques, Spanish authorities are using modern scanning technology and careful monitoring of all types of containers entering the country by plane or ship. One of their tools is a risk analysis technique that investigates company profiles, passenger lists and shipments to detect suspicious activity.

Spanish authorities also use a complex radar system to control and monitor the Strait of Gibraltar between
Spain and North Africa. The Exterior Vigilance Integrated System, or SIVE, began in 2002 as a measure to control and counter illegal immigration from Africa. Today, it is also a tool to fight cocaine and hashish trafficking. Due to its success, SIVE has expanded to Almeria and Alicante in the Iberian Peninsula, and in the near future will be used in the Galicia region.

Quick International Response

Spanish authorities recognize they are not alone in the fight against drug traffickers. Working with officials from Latin American nations, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the U.K. Serious Organized Crime Agency and other institutions has been a significant step in their fight to eradicate this threat. “This international cooperation is essential. It is the only way that we can identify the [narcotrafficking] operations from their origin and that what is done in Spain has repercussions in South America and the other way around,” Duarte said, adding that countries share information, intelligence, training and interdiction operations. A recent example of this type of international collaboration is the January 2011 discovery of what was called the biggest and most sophisticated cocaine laboratory in Europe. About 300 kilograms of cocaine and 2 million euros ($2.8 million) in cash were seized and 25 people were arrested as a result of the two-year investigative effort, according to BBC News. “It was an enormous laboratory. … We disarmed it before it was used,” Duarte said.

His counterpart, Lt. Botello from the Spanish Judicial Police, agrees that “as much effort from one side of the Atlantic as from the other [is needed] to try to eradicate or diminish the narcotrafficking problem.” As he recalled the accuracy of the Colombian authorities' tips about the container of industrial cleaning equipment loaded with cocaine, he confidently affirmed that “the only way to fight this type of problem is with international cooperation.”