

FRI, DEC 1, 2017

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Smuggling of Drugs, People Spurs Violence in Argentina Contraband Hotbed

Written by Tristan Clavel - May 23, 2017

Argentina

Contraband

Human Trafficking

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Contraband smugglers between Bolivia and Argentina, dubbed "bagayeros"



human trafficking on the Bolivia-Argentina border as the cause of spiking violence among local smugglers.

An apparent revenge killing linked to drug trafficking in Argentina's Salta province has provided the latest evidence that the growing flow of drugs and unauthorized migrants from Bolivia into Argentina has fueled violence in the region, according to [La Nación](#).

Raúl "Coya" Martínez, a suspected trafficker, was killed on May 6 in Orán, a city in Salta province on the country's northwest border with Bolivia. His murder appears to have served as retaliation for the gunning down of rival smuggler Adrián Ricardo Gerónimo on April 29 in the context of an apparent turf war unfolding between their respective trafficking groups, according to both [La Nación](#) and [El Tribuno](#).

This area of the Salta province has long served as a major contraband gateway into Argentina, and as many as 5,000 inhabitants of the two towns are thought to be working as "bagayeros," the local term used to

Recent media reports point to the rise of drug and

describe smugglers. Orán prosecutor José Luis Bruno told La Nación that an estimated 30 percent of the local population lives off the contraband business, which has boomed in recent years.

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But while the smuggling activities cover an array of products, the more recent increase in smuggling drugs and individuals — [particularly Chinese citizens](#) — into Argentina appears to have led to the creation of structured criminal groups that a judicial source described to La Nación as “mafias.”

These organizations now resort to violence in an attempt to assert their control over important territory and routes, authorities said. And due to armed robberies and past confrontations between rival smugglers in the area, a local bagayero said that convoys of smuggled goods are now protected by armed members of criminal groups, La Nación reported.

Argentine officials said that they will tackle the contraband issue and close down 25 illegal border crossings. But as pointed out by La Nación, this task may be complicated by the high proportion of the local population living off the illicit activity and the limited resources of local authorities. According to the news outlet, the government had typically turned a blind eye to contraband in the area until the recent spike in violence.

InSight Crime Analysis

The recent violence in Salta province provides further evidence that a shift toward greater involvement in drug and human smuggling by local organizations has appeared to contribute to increasing violence in the Argentine border region.

Salta has long been a gateway for smuggling Bolivian cocaine into Argentina, which is both an important consumer of the drug as well as a transshipment point for its further international distribution. The province is home to the Route 34 highway, which starts at the Bolivian border and winds its way south to Argentina’s three most

important urban centers: Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Rosario. The highway has previously been dubbed the country's "White Road" of cocaine smuggling.

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Illegal drug smuggling, particularly from Bolivia, has been on the rise in recent years. As InSight Crime has [previously reported](#), official sources suggest the amount of contraband flowing through the area where the recent murders took place rose by 200 percent between 2006 and 2012. And as cocaine seizures have grown in Argentina, [Clarín reports](#), Salta has emerged as the province where the most busts have been made in recent years. Similarly, there are indications of [increased human smuggling](#) in the region.

Local authorities claim that the rise in smuggling of humans and drugs in the Argentine border region has led to increased violence, but official statistical data backing this assertion is scarce.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons why this theory makes sense. The illicit markets for human and drug smuggling tend to be more lucrative and more competitive than other forms of contraband, meaning crime groups may be more willing to use violence to establish control in such cases. Also, the large amounts of money to be made in these illegal activities may have fed the coffers of local crime groups, allowing them to ramp up recruitment and secure more powerful weapons, which may also be contributing to their growing willingness to use violence to further their business interests.

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