

Coal shipments targeted by Colombian drug cartels

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Cocaine became Colombia's largest export last year in US dollar terms, surpassing oil and coal, according to data from Bloomberg. Increasingly drug cartels are turning to coal shipments as a way to export their goods, using chemicals to create fake coal.

Law firm A&A Multiprime Corp has released its 2024 Colombia Drug Smuggling Report, offering analysis of the shifting challenges encountered by authorities and the maritime industry in their efforts to combat narcotics trafficking.

“With a record surge in cocaine production in Colombia during 2023, we’re facing unprecedented challenges in maritime security,” the report warned.

According to the Dirección General Marítima y Portuaria, the country’s maritime authority, cases involving drugs smuggled in containers of fruit, as well as in coal and scrap cargoes have soared.

Cocaine disguised as fake coal and hidden within other bulk cargoes is on the increase necessitating the use of special alkaloid tests to detect the presence of drugs.

Colombia is the fifth largest exporter of coal in the world with 5.4% of total exports worldwide, according to statistics covering 2022.

The report also discussed how port authorities in Santa Marta and Turbo have raised special concern about the discovery of drugs in reefer containers carrying fruits, particularly bananas from the Urabá and Magdalena regions.

With much of the cocaine heading to European shores, there is an increasing focus of tackling the shipments as they reach port.

In January this year, the European Union along with port authorities and many associations including Europol, and customs and law enforcement authorities launched the European Ports Alliance Public Private Partnership. The partnership aims to bring all relevant stakeholders together, to form solutions to protect ports from drug trafficking and criminal infiltration.

Seizures of cocaine in the EU are at record levels, with more than 300 tonnes seized on an annual basis in recent years.

According to the International Chamber of Shipping, nearly 90% of all cocaine, 45% of all cannabis, and 30% of all amphetamine-type stimulants are trafficked by sea.

Pictured above is part of a haul of cocaine disguised as charcoal discovered by Irish police three years ago.