Republic of the Marshall Islands

MARITIME ADMINISTRATOR

11495 COMMERCE PARK DRIVE, RESTON, VIRGINIA 20191-1506
TELEPHONE: +1-703-620-4880 FAX: +1-703-476-8522
EMAIL: marsec@register-iri.com WEBSITE: www.register-iri.com

SHIP SECURITY ADVISORY NO. 07-26

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

Subject: **DRUG TRAFFICKING FROM SOUTH AMERICA**

Date: **30 October 2026**

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) Maritime Administrator (the "Administrator") draws attention to the continued use of vessels to transport illicit drugs from South America. South American drug traffickers are increasingly diversifying their maritime methods. Containers remain a major trafficking channel; however, traffickers are increasingly using bulk carriers, fishing boats, go-fast boats, semi-submersibles ("narco-subs"), floating support/refueling vessels, and underwater hull spaces.

1.0 Updates

1.1 This Ship Security Advisory (SSA) supersedes SSA No. 08-25.

1.2 Principal Revisions:

1.2.1 Statistics updated to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report 2026 and the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) European Drug Report 2026;

1.2.2 New §5.0, addressing the Port of Santos, Brazil, and the mitigating measures recommended for vessels calling there;

1.2.3 Expanded treatment of sea chest and other underwater concealment, now assessed to be the principal concern for bulk carriers loading in Brazil;

1.2.4 New §8.0, addressing the counter-narcotics operating environment in the Caribbean Sea and the Eastern Pacific Ocean, and the associated sanctions exposure; and

1.2.5 Sections 4.0, 6.0, 7.0, and 10.0 revised, and the reference list updated.

This SSA is evaluated annually by the Administrator and expires one year after its issuance or renewal unless otherwise noted, superseded, or revoked.

2.0 Background

Maritime and waterway trafficking routes have continued to expand across Europe, Latin America, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. Organized crime groups have widened their reach into emerging markets in Africa and Asia, and the International Narcotics Control Board assesses that Africa is increasingly targeted both as a transit region and as a destination.[1]

3.0 Drug Trafficking Trends

According to the UNODC *World Drug Report 2026*, the global supply of cocaine from South America has grown more than fourfold since 2014.[2]

4.0 High-risk Countries and Ports

4.1 Based on recent seizure data, high-risk countries for cocaine trafficking include Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, and Uruguay.

4.2 Brazil

Sustained interagency pressure at Santos has coincided with a marked fall in seizures there and with displacement toward other ports, including Salvador, Paranaguá, the Santa Catarina ports, and the northern ports of Manaus, Vila do Conde (Barcarena), and Pecém; see InSight Crime. The Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) remains the dominant organization. Bulk carriers are increasingly targeted through concealment in bulk cargo and in sea chests and other underwater spaces. Vessels calling at Santos should refer to §5.0.[3]

4.3 Colombia

Underwater inspections (UWIs) are mandatory before departure at certain Colombian ports and terminals and are advisable elsewhere, including Buenaventura; see the A&A Multiprime *Drug Smuggling Report 2024* and Steamship Mutual *Colombia: Precautionary Anti-Narcotics Guidelines*. Current requirements should be confirmed with the local agent before arrival.

4.4 Ecuador

Ecuador remains a primary exit point for cocaine consigned to Europe and North America. The World Customs Organization attributes 30 percent (385 tons) of cocaine detected in shipping containers to a reported Ecuadorian loading port. The deepwater terminal at Posorja, expanded in April 2026, is assessed to be of growing

1 International Narcotics Control Board, *Annual Report 2025*, launched 26 February 2026.
2 UNODC, *World Drug Report 2026*, released 26 June 2026. Figures are for 2024.
3 InSight Crime, *Is Brazil's Biggest Port Winning the Fight Against Drug Traffickers?*, 2 March 2026.

importance to traffickers; see InSight Crime. Violence remains elevated in Guayaquil and Durán, and shore leave should be risk assessed accordingly.[4]

4.5 Uruguay

The Port of Montevideo has become an increasingly significant transit point for cocaine consigned to Europe, and criminal groups originating in Brazil are reported to be active there (InSight Crime). Vessels calling at Montevideo should apply the measures set out in §5.2.

5.0 Port of Santos, Brazil

5.1 Threat Picture

5.1.1 Santos is the largest port in Latin America, and container security there has been substantially hardened, including the scanning of all export containers consigned to Europe or Africa; see InSight Crime.

5.1.2 Concealment has consequently migrated toward bulk and breakbulk cargo and toward underwater hull spaces, although concealment in containers remains widespread. Bulk carriers are assessed to be at elevated risk owing to extended waits at anchorage, lower security at bulk terminals, and the absence of container scanning.

5.1.3 Recent cocaine seizures at Santos and other Brazilian ports, involving containerized cargo, reefer units, port trucks, and sea chests, are tabulated by Proinde.[5]

5.1.4[6] On 10 May 2026 a joint operation by Brazil's Federal Revenue Service (Receita Federal), the Federal Police, and Brazilian Navy divers recovered 341.75 kg of cocaine from the sea chest of a Liberia-flagged bulk carrier loading at Santos for Poland; the vessel was selected through risk analysis and intelligence. The method, in which divers place weighted bags in the sea chest at the load port for retrieval at destination, requires no crew complicity and bypasses terminal scanning and cargo documentation; see Proinde and Windward.

5.1.5 On 19 May 2026 the Federal Police launched Operation Tirocinium against a network using professional divers to conceal cocaine in ship hulls at the Santa Catarina ports of Navegantes, Itapoá, and Imbituba.[7]

---

4 World Customs Organization, *Infiltration of maritime cargo supply chains*, June 2025. Figures cover cocaine detected in shipping containers in 2023 and 2024.

5 Compiled from Receita Federal do Brasil, Departamento de Polícia Federal, and Marinha do Brasil data, as published by Proinde, 26 May 2026.

6 Ibid.

7 Departamento de Polícia Federal Operation Tirocinium, 19 May 2026, as reported by Proinde.

5.2 Recommended Mitigating Measures

5.2.1 General port-call security measures, including voyage-specific threat assessment, access control, gangway and deck watchkeeping, lighting, closed-circuit television monitoring, crew briefing, and pre-departure searches repeated after the pilot disembarks, are set out in IMO Resolution MSC.228(82), the International Chamber of Shipping publication *Drug Trafficking and Drug Abuse on Board Ship*, and the loss prevention guidance issued by Britannia, Steamship Mutual, and NorthStandard. Measures specific to underwater concealment at Brazilian ports, including dedicated waterside lookouts, evidential recording of diver activity, pre-departure underwater inspection by diver or remotely operated vehicle, and the engagement of diving contractors compliant with NORMAM-222/DPC,[8] are set out in the Proinde guidance. Those measures are not repeated in this SSA. Vessels calling at Santos should apply them and, in addition:

.1 minimize time at anchorage where commercially practicable;

.2 where practicable, have tamper-evident seals fitted by divers or during dry-docking to sea chest gratings and to other externally accessible underwater closures, without obstructing seawater intake;

.3 photograph or video any small craft, diver, or bubble trail observed near the hull, record the time and the position relative to the ship, report immediately to the Federal Police, the port facility security officer, the agent, the Company Security Officer, the P&I correspondent, and the Administrator, and retain the evidence. Any such sighting should prompt consideration of an underwater inspection before departure;

.4 arrange an underwater inspection of the hull before departure from the last Brazilian port of call for vessels bound for Europe or Africa, following any sighting under .3, or where local intelligence so indicates, covering the sea chests and gratings, the bilge keels, the rudder trunk and stock, the thruster tunnels, the anodes, and the propeller boss; and

.5 where grating fasteners show signs of tampering, or an anomalous object is observed, make no attempt at recovery. Cease the inspection, secure the area, and notify the Federal Police and the agent immediately.

[8] NORMAM-222/DPC, Normas da Autoridade Marítima para Mergulho Comercial, approved by Portaria DPC/DGN/MB No. 183 of 8 July 2025.

5.2.2 Documentation:

.1 retain the underwater inspection report, the access control logs, the watchkeeping records, and the search records for not less than the period specified for security records in the SSP and, in any event, until any investigation or claim arising from the voyage has concluded. These constitute the primary evidence of due diligence should a consignment be detected at the discharge port; and

.2 where narcotics are recovered from a ship's own spaces rather than from a sealed container or an underwater recess, investigating authorities in a number of jurisdictions frequently treat the find as indicative of crew involvement unless the contrary is shown. Contemporaneous records are the principal means of showing the contrary.

5.2.3 Where narcotics have been recovered from underwater spaces at Brazilian ports, the practice of the Federal Police has generally been to treat the crew as non-complicit and to release the vessel without extended delay. That practice should not be relied upon and affords no protection at the discharge port.

6.0 Drug Trafficking Methods

Maritime trafficking methods, including rip-on/rip-off container concealment, hull-attached "torpedoes," sea chest concealment, onboard concealment with insider assistance, chemical concealment, at-sea transfers, semi-submersible craft, and routing through West African ports, are described and illustrated by InSight Crime in *Hide and Seek: How Drug Traffickers Get Creative at Sea* and by the EUDA in the *European Drug Report 2026*.

7.0 Preventative Measures

7.1 International Maritime Organization (IMO) Guidelines

Operators and Masters of vessels trading to and from high-risk ports should familiarize themselves with, and ensure their SSPs 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)).[9]

[9] Note: Amendments to these guidelines remain under development. The Facilitation Committee agreed on a roadmap at its 49th session in March 2025 and re-established the correspondence group at its 50th session in March 2026 to report to the 51st session. The amendments have not been adopted.

7.2 International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code

Under the ISPS Code,[10] the SSP is the principal vehicle for these measures. Best practices for high-risk ports are referenced in the ISPS Code, §5.2.1.

8.0 Counter-narcotics Operating Environment

8.1 Since September 2025, United States (US) forces have conducted a sustained campaign of strikes against vessels assessed to be engaged in narcotics trafficking in the Caribbean Sea and the Eastern Pacific Ocean. Naval and air activity in both areas is correspondingly elevated.

8.2 No US Government advisory presently addresses merchant vessel operations, deconfliction, or reporting in connection with this campaign. None of the current US Maritime Advisories covers the Caribbean Sea or the Eastern Pacific Ocean. Company Security Officers should monitor that channel and the relevant navigational warnings for any subsequent issuance.[11]

8.3 Vessels transiting these areas should:

8.3.1 maintain a continuous listening watch on VHF Channel 16 and be prepared to respond to queries from naval or coast guard units;

8.3.2 maintain Automatic Identification System transmission and ensure that voyage data is accurate, except where the Master determines that continued operation would compromise the safety or security of the ship, in accordance with IMO Resolution A.1106(29), paragraph 22;

8.3.3 avoid close quarters with unidentified small craft and semi-submersible craft, and report sightings to the relevant reporting authority;

8.3.4 note that the obligation to render assistance to persons in distress under SOLAS V/33 is unaffected and inform the relevant rescue coordination center at the earliest opportunity; and

8.3.5 reach out to US Naval Forces Southern Command (NAVSOUTH) Naval Cooperation and Guidance for Shipping (NCAGS) for insight to assist with your port risk assessment in South America. Contact details are located in MARSEC-210.

8.4 On 20 August 2026 the US Office of Foreign Assets Control designated 15 Ecuador-based persons and entities and identified 10 Ecuador-based fishing vessels as blocked property. Those vessels were assessed to provide fuel, provisions, and counter-detection support to trafficking craft in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. Owners,

[10] See RMI Marine Notice 2-011-16, *International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code*.
[11] United States Maritime Administration, MSCI advisories, reviewed 10 September 2026.

operators, and charterers should screen counterparties and vessel interactions against the current Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List.[12]

9.0 Incident Reporting

9.1 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, act in accordance with the SSP and the guidance issued by Steamship Mutual and NorthStandard.

9.2 Suspected diver or small craft activity alongside should be reported at the time of observation, whether or not narcotics are subsequently recovered, and the report should include the date and time, the position or berth, a description, and any imagery.

10.0 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 2026*

.5 World Customs Organization, *Infiltration of maritime cargo supply chains: Organized crime, cocaine and the internal conspirator*, June 2025

.6 InSight Crime, *Hide and Seek: How Drug Traffickers Get Creative at Sea*

.7 InSight Crime, *The Cocaine Pipeline to Europe*

.8 Britannia, *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*

[12] US Department of the Treasury, press release of 20 August 2026, and Federal Register notice of 25 August 2026. Designations are subject to change.

.11 EUDA, *European Drug Report 2026*

.12 EUDA and World Customs Organization RILO-WE, *Seaports: monitoring the EU's floodgates for illicit drugs*

.13 International Narcotics Control Board, *Annual Report 2025*

.14 Proinde, *Underwater Threat: Drug Concealed in Sea Chests Remains a Security Challenge*

.15 InSight Crime, *Is Brazil's Biggest Port Winning the Fight Against Drug Traffickers?*

.16 Diretoria de Portos e Costas, Brazilian Navy, *NORMAM-222/DPC, Maritime Authority Standards for Commercial Diving*

.17 Windward, *The Cocaine Is Below the Waterline and the Crew Has No Idea*