



A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers

Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°51
Bogotá/Brussels, 17 July 2024

What's new? Across the region where Brazil, Colombia and Peru meet deep in the Amazon, an assortment of criminal organisations are exploiting the feeble reach of states, abundance of natural resources and poverty of local communities to grow, diversify and hatch new cross-border ventures.

Why does it matter? Surging cocaine production in Peru and the spread of other rackets like gold dredging and illicit logging threaten Indigenous ways of life, spur deadly violence and harm the environment. Should these criminal ventures go unchecked, they could undermine the already tenuous state control of the world's largest rainforest.

What should be done? Following up on promises made in 2023, the three countries should bolster security cooperation and harness foreign assistance with a view to prosecuting and sanctioning those responsible for environmental crimes. Support for law-abiding livelihoods and stronger collaboration with Indigenous communities at the front lines of criminal expansion are vital.

I. Overview

Deep in the Amazon jungle, the tri-border area where Brazil, Colombia and Peru meet has become a hotbed of crime, sending a continuous warning of the threats facing the world's largest rainforest. Emboldened by the patchy hold of state authorities on this vast area, Brazilian criminal groups have struck partnerships with Colombian guerrilla factions and Peruvian drug trafficking outfits. They exploit an array of illegal enterprises, from growing coca and processing it into cocaine to logging, dredging for gold and fishing in protected areas. As criminal revenues boom, the environmental harm to the Amazon and the violence meted out to local people have soared, but so have the material incentives for hard-up locals to enlist in one or another of these groups. To protect the forest, security forces in the three states should put aside their mutual wariness, capitalising on foreign support to build a more effective response to transnational crime. At the same time, safeguarding the Amazon will depend on ensuring that local communities, including Indigenous groups, can pursue legal livelihoods and build stronger trust with security forces and state bodies.

The growing clout of criminal groups on the triple frontier has spurred a high number of killings, many of them linked to feuds over turf or punishment of local people who dare to resist these outfits' encroachment on their land. Across this part of the Amazon, the new illegal overlord is the Brazilian group Comando Vermelho, which has gained the upper hand in battles with two other major criminal outfits: the local band Os Crías and the Primeiro Comando da Capital, an immensely powerful group originally from São Paulo but now active throughout Brazil. Law enforcement officials believe Comando Vermelho may be in cahoots with the Colombian guerrilla group Carolina Ramírez, which broke away from the now-demobilised Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Peru, for its part, has become the engine of cocaine production in the area, causing serious environmental damage. Coca crops, which are grown on razed forest land, have boomed in the Peruvian border province of Mariscal Ramón Castilla, often funded by Colombian or Brazilian investors and drawing on the labour of local villagers to cultivate the plant. The leaf is processed in laboratories that leak contaminants into the soil and water, and then the finished product is transported largely unchecked along the Amazon and its tributaries. Most of it is eventually sold in Brazil – the largest domestic market for the drug in South America – or exported to Europe and Africa. Some of it travels via Ecuador, the country now suffering the worst rates of criminal violence in South America.

What little resistance state authorities put up to this flow is promptly eliminated by bribes or violence. Illegal outfits frequently reinvest profits from drug trafficking in other environmentally harmful rackets such as illegal logging, dredging and fishing, enabling them to launder their income while generating still more. Indigenous communities have sought to defend their territories from the incursions of criminal groups, but many claim to have received no support from the state or security forces. At particular risk from booming crime are the so-called uncontacted Indigenous tribes. These communities live deep in the jungle, having evaded interaction with Western civilization for centuries. The unbroken perimeter of their territory, which is protected by law, is on the verge of being breached by encroaching loggers, land grabbers and other racketeers, threatening not only their culture but also their very existence.

The essential role played by the Amazon in regulating the world's climate is universally acknowledged. It is sure to take centre stage at major international gatherings on the environment taking place soon in Colombia and Brazil, the Biodiversity COP16 in October 2024 and the Climate COP30 in 2025, as well as at the G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro in November.

But without greater commitment to protecting the Amazon and its peoples by the three border countries, organised crime will continue to trigger violence, harm the rainforest and disrupt society. The region's immense natural assets can be preserved only if protections are properly enforced and the rules of forest use honoured, instead of subverted by the spread of criminal activity. Strengthening cooperation among the law enforcement agencies of the three border countries as well as their foreign partners is crucial. It is the only viable way to identify, prosecute and – where necessary – sanction the criminal groups and financial backers responsible for the greatest harm to local people and the environment. Aside from greater transnational coordination, security forces will also need to draw on the support and local knowledge of Indige-

nous communities while increasing the number of law-abiding livelihoods available to them. With the backing of foreign donors, Colombia, Brazil and Peru should act fast before crime causes irreversible damage to the Amazon's heartland.

II. Criminal Groups in the Borderlands

The Amazon's remoteness is both its most precious characteristic and its greatest liability. The region where Brazil, Colombia and Peru meet is particularly far away from populous areas. With its last frontiers demarcated only in the 1920s, the tri-border region stands thousands of kilometres from the countries' respective capitals, which is a major reason why wildlife has flourished and natural resources remain abundant within its confines.¹ At the same time, the opportunities the area provides for illicit profit-making are attracting increasing attention from powerful criminal outfits, above all in Brazil.

A. The Amazon's Resources

The tri-border region is home to isolated communities that have monitored, nurtured and protected the forest. Indigenous peoples – including the Ticuna, Bora, Marubo and Matis – reside in villages and rural settlements along the Amazon and its tributaries. State services in these towns are essentially non-existent. Locals depend on gasoline-powered generators for intermittent electricity, and there are no hospitals within a day's travel for many remote communities. Deep in the forest, several Indigenous groups such as the Mayoruna and Tsohom Dyapa live in voluntary seclusion.² An influx of new residents, tourists and members of criminal groups pose grave threats to these native populations, bringing new diseases as well as the threat of violence.³ The region's main urban centres, meanwhile, are the twin towns of Tabatinga and Leticia on the Brazilian-Colombian border, which have in effect merged into a single conurbation home to some 113,000 inhabitants.

Lack of passable roads means the tri-border region is accessible only by boat or plane. The paucity of legitimate businesses and absence of a robust state presence, both of which stem from the area's remoteness, make jobs scarce, while illicit activity

¹ The 1922 Salomón-Lozano treaty between Colombia and Peru aimed to resolve longstanding border disputes in areas dominated by rubber barons. In this treaty, Peru ceded sovereignty of Leticia to Colombia, granting the latter access to the Amazon River, and retained control of the lands up to the right bank of the Putumayo River. In 1932, however, Peruvian dissatisfaction with the treaty spurred an effort to seize control of Leticia, sparking an eight-month Colombian-Peruvian war. The League of Nations played a crucial role in mediating the conflict and facilitated the transfer of Leticia back to Colombia in 1933. See Yohana Pantevis and Germán Palacio, *Ciudades amazónicas intermedias, pesca y frontera* (2016). Andrea Díaz Cardona, “El conflicto de Leticia: cómo fue la guerra entre Perú y Colombia por un pequeño territorio (y quién ganó)”, BBC, 26 May 2023.

² Experts say there are around nineteen voluntarily isolated Indigenous groups. “Vale do Javari: la presencia del Estado aseguró la paz por muchos años”, Agencia Brasil, 27 February 2023.

³ A recent arrival is a Christian cult known as the Israelites, which has established several settlements in the Amazon forest. See Ivan Brehaut, “Los Israelitas del Nuevo Pacto Universal en el Perú: religión, deforestación y narcotráfico”, *La Mula*, 14 August 2023; and Dom Phillips, “The isolated tribes at risk of illness from Amazon missionaries”, *The Guardian*, 23 March 2020.

thrives.⁴ Poverty and homicide rates in the area are far in excess of national averages, but because the region is comprised of rural hinterlands and small cities, national authorities tend to overlook outbreaks of violence there.⁵ Officials in the region's law enforcement agencies – which are principally tasked with border security – complain that they lack the resources and equipment they need to do their jobs.

The Amazon's role in climate regulation makes insecurity in the tri-border region a global concern. As the world's largest tropical rainforest, the Amazon serves as a pre-eminent carbon sink, absorbing substantial amounts of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Through its central place in the hydrological cycle, the Amazon also exerts a profound influence on global weather and precipitation patterns. Its unparalleled biodiversity is essential for maintaining ecological balance.⁶ But as organised crime spreads across the Amazon it exacts a heavy price, fuelling violence, breaking up communities and furthering deforestation and other kinds of environmental degradation. In combination, the harm wrought by criminal activity to nature and human lives also makes it harder for states in the region to preserve the ecosystem and its capacity to mitigate the impact of climate change.

B. *Criminal Competition*

Rising violence and environmental degradation are the result of the expansion of criminal groups into the remote Amazon jungles, particularly by Brazilian organisations that until a decade ago operated mostly in urban centres. By far the dominant illicit organisation is Comando Vermelho, which sprung up in the Rio de Janeiro prison Cândido Mendes nearly 50 years ago. Together with the powerful nationwide syndicate Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), this group has extended its reach to towns in the heart of the Amazon and now reportedly operates in Colombia and Peru. The group has also established a power base in the jails of Leticia and Tabatinga, allegedly with the support of corrupt officials.⁷

In their incursions into the Amazon, Comando Vermelho and the PCC followed the lead of Família do Norte, a group originally from Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state, and which was the main criminal organisation there for almost a decade. In the late 2000s, Família do Norte forged ties with Colombian guerrillas and drug traffickers in Peru to become the primary purchaser of Peruvian coca along the Amazon River.⁸

⁴ The Amazonas department in Colombia, despite being connected to important rivers used for transport, represents only 0.1 per cent of national GDP. “La información del DANE para la toma de decisiones regionales”, National Administrative Department of Statistics, May 2022. In Brazil, Amazonas state represents just 2 per cent of national GDP despite the free trade zone in Manaus and many extractive industries. “Economia do Amazonas”, Brasil Escola.

⁵ Bram Ebus and Ulrich Eberle, “Crimes against the Climate: Violence and Deforestation in the Amazon”, Crisis Group Commentary, 8 December 2023. Data gathered by Crisis Group from national police databases in Brazil, Colombia and Peru.

⁶ “Amazon Assessment Report 2021”, Science Panel for the Amazon, 2021.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, inmates, Tabatinga, November 2023. In 2023, over two dozen prisoners, including Brazilian nationals, were sent from Leticia to Bogotá to prevent them from staging an uprising. Crisis Group interview, state officials, Bogotá, 5 June 2024.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, inmates and law enforcement officials, Tabatinga, November 2023.

Almost five years ago, Comando Vermelho mounted a successful challenge to Familia do Norte's dominance, despite a previous alliance, when it launched a new venture known as Comando Vermelho Amazonas. (A thirteen-member so-called Permanent Council in Manaus oversees this enterprise. That entity, in turn, answers to the gang's leadership in Rio de Janeiro.⁹) In mid-2023, it bested not just Familia do Norte but also another of its main competitors in the tri-border region, Os Crías. That gang was an offshoot of Familia do Norte: former Familia members – along with new local recruits – established it in 2019. Os Crías received initial financing and weaponry from the PCC, on the understanding that together the groups would counterbalance the influence of Comando Vermelho and gain control of trafficking routes.

This plan came to naught due to lack of discipline in Os Crías' ranks. "They are young people, aged fifteen to sixteen, up to twenty years old, [and the organisation] did not have a very strong, well-designed structure", explained a Brazilian police investigator. At one point, he said, the syndicate did have a prominent leader "who would tell them what to do and how to do it".¹⁰ That person was a man known as Brendo dos Santos; when he was killed in August 2023, Os Crías began to crater.¹¹ Facing an ultimatum from Comando Vermelho, Os Crías members were forced to either join that group's ranks or risk elimination.¹² As a result, the local criminal ecosystem has drastically changed in the last two years. "Os Crías is finished", affirmed a Comando Vermelho member interviewed in Tabatinga's prison. "It doesn't exist anymore".¹³

Comando Vermelho's aim now, according to a member, is to assert supremacy in the tri-border region in the hope of expanding into Colombia and Peru. The group wants to control the cocaine supply chain all the way from the coca fields in Peru to the trafficking routes in Colombia and Brazil's Amazon regions.¹⁴ To do so, they offer sweeteners to locals, exploiting the absence of legitimate work opportunities. Criminals give recruits – often men and boys as young as fifteen – payments that include sums ranging from \$2,000 to \$2,400 for tasks such as transporting cocaine to Manaus, drawing them into lives of crime and often encouraging them to enlist others.¹⁵ Comando Vermelho also claims to provide financial aid, medication and food to needy families in the areas they control. Their primary objective, as described by a member, is to "conquer everything" – to achieve dominance over local markets and populations.¹⁶

In Colombia, Comando Vermelho has found willing partners in its drive to expand. While Colombia's 60-year internal conflict largely did not touch the Amazonas department, the Carolina Ramírez front – a dissident faction of the Revolutionary Armed

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officials, Manaus, 2023; inmates, Tabatinga, 16 November 2023.

¹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Brazilian law enforcement official, 12 September 2023.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, NGO representative, Tabatinga, 15 November 2023.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, inmates, Tabatinga, 16 November 2023; law enforcement officials, Letícia, 10 October 2023.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, inmates, Tabatinga, 16 November 2023.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, church leader, Benjamin Constant, 20 January 2024.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, inmates, Tabatinga, 16 November 2023.

Forces of Colombia (FARC) – is making inroads in the region.¹⁷ Operating mostly along the Caquetá River, which flows through the Amazonas department into Brazil, the Carolina Ramírez front appears set on acquiring more turf in the tri-border area. At first, it extorted equipment and fuel from park rangers. “Just as if they were [picking up] groceries”, a state official rued, recalling how guerrillas took the outboard motor for his boat, fuel and his GPS unit.¹⁸ In 2020, tensions escalated when guerrillas summoned National Parks Institute officials to a meeting, at which it announced that state employees were henceforth prohibited from working in designated nature reserves, such as the Río Puré National Park.¹⁹

The relationship between the front and Comando Vermelho has strengthened notably over the past year. Carolina Ramírez had been selling cocaine and marijuana produced in Colombia to the Brazilian criminal group, but in September 2023, a senior Carolina Ramírez representative – who goes by the alias El Tigre – created a new sub-unit called Frente Amazonas, which engages in drug trafficking and extortion of illegal gold miners.²⁰ According to law enforcement investigators, many of its members are Brazilian nationals, and they have a presence in the municipality of Japurá, Brazil. Intelligence officials warn that relations between Colombian guerrilla outfits and Comando Vermelho could deepen, potentially converting their combined forces into the first major binational criminal enterprise in the Amazon.²¹

That would not be the only setback for state authorities. Until now, Carolina Ramírez has been participating in rounds of dialogue with the Colombian government under President Gustavo Petro’s “total peace” strategy.²² A formal alliance with the Brazilian criminal outfit could deal a severe blow to Petro’s peace ambitions and pose serious regional security dilemmas.²³

¹⁷ Carolina Ramírez was a front of the Estado Mayor Central (EMC), a dissident FARC faction led by alias Iván Mordisco that did not sign the 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the guerrillas, but which has begun talks with Bogotá. In April, splits within the EMC appeared to indicate that Carolina Ramírez front has split from Mordisco and is acting as an independent force. After fieldwork for this briefing was complete, Carolina Ramírez rebranded itself as the Raúl Reyes Front, but this briefing will refer to it by its original name. For more information, see José David Rodríguez, “Disidencias instrumentalizan menores de edad y los entrenan para fabricar explosivos”, W Radio, 27 May 2024.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, state official, Colombia, 2023.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officials, Leticia, 10 October 2023.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officials, Amazonas (Brazil), 2023.

²² For background, see Elizabeth Dickinson, “Colombia’s Last Guerrillas Make First Step toward ‘Total Peace’”, Crisis Group Commentary, 23 November 2022; and Crisis Group Latin America Report N°98, *Protecting Colombia’s Most Vulnerable on the Road to ‘Total Peace’*, 24 February 2023.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, state officials, April and May 2024. Peruvian organised crime groups have remained mostly local. Plantation owners from Lima, Peru’s interior regions and Colombia, known as *patrones*, oversee coca plantations in the Mariscal Ramón Castilla province with private security. Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community leaders, Mariscal Ramón Castilla, 13 November 2023.

III. Illicit Business

Criminal groups are attracted to the tri-border region largely because of the opportunities it provides to control the flow of illicit drugs. The patchy state presence in the borderlands and most of the Amazon allows these groups largely unfettered access to rivers that flow, unguarded, to major Brazilian port cities or, to a lesser extent, to Ecuador. From these harbours, criminal groups distribute cocaine for consumption in Brazil or ship it around the world. Much of the fighting among criminal groups – and the concomitant danger to civilians it brings – can be traced to efforts to dominate these trafficking routes. At the same time, these organisations are exploiting natural resources in the Amazon rainforest to diversify their sources of income and launder their ill-gotten profits. To date, law enforcement in the three countries has been unable to rein in this influx of illegal outfits.

A. *Coca and Cocaine Production*

Cocaine is the main cause of deforestation in the tri-border region, in large part because drug trafficking groups are increasingly growing the crop – and processing it – within the forest itself. The core of coca production in the Amazon lies in the Peruvian departments of Uyacali and Loreto. Bordering Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, Loreto saw its hectares of coca crops almost triple between 2018 and 2022.²⁴ According to a Peruvian official, Comando Vermelho pays plantation and lab owners to get their operations running, as do Colombian investors; thus far, about 200 processing laboratories have sprung up.²⁵ An estimated 70 per cent of the cocaine and cocaine base paste produced in Peru is then trafficked into Brazil, while about 30 per cent is taken to Ecuador, mainly via the Napo River. Security officers admit that Peru's counter-narcotics agency, the Anti-Drug Directorate, has no active presence along some of the main trafficking routes.²⁶

The Peruvian state has been unable to curb the growth of drug trafficking or the violence that often accompanies it. Peru has ample experience with crop substitution projects, under which the government entices coca growers to switch to crops such as cacao. But crop substitution efforts in Loreto have flopped, largely because small-hold farmers lack the financing, technical tools and access to markets to make the

²⁴ Loreto went from having 5,072 hectares of coca crops in 2018 to 13,844 in 2022. The province of Mariscal Ramón Castilla in Loreto is the hub of cocaine production: coca cultivation in the province rose from 2,939 hectares in 2018 to 8,613 in 2022. In addition, the majority of drug labs are situated there. "Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2022", DEVIDA, 2023. When Crisis Group spoke with counter-narcotics authorities in November 2023, they said they had managed to destroy only five labs in 2022, adding that they hoped to take down many more in the future. While law enforcement officials have decried what they describe as a lack of resources to cover the vast region, during a field visit, Crisis Group visited coca plantations just a few kilometres from a military base. Hence it may not be just a lack of resources that inhibits a forceful state response to criminal groups. Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Mariscal Ramón Castilla, November 2023 and January 2024.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Cuchillacocha, 14 November 2023. Unlike in other ethnic Amazon territories, in Mariscal Ramón Castilla, Indigenous populations such as the Ticuna have no ancestral use for the coca leaf, so all the plantations are for cocaine production.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Cuchillacocha, 14 November 2023.

change.²⁷ To get a handle on the growing violence, the Peruvian government declared a state of emergency in the province of Mariscal Ramón Castilla in December 2023. Despite the extended powers this designation gave security officers, they say they are outgunned by the drug traffickers.²⁸ Organised crime groups protect their coca labs by deploying one or two dozen armed men carrying U.S.-made weapons, including M16s and grenade launchers that fire 40mm ammunition.²⁹ “We are a bit afraid”, said a local state official. “They can kill us”.³⁰

Little, if any, of the proceeds from cocaine trafficking trickle down to rural and Indigenous communities in Mariscal Ramón Castilla. The region is mired in extreme poverty, lacking passable roads, electricity and potable water. While Colombian and Brazilian drug traffickers often pay Indigenous leaders for access to their communities’ territories to grow coca, these criminal groups frequently renege on the terms of the agreements and in essence usurp the land.³¹ Community leaders feel powerless to confront the drug traffickers. During a focus group Crisis Group conducted in the Amazonas department in Colombia, one Indigenous leader described the fraught dynamic: “Everyone has weapons; [the traffickers] no longer pay attention [to us] and threaten the authorities”.³²

Criminal groups seek cheap manual labour for the plantations from local communities, including those on the Colombian side of the river. Indigenous people – mostly young men – are offered fat paychecks to work on coca plantations, but they are often paid instead in cocaine base paste, a dried substance that has not been purified into cocaine and can be smoked for an intense high. The ready supply of this drug has led to an increase in consumption, including among children.³³ In some cases, when coca leaf pickers have demanded cash payment from plantation owners, they have been killed. In Colombia, drug traffickers have threatened community members who discourage their children from working in drug production in Peru.³⁴

B. Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking has been a major source of revenue in the region since the 1980s, when Leticia became a hub for transporting illicit substances. The main person re-

²⁷ Cacao, for example, typically takes several years to become productive, forcing some farmers to return to coca to earn a livelihood. Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community leaders, Mariscal Ramón Castilla, 13 November 2023.

²⁸ “Decreto Supremo que prorroga el Estado de Emergencia en las provincias de Putumayo y Mariscal Ramón Castilla del departamento de Loreto”, *El Peruano*, 12 December 2023. Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Cuchillacocha, 14 November 2023.

²⁹ While hitting a remote drug lab takes about twenty armed officers, a law enforcement official estimated that raiding Bellavista, in Mariscal Ramón Castilla, a village practically run by drug traffickers, would require a force of at least 200. Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Cuchillacocha, 14 November 2023.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Mariscal Ramón Castilla, January 2024.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community leaders, Mariscal Ramón Castilla, November 2023.

³² Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Amazonas (Colombia), October 2023.

³³ Ibid. Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian official, 7 June 2024.

³⁴ Pamela Huerta, “The poorest narcos in the drug trafficking chain”, *Amazon Underworld*, 10 August 2023.

sponsible was Evaristo Porras, a trafficker connected to cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar, who established the so-called Cartel del Amazonas, which – as its name suggests – became the Amazon's preeminent drug cartel.³⁵ Although Porras died in 2010, the region has since become even more deeply enmeshed in the international drug trade.³⁶ Increased coca cultivation in Peru means there is more product to bring to market. Crime syndicates are vying to control trafficking routes, particularly those leading to Manaus, which lies on the Amazon along the way to coastal ports. They also aim to dominate local drug markets, extending their influence into Brazilian towns near the tri-border area like Benjamin Constant and Atalaia do Norte, both of which sit on tributaries that are crucial trafficking corridors.³⁷

The rivers and tributaries in the Amazon basin connecting Colombia and Peru to Brazil's interior and Atlantic seaports have become aquatic highways for drug trafficking. Law enforcement teams encounter major challenges in controlling the shallow rivers, in part because their heavy metal vessels are ill suited to navigating the waterways. During the rainy season, rivers swell by up to 15m, creating additional trafficking routes and concealment opportunities.³⁸ The Amazon itself has seen a huge increase in drug transit since 2016.³⁹ Simultaneously, cases of river piracy have multiplied. Also known as "river rats", the pirates mostly rob the locals, but on occasion they attack drug traffickers with .30 and .50 calibre guns.⁴⁰ Local sources allege that police officers are directly involved in piracy. "The police take and sell", said an Indigenous leader who makes this accusation.⁴¹ Authorities deny it, claiming that criminals wear official-looking uniforms to confuse people.⁴²

Drug cartels do not just depend on rivers to get their product to market. They recruit local men to act as "mules" and transport drugs via land across international borders.⁴³ Indigenous men carry loads that can weigh up to 50kg across the jungle to drop-off points in Brazil. They will walk for weeks between production areas in Peru,

³⁵ At that time, coca leaves produced in Peru and Bolivia were processed in laboratories in the Colombian departments of Caquetá, Guaviare and Putumayo. Hernando Salazar, "Muere arruinado famoso capo colombiano", BBC Mundo, 9 March 2010. Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community leaders and law enforcement officials, Brazil, Colombia and Peru, 2023 and 2024.

³⁶ Porras died of heart failure, four years after completing a prison sentence for illegal enrichment and drug trafficking. "En la quiebra murió el ex-narco Evaristo Porras", *El Tiempo*, 9 March 2010.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, inmates, Tabatinga, 16 November 2023.

³⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, academic, 14 April 2024.

³⁹ Drug trafficking has increased along the Amazon to such an extent that in 2019 a makeshift submarine filled with three tonnes of cocaine left Leticia; almost a month later, Spanish law enforcement intercepted it off the coast of Galicia. Sam Jones, "Cocaine seized from 'narco-submarine' in Spain was likely headed for UK", *The Guardian*, 27 November 2019. See also "Tussle for the Amazon: New Frontiers in Brazil's Organized Crime Landscape", *Diálogo Américas*, 16 November 2022.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement official, Tabatinga, 10 October 2023; community leaders, Amazonas (Brazil), 2023 and 2024.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Indigenous leader, Amazonas (Brazil), September 2023. In February, nine military police officers were arrested on suspicion of diverting half a tonne of drugs seized from criminals. See "Operação prende nove PMs suspeitos de desviar meia tonelada de drogas no AM", *G1 Globo*, 15 February 2024.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Tabatinga, 10 October 2023.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders and church representatives, Atalaia do Norte, 18 January 2024.

through Colombia's Amacayacu National Park and along the Putumayo River.⁴⁴ They carry cocaine, as well as a potent strain of marijuana known as "creepy" that is cultivated in Colombia's Andean region.⁴⁵ Before embarking on their journey, these Indigenous men often consult with shamans for spiritual protection.⁴⁶

Since 2015, Brazil has emerged as a leading supplier of cocaine to European markets, but there is growing domestic demand as well.⁴⁷ A member of Comando Vermelho claims that 95 per cent of the drug retail spots in Tabatinga, known as *bocas de fumo*, belong to their organisation.⁴⁸ In Indigenous communities across the Colombian border, local leaders also report a rising trend of substance abuse among young people. The same holds true in cities like Leticia and other villages along drug trafficking corridors.⁴⁹

C. *Illegal Logging, Gold Dredging and Fishing*

Criminal groups are increasingly branching into illicit logging, gold dredging and fishing. These activities allow them to launder money made from drug trafficking: state officials in Brazil refer to "narco-mining" and "narco-loggers" to describe how drug profits are reinvested in the timber and gold industries.⁵⁰ But criminal groups do not just engage in these activities for laundering; they are also looking for another, safer source of income. Because law enforcement focuses on curbing the production and transport of cocaine, other illegal endeavours tend to be more lightly policed.⁵¹ Indeed, in some cases corrupt state officials facilitate bringing illegally obtained commodities to market by providing false paperwork, which gives these groups access to the legal supply chain.

Criminal groups have become particularly active in illegal fishing. (The activity is illegal if it is conducted in violation of government regulations, during certain months or in protected areas.) Certain species of Amazon fish command high prices, in particular *arapaima gigas* – known as *pirarucu* in Brazil and *paiche* in Peru. Years of

⁴⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, state official, 1 May 2024. See also Bram Ebus, "Colombian drug runners turn to shamans for protection", *Amazon Underworld*, 15 August 2023.

⁴⁵ Criminal groups are eager to control drug transport in addition to production because the price of cocaine and base paste rises sharply en route: 1kg of cocaine base paste costs between \$500 and \$900 in the tri-border region but can fetch up to \$4,000 in Manaus. On the streets of São Paulo, 1kg of cocaine can be sold for as much as \$4,400. The cost/benefit ratio with marijuana is even higher, partly due to lower production costs. For instance, 1kg of "creepy" in the municipality of Japurá can be sold for \$100, while it can cost between \$800 and \$1,000 in Manaus. "Dinâmicas do mercado de drogas ilícitas no Brasil", Centro de Excelência Para a Redução da Oferta de Drogas Ilícitas, 2022. Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Manaus, 22 September 2023.

⁴⁶ Ebus, "Colombian drug runners turn to shamans for protection", op. cit.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leader, Amazonas (Brazil), September 2023; law enforcement official, Manaus, 22 September 2023. See also "Justiça manda prender seis PM's suspeitos de chefiarem esquema de tráfico de drogas, no AM", *G1 Globo*, 2 December 2022; and Gabriel Stargardter, "Brazil's gangs emerge as major cocaine exporters, flooding Europe with white powder", Reuters, 12 March 2020.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, inmates, Tabatinga, 16 November 2023.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Amazonas (Colombia), October 2023.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, state officials working with Indigenous peoples, Manaus, 18 September 2023.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, environmental police, Manaus, 21 September 2023.

unregulated overfishing have depleted *pirarucu* stocks, leading the governments of Peru, Colombia and Brazil to classify it as a protected species. That has done little to dent the market, however, and enterprises that can ship the fish out of the Amazon reap impressive profits. While local markets typically offer *pirarucu* at prices ranging from \$1.50 to \$2.50 per kilogram, in Leticia prices surge to around \$6 before the fish is transported out of the region.⁵² Such profit margins have induced drug traffickers to invest in large fishing operations, in defiance of state regulations to prevent overfishing. Additionally, there are reports that fish shipments are being used to conceal narcotics.⁵³

Illegal timber harvesting and processing is also rampant in the Amazon. To legitimise Brazilian timber that was cut illegally, criminals use falsified Peruvian documents. Timber illegally downed in Peru is also imported into Colombia with forged paperwork.⁵⁴ Corrupt local authorities facilitate these activities, with officials receiving kickbacks from timber traffickers in exchange.⁵⁵ Drug traffickers also use timber to hide cocaine.⁵⁶

Gold dredging, especially along the Puruê River (which is known as the Puré as it crosses Colombia before reaching Brazil), has also been on the rise. Comando Vermelho, on occasion, allegedly finances illegal extractive operations and, in some cases, purchases gold directly from the miners.⁵⁷ Local miners also complain that Colombian guerrillas and corrupt officers in the Brazilian Military Police often extort payments from those working the river, demanding a certain amount of gold per mining dredge.⁵⁸

Brazilian and Colombian authorities have attempted to crack down on illegal dredging, but their measures have proven ineffective: after law enforcement officers close illicit operations, the dredges resurface. Sources say corrupt state officials leak information about forthcoming operations, allowing criminals to sink the dredges intentionally; after the security forces leave, they recover the dredges or conceal them in tributary rivers.⁵⁹ In April, new dredges were detected in the Río Puré National

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, environmental police, Manaus, 21 September 2023; Atalaia do Norte, 18 January 2024. See also Rodrigo Pedroso, Nelly Luna Amancio and Jonathan Hurtado, “La triple frontera de la pesca ilegal: mafias e impunidad detrás del tráfico en la Amazonía”, *Ojo Público*, June 2023.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Atalaia do Norte, 18 January 2024. Small fisheries demand that they not be equated with bigger groups that are often funded by criminal syndicates, noting that they lack the financial resources needed for the larger operations. Cícero Pedrosa Neto, “The final minutes of Bruno and Dom in São Rafael”, *Amazônia Real*, 20 June 2022. Crisis Group interview, fisherman, Javari Valley region, 19 January 2024.

⁵⁴ An unintended consequence of stricter regulation is that communities that historically depended on timber for their livelihoods are struggling. In Islandia, a Peruvian village once reliant on timber, the collapse of mills following forest concession restrictions on cutting down trees pushed residents into illicit activities such as picking coca leaf. Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Atalaia do Norte, 18 January 2023; residents and entrepreneurs, Islandia, January 2024.

⁵⁵ “Condenando el Bosque”, Environmental Investigation Agency, June 2019.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Atalaia do Norte, 18 January 2023.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Manaus, 22 September 2023.

⁵⁸ Bram Ebus and Rodrigo Pedroso, “Gold spurs crime and corruption on Brazil-Colombia border”, *Amazon Underworld*, 3 August 2023.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Indigenous leader, Amazonas (Brazil), September 2023; Colombian law enforcement officials, Leticia, 10 October 2023.

Park, including in a do-not-enter area preserved to protect an Indigenous tribe in voluntary isolation, the Yuri-Passé (see Section V.A). State officials have spotted additional dredges on the Purité and Cotuhé Rivers, in Colombia's Amacayacu National Park and on the border with Peru, during flyovers.⁶⁰

D. *Flawed Law Enforcement*

Law enforcement in the area is underequipped, understaffed and ill prepared to respond to the violence and environment degradation brought about by the expansion of organised crime. Police and other security forces across the tri-border region acknowledge the need to better coordinate their approach to crime. "What happens there affects us here", a Colombian law enforcement official said, referring to crime on the other side of the Peruvian and Brazilian borders.⁶¹ The fact that no country's forces can pursue or arrest criminals outside their own jurisdiction is one reason illegal groups are able to operate with impunity in the region.

Criminals know they can take advantage of the porous borders. An inmate in Tabatinga's prison explained that illicit dealings such as money handovers are conducted within metres of the border, allowing for a quick escape if the police show up.⁶² The police in Leticia and Tabatinga communicate via WhatsApp, but due to unreliable internet connections in the area, messages sometimes arrive too late.⁶³ Senior gang members in Tabatinga are rumoured to keep a low profile during times of increased scrutiny on the outskirts of Leticia, avoiding encounters with Brazilian law enforcement on their side of the border.⁶⁴

Lack of resources also hampers security forces' ability to deal with crime. The police force's predicament in the Peruvian town of Islandia, which is in effect an island, is telling. Their two boats are broken down; as a result, they cannot pursue drug and timber traffickers who freely glide by their outpost. Officers pooled their own money to buy a Wi-Fi router, but they have been unable to pay for internet service and they still lack a working printer for official documents.⁶⁵ Colombian state officials told Crisis Group that before the Carolina Ramírez front prohibited National Parks Institute employees from operating in the area, park rangers could monitor criminal activity from a control post near the border where the Puré River crosses into Brazil. "For six years, we managed to avoid having [mining barges], so it can be done", said a state official.⁶⁶ But during the COVID-19 pandemic, the outpost was burned down, and mining barges started coming across the border from Brazil.⁶⁷ It has not yet been rebuilt.

With limited funding, state institutions also find it hard to protect vulnerable communities and the environment. The state agency for Indigenous affairs in Brazil,

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, NGO representatives, April 2024. See also Pilar Puentes, "Parque Nacional Amacayacu: rodeado por la minería ilegal y controlado por grupos armados que restringen el ingreso de guardaparques", *Mongabay*, 17 October 2023.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Leticia, October 2023.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, inmates, Tabatinga, 16 November 2023.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, police officers, Tabatinga, October 2024.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officials, Mariscal Ramón Castilla, January 2024.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, state official, Leticia, October 2023.

⁶⁷ Lucía Franco, "La violencia impide a Colombia proteger diez parques nacionales de la Amazonia", *El País*, 12 May 2022.

FUNAI, can only operate in the field with the accompaniment of security forces because of constant threats to their staff, making it difficult to respond to criminal activity in a timely fashion.⁶⁸ FUNAI officials voice concern about how easy it is to commit crimes with impunity in the Amazon's Indigenous lands.⁶⁹ Similarly, in recent months, Brazil's environmental police, the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources and the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation have scaled back field inspections aimed at combating illegal deforestation and gold extraction on Indigenous lands.⁷⁰ After Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government managed a 50 per cent reduction in deforestation in its first year in office in 2023, the drop in the number of inspections has roused concern as to whether environmentally destructive practices may rise once again.⁷¹

Low salaries for state officials, meanwhile, have bred rampant corruption in the three border countries. Police officers in Peru's Mariscal Ramón Castilla province have been implicated in facilitating drug trafficking and even directly participating in illicit activities.⁷² Similarly, in Colombia, army officers lament that criminals are able to "buy" – read, bribe authorities to provide – intelligence, compromising law enforcement efforts.⁷³ Sources also told Crisis Group that Brazilian security forces share information with criminal networks. A lieutenant colonel in the Brazilian army, for example, has been accused of receiving nearly \$200,000 in bribes to tip off miners about impending crackdowns between 2020 and 2022.⁷⁴ In 2023, the security secretary of the Brazilian state of Amazonas was arrested on suspicion of collaboration with a criminal organisation.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, state officials working with Indigenous peoples, Manaus, 18 September 2023.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Amazonas (Brazil), 2023.

⁷⁰ Mariana Durao and Leonardo Lara, "Brazil labor spat thwarts Lula's bid to boost growth and save the Amazon", Bloomberg, 6 April 2024.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Amazonas (Brazil), 2023.

⁷² Three police officers were sentenced to eighteen months of pretrial detention in June 2023. Doris Aguirre, "Loreto: agentes PNP eran 'topos' de narco en el trapecio amazónico", *La República*, 22 June 2023.

⁷³ For example, illegal gold miners often get tips about impending crackdowns. When they do, they simply move their mining barges from Colombia across the border into Brazil, or vice versa, as police in the two countries rarely coordinate their operations. Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officials, Leticia, 10 October 2023.

⁷⁴ The official has claimed he is innocent, and his lawyer stated that his client was accused in retaliation for the work he has done in the region fighting illegal mining. Eduardo Gonçalves, "PF aponta que militar recebeu R\$ 930 mil para vazar dados de operações a garimpeiros da Amazônia", *O Globo*, 29 June 2023.

⁷⁵ Vinicius Sassine, "Secretário de Segurança do AM é preso em operação sobre extorsão a criminosos", *Folha de S. Paulo*, 29 August 2023.

IV. Violence in the Amazon

Even by the standards of Latin America and the Caribbean, the Amazon now stands out for its high rates of violence.⁷⁶ In 2022, Leticia emerged as Colombia's second most violent town, while Tabatinga reported a homicide rate of 80 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2023, ranking among the highest in the Amazon.⁷⁷ Much of this violence stems from competition between rival criminal groups over illegal rackets and turf.

The murders of Dom Phillips, a correspondent for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, and his local guide, Indigenous rights defender Bruno Pereira, brought the region's high level of violence to international attention.⁷⁸ Well before these killings, criminality had been on the upswing across the region. Communities in the area have seen murders, and some of their leaders have been forcibly displaced, while criminal groups have stepped up their recruitment of minors.⁷⁹

Violence has intensified in the urban areas of the tri-border region as crime rings vie for control of illicit markets, while armed outfits in the rainforest threaten those suspected of informing state authorities or opposing their operations. A network of *sicarios* (paid assassins) who evade capture have become notorious in the region. They avoid answering for their crimes not just because state and security institutions are lax, but also because they can easily slip across borders. They may commit a murder in Tabatinga, Brazil, but then pass through an unsupervised crossing into Leticia, Colombia, or take a boat a few hundred metres to Peru.

An Indigenous man who worked for a criminal group that operates in Brazil, Colombia and Peru recounted his own story as an example of how these organisations draw in local teenagers to carry out acts of violence. At the age of thirteen he began working for a drug dealer, his main job being to connect young Indigenous girls to

⁷⁶ With only 8 per cent of the world's population, Latin America and the Caribbean account for 29 per cent of homicides worldwide. See Ebus and Eberle, "Crimes against the Climate: Violence and Deforestation in the Amazon", op. cit.; "Environmental and Climate Justice, and the Dynamics of Violence in Latin America", SIPRI, February 2024; and "Justicia ambiental y climática, y las dinámicas de violencia en América Latina", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Colombia, February 2024.

⁷⁷ Data provided by the Colombian national police.

⁷⁸ According to local authorities, Pereira was the main target of the attack and Phillips may have been collateral damage. Although then-Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro claimed that Phillips was disliked in the region, calling his journalistic endeavour ill advised, intelligence officers believe the men were attacked because of an escalating dispute between Pereira and local fisherfolk. The slow state response to the crime led local Indigenous groups to organise search committees, which uncovered criminal interests competing in the tri-border region. Ruben Dario da Silva Villar, known as "Colombia", a Peruvian drug trafficker with ties to both the cocaine and fishing industries, is alleged to be the mastermind behind the killings; three men who have been arrested await trial. "Dom Phillips was at the wrong place on the wrong day", a local law enforcement official said. Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Amazonas (Brazil), October 2023. Tom Phillips, "Indigenous groups scour forests and rivers for Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira", *The Guardian*, 10 June 2022. Constance Malleret, "Brazil police make new arrest in Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira murder investigation", *The Guardian*, 19 January 2024.

⁷⁹ A young man interviewed in a local jail told Crisis Group that he had no choice but to join a gang to keep his family safe; the only decision in his hands was which of the groups operating in the area he would prefer to become part of. Crisis Group interviews, inmates, Tabatinga, 16 November 2023. See also "Dos masacres en Amazonas: nuevo escenario en la disputa de las disidencias de Farc", *El Espectador*, 13 April 2022.

sexual exploitation rings.⁸⁰ By age seventeen, he was a hit man, eventually rising to become coordinator of a group comprising over three dozen contract killers.⁸¹ This criminal career, he said, left both physical and mental scars. “Every night when I close my eyes, I see the faces of those I’ve murdered, the bodies I have dismembered”, the *sicario* confessed.⁸²

Once a person has joined a criminal group, leaving is very difficult. For those determined to quit an organisation, becoming a member of an evangelical church is the most reliable way out. These churches have come to an understanding with gang leaders under which a member’s withdrawal will be accepted so long as he or she can demonstrate true devotion and faith.⁸³ “The government cannot pull this off, and it doesn’t cost the state any money”, declared an evangelical church leader in Benjamin Constant, a small Brazilian town.⁸⁴ But not everyone is offered such a choice. The former boss of the Indigenous *sicario*, a prominent local drug trafficker, owned plantations in Peru where, he said, the bodies of enemies were fed to caimans.⁸⁵

Organised crime groups have established themselves in the main urban centres in this part of the Amazon, bringing spikes of deadly violence in their wake. Targets of planned killings in Tabatinga receive warnings through death lists, disseminated via social media and text messaging groups. In the lists that Crisis Group was shown, individuals had the word *decretado* (ordered) scrawled across pictures of their faces.⁸⁶ The lists included members of rival groups, women involved in drug sales for competing factions and men believed to be vying for the affections of a gang member’s girlfriend.⁸⁷

Gender-based violence has become alarmingly common in Tabatinga, but there are few support services or safe houses in the town. Other parts of Brazil – particularly big cities such as Rio de Janeiro – offer more of a safety net, often with the support of state agencies such as Brazil’s Ministry of Women. Gang members have reportedly perpetrated group rapes in Tabatinga, where victims include minors.⁸⁸ In early 2024, members of Comando Vermelho spray-painted threats on the walls of the sole safe house for victims of gender-based violence in Tabatinga.⁸⁹ On the Colombian side of the border, the Amazonas department has the highest rate of gender-based violence nationwide.⁹⁰ Young women and girls from riverine communities on the Colombian and Peruvian sides of the Amazon are often enticed, sometimes under false pretences,

⁸⁰ Local crime groups often recruit young men and women who live nearby. Most victims of these groups also come from this same segment of the population. Crisis Group interview, state official, Islandia, 20 January 2024.

⁸¹ Most recruits are between the ages of eighteen and 22, although gangs occasionally enlist minors as young as eight as lookouts or involve them in drug sales in schools. Crisis Group interview, NGO representative, Tabatinga, October 2023.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, member of criminal organisation, Amazonas (Colombia), November 2023.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, church and Indigenous leaders, Amazonas (Brazil), January 2024.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, church leader, Benjamin Constant, 20 January 2024.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, member of criminal organisation, Amazonas (Colombia), November 2023.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Tabatinga, 10 October 2023; NGO representative, Tabatinga, 15 November 2023; inmates, Tabatinga, 16 November 2023.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Tabatinga, 10 October 2023.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, NGO representative, 8 May 2024.

⁹⁰ “Briefing Departamental, Amazonas, enero a diciembre de 2023”, UN OCHA, May 2024.

to work in coca-growing areas in Peru, where they are frequently subjected to sexual exploitation or even death. Sexual violence is particularly pervasive in Indigenous communities, often going hand in hand with alcohol consumption.⁹¹

State security forces also perpetrate violence, locals told Crisis Group. In Tabatinga, officers from Brazil's Military Police allegedly tortured and killed seven men in 2021; some of the bodies were then disposed of at the local garbage dump.⁹² Public officials in the area say they are aware of these allegations.⁹³ Judicial consequences for these actions, however, have remained elusive. "I don't think the justice system is prepared to go after law enforcement officers", a state source said.⁹⁴ Family members of one murder victim have received explicit threats warning them not to draw attention to the lack of repercussions for the perpetrators of violence.⁹⁵ "In our perception, these [criminal] organisations are very well organised also inside the institutions, especially the police", officials in Tabatinga explained.⁹⁶ Senior Military Police officers in Tabatinga interviewed by Crisis Group dismissed allegations of corruption and wrongdoing inside their institution.⁹⁷

V. Communities and the Environment

Encroaching criminal activity is threatening the safety of communities that have long made the Amazon their home, damaging the places where they live and breeding violence. Indigenous groups and *ribeirinhos* – non-natives of the rainforest who came to the Amazon during the rubber fever of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – feel under threat and unprotected by the state. Because of their critical role as defenders of the environment, attacks on these Indigenous communities could open the way to accelerating destruction of the rainforest.

A. Indigenous Groups under Threat

Criminal groups' incursions into Indigenous lands endanger these communities.⁹⁸ One area under threat is Brazil's Javari Valley, which is home to a mix of voluntarily isolated groups and others in "initial contact" with the Western world. (Initial contact refers to the period when outside groups first establish regular communication

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community leaders, Brazil, Colombia and Peru, 2023 and 2024.

⁹² Fabiano Maisonnave, "After a sergeant's death, Military Police wreck carnage in Amazonas state", *Folha de S. Paulo*, 30 June 2021. Sources have indicated to Crisis Group that an inquiry is still under way. Crisis Group telephone interviews, April and May 2024. Brazil's Military Police is a state-level security force tasked with maintaining public order and safety. Each of Brazil's 26 states and the Federal District has its own Military Police force, operating under the authority of the state governor. Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Amazonas (Brazil), 2023 and 2024.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Amazonas, 2023.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, family member of murder victim, May 2024.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Brazilian state official, Manaus, 18 September 2023.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Military Police officers, Tabatinga, October 2024; state officials, Bogotá, 5 June 2024.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Atalaia do Norte, 17 January 2023.

and a formal relationship with the previously secluded group.⁹⁹) The Yuri-Passé – a semi-nomadic group comprised of approximately 400 members who have lived in voluntary isolation for at least 500 years in Río Puré National Park in Colombia – are also at risk.¹⁰⁰ Guerrilla factions and illegal gold miners are trespassing on their land, which could lead to their extinction, in large part because the newcomers may expose them to diseases to which they lack immunity. According to an expert on Indigenous affairs, “these unregulated contacts typically slip under the institutional radar and generate disastrous consequences”.¹⁰¹ Once these groups are gone, the forest will become more vulnerable to exploitation, potentially with cascading effects that harm the entire ecosystem.

Demarcating territories – essentially, establishing legal boundaries around land deemed to belong to specific communities – is helpful but insufficient to protect these groups. Brazil, Colombia and Peru have gone to great lengths to demarcate Indigenous territories, but in the absence of effective state and security services, criminal groups are nonetheless encroaching upon these areas. In Brazil, Indigenous leaders complain that sharing detailed information about drug trafficking routes and the modus operandi of local crime syndicates with law enforcement has not led to a tangible response.¹⁰²

Indeed, members of these groups say speaking up is dangerous. One Indigenous leader told Crisis Group that violent threats from criminals seeking to exploit the region’s natural resources forced him to leave the Javari Valley. Not even relocation protected him from this criminal group: armed men, he said, hunted him down in his safe house in the Brazilian interior.¹⁰³ In Colombia, guerrilla organisations and criminal groups have entered Indigenous territories to recruit young people, threatening community leaders who protest their presence. Indigenous leaders in Peru, meanwhile, have denounced state officials for selling plots of land inside legally demarcated Indigenous territories to private investors.¹⁰⁴

Given the high stakes not just for those vulnerable to recruitment but the very survival of Indigenous communities, members of these groups have organised their own patrols, keeping an eye on rivers and other access points to their land.¹⁰⁵ While these initiatives could, in theory, operate as an early warning system for government officials seeking to stave off criminal groups’ illicit incursions, they have not done so in practice. Villagers on the Colombian side of the Amazon, for example, alerted

⁹⁹ Brazil’s state agency FUNAI is responsible for initial contact with isolated Indigenous groups and mitigating the risks brought about by interaction.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, state official, Leticia, October 2023.

¹⁰¹ According to international law, including the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, states have an obligation to protect ethnic groups in voluntary isolation. Crisis Group telephone interview, Indigenous peoples expert, 13 April 2024. Besides violent threats, rapid modernisation and the introduction of internet service generate challenges for remote Indigenous communities. Jack Nicas, “The internet’s final frontier: Remote Amazon tribes”, *The New York Times*, 2 June 2024.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Indigenous leader, Amazonas (Brazil), September 2023.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group telephone interview, Indigenous leader, 5 October 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders in Mariscal Ramón Castilla and Atalaia do Norte, November 2023 and January 2024. See also Alerta Temprana N° 007-24, Colombia’s Human Rights Ombudsman, 18 March 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Amazonas (Colombia), October 2023.

local police that *pelacaras* (the word used for armed intruders), had entered their territory on several occasions in 2023, but law enforcement did not act on the tip.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Indigenous leaders in Peru have reported that members of Os Crías and Comando Vermelho are present in the villages of Bellavista Callaru, Santa Rosa and Caballococha.¹⁰⁷

B. *Brazil's Ribeirinhos*

Ribeirinhos, the descendants of workers recruited to labour in the Amazon rubber industry in the 20th century, also struggle to get by in the region. The *ribeirinhos* – or “river people” in English – have long dwelled in poverty. Lured into the forest to harvest latex in the late 19th century and work on rubber plantations during World War II, they were subjected to exploitative conditions, in some cases enduring indentured servitude. Today, their descendants support themselves by fishing. Increasingly, however, they are finding it difficult to pursue this livelihood.

One cause of their difficulties is the Brazilian government's move in the 1990s to demarcate Indigenous lands in the Javari Valley to protect ancestral groups threatened by loggers. Although this initiative had the interests of communities and the environment at heart, one of its side effects was to limit the *ribeirinhos'* ability to fish in Indigenous lands. Members of Indigenous groups now patrol the waters and confront the fisherfolk, sometimes with shotguns. They are not the only ones clamping down on the *ribeirinhos*. “I was born in Indigenous territory”, said a senior *ribeirinho*, whose father relocated to the region during the World War II rubber boom. Now, he complains, state and federal security forces have increased their scrutiny of environmental offences. They punish him even when he is carrying fish caught in permitted zones.¹⁰⁸

To be sure, the *ribeirinhos* are not blameless bystanders. Several *ribeirinhos* were arrested in conjunction with the murders of Bruno Pereira and Dom Phillips. In the aftermath, law enforcement has cracked down on *ribeirinhos* fishing in protected waters. Restrictions on their traditional livelihoods, however, have forced more of them to seek work in illicit markets. Organised crime outfits often have particular success drawing younger *ribeirinhos* into their ranks.¹⁰⁹

C. *Environmental Harm*

The surge in criminal activity in the tri-border region has harmed the environment, although not at rates seen in other parts of the Amazon.¹¹⁰ Across the Amazon basin, cattle ranching and industrial agriculture are the main forces destroying the rainforest.¹¹¹ That is not the case in the tri-border region, particularly in Peru, where coca

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. Law enforcement officials claimed the tip was based on rumour rather than any serious threat. Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officials, Leticia, October 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Amazonas (Colombia), October 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, fisher, Javari Valley region, 19 January 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, NGO representative, Tabatinga, 15 November 2023.

¹¹⁰ For the most current data on Amazon deforestation, see the monitoring tools provided by Global Forest Watch.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°91, *A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia*, 4 November 2021.

plantations – which require razing fewer hectares of forest than the other businesses destroying the jungle – are the primary driver of environmental degradation.¹¹² Still, the quick expansion of criminal economies likely prefigures worse levels of environmental destruction and loss of state control of the rainforest in the future. Already penetrated by illegal gold miners and drug traffickers, these border zones could become one of the next Amazon wastelands if urgent action is not taken. Sources affirm that several Indigenous leaders have granted permission for coca plantations in exchange for cash. “They have gladly decided to raze their forest”, an Indigenous community leader told Crisis Group.¹¹³

It is not just the cultivation of coca, but also the production of cocaine that is damaging the forest. In the process of making coca paste, laboratories operated by criminal groups discharge chemical waste – including acetone, gasoline and sulfuric acid – into the Amazon’s rivers and soil.¹¹⁴ Near Tipisca, in Colombia, locals complain about the drug labs in nearby Peruvian communities. “It affects us because when it rains, all the chemicals are washed into the river”, said an Indigenous leader, who added that her community is forced to consume contaminated waters.¹¹⁵

Human settlement has also accelerated deforestation. A Christian group known as the Israelites has built several compounds, especially on the Peruvian side of the border. Anticipating a severe drought and famine that they believe will mark the beginning of the final judgment, the cult’s leadership instructed followers to settle in the jungle. The settlers have cleared land near their homes, making them a significant driver of deforestation.¹¹⁶

Illegal gold extraction is also befouling the Amazon’s rivers, such as the Puré (Purú). The gargantuan mining dredges move so much sediment in search of fine concentrations of gold that they sometimes alter the course of rivers. These machines can cost up to \$500,000 each, but the returns are so big that the operators recoup their investment within a few months.¹¹⁷ Another alarming effect of the search for gold is the discharge of toxic quicksilver mercury into rivers and surrounding land, which can cause irreversible damage to the nervous systems of those who ingest it.¹¹⁸ Blood

¹¹² Daniel Yovera and Carlos Mauriola, “Yavarí, un corredor de Loreto bajo asedio”, *La República*, 4 March 2024.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Amazonas (Colombia), October 2023; Indigenous leader, Atalaia do Norte, 18 January 2024. See also Brehaut, “Los Israelitas del Nuevo Pacto Universal en el Perú: religión, deforestación y narcotráfico”, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴ “World Drug Report 2023”, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023.

¹¹⁵ Producing one kilogram of cocaine requires over 300l of gasoline. It is common to see men in small Peruvian towns moving barrels of chemicals through the village’s main streets. Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Amazonas (Colombia), October 2023.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Amazonas (Colombia), October 2023. See also Brehaut, “Los Israelitas del Nuevo Pacto Universal en el Perú: religión, deforestación y narcotráfico” *op. cit.*; and Phillips, “The isolated tribes at risk of illness from Amazon missionaries”, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁷ Ebus and Pedroso, “Gold spurs crime and corruption on Brazil-Colombia border”, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁸ As a rule of thumb, at least three grams of mercury are necessary to trap a gram of gold in an amalgam. The use of mercury is common in gold dredging, despite Brazil, Colombia and Peru having ratified the Minamata Convention on Mercury that prohibits it. “Opening the Black Box: Local Insights Into the Formal and Informal Global Mercury Trade Revealed”, IUCN NL, 2021.

tests of Indigenous people residing along rivers where mining dredges operate register mercury levels far above what is considered safe.¹¹⁹

VI. Strengthening Responses to Crime

A. Improving Security Cooperation

An effective security strategy for the tri-border region must include at its heart the three countries' states and security services. A number of small-scale efforts to forge greater collaboration have already proven fruitful.¹²⁰ These could be given far greater impetus by the joint declaration at an August 2023 summit of the eight Amazon countries that form the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation, which pledged to "promote the exchange of information and police and intelligence cooperation to combat illegal activities and environmental crimes affecting the Amazon region".¹²¹ Notably, it proposes establishing a regional police cooperation centre in Manaus. Also in 2023, Colombia announced a plan to create another coordination centre in Leticia.¹²²

Regardless of which new centres are created, Brazil, Colombia and Peru should build on the 2023 summit and foster increased cooperation and intelligence sharing among their security agencies. Standardising environmental crime legislation among countries and using technological tools such as satellite imagery to detect illegal activities – including the operation of coca plantations and illicit dredging projects – is essential. Judicial and police agencies should organise cross-border projects to enforce laws against money laundering and trafficking of narcotics, timber, gold and mercury. These strategies should be designed in collaboration with representatives from local communities, who have the greatest understanding of how crime is operating on the ground and are the most adept forest stewards in Latin America. (State officials should first, of course, vet the Indigenous leaders to make sure they have not entered in dealings with the criminal groups.¹²³)

¹¹⁹ "Contenido de Mercurio en comunidades étnicas de la Subregión planicie en la Amazonia Colombiana", Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia, 2018.

¹²⁰ Small steps – such as the secondment of two Peruvian police officers to the Brazilian counter-narcotics operations in Manaus and a memorandum of understanding among Brazil, Colombia and Peru inked in 2008 to combat illicit activities in border areas and along common rivers – have increased the effectiveness of patrols. Crisis Group interviews, Brazilian and Colombian law enforcement officials, 2023.

¹²¹ Established in 1978, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation had experienced a period of decline in the late 2010s. But in August 2023, representatives of the eight Amazon countries gathered in Brazil under the organisation's auspices with the overarching goal of fostering the "harmonious development of Amazonian territories". The declaration also highlighted the risks faced by human rights defenders and Indigenous leaders and aimed to promote and finance the protection and activities of social and environmental defenders in the Amazon. "Get to know the Belem Declaration signed by the Amazon countries at the Summit", press release, Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation, 9 August 2023.

¹²² "Colombia creará una unidad de la Policía para la protección del agua", W Radio, 14 May 2024.

¹²³ Colombian President Petro has made a priority of cooperation with local communities, including through a state-run pilot project to give financial incentives to residents to conserve forests in conflict-affected areas. "Forest Governance by Indigenous and Tribal Peoples", UN Food and Agriculture

Governments should adopt a multi-faceted approach to tackle entrenched corruption and state involvement in illegal activities, which have fostered mutual distrust between security forces operating in the tri-border region and hampered coordination. Authorities must strengthen public prosecutors' ability to investigate environmental crimes that might involve state officials or politicians, including by providing regional offices with sufficient staff and equipping them with tools to trace financial flows associated with graft. Those officials found guilty should receive punishments that are severe enough to act as a deterrent to others. Furthermore, establishing robust oversight mechanisms, such as independent ombudsman offices or external audit bodies to monitor the activities of law enforcement agencies, can help minimise corruption among these forces. Finally, encouraging communities to denounce corruption among the state officials working in their territories is essential for holding law enforcement accountable and creating a stronger system of checks and balances.

Foreign capitals should pursue those with deep pockets who can be held accountable for damaging the health of the Amazon. The European Union should deploy its renewed framework on environmental crimes, working with local law enforcement and Indigenous communities to sanction those responsible for law-breaking, including illicit wildlife and mercury trafficking.¹²⁴ Shedding light on illegal extraction of commodities such as gold and timber, which contributes to the Amazon's destruction and finances crime, can help identify those responsible for bankrolling environmentally harmful activities. Similarly, the U.S. Treasury and State Departments should include environmental offenders in the Office of Foreign Assets Control list, allowing global banks to take action against money laundering by these individuals.¹²⁵ International donors should also provide resources and technical assistance to financial intelligence units operating on both the national and regional level in Colombia, Brazil and Peru, so they can better follow illicit money trails and enable sanctions to be targeted more effectively.

B. *Community Livelihoods and Defence*

All three border countries should address the socio-economic conditions that entice residents to join criminal groups. They could, for example, consider pooling resources and efforts to bring state services to cross-border areas, including mobile clinics – with staff qualified to help survivors of gender-based violence – and schools that could reach people in remote places where it is unlikely that permanent facilities will be built. Responses to climate-driven emergencies such as floods, droughts and forest fires would be more effective if transnational teams could also operate across borders and draw upon funding from the three capitals and foreign donors. At the

Organisation, 2021. Daniel Esteban Reyes Espinosa, “‘Conservar Paga’, el incentivo de Ministerio Ambiente para cuidar el Amazonia”, *Infobae*, 11 November 2023. In Brazil, an official spoke of the need for improved dialogue with communities so that state agencies can react promptly to the information and alerts their representatives provide. Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Manaus, 21 September 2023.

¹²⁴ “Environmental crimes: Deal on new offences and reinforced sanctions”, press release, European Parliament, 16 November 2023. Imposition of environmental sanctions has been limited to date, taking place almost entirely in Asia.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, U.S. officials and money laundering experts, May 2024.

same time, authorities from the three countries should be mindful of the potential impact of new policies on the livelihoods of people living in the area. While protecting the ecosystem is crucial, cracking down on subsistence economies without providing alternative paths to legal employment could push more people to engage in criminal activity.

These tensions need to be handled with particular care when demarcating more Indigenous collective lands in this region. Demarcation can help empower Indigenous communities to defend themselves from those wanting to use their territory for illicit activities.¹²⁶ Collective land titles recognise the unique relation that Indigenous groups have to the land. They also give communities the rights to self-determination and to defend their cultural practices.¹²⁷ Therefore, along with the demarcation of the territories, a legal framework is in place that recognises the authority of Indigenous governance structures over the land (the specific form depends on the country or ethnicity). This legal recognition empowers communities in their interactions with the state, including the police or armed forces, which are legally mandated to safeguard their collective rights and provide protection.

That said, moves to demarcate more Indigenous land should play close heed to the presence and needs of other people who might drift into the orbit of organised crime if they are not allowed to pursue their livelihoods. Non-Indigenous groups such as the *ribeirinhos* could also be granted additional rights to land ownership and use of resources through collective or community titling, so long as these are complemented by appropriate environmental regulations encouraging forest-friendly activities.

Across the vast stretches of the Amazon, meanwhile, law enforcement agencies will struggle to strengthen their presence unless they form strong links with communities. Local people are best positioned to detect when violent groups pose a threat to their territory, and they could alert security forces to any suspicious movements.¹²⁸ To this end, states and their foreign partners should also support Indigenous guards that have sprung up in response to criminal incursions.¹²⁹ On their own, these generally unarmed informal networks are unlikely to be able to ward off intruders who are bearing weapons. But law enforcement agencies should be encouraged to build ties with these groups and act upon the information they provide rather than spurning their requests for assistance, as often happens now.

¹²⁶ Indigenous leaders have been outspoken in their criticism of Brazilian President Lula da Silva, who had promised to accelerate demarcation of collective lands in his campaign but has not delivered during his first year in government. "Indigenous Brazilians lament Lula's unfulfilled land demarcation promises", *Common Dreams*, 19 April 2024.

¹²⁷ All Latin American countries are signatories of Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, which recognises the collective rights of Indigenous communities. This treaty, together with the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which recognised the right of these peoples to self-determination, is the legal bedrock of the demand for collective land rights. "Guaranteeing Indigenous People's Rights in Latin America: Progress in the Past Decade and Remaining Challenges", ECLAC, November 2014.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous leaders, Amazonas (Colombia), October 2023.

¹²⁹ Indigenous guards have been effective in defending their territories in Colombia, but have encountered greater resistance elsewhere, including Brazil and Mexico. "Pueblos indígenas latinoamericanos en la mira del narcotráfico y la insurgencia", IWGIA, 8 April 2022. "In Brazil, Indigenous Ka'apor take their territory's defense into their own hands", *Mongabay*, 14 March 2022.

VII. Conclusion

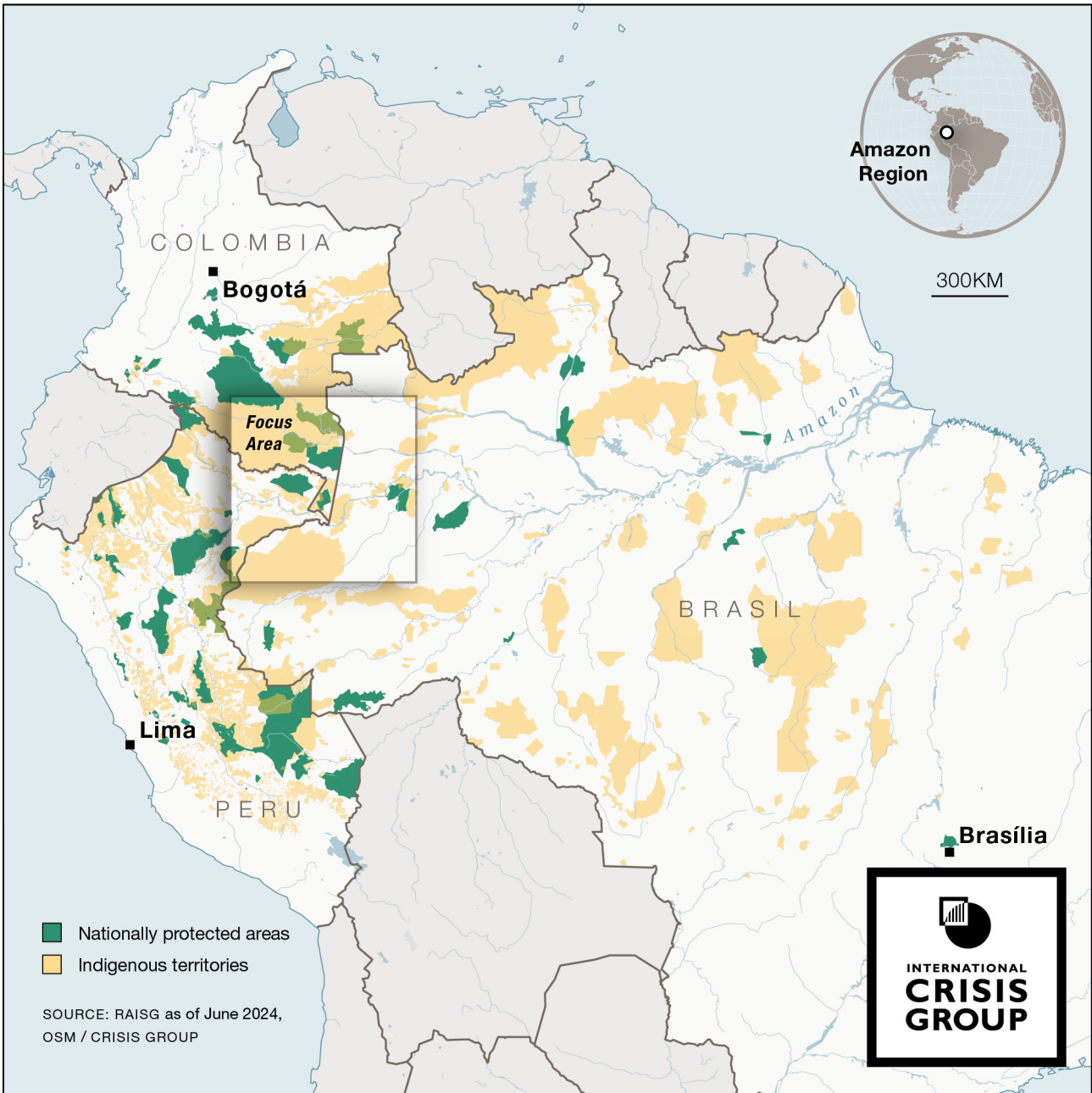
Criminal groups are filling their coffers at the expense of the Amazon rainforest and the populations it shelters. For communities scattered across the tri-border area, these outfits offer employment but also cause acute unease as they perpetrate violence, pollute land and waterways, and stake illegitimate claims to swathes of territory. Deforestation in this frontier zone has not reached the extremes seen elsewhere in the rainforest. But the weakness of local authorities, and the ways in which expanding criminal outfits reinforce a combination of deadly violence, community breakdown and environmental damage, raise urgent questions as to whether the three states can honour the commitments they have made to protect the Amazon's biodiversity and its essential role as a global climate regulator.

These issues will be at the forefront of major international events tackling global environmental challenges: the Biodiversity COP16 in Cali, Colombia in October 2024; the G20 Summit that Brazil will host in November 2024; and the Climate COP30 which will gather in Belém do Pará, in the Brazilian Amazon, in November 2025. States present at these meetings should take care not to issue grand pledges to protect the environment without also addressing the grassroots conditions in the Amazon, as well as the corrosive effects that crime, illicit livelihoods and state corruption could have on the possibility of putting green promises into action.

Joint law enforcement efforts led by the Amazon countries and backed by foreign partners will be crucial to force criminal groups onto the back foot. In regions that are difficult to govern – where transport is infrequent and expensive, and state bodies often have lower budgets than those of organised crime – local authorities will need to collaborate more closely with communities, while inhabitants will need better access to legal employment if they are to be dissuaded from joining criminal groups. World leaders seeking to harness these summits to safeguard the Amazon for humanity should not lose sight of the crime festering in the rainforest.

Bogotá/Brussels, 17 July 2024

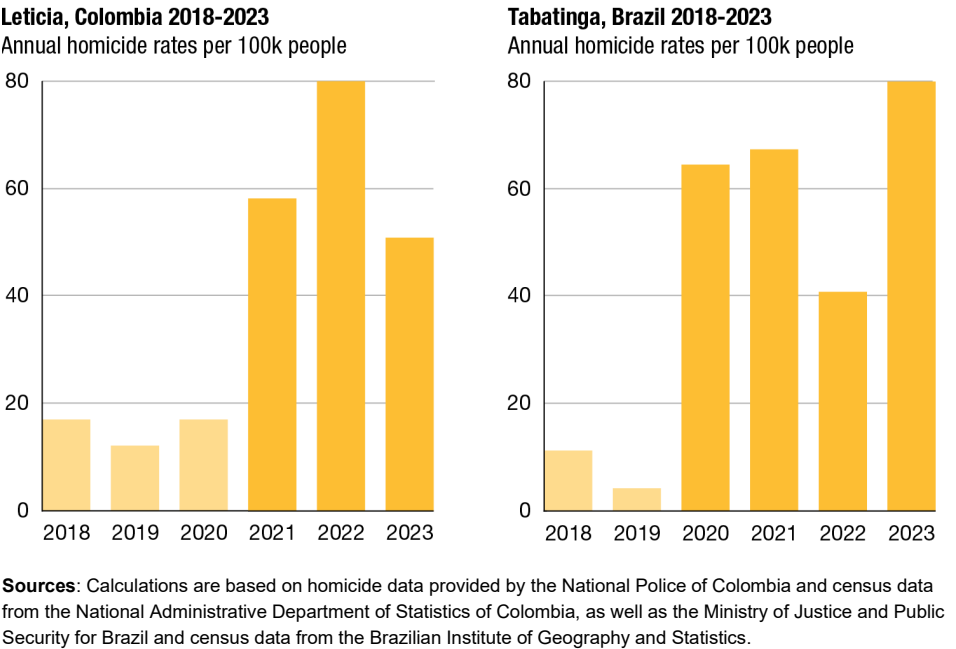
Appendix A: Map of the Amazon Borderlands Including Protected Areas and Indigenous Territories



Appendix B: The Tri-border Region of Brazil, Colombia and Peru



Appendix C: Homicide Rates in the Borderlands



Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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July 2024



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