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This Report will serve as a reference to policy makers, academia and all those who are interested in understanding trends and patterns with regard to the safety and security of cross-border trade.
Dear Reader,

In an increasingly globalized world, the shadow economy of illicit trade remains a significant and persistent challenge that undermines legitimate markets, erodes public trust, and funds criminal enterprises. Illicit trade encompasses a wide range of activities, including counterfeiting, smuggling, drug trafficking, money laundering, and the illegal trade of wildlife and natural resources.

As we delve into the intricacies of illicit trade, it becomes evident that the solutions must be as dynamic and adaptable as the problem itself. Illicit trade can be deterred through a coordinated, multifaceted approach based on the collective knowledge and experience developed by the Customs community as well as our stakeholders.

With this context in mind, it is my pleasure to present to you the 2023 edition of the World Customs Organization (WCO) Illicit Trade Report (ITR), which provides an in-depth analysis of the current state, evolving trends, and complex impacts of illicit trade.

The report identifies key areas of focus for enforcement activities, including cultural heritage, drugs, anti-money laundering, environment, intellectual property rights, health and safety, revenue, and security. The findings presented in this report are the result of rigorous research and collaboration among WCO Secretariat staff, the Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices, and WCO Members. The effort to produce this report exemplifies the WCO’s theme for 2024: “Customs Engaging Traditional and New Partners with Purpose”.

FOREWORD
This collaboration, inspired by the goals of the WCO Charter of Data Quantity and Quality Enhancements in the Customs Enforcement Network (CEN), led to an increase in data submission in 2023, thus enriching the analysis contained in this report. By examining case studies, open-source intelligence, statistical data, and enforcement challenges, and by leveraging technology in the form of the CEN data visualization tool, this report aims to shed light on the scale and scope of illicit trade and offers actionable insights for Customs policymakers, and stakeholders across the globe. The intent is for this report to both inform and inspire concerted efforts to mitigate the impact of illicit trade. By understanding the underpinnings and consequences of these illicit activities, the WCO and its partners can work together to foster a safer, more transparent, and equitable global economy.

Armed with valuable insights contained in the ITR, the trade community can broaden its perspectives, think creatively, and embrace innovative approaches to combatting illicit trade. These approaches are essential for Customs administrations to maintain their role in facilitating legitimate trade while ensuring security in an ever-changing global landscape. In addition, utilizing cutting-edge technologies and data analytics, continually enhancing and supplementing our CEN tools, and raising our understanding and engagement, all increase responsiveness and effectiveness in the fight against illicit trade.

I express my gratitude to all contributors who generously contributed their expertise and resources to this report. That commitment to understanding and addressing the challenges of illicit trade is invaluable as the WCO and its partners work together to find effective responses to illicit trade. It is through such collaborative efforts that we can make meaningful progress.

Ian SAUNDERS
Secretary General, World Customs Organization
INTRODUCTION
Since its inception in 2012, the Illicit Trade Report has been of paramount importance in unveiling the intricacies of cross-border criminal activities.

This Report meticulously analyses seizure data voluntarily submitted by Customs administrations worldwide, offering a detailed overview of the extent of illicit trade and the enforcement efforts of Customs authorities.

PURPOSE AND VISION

The Illicit Trade Report serves a dual purpose for the World Customs Organization:

1. **RAISING AWARENESS:**
   highlighting critical areas of Customs enforcement; and

2. **KNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTION:**
   enhancing the existing body of knowledge on illicit trade, enabling policymakers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the global situation and empowering Customs administrations to enhance their response effectively.
FOCUS AREAS

The 2023 edition emphasizes seven key risk areas within Customs enforcement:

1. **ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING AND COUNTER-TERRORISM FINANCING**
   examining efforts to combat money laundering and terrorism financing, highlighting successful operations and emerging threats;

2. **CULTURAL HERITAGE**
   addressing the illicit trafficking of cultural heritage items, focusing on recent significant incidents and protective measures implemented by Customs administrations;

3. **DRUGS**
   providing an in-depth analysis of global drug trafficking patterns and the challenges faced by Customs and law enforcement agencies;

4. **ENVIRONMENT**
   highlighting crimes related to the illegal trade in wildlife, timber, hazardous waste, and other environmentally sensitive commodities;

5. **INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS (IPR), HEALTH, AND SAFETY**
   exploring the illicit trade in counterfeit goods and illicitly traded medical products, including impacts on public health and safety;

6. **REVENUE**
   focusing on the illicit trade in tobacco and alcohol, commercial fraud, and other revenue-related offences; and

7. **SECURITY**
   discussing the role of Customs in preventing the illicit trafficking of prohibited and restricted goods, such as firearms, explosives, and materials of mass destruction.

By leveraging robust data analysis and collaborative efforts, the WCO continues to lead the charge in enhancing global Customs enforcement and safeguarding the integrity of international trade.
1. The Customs Enforcement Network (CEN)

Launched by the WCO in 2000, the CEN is instrumental in aiding the Customs community with enforcement activities through the collection of data and intelligence. This central repository for enforcement-related information, with currently more than a million seizure and offence cases, depends on the consistent submission of high-quality data from all WCO Members.

The foundation of the analysis in this Report is the data sourced from the CEN. This data set encompasses seizures reported by Customs, joint Customs and Police units, and other law enforcement agencies. Currently, the CEN boasts over 3,500 users from 186 Customs administrations, who voluntarily contribute non-personal national seizure and offence data. Access to the CEN is tightly regulated to ensure comprehensive governance of data handling and protection.

2. Additional data sources

The 2023 Report adopts a multifaceted approach, integrating various data sources to deliver a comprehensive assessment of illicit trade. These sources include:

- **Official government media outlets**: reports published by Member administrations;
- **International organizations**: contributions from entities engaged in combating illicit trade;
- **Member surveys**: targeted surveys conducted by the WCO Secretariat to gather supplementary data from its Members and the RILO network; and
- **Open-source analysis**: incorporating publicly accessible information to enhance the understanding of illicit trade patterns.

3. Data visualization

In 2023 the WCO introduced a cutting-edge data visualization solution to provide Members with an instant and comprehensive overview of illicit trafficking trends. This advanced tool, a platform based on interactive dashboards that provide a graphical representation of CEN data, enables Customs administrations to effectively uncover hidden patterns and trends within complex data sets, thereby strengthening their risk analysis capabilities and optimizing Customs controls for improved efficiency.

The platform empowers users with the ability to view, filter and analyse seizure data on a global scale independently, including the different means of transport and concealment methods used. The seizure dashboard offers a unique opportunity for direct interaction with comprehensive information on seizures that have been reported in the CEN.

The visuals integrated into this Report are intended to give the reader a deeper understanding of the dynamics behind the data and enhance the identification of trends, patterns, and potential areas of improvement in Customs enforcement efforts.
METHODOLOGY

The Illicit Trade Report is the culmination of the work of various stakeholders. The content of this Report is compiled by the WCO programmes, drawing primarily on data from the CEN.

This data is contextualized within the broader framework of the WCO’s annual activities and the subject matter expertise of the programmes. The analysts from each programme play a pivotal role in this process, while the Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILOs) support the process through data entry and data validation.

The Global RILO Network is spread across the six WCO regions, and contributes actively to the CEN database by:

- entering data on behalf of affiliated Members;
- validating the accuracy and reliability of CEN data; and
- ensuring high-quality data standards.

Moreover, the RILOs develop regional intelligence products based on the information in the CEN, which are crucial for strategic operations and contribute to the analysis contained in this Report.
THE VALUE OF CASE STUDIES

This year’s Report includes a series of detailed case studies to complement the comprehensive analysis of global seizure data. These case studies enrich the Report by providing practical, real-world examples of successful operations against illicit trade.

They are valuable in:

• **Illustrating real-world applications**: demonstrating the application of enforcement strategies in real-world situations;

• **Providing detailed insights**: revealing complexities and challenges faced by enforcement agencies;

• **Highlighting best practices**: showcasing successful enforcement actions as models for other administrations;

• **Enhancing engagement**: making the Report more compelling and accessible through narratives and stories;

• **Demonstrating impact**: providing tangible evidence of the impact of enforcement actions;

• **Encouraging collaboration**: highlighting multi-agency and international cooperation efforts;

• **Identifying trends and emerging threats**: revealing new trends and threats through detailed examinations of specific cases;

• **Educational tool**: serving as an educational resource for training Customs officers and other stakeholders; and

• **Supporting policy development**: offering insights for developing more informed and effective policies.

By incorporating these detailed case studies, the Illicit Trade Report 2023 not only provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of illicit trade, but also offers actionable insights and practical examples to enhance global enforcement efforts.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

The WCO Illicit Trade Report opens with a comprehensive analysis of global smuggling trends, leveraging data and intelligence from Member administrations. The Customs Enforcement Scan highlights a concerning rise in cocaine trafficking, posing a significant threat to both supply chains and public safety. The Report underscores the urgent need for enhanced collaboration between the global Customs community and industry stakeholders, particularly the shipping industry. Embracing technological advancements, such as Smart Containers, is identified as a key strategy to combat illicit activities.

The Report delves into the evolving tactics of criminal organizations, revealing a persistent interconnected network of smuggling routes across various transportation modes. While maritime and land transport remain the primary modes of concern for Member administrations, a resurgence in air passenger smuggling has been observed following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

The first section of the WCO Illicit Trade Report is dedicated to the Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Counter-Terrorism Financing (CTF) Programme, the WCO’s most recently-created law enforcement programme within the Compliance and Enforcement Sub-Directorate. The programme was created in 2018 to strengthen the capabilities of the WCO membership and WCO law enforcement partners to combat money laundering and terrorism financing in the Customs arena, as well as to support the other WCO law enforcement programmes from a money laundering perspective. The programme is composed of two major initiatives: Project TENTACLE and Project OCTAGON, both of which focus efforts on the Asia/Asia Pacific, Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and Middle Eastern regions.

Project TENTACLE, the WCO’s primary AML-CTF capacity building and operational effort, is an initiative established to counter bulk cash smuggling, trade-based money laundering, and the smuggling of gems and precious metals associated with money laundering. Project TENTACLE places emphasis on the advancement of money laundering and terrorism financing investigations following border seizure events, and the collaboration between Customs Services, Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs) and Police services in targeting and prosecuting money laundering. The WCO’s main partners for Project TENTACLE are the Egmont Group of FIUs and INTERPOL.

In 2023, Project TENTACLE delivered three Operation TENTACLE capacity building workshops, in the Asia/Asia Pacific, Eastern Europe and Mediterranean regions respectively. In total, over 450 Customs, Police and FIU officers received WCO AML training in 2023. The total value of seizures and interdictions of currency, gemstones and precious metals achieved through Project TENTACLE operations in the above regions in 2023 exceeded USD 22 million. The operations also exposed multiple
illicit networks and resulted in the arrest of over 130 money launderers/couriers. These operational efforts yielded valuable intelligence with regards to new money laundering techniques and concealment methods.

Project OCTAGON is an AML/CTF and counter-predicate offences effort targeting the growing threat posed by transnational criminal organizations and terrorist organizations and their illicit activities at international border areas. Project OCTAGON’s three-pronged approach includes: the Hot Zone Prioritization Forum (HZPF); a gemmologist certification training effort with the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) geared towards higher-risk Customs Services; and a mentorship and training effort focused on countering international money laundering offences for high-risk Customs Services. In 2023, Project OCTAGON delivered two mentorships for the Customs Administration of Malta and the Mauritius Revenue Authority (MRA). Together these mentorships trained 100 Customs officers. Six Customs administrations are currently enrolled in the GIA’s Gemologist Program: Angola, Namibia, South Africa, India, Chile, and Brazil. WCO officials are also enrolled and being trained in order to support WCO Members with permanent expertise on gemstones and their potential use for money laundering purposes.

The second section, Cultural Heritage, focuses on the illicit trafficking of stolen or looted cultural objects, including archaeological objects and works of art. The most significant story in the realm of cultural heritage in 2023 was once again the conflict in Ukraine, resulting in the destruction and expropriation of Ukrainian cultural heritage. This section primarily highlights examples of Customs interventions in this illegal trade and the responses that have been developed to address this tragic circumstance.

The Drugs Section offers a detailed examination of the global illicit drug trade, emphasizing the substantial shifts in trafficking patterns and the challenges emerging for Customs and law enforcement agencies internationally. In 2023, the drug trafficking landscape has evolved significantly, influenced by a dynamic interplay of economic, geopolitical, and technological factors that shape criminal strategies. The Report comprehensively analyses drug seizures within the Customs domain, detailing the types and quantities of drugs intercepted. Predominantly, cocaine, cannabis, and synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine continue to lead in the global drug market, each presenting distinct challenges due to their broad distribution and consumption.

Europe remains a principal market for cocaine in 2023, with significant trafficking volumes of cannabis and synthetic drugs. The rising prevalence of synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, is highlighted as a significant public health concern due to their potent effects and increasing incidence.

The WCO is essential in fostering international cooperation and capacity building among its Members. Initiatives headed by the WCO Drugs Programme and the Passenger and Cargo Control Programme (PCCP)
are pivotal in enhancing the abilities of Customs authorities to effectively address and manage the challenges posed by the global drug trade.

As detailed in the Environment Section’s analysis, environmental crimes related to the illegal trade in wildlife, timber, waste, substances regulated by the Montreal Protocol and other hazardous chemicals are on the rise. Findings, based on seizure data provided by WCO Members through the Customs Enforcement Network (CEN) and global enforcement operations such as DEMETER IX and THUNDER 2023, confirm a continual global upward trend in the illicit trade of environmentally sensitive commodities. This includes a wide variety of impacted goods, intricate illicit trading routes, and discrete modus operandi.

Additionally, the Environment Section provides information on the actions taken and the impact achieved through the implementation of initiatives such as the INAMA Project, projects implemented with the support of the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCW), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Asia-Pacific Plastic Waste Project (APPWP), as well as the organization of global (DEMETER IX and THUNDER 2023) and regional (PRAESIDIO II) enforcement operations. Project activities included 48 events, encompassing diagnostic missions, workshops, and training events that involved the participation of over 870 Customs officers. This section also offers valuable insights into issues related to the illicit trade of environmentally sensitive commodities, showcasing trends, case studies, and lessons learned from these global and regional enforcement operations. These insights are crucial for Customs and other law enforcement partners to understand the current dynamics of environmental crime at various levels and to combat illicit activities in this area. They also underscore the importance of enhanced inter-agency cooperation and partnerships to effectively combat and deter transboundary environmental crimes.

Counterfeiting and piracy pose a serious threat to national economies, the health of citizens and global security, given the ramifications of the existing relationships between counterfeiters and criminal/terrorist networks. The IPR, Health, and Safety Section of this Report examines the global illicit trade in counterfeit and medical goods in 2023, with a particular focus on two categories: IPR products (counterfeit non-medical goods) and medical products (illicitly traded and smuggled medical goods). This section provides an overview of trends in both categories, including a comparison with seizures from 2022, conveyance methods and trafficking flows. Reports on IPR products and medical products were submitted by Members from all WCO regions, confirming that crimes related to IPR, health, and safety are global threats.

E-commerce and the proliferation of small consignments remain a major challenge for Customs, not only in terms of IPR products but also – and above all – for medical and pharmaceutical products. This analysis relies on the Members’ reports, which include the WCO global operation with a special focus on e-commerce, Operation STOP III.
The Revenue Section of this Report provides a comprehensive global overview of the illicit trade in tobacco products and alcohol. Illegally produced tobacco has had a significant impact on the industry, extending beyond specific jurisdictions and becoming widespread. Similarly, jurisdictions are struggling with significant health concerns due to the illicit production of alcohol, resulting in fatal consequences in certain regions of the world. Customs administrations prioritize controlling excise goods as part of their core responsibility for revenue collection. Despite evolving challenges, they remain committed to combating illicit trade and safeguarding financial interests. The WCO, along with its Members, other law enforcement partners, and shipping lines, will continue to lead and participate in global and regional initiatives. These initiatives are aimed at gathering intelligence, seizing illicit products, and promoting collaboration among Members to understand current trends and changing smuggling patterns related to revenue fraud.

The Security Section of this Report highlights the vital role of Customs in preventing the illicit trafficking of prohibited and restricted goods, including explosive precursors, weapons, and materials of mass destruction. Specifically, the section focuses on the illicit firearms trade, which constitutes the primary category of seizure data reported by Members. Persisting trends reveal an increase in the trafficking of firearms components, facilitated through e-commerce platforms and the dark web. Criminals exploit these channels to purchase individual parts and subsequently assemble fully functioning weapons. This practice presents a significant challenge for detection, as disassembled firearms are harder to identify, even with advanced non-intrusive technologies such as X-ray scanners.

Acknowledging the challenging circumstances arising from fragile borders and conflict-affected environments, and recognizing their profound implications for both society and the operations of Customs, the WCO has undertaken significant efforts in addressing the issue of border fragility. In 2016, the WCO Research Unit initiated comprehensive research on this subject, laying the foundation for subsequent endeavours. Building upon this groundwork, the WCO pursued its commitment to addressing border fragility, culminating in the publication of a Report in 2022 titled “Customs, Security and Fragile Borders: Practices and Recommendations from the Experience of the North Africa, Near and Middle East Region”. Additionally, the Organization convened a global conference entitled “Enabling Customs in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations” in Nigeria having formulated an actionable Fragile Border Action Plan in 2023, slated for implementation in the coming years. These collective initiatives underscore the WCO’s dedication to addressing the challenges presented by fragile borders and conflict-affected regions, fostering enhanced security and efficiency within the realm of Customs and wider society.
CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT SCAN 2023
1. Customs Enforcement Scan

Escalating Concerns: Cocaine Trafficking Trends

WCO Seizure Statistics confirm cocaine as the leading illicit drug by quantity seized in the past two years. This reflects heightened vigilance by WCO Member administrations in addressing this threat. Cocaine trafficking poses a significant and growing threat to global security. European countries are “currently experiencing unprecedented levels of drug market-related violence” due to the surge in cocaine entering the continent. Record-breaking cocaine seizures exceeding 300 tonnes annually highlight the vast amount of drugs flowing from Latin America.2

To counter this challenge, the European Commission launched the “European Ports Alliance Public Private Partnership” in January 2024, fostering collaboration across many sectors and partners to combat drug trafficking.

The WCO Global Seizure Statistics for 20233 confirm this trend. Cocaine seizures reached a staggering 461 tonnes in 2023, compared to 296 tonnes in 2022. While this demonstrates increased efforts by Customs authorities, it remains significantly lower than the estimated global cocaine production of nearly 2,000 tonnes in 2020.4 This substantial gap underscores the need for continued international cooperation to disrupt trafficking networks.

Figure 1: Total quantity of cocaine seized by route (origin and destination) based on open-source data analysis.

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1 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and Europol, EU: Drug Markets: In-depth analysis, 7 March 2024
2 European Commission Press release “Commission launches the European Ports Alliance Public Private Partnership to fight organized crime and drug trafficking”, 24 January 2024
3 The seizure statistics were collected from the WCO Member administrations via the WCO’s 2024 Annual Survey
4 UNODC Global Report on Cocaine 2023
Maritime Cocaine Routes

Open-source data analysis by the WCO Secretariat confirms that maritime transport remains the primary route for cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Europe. In 2023, an estimated 360 tonnes of cocaine were seized at sea, with over 75% concealed within maritime containers, often using the “rip-on/rip-off” method. The quantity per seizure is concerning, averaging nearly 700 kg hidden within container structures or cargo in 2023. The most frequent concealment method involves bananas, a major export from Ecuador. The largest cocaine seizure in Spain’s history occurred in August 2023, with 9.5 tonnes discovered in a refrigerated container carrying perishable goods.

Figure 2: Total quantity of cocaine seized by means of transport based on open-source data analysis

Criminals exploit refrigerated containers transporting perishable products such as bananas and frozen food to conceal illicit drugs. Open-source data suggests at least 12 tonnes of cocaine were discovered within refrigerated compartments, a smuggling method not limited to cocaine but applicable to various illicit commodities including other drugs, tobacco, and timber.

Figure 3: Total quantity of cocaine seized by cargo type based on open-source data analysis
Enablers and the Heightened Security Threat

The success of large-scale illicit activities often relies on “enablers” within the legitimate supply chain, such as port workers, vessel crews, and other insiders with privileged access. Criminal groups exploit these individuals through bribery or intimidation, facilitating the smuggling of illicit goods. This deep infiltration of criminal organizations poses a serious threat to the safety and security not only of port workers but also, more widely, of truck drivers, fishermen, and even Customs officers on the frontlines. As one European Customs officer aptly stated, “10 years ago, we were chasing mice at ports, but now we are chasing bears.” The rise in drug-related criminal incidents undermines overall societal security, highlighting the critical role of robust border protection measures implemented by Customs authorities.

Building a Coalition Against Illicit Trade

Protecting our supply chain and society requires a comprehensive coalition against illicit trade. Operation TIN CAN, the first enforcement operation involving the shipping industry led by the WCO/UNODC Container Control Programme from November to December 2022, serves as a prime example. The operation’s success, resulting in over 62 tonnes of cocaine seized within a four-week period, underscores the importance of mutual understanding and information exchange with private partners.

The increasing digitalization of the supply chain and growth in enabling technologies present new opportunities for cooperation. Smart Containers equipped with tracking devices that detect unauthorized door openings are proving invaluable in detecting the “rip-on/rip-off” method. According to a leading supplier, these containers facilitated...
the seizure in Latin America of over 30 tonnes of cocaine in containers bound for Europe, although their use by shipping lines is still limited so far. Beyond enabling seizures, the data collected provides valuable investigative insights, including geolocation, timestamps, and the duration of contamination. This mature technology is readily available for rapid and large-scale deployment, highlighting the vital role of technological innovation in combating illicit activities and securing the global supply chain.

Further analysis shows that cocaine is just one among many commodities trafficked via maritime transport. Securing maritime transport is therefore a fundamental measure in safeguarding the global supply chain and effectively countering illicit trade.

2. WCO Seizure Statistics

The WCO launched a dedicated survey to collect seizure statistics from its Member Administrations in 2022. To streamline the process and reduce Members’ workload, the survey was integrated into the WCO Annual Survey in 2024. This change resulted in a significant increase in responses, with 75 Members participating in 2024 compared to 44 in 2022 and 46 in 2023. The scope and definitions of goods covered by the survey adhere to those established by the WCO’s Working Group on Data and Statistics (WGDS).

This section provides an overview and analysis of data collected from WCO Members through the WCO Annual Survey this year. The survey included questions on illicit trade, encompassing seizure statistics (number of cases and quantities seized), along with current trends and concealment methods observed by Member Customs administrations.

2.1 Quantitative Data: the number of cases and seized quantity

As illustrated in Figure A-1, all commodity categories experienced an increase in either the number of seizures or the total quantity seized. This overall rise reflects the persistent high level of organized criminal activity. Notably, the drugs category displayed the most significant trend, with increases in both the quantity of all drug types seized and the average quantity per case.

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6 DS0016EAE1a for the 3rd Meeting of the WGDS in October 2023
2.2 Qualitative Data: Trends and Modus Operandi

Illicit drugs and tobacco remain the top priorities for Customs authorities worldwide, with generally high importance placed on all commodity categories. The diversified activities of criminal organizations pose challenges for Customs administrations with limited resources, as these groups are not restricted to trafficking a single type of good.

Figure 5: Priority level scored by the WCO Members

WCO Members were asked to identify the mode of transport posing the greatest threat for each commodity category. Road vehicles and sea transportation emerged as the top threats. Road vehicles are used for smuggling a wide range of illicit goods. Many Members face challenges with unauthorized vehicle crossings and increasingly sophisticated concealment methods, including hidden compartments within vehicle roofs. Sea transportation is also employed for various commodities, capitalizing on its capacity for heavy load. Conversely, air transport exhibits a unique distribution pattern, with a significant proportion of CITES species, cultural goods, and cash utilizing this method due to its speed and flexible routing options.
2.3 Observations with respect to Trends

Effects of Social Changes

The illicit trade landscape is susceptible to global environmental shifts. Increased international travel following the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a rise in passenger luggage smuggling observed by numerous countries. For instance, drug seizures from traveller luggage have grown, likely due to criminal organizations re-employing drug couriers as travel restrictions eased globally. This trend extends beyond drugs to encompass other goods, such as cultural artefacts, which are frequently concealed in passenger luggage. The relatively short transport times required for species survival have led to attempts to smuggle CITES-listed species through express couriers and air passenger baggage.

The global supply chain faces new challenges. Disruptions to maritime traffic in the Red Sea have diverted illicit cigarette flows destined for the Middle East. The armed conflict in Ukraine has introduced new risks associated with a novel source area for the illicit firearms trade in Eastern Europe. Additionally, sanctions blocking transportation routes have influenced illicit tobacco trafficking patterns, leading to a rise in illicit cigarette production within Europe. Social changes, including internal conflicts and ongoing struggles in the Middle East, have fuelled attempts to illegally trade arms and ammunition along the crucial Asia-Europe transit corridor.
Routes
Observations from WCO Members illustrate the interconnected nature of global illicit trafficking flows. The primary cocaine flow originates in Latin America and reaches Europe either directly or through transit countries in Central America or Western Africa. While Antwerp, Rotterdam, and Valencia serve as the three main ports of entry for cocaine in Western Europe, land routes via trucks are subsequently employed for secondary distribution to Nordic countries. The cocaine distribution network also extends to Asia/Pacific nations. Large cocaine seizures outside Western Europe, exceeding suspected domestic consumption levels, suggest that some of these drugs may be intended for further export to other countries. Another recently observed trend is that cocaine from Latin America and heroin from Afghanistan are smuggled to East and South Africa, and then packaged and distributed to Western Europe and Asia. Conversely, synthetic drugs are observed traveling outwards from Europe primarily through courier and postal parcel services.

The traditional Balkan route remains a significant threat for illicit trafficking, with various commodities flowing in both directions. Drugs (cannabis and heroin), tobacco products, gold, and medicines are smuggled eastward (from the Middle East and Asia) into Europe, while synthetic drugs, cocaine, and cash flow westward. Additional concerns have been raised regarding illicit tobacco trafficking on this route, specifically from the Near East to Central and Western European countries.

Commodities
North America witnessed record fentanyl seizures in 2023, alongside a rise in adulterants like xylazine, a veterinary sedative unfit for human use. Smugglers exploit postal and air cargo (couriers) for bulk drug and precursor chemical trafficking, due to the perceived ease of success by using. Consolidated shipments are further abused by adding packages into a master carton for final delivery within the importing nation.

Liquid drug concealment across continents (Europe, Africa, Americas) has seen drugs hidden within medicines, detergents, cosmetics, oils, lubricants, and even alcohol products, with one case involving over 2,000 litres of tequila laced with methamphetamine. Other instances have involved impregnating clothing and paper with liquid drugs.

Modus Operandi
E-commerce remains a significant threat for all smuggled goods, with Europe experiencing a surge in illicit tobacco (including e-cigarettes) trafficking through this channel. The sale of counterfeit products through social media and the Internet is on the upsurge, with goods and logos/labels often shipped separately.

North America has observed a trend of 3D-printed firearm parts sourced primarily through e-commerce. Firearms have also been concealed within electronics/appliances and craft/office supplies transported via postal or courier services due to their route flexibility. The Internet, while enabling legitimate commerce, also fosters illicit trade by connecting buyers and sellers of stolen cultural artefacts.
Criminals are adopting **technological advancements** as well. Double-bottomed sea containers with concealed compartments necessitate more in-depth inspections for detection. Technical surveillance tools like Airtags are increasingly used by criminals for drug transportation. Additionally, the use of narcotics mixed with other substances, requiring sophisticated concealment methods identifiable only through laboratory analysis, has seen an increase.

**Mode of Transport**

**Road vehicles** pose the top threat for all smuggled goods. Criminals employ increasingly sophisticated hiding places within vehicles, as evidenced by Eastern Europe’s case of over 40,000 cigarettes concealed in a remote-controlled bunker built into a van’s roof. Changing licence plates on trucks is another tactic observed in Africa. Notably, Latin America has seen a shift from traditional older vehicles to high-end models with tinted windows for smuggling purposes.

**Conclusion**

Organized crime groups demonstrate a remarkable ability to adapt their smuggling routes and methods to evade law enforcement. Continuous efforts are crucial to stay updated on the evolving trends in modus operandi and routes.
Annex: WCO Seizure Statistics 2023

Figure A-1: The number of responses to the survey by commodity

- Cocaine
- Psychotropic Substance
- NPS
- Marijuana/Hashish
- Methamphetamine/Amphetamine
- Heroin/Opioids
- Captagon
- Chemical Precursors
- Other illicit drugs
- Counterfeit
- Medicine
- Cigarettes
- Other Tobacco Products
- Alcohol
- Firearms/SALW
- Ammunition
- Parts of Weapons
- Cultural Goods
- Cash
- Gold
- Diamond
- Fake money
- Other forms of money (BNI etc)
- CITES
- ODS (Substances controlled under the Montreal...)
- HFC (Substances controlled under the Montreal...)
- Waste
- Duties lost because of smuggling of commercial...
- Duties collected due to misclassification
- Duties collected due to undervaluation
- Duties collected due to change of origin country

2023
2022
Table A-2: Change in seized quantity and in the number of seizure case from 2022 to 2023

Table A-3: Priority level score by commodity

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Note: the Average is the weighted average with the priority (0: Not a priority to 6: Essential priority) and the number of responses for each level.
### Table A-4: The mode of transportation with the biggest threat by commodity

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<th>COMMODITY</th>
<th>Sea</th>
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<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
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Note: the table shows the number of responses from the WCO Members for each commodity.
1 ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING AND COUNTER-TERRORISM FINANCING
Over the last thirty years, globalisation has led to unprecedented growth in international trade. With this increase in global trade, nefarious actors such as transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and terrorist organizations (TOs) have also increased their illicit activities in the same arena. The last three decades have given rise to a dramatic increase in the movement of contraband and corresponding money laundering activities via the international trade and commercial travel sector.
INTRODUCTION

TCOs and TOs continue to threaten regional security and the overall stability of both the global financial and international trade systems. According to the 2023 Global Financial Integrity Report, from 2011 to 2021, trade-based money laundering (TBML) totalled more than $60 billion (US). The evolution of smuggling methods by TCOs and TOs, and their agility in developing novel ways to conceal contraband and illicit currency/currency equivalents, presents a formidable task for Customs Services around the world. Managing the facilitation of licit trade while concurrently disrupting illegitimate trade flows is a complex and demanding operational task for Customs Services. Customs Services, particularly in developing countries, face challenges in combatting money laundering within the international trade and passenger transportation sectors. For this reason, it is important to provide Customs Services with valuable know-how and in-person training in countering specific illicit activities connected to money laundering, to include elevating Customs interdiction events to seizure/confiscation, investigation and prosecution.

From a global law enforcement scope, the WCO is one of the primary international organisations with regard to tackling illicit financial flows occurring at international borders. The WCO Anti-money Laundering (AML) and Counter-terrorism Financing (CTF) Programme, through its primary capacity building and operational project efforts, Project TENTACLE and Project OCTAGON, continues to deepen and broaden the global Customs community’s knowledge and capability to tackle money laundering in the Customs realm. Project TENTACLE, the WCO’s main operational effort to combat money laundering, with a specific focus to target the smuggling of currency/currency equivalents, precious gems and metals, as well as TBML, has resulted in the seizure of over $60 million (US) in a combination of currency, gold, gems and other
precious metals and the arrest of 179 money launderers/smugglers from 2019 to the present.

Project TENTACLE collaborative efforts between the WCO, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) led to the creation of the law enforcement, industry and academia intelligence effort, the Informal Law Enforcement Network on Minerals-Related Crime (ILEN). The ILEN has become a key global platform for the development of intelligence on organised crime and extremist groups connected to the gold and gemstone industries. The meetings held this year in Brazil and in France have deepened the understanding of our Membership and partner agencies on smuggling dynamics involved in illicit mining activities connected to precious metals and gemstones. The insights gained from the ILEN meetings equip WCO Members to enhance their intelligence and targeting activities.

Project OCTAGON, the WCO’s AML/CTF and counter-predicate offenses effort, is currently supporting six (6) Customs administrations that are at high-risk for illicit gem smuggling and associated money laundering. In partnership with the Gemmological Institute of America (GIA), the WCO has arranged for these six (6) frontline officers to become certified gemmologists. This will greatly assist these administrations in identification of money laundering activities connected to gem smuggling/misdeclaration schemes. The WCO is also establishing inhouse expertise to assist its membership in tackling this crime challenge. This specialist capability will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of both the targeting and investigation of smuggled gems and precious stones by increasing regional Customs expertise to combat the same. Two WCO AML-CTF Programme officers are also in the process of becoming certified gemmologists, to provide future online support to frontline Customs officers around the globe and their own administrations.

The WCO, through its AML-CTF experts, are also supporting WCO members that are in high need of crucial AML-CTF training and on-the-job mentorship. This support is being delivered through Project OCTAGON.

The Hot Zone Prioritisation Forum (HZPF) is the largest component of Project OCTAGON and involves a partnership between the WCO, the Egmont Group of FIUs and the George Mason University-Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (GMU TraCCC). The HZPF has been designed to be a global tool and intelligence element to identify specific bad actors and salient Customs crime sets that are occurring in remote or harsh terrain border areas or border areas with a limited government presence. The HZPF develops intelligence based on the input of the memberships of the WCO and the Egmont Group, as well as that of GMU TraCCC. Once these Customs and money laundering challenge sets are identified, the WCO and Egmont Group then orient their capacity building and operational efforts to assist the Customs administrations and FIUs in those sub-regions.
The following sections will provide an overview of some of the operational and other results that the WCO and its partners have realised through Project TENTACLE. In the concluding section, the outcomes of the 2023 WCO CEN database entries for currency, gold, gems and precious metals smuggling will also be highlighted.

1. General Observations of 2023

In 2023, the WCO AML-CTF Programme intensified its global initiatives against organised crime and terrorism through the TENTACLE operational efforts. The operations this year have provided crucial insights into the adaptive and sophisticated strategies utilised by criminals and their networks, highlighting both successes and areas for strategic improvement in Customs enforcement worldwide.

1. Criminal network insights: TENTACLE operations have uncovered the activities of organised criminal groups based in the Middle East, which specialise in gold-concealment services. Interviews of the detained suspects reveal that these groups employ sophisticated technologies to alter raw gold bars into components resembling industrial equipment and electronic goods. Several shipments were intercepted in which gold bars had been disguised within larger consignments of industrial machinery, indicating a high level of premeditation and operational intelligence with regard to customs enforcement strategies.

2. Integrated criminal payment ecosystems: Investigations revealed a well-entrenched payment ecosystem involving gold smugglers, hawala networks, and professional money launderers connected with the methamphetamine trade. The role of corrupt Customs brokers has been particularly noted, with many serving as facilitators within these networks. The potential exploitation of these networks by terrorist groups remains a significant threat if left unchecked.

3. Exploitation of Customs infrastructure weaknesses: Arrested offenders revealed that criminal groups based in the Middle East have conducted extensive studies of the infrastructure, policy, control mechanisms, and priorities of Customs administrations. Criminals have compiled a detailed list of ports, noting deficiencies such as inadequate infrastructures, lack or reduced number of non-intrusive inspection equipment, regulatory discrepancies, and corrupt insiders. An Operation TENTACLE team successfully intercepted one (1) list from an arrested offender. It was discovered therethrough, that these groups strategically choose their smuggling routes and concealment methods based on the characteristics and volume of gold involved. Typically, they opt for neighbouring countries with weak Customs controls and vulnerable borders to first move the gold before transporting it to the final destination countries.

4. Reliance on intelligence and equipment: The disparity in Customs enforcement effectiveness is also evident in the reliance on intelligence leads and random controls, particularly in countries
without robust risk profiling mechanisms. However, administrations equipped with non-intrusive inspection (NII) equipment and currency detection dogs have shown higher efficacy in intercepting illicit activities, suggesting a critical investment area for Customs authorities.

5. **Use of female couriers in the Asia Pacific region:** A new trend noted this year was the higher involvement of women from the Asia Pacific region as couriers in the smuggling of gold and currency. This specific demographic targeting necessitates a focused scrutiny and preventative measures to safeguard against exploitation.

The TENTACLE operational efforts revealed that criminal groups strategically select smuggling routes based on the volume of gold and the perceived weakness of Customs controls in transit countries. This methodical selection process highlights the need for a collaborative regional approach to strengthen border controls and for the sharing of critical intelligence. The findings from the 2023 TENTACLE operations provide a clear need for the enhancement of international Customs enforcement strategies. By addressing infrastructure gaps, standardising controls, and bolstering technological capabilities, the WCO AML-CTF Programme can better equip member countries to combat the evolving threats of Customs-based money laundering and terrorism financing.

1.1 **Project TENTACLE**

Project TENTACLE, launched in 2019, is a cornerstone initiative of the WCO in the fight against money laundering and terrorism financing. This WCO-led, joint effort with the Egmont Group of FIUs and INTERPOL, is dedicated to combat bulk cash smuggling and the illicit trade of gems and precious metals. An important additional component of this effort is the targeting of TBML. This initiative has effectively expanded its reach and influence, deploying comprehensive operational and educational programs across the globe, specifically encompassing the regions of the Asia Pacific, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.

Capacity building remains at the core of Project TENTACLE’s mandate. Throughout the 2023-2024 period, the project has supported and enhanced the professional competencies of relevant authorities through the training of 630 frontline officers, investigators, and analysts. The workshops and hands-on training focuses on suspicious activity/transaction reporting, operational and strategic analysis, TBML investigations, and terrorism financing. These trainings both sharpen the practical skill-sets of participants and foster inter-agency cooperation, through insights in current trends and methodologies utilised by organised crime groups. These efforts extend across the regions of Asia/Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Mediterranean.
In terms of field operations, Project TENTACLE, in collaboration with INTERPOL and the Egmont Group, executed three (3) targeted AML/CTF operations in the Asia/Pacific, Eastern Europe, and Mediterranean regions in 2023, engaging 29 countries in these collaborative intelligence and enforcement actions.

**Operation TENTACLE Asia/Pacific (AP) II** surpassed previous benchmarks through the interdiction/seizure of more than $20 million (US) in the form of different currencies and precious metals. The operation uncovered a complex web of criminal activities, exposing multiple Middle East-based hawala networks that were linked with methamphetamine smuggling organisations in Myanmar. These findings unveiled an innovative exchange modality whereby gold was traded for illicit drugs, deviating from traditional regional monetary transactions associated with narcotics trafficking.

**$20 Million (US) in Gold and Currency Seized:**

- 116 gold seizures – 266.3 kilograms of gold bars, 153 gold coins, and 122 pieces of jewellery
- 153 currency seizures – 3.36 million USD in currency
- 1 wildlife seizure: 69 toucans and macaws
- 1 TBML case connected to high-duty consumer goods and alcohol
  - 29 watches (4 Rolex watches)
This operation also revealed numerous organised TBML networks, providing insight into the complex financial schemes connected to international trade employed by criminal networks. The outcome of this operational effort led to the arrests of 127 suspects. Notably, a significant proportion of the arrests involved integral players to the gold-based money laundering schemes, underscoring the precise targeting and impact of the operation in dismantling key components of these illicit networks.

The progress achieved in the 2023-2024 period has had a major impact in the global fight against complex money laundering schemes, from both an operational perspective and an intelligence perspective.

Figure 2: Currency seizures of Operation TENTACLE Asia-Pacific II
Case study 1.
SUBMERGED GOLD SMUGGLING CASES

During Operation TENTACLE Asia/Pacific II, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) of India, together with the Indian Coast Guard (ICG), intercepted two (2) fishing boats and seized over 32 kilograms of gold in two (2) separate cases in Tamil Nadu. The DRI and Coast Guard personnel intensified coastal surveillance after their intelligence indicated smuggling of foreign-origin gold from Sri Lanka through the Vedhalai coast in Ramnad.

After having identified the suspicious vessel and following a sea chase, the DRI and ICG officers intercepted one of the suspected fishing boats. Despite attempts by the individuals onboard to dispose of the contraband, India Coast Guard divers successfully recovered a package containing 11.6 kilograms of gold of foreign-origin from the seafloor. The DRI and the ICG also seized the smuggling vessel.

DRI officers on board an Indian Customs patrol boat also approached a second fishing boat and witnessed the transfer of a package to two (2) individuals onshore. Upon realising they were being watched, the individuals attempted to flee with the illegal gold. Both individuals were apprehended by the DRI Customs officers.
During Operation TENTACLE Asia/Pacific II, Bangladesh Customs seized over 36 kilograms of gold bars. These gold bars were smuggled into the country from the Middle East by three (3) Bangladeshi males who had arrived at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Subsequent interrogations revealed the involvement of a Middle East-based hawala network connected to a Myanmar-based methamphetamine smuggling network. It was discovered that the smuggled gold was used for drug payments and informal trade payment settlements.

At a separate seaport, Bangladesh Customs exposed the criminal operations of a China-based TBML network during the operation. This network utilised chemical consignments to conceal high-duty consumer goods, including 1,688,000 pieces of primary batteries and 16,824 litres of alcohol, that were used to launder illicit funds through an ongoing misdeclaration scheme. This interdiction and subsequent investigation led to the discovery of a hawaladar and corrupt banker who were involved in the settlement of payments and the laundering of illicit funds.
Case study 3. “GOLDEN SHOE” SMUGGLING CASE

During Operation TENTACLE Asia/Pacific II, Japan Customs detected two (2) gold bars concealed in a pair of shoes worn by a female passenger on arrival into Narita Airport. On examination, the inspecting officer noticed the excessively heavy weight of the shoes. The shoe soles were subsequently deconstructed to reveal two (2) gold bars, wrapped in electrical tape, moulded and fitted to the inner lining. This concealment method highlights the ease in which gold can be smuggled and concealed from border agencies by reshaping gold into common objects, as well as the use of gold a money laundering mechanism.

Courtesy of Japan Customs.
The WCO AML-CTF Programme conducted Operation TENTACLE Mediterranea III from the 15th of October to the 15th of November 2023. The operational effort led to the detection and/or seizure of approximately $1.2 million (US) in smuggled currency and $686,448 (US) of smuggled gold.

During the operational effort, the Customs administration of Morocco discovered five (5) cases of bulk cash smuggling, amounting to approximately $269,467 USD. The majority of the currency seizures were a result of the concealment of the currency in passengers’ carry-on luggage. A targeted effort by Moroccan Customs also resulted in the seizure of eight (8) gold bars weighing 10,215kg with a value of approximately $686,448 (US). The Moroccan Customs officers at the Guerguarat Border Post seized the gold bars from a passenger vehicle. The gold bars were hidden between the trunk and the fuel tank of the vehicle.

Case study 4.
MEDITERRANEAN BULK CASH SMUGGLING AND GOLD SMUGGLING CASES

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2. General trends in currency smuggling based on CEN Data

This section of the ITR 2023 focuses on currency seizures and is derived from data sourced from the Customs Enforcement Network (CEN). The 2023 CEN data uncovers complex dynamics in the realm of global currency smuggling. By comparing this data with the 2022 figures, the report provides a detailed analysis and underlines significant trends and changes in the patterns of illegal currency trafficking observed throughout the year. Here are the key trends and patterns identified in 2023:

- **Expansion of monitoring and reporting**: In 2023, a total of 70 countries reported 11,202 currency seizure cases involving 12,654 seizures of 92 different currencies. This is a slight decrease from the 80 countries reporting in 2022, although the involvement of 12 new countries that did not report in the previous year suggests an expansion in the monitoring and reporting framework. This expansion reflects a global effort to enhance Customs oversight and Customs response to currency smuggling activities.

- **Inclusion of diverse currencies**: The range of currencies seized in 2023 has expanded to include several that were not reported in 2022, such as the Uruguayan Peso and the New Taiwan Dollar, among others. This diversity indicates the broad and complex nature of currency smuggling, involving various global currencies across different continents.

- **Persistence of counterfeit currency challenges**: Detection of counterfeit currencies remains a significant challenge, with the euro and CFA Franc being the most frequently identified in counterfeit currency seizures. This underscores ongoing issues in controlling the circulation of counterfeit money, which has serious implications for economic security both regionally and globally.

- **Prevalence of non-cash seizures**: The variety of the types of money and currency equivalents seized, which includes cheques, gold, and other non-cash financial instruments, highlights the sophistication of illicit currency movements and currency equivalents. The majority of non-cash seizures comprised simple cheques, promissory notes, and money orders, emphasising the need for multifaceted financial oversight mechanisms to tackle these advanced smuggling techniques.

- **Dominance of the euro in seizures**: The euro was the predominant currency involved in seizures, constituting of 62.51% of the total top ten (10) seizures, with a substantial value forfeited. This indicates the euro's significant role in illicit trafficking activities due to its wide acceptance as a hard currency of stable value versus other hard currencies.

- **Significant roles of other major currencies**: Following the euro, the US dollar and the Saudi riyal are also featured prominently in seizures. The US dollar, representing 25.40% of the total, highlights its global relevance, while the specific role of the Saudi riyal in seizures underscores regional trafficking routes and its use in transnational crime. It is believed that the USD is still the most widely used hard currency by professional money laundering networks (PMLNs) across the globe.
• **Regional implications:** The seizure of significant amounts of specific currencies like the pound sterling and the Saudi riyal suggests regional trends in smuggling activities for some hard currencies. These currencies’ roles reflect their use in specific trafficking routes and potentially point to the need of enhanced enforcement and monitoring efforts in these sub-regions.

2.1 Currency seizures/detentions, 2022-2023

**Figure 3:** Currency seizures/detentions in 2022 - 2023

This visualisation highlights the changes and trends in currency seizures between 2022 and 2023. While the euro and US dollar remained the most significant currencies seized, there was a notable increase in the amount of pound sterling seized in 2023 compared to 2022. This indicates a possible shift in trafficking routes or methods as well as hard currency preferences by TCOs and TOs.

2.2 Percentage of currency seized by currency type, 2023

**Figure 4:** Percentage of currency seized by currency type, 2023

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Figure 3 compares the amount seized in US dollar for each currency by year, sorted in ascending order based on the amounts seized in 2023.

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of reported cases of currency seizures in 2023 by Customs officers, focusing on the top four (4) currencies seized. These top four (4) currencies represent 90% of the total amount seized.
In 2023, the euro was the primary currency seized, constituting 62.51% of the total top ten (10) seizures, amounting to €164,783,176 (equivalent to $178,086,673). This dominance of the euro highlights its significant role in illicit trafficking activities. The US dollar followed with 25.40%, representing $72,367,993, underscoring its global relevance in these networks. The pound sterling and the Saudi riyal comprised 6.53% and 5.56% of the seizures, respectively, reflecting their specific roles within certain regions or trafficking routes. The pound sterling seizures amounted to £15,006,188 (equivalent to $18,607,228), and the Saudi riyal amounted to SAR 59,618,082 (equivalent to $15,848,488).

2.3 Seizures of currencies by country, 2022-2023

Figure 5: Quantity of currency seizures by country 2022-2023

Italy reported the most currency seizures in both years, with a slight decrease from 7,555 in 2022 to 7,077 in 2023. Poland saw an increase from 796 in 2022 to 860 in 2023. The United States experienced a notable decrease, from 1,324 in 2022 to 841 in 2023. Hungary showed a moderate increase from 348 in 2022 to 482 in 2023. Spain experienced a decrease, dropping from 458 in 2022 to 330 in 2023. The United Kingdom reported 288 seizures in 2023, a significant increase from no reported cases in 2022. Saudi Arabia had a slight increase from 259 in 2022 to 287 in 2023. Israel saw an increase from 121 in 2022 to 147 in 2023. Austria also reported an increase from 83 in 2022 to 108 in 2023. The Russian Federation reported a stable number of seizures with 91 in 2022 and 90 in 2023. These trends highlight changes in enforcement effectiveness and ongoing efforts of different countries to combat illicit currency activities.

Figure 5 shows the ten (10) countries that reported the most currency seizures in 2023 and the seizure data compared to 2022.
Most currency seizures occurred at airports in 2023, accounting for 8,639 seizures, representing 79.17% of all seizures for that year. This was a slight decrease in total seizures from 2022, where airports accounted for 9,095 seizures, or 77.81% of the total. Land boundaries reported 1,602 seizures in 2023 (14.68% of the total), down from 1,709 in 2022 (14.62%). Seaports also saw a decrease, with 469 seizures in 2023 (4.30%) compared to 659 in 2022 (5.64%). Inland seizures remained relatively stable, with 155 seizures in 2023 (1.42%), slightly up as a portion of total seizures from 158 in 2022 (1.35%). Mail centres experienced an increase, rising from two (2) seizures in 2022 to nine (9) in 2023, which is a 350% increase but still a small percentage of the total (0.02% in 2022 to 0.08% in 2023). Similarly, express couriers saw an increase from one (1) seizure in 2022 to three (3) in 2023, a 200% increase, representing a minimal part of the total seizures (0.01% in 2022 to 0.03% in 2023). Rail seizures increased from one (1) in 2022 to 6 in 2023, a 500% increase (0.01% in 2022 to 0.05% in 2023). Border seizures slightly decreased from 11 in 2022 (0.09%) to ten (10) in 2023 (0.09%), and “unknown locations” (unreported location in CEN) saw a reduction from 51 seizures in 2022 (0.44%) to 19 in 2023 (0.17%). There were no seizures reported for free trade zones in 2023, down from two (2) in 2022 (0.02%).

Overall, while airports remained the primary location for currency seizures in both years, there were notable changes. Locations such as mail centres, express couriers, and railways saw an increase in the number of seizures in 2023 compared to 2022. In contrast, seizures at seaports, land boundaries, and “unknown locations” (i.e. unreported source locations for seizures) decreased in 2023. This analysis only highlights the shifting patterns in currency seizure locations over the two (2) years.
Most currency seizures in 2023 were related to exports, accounting for 5,334 seizures, representing 48.88% of all seizures for that year. This was a slight decrease from 2022, where exports accounted for 6,035 seizures, or 51.63% of the total. Imports closely followed with 5,331 seizures in 2023 (48.85% of the total), showing a slight increase from 5,439 seizures in 2022 (46.53%). Internal seizures remained relatively rare but saw a slight increase, with 45 seizures in 2023 (0.41%) compared to 35 in 2022 (0.30%). Transit-related seizures also increased, with 202 cases in 2023 (1.85%) up from 180 cases in 2022 (1.54%).

Overall, the majority of currency seizures were related to exports and imports in both years, with exports slightly decreasing and imports slightly increasing in 2023 compared to 2022. Internal and transit-related seizures, although representing a smaller portion of the total, both saw an increase in 2023. This analysis highlights the stability and slight shifts in the direction of currency seizures over the two years.
2.6 Currency seizures by concealment method, 2022-2023

Figure 8 shows the number of seizures reported in 2023 compared to the number reported in 2022 by concealment method.

Most currency seizures in 2023 were concealed in baggage, accounting for 8,305 seizures, representing 76.11% of all seizures for that year. This was slightly lower than in 2022, where seizures in baggage accounted for 8,907 cases or 76.20% of the total. Seizures involving transport vessels/vehicles/aircraft saw a decrease from 983 cases in 2022 (8.41%) to 406 cases in 2023 (3.72%). Cases where the currency was not concealed also decreased from 364 cases in 2022 (3.11%) to 229 cases in 2023 (2.10%). Seizures on the person decreased from 584 cases in 2022 (5.00%) to 305 cases in 2023 (2.80%). Conversely, seizures concealed in mail increased slightly from 43 cases in 2022 (0.37%) to 48 cases in 2023 (0.44%). Concealment in premises saw a rise from seven (7) cases in 2022 (0.06%) to 14 cases in 2023 (0.13%). The number of entries with "unknown concealments" methods increased significantly from 776 cases in 2022 (6.64%) to 1,611 cases in 2023 (14.76%). Seizures involving freight decreased significantly from 35 cases in 2022 (0.30%) to five (5) cases in 2023 (0.05%). Express courier concealments remained stable with one (1) case each year, and seizures in market places also remained the same with one (1) case each year.

Overall, the majority of currency seizures involved concealment in baggage in both years. There was a notable increase in the number entries with unlisted methods of concealment ("unknown concealment") in 2023. Conversely, there was a decrease in seizures involving transport and non-concealed currency, as well as seizures on the person from 2022 to 2023. This analysis highlights the changes in concealment methods used for currency seizures over the two (2) years.
2.7 Heatmap: Currency seizures, 2023

Figure 9: Currency seizures by country, 2022-2023

Italy was the leading country for seizures, with 7,076 cases, accounting for 63.17% of the total. The United States followed with 838 cases, representing 7.48%, and Poland with 812 cases, making up 7.25%. Hungary recorded 332 cases, contributing 2.96%, while Spain had 292 cases, accounting for 2.61%. These five (5) countries represent the top locations for seizures, highlighting the significant focus of law enforcement efforts in these areas.

2.8 Currency seizures routing, 2023

Figure 10: Currency seizures by route, 2022-2023

Figure 9 indicates countries that have recorded currency seizures in CEN in 2023.

Figure 10 shows the currency seizures routing in 2023.
The primary regional flows of cases were significant within Western Europe (WE), which accounted for 19.21% of the total cases reported. Following this, the flow from Eastern and Central Europe (ECE) to Western Europe represented 13.12%, and from Western Europe to Eastern and Central Europe represented 11.42%. The flow from Western Europe to the Asia-Pacific (AP) region comprised 10.33%, while the Middle East (ME) to Western Europe accounted for 4.74%. Within these regional flows, notable country-specific routes included Italy to China, making up 7.38% of the cases. The flow from Switzerland to Italy represented 6.95%, and from Türkiye to Italy was 5.90%. Additionally, the route from the United Arab Emirates to Italy constituted 2.16%, while the flow from Italy to Albania comprised 1.95% of the total cases.

3. General trends in gold and gems smuggling based on CEN Data

The 2023 Customs Enforcement Network (CEN) report highlights significant trends and patterns in the smuggling of gold and gemstones. Here are the key trends and patterns identified in 2023:

3.1 Gold seizures: A quantitative and regional perspective

- **Quantitative increase:** Compared to 2022, 2023 saw a dramatic rise in gold seizures, with a 623% increase in seized gold by weight and a 36.8% increase in the number of cases. This suggests not only a rise in smuggling activities but also points to improved detection capabilities and enforcement actions by Customs authorities worldwide.

Figure 11: Cumulative gold seizure (in Kilograms); 2022-2023

- **Geographical hotspots:** The Asia Pacific region reported 81% of the total gold seizures by weight, pinpointing this region as a critical area for smuggling activities. The primary source of this gold is from the MENA region, indicating a region with preferred routes used by smugglers. These routes leverage the high demand for illicit gold in Asia-Pacific markets.
Figure 12: Gold trafficking: regional flow, 2023

Figure 13: Heatmap of country reporting gold seizures, 2023
3.2 Gemstone seizures: Data gaps and regional enforcement

- **Data challenges**: The report notes a significant deficit in data concerning gemstone seizures, with many regions reporting insufficient cases to form a comprehensive analysis. Gemstones are inherently also a very difficult commodity to identify in counter-smuggling efforts. This lack of data hinders effective strategic planning and international collaboration.

- **Source and enforcement Regions**: The seizures that were reported primarily came from the Asia Pacific and Eastern and Central European countries, with Eastern and Southern Africa noted as significant sources for these gemstones. This points to specific regional routes that may require targeted enforcement strategies.

Figure 14: Gemstone trafficking: regional flow, 2023

3.3 Enforcement gaps

- **Tactical Insights**: Most gold seizures occurred at airports and land borders, confirming the prevalent use of human couriers for smuggling. This trend emphasizes the need for more robust Customs enforcement measures and advanced detection technologies at these points of intervention.
Figure 15: Gold and gems seizures in terms of number of seizures

Figure 16: Detection methods in terms of the number of seizures
• **Reporting Inconsistencies**: The notable absence of seizure reports from MENA and South American countries suggests either underreporting or lower enforcement capabilities. These gaps are critical as they may obscure broader smuggling trends and complicate global enforcement efforts.

• **Enforcement Strategy Enhancement**: Many Customs administrations primarily depend on intelligence and routine inspections to seize gold and gemstones. There is significant potential for these authorities to enhance their capabilities in risk profiling, which would, in turn, lead to more effective targeting of high-risk passengers and the development of valuable intelligence relative to TCOs and TOs.
The illicit market for cultural objects is international in nature valued in the tens of billions of euros annually. Situated at the world’s borders, Customs is often in the best position to disrupt this destructive trade. With regional and international partners, Customs works tirelessly to detect and prevent the destruction of our shared cultural inheritance and values.
INTRODUCTION

Despite a slight decline in sales in 2023, the estimated value of global sales of art and antiquities reached an estimated USD 65 billion (the United States, China, and the UK account for 78% of the purchase market).¹ And, despite the slight decline in total value from 2022, the number of transactions increased by 4% to approximately 39.4 million.² The art market is one where individual objects can attract prices in the millions of dollars, and there is often an ingrained culture of privacy and discretion regarding the identities of buyers and sellers. As we will see below, the market has naturally attracted criminals, organized crime groups, and terrorists who seek to launder proceeds of crime and fund their activities.

When analyzing trends, we would prefer to rely on seizure data and other information provided by Members through the WCO’s Customs Enforcement Network (CEN). Unfortunately, the reporting has been quite low in volume. This is understandable given the multitude of other priorities that Customs agencies are faced with. Therefore, we rely largely on reporting by our Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILOs) and on open-source information.

However, we at the WCO Secretariat continue to urge Members to report seizure data through WCO platforms such as the CEN and Archeo. This will facilitate future analysis of trends and emerging threats in this area of illicit trade.

¹ The Art Market Art|Basel (https://theartmarket.artbasel.com)
² Ibid
1. Overall trends in trafficking of cultural goods

1.1 CEN data shows an increase in reported seizures

CEN reporting of data — though the total volume of reported seizures is relatively low compared to other Compliance Programmes, seizures of cultural items have been consistently trending upwards since 2019. Additionally, there was another uptick in reported seizures in 2023, with an increase of 15% year over year. This is on top of a large 50% increase in 2022. The increase in reported cases is largely due to additional seizures by Ukraine Customs.

1.2 Increasing recognition of the potential for art and antiquities to be used to launder illicit funds

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the underground art market, which includes thefts, fakes, illegal imports, and organized looting, may bring in as much as $6 billion annually. The portion attributed to money laundering and other financial crimes is in the $3 billion range. Law enforcement officials and even some art merchants now say that excessive secrecy has become a drawback because more and more money launderers have discovered that the art market can be used as an easy conduit. As noted by the FBI and Interpol, “in comparison with other trade sectors, the art market faces a higher risk of exposure to dubious financial practices” because “the volume of legally questionable transactions is noticeably higher than in other global markets.” The Financial Action Task Force report on money laundering and terrorist financing in the art and antiquities market also notes, “There are many challenges to addressing money laundering and terrorist financing in the markets of art, antiquities and other cultural objects. The challenges can be broadly split into two distinct categories. The first concerns vulnerabilities related to the type of objects and the nature of the markets, including: Difficulties in tracing the origin of cultural objects, a history of privacy and use of third-party intermediaries in the sector, inadequate measures, or none at all, to identify and verify customers, and a low number of suspicious transaction reports filed with Financial Intelligence Units. The second category concerns investigative challenges, including: a lack of prioritisation of investigations in this area, limited resources, awareness and expertise by operational authorities, and difficulties with cross-border investigations.”

The following case is an excellent example of money laundering in the heritage market. The main target of the investigation is a alleged major donor to a proscribed terrorist organization. A joint investigation by the U.S. and the UK led to criminal charges in April 2023 against nine co-conspirators in relation to conspiring to defraud the several governments, evade sanctions and Customs laws, and conduct money laundering transactions involving approximately $160 million.

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3 The Art of Money Laundering – IMF F&D
According to court documents, despite being sanctioned the co-conspirators relied on a complex web of business entities to obtain valuable artwork from artists and art galleries and to secure diamond-grading services. Approximately $160 million worth of artwork and diamond-grading services were transacted through the financial system. Millions of dollars in assets including a diamond ring, cash in an account, and artwork were ultimately seized.

1.3 Customs seizures resulting from the conflict in Ukraine

The European External Action Service in addressing the Cultural impact of the conflict in Ukraine highlighted “the number of destroyed or severely damaged cultural heritage landmarks, such as monuments, museums, art collections, libraries and archives. The destruction of museums and the looting and loss of artifacts has served to create a source and a market for illicit cultural heritage items.”

The Netherlands returns eight archaeological objects to Ukraine

On March 30, 2024, eight cultural objects intercepted by Dutch Customs after being illegally exported from Ukraine were turned over to the Ukrainian embassy in The Hague. The objects were initially seized in March of 2023, having been shipped to a consignee residing in the Netherlands. The artifacts are swords, spearheads, and arrowheads from various archaeological cultures and regions in Ukraine, dating back to periods ranging from Roman times to the Middle Ages.

The information and Heritage Inspectorate of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science worked with experts from the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden to investigate the objects’ provenance. The investigation showed that the objects had likely been illegally exported from Ukraine. Experts from the National Museum of the History of Ukraine confirmed this conclusion, that the items were exported from the territory of Ukraine in violation of national legislation on the exportation, importation, and restitution of cultural values. Ukrainian law prohibits the export of cultural objects without the consent of national authorities. Following this conclusion, the Inspectorate took the objects into custody.

The items are being returned to Ukraine in accordance with the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property of 1970. Both the Netherlands and Ukraine are States Parties to the Convention. States Parties to this Convention are obligated to assist each other in identifying illegally exported items and take appropriate measures to return them to the country of origin.
From RILO WE Info magazine

On April 5, 2023, Ukrainian Customs conducting routine inspections of outbound mail seized 150 items of cultural objects that were being exported using regular mail. The package was destined to Canada and contained various objects including coins, jewelry, medals, and even an ancient mirror. There were also 38 arrowheads, probably of archeological value. The customs declaration stated that the parcel contained “books and toys.”
Seizures in Ukraine

On January 16, 2023, Customs officers in Kiev seized a collection of 80 coins from the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth Sigismund III Vasa (1587-1632) Bydgoszcz Mint and Baltic possessions of Sweden, Gustav Adolf (1618–1632) Elbing Mint. These items were detected during routine controls in a mail parcel in Kiev. The items were destined for Szczecin, Poland.

Courtesy of Ukraine Customs.
On March 16, 2023, Customs officers seized a Bible printed in St. Petersburg in the second stereotypical edition in 1819 in the Old Church Slavonic language. The bible was discovered during routine controls in a mail parcel in Kiev. It was being shipped from Ukraine to Toronto, Canada.

Courtesy of Ukraine Customs.
On December 3, 2023, Customs officers seized an oil on canvas painting of a violin. The bible was detected during routine controls at an express courier company parcel in Kiev, and was destined for Czechia.

Other Case Studies from 2023

The following case serves as an excellent example of the necessity of cooperation between customs agencies from multiple countries. The case involves trafficking in ancient coins that were looted from Türkiye. However, the coins were discovered by Austrian Customs and the investigation ultimately involved the cooperation of police and Customs authorities in Austria, Türkiye, Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and France. The WCO played a pivotal role in the investigation by connecting many of the agencies and initiating the cooperation that would allow successful enforcement actions in multiple countries against the perpetrators and the restitution of the stolen objects to Türkiye.

The case began in 2021 when Austrian Customs intercepted a package containing several antique objects with suspicious provenance. The investigation ultimately led to French Customs investigators from La Direction Nationale du Renseignement et des Enquêtes Douanières (DNRED) executing a search warrant at a house in central France where they discovered 8597 ancient coins. Experts concluded that the bronze, silver, and gold coins, some of which dated to the 7th century BC, originated in the Anatolia region of Türkiye. Intercepted communications between the conspirators indicated that over 7000 additional items had
already been sold with a total value exceeding 1.5 million Euros. As stated by a member of the customs service, “Usually, the pieces are looted from villages by people who are in quite precarious situations. The mobsters will provide them with metal detectors so that they can search for treasure in their locality according to the stories they have heard and which may have passed down through the generations. Once these materials have been recovered, collectors will go from village to village to buy these objects at low prices, and certainly not at the price of the European market.”
Two of the most unique and valuable items were simple bronze plaques inscribed with Greek writing. While unbeknownst to the smuggler, this writing was deciphered by experts from the Louvre and determined to be a Roman imperial exemption plate. This extremely rare item signified that certain animals belonging to the Imperium were exempt from conducting chores or other menial work.

1.4 Open source trend observations

Open source information revealed trends in the cultural heritage arena:

- A surge in digital preservation and documentation technologies are changing the way cultural heritage is recorded, archived, and shared. Heritage sites are able to be digitally preserved through advances in 3D scanning, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence. This allows for broader access to cultural heritage, and helps to safeguard vulnerable sites thus potentially reducing the incidence of looting, theft, and trafficking of cultural heritage. Notably, the WCO participated in a meeting with the Expert Group against Theft, Trafficking and Tampering of documentary heritage (EGATTT, part of the International Council on Archives) in Paris in January of 2024. The purpose was to present the Customs perspective as EGATTT works to develop new guidance to inform its member librarians and archivists of best practices in the protection of documentary heritage.

- An emphasis on sustainable heritage tourism. Travelers seeking experiences that are perceived to be more authentic, responsible, and immersive and which support local communities and preserve heritage. These initiatives often emphasize the importance of minimizing environmental impact, respecting local customs and traditions, and contributing to the economic empowerment of host communities. By providing local communities with revenue from such tourism, this will allow greater protective measures to be taken that may reduce illicit trade.
2. Projects and Operations

Due to a lack of resources, the WCO was unable to conduct any PITCH (Preventing Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Heritage) trainings in 2023. Also due to a lack of resources, the WCO did not participate in Operation Pandora VIII. It should be noted, however, that the WCO will participate in Operation Pandora IX this summer in its usual role as a co-leader of the operation. Operation Pandora is an annual multilateral effort to combat the illicit trafficking in cultural heritage. The effort will be led this year by the Spanish Guardia Civil, and co-led by Europol, Interpol, and the WCO. Focused in the European Union and joined by Western Balkan countries, Mexico, and the United States, the operation will commence in June and last through September. The goals of the operation are the following:

• Conduct focused controls and checks at borders and mail and express consignment facilities looking for stolen cultural objects
• To direct patrols (on land and offshore) at known theft hot spots such as unprotected land and underwater archaeological sites, in order to identify suspects, arrest criminals, and seize looting tools such as metal detectors and ships with special radars for searching wrecks)
• To inspect antiques shops, art auction houses, art fairs, and sport diving clubs for legal compliance and trafficked cultural property

There will also be a "cyber patrol" led by the Dutch Art Crime Unit that will focus on private sales sites such as eBay and on auction houses and other internet-based sales platforms dealing in art, sculpture, and other movable cultural heritage.

The overarching goal is also for all countries and agencies involved to arrest criminals, develop criminal investigations, and share intelligence in order to counter the illicit traffic of national heritage.

1. Seizure of a post-Byzantine painting by Greek police
2. Seizure of a part of a marble Ottoman tombstone and two Byzantine artifacts by Greek police
3. Seizure of archeological objects made by Spanish Guardia Civil
4. Seizure of coins made by Spanish Guardia Civil
2. CULTURAL HERITAGE
The global illicit drug trade not only poses a severe threat to public health and safety but also catalyses a spectrum of associated criminal activities. Understanding the main evolving patterns is needed for a robust international response.
INTRODUCTION

Amidst persistently low growth rates and high inflation, the dynamics of international trade continue to influence the scale and methods of drug trafficking. Criminal organisations can adapt to new circumstances, challenging law enforcement efforts by constantly evolving and continually changing routes and modus operandi.

This report analyses the shifts in global drug trends during 2022 and 2023 within the customs domain, specifying the quantities of drugs seized by type, regional differences in trafficking activities, and drug concealment and transportation tactics, based on the seizure data recorded in the Customs Enforcement Network (CEN) by World Customs Organization (WCO) Members.

As international drug trafficking adapts and transforms, it presents persistent challenges to public health, safety, and security, demanding a sophisticated and informed response. This report aims to provide customs and law enforcement agencies with analytical tools to navigate the complex landscape of the drug trade. Drug consumption is a growing challenge for public health systems.

In 2023, Europe remained one of the primary consumer markets for cocaine globally. According to CEN statistics, cocaine held the leading position among illicit drugs, followed by cannabis, synthetic drugs, khat, opioids, and opiates. Global trafficking of synthetic drugs introduces additional complexities since many of them also have legitimate medical uses. Furthermore, drug dealers change the chemical composition of...
3. DRUGS

Synthetic drugs to circumvent the controls. Methamphetamine trafficking is witnessing a surge to a record high.

Synthetic opioids are now emerging as one of the most worrying threats, particularly fentanyl, whose deadly effects have been devastating some regions as North America for several years now. The decline in heroin production is leading to fears of a global expansion in fentanyl trafficking.

As first-line border controllers, customs authorities must remain vigilant and continually adapt their strategies to ensure effective combat against drug trafficking, whilst also facilitating the smooth flow of legitimate trade. The WCO Drugs Programme has implemented extensive projects to strengthen international cooperation and enhance capacity building among its members, aiming to preserve the integrity of the supply chain. These initiatives will be detailed in the final section of the report.

1. Overall trends in drug trafficking

When analysing the country-level data on drug trafficking, 134 countries reported 41,677 seizures in 2022. In contrast, 27,519 seizures were reported by 127 countries in 2023.

![Figure 1: Drug seizures in weight (Kg) by category, 2022-2023](chart)

1 The data includes all the seizures registered in 2022 and 2023. There could be minimal differences concerning what was reported in the WCO ITR 2022, which presented the data collected until the report’s publication.
Figure 2: Drug seizures by category, 2022-2023

The general trend for drug seizures, both by weight and number of cases, showed a decrease from 2022 to 2023. The total weight of drugs seized was approximately 1,037,843 Kilogrammes in 2023, down from 1,207,967 Kilogrammes in 2022, representing a decline of 14.08%. The predominant drugs by volume seized in 2023 were cocaine (46.23%), cannabis (23.46%), and synthetic drugs (20.26%).

For cannabis, there was a notable reduction of nearly 19.06% in Kilogrammes, from 300,796 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 243,472 Kilogrammes in 2023. Cocaine experienced a decrease of 12.76% in Kilogrammes, from 549,933 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 479,752 Kilogrammes in 2023. Only opioids and opiates registered an increase in seized Kilogrammes.

Regarding the number of seizures, synthetic drugs led with 10,685 instances (38.83% of total seizures) in 2023, followed by cannabis with 9,767 seizures (35.49%), and cocaine with 4,739 seizures (17.22%). All categories witnessed a decline in the number of seizures, with the most notable decreases in relative terms occurring in opioids and opiates, and khat.
In the year 2023, drug seizure dynamics by region depicted significant shifts in volume terms. Western Europe saw a notable increase in seizures, escalating to 518,634.95 Kilogrammes, a substantial rise of 36.21% from the previous year. Conversely, South America witnessed a dramatic decline, with seizures plummeting by 50.85% to 135,253.66 Kilogrammes. The Asia-Pacific region continued its upward trend, increasing seizures by 26.87% to 146,276.49 Kilogrammes. In contrast, North America saw a significant decrease of 61.92%, with seizures falling to 58,198.44 Kilogrammes. The Middle East also experienced reduced drug seizures by 46.68% to 36,212.20 Kilogrammes.

Figure 3. Drug seizures in weight (Kg) by region, 2022-2023

Figure 4. Drug seizures in weight (Kg) by region and category, 2022-2023
Analysing trends in drug types by region, cannabis seizures decline in terms of weight is explained mainly by variations in the regions of Eastern and Central Europe (from 62,744.54 Kg in 2022 to 8,619.81 Kg in 2023), North America (from 44,550.84 Kg in 2022 to 14,362.99 Kg in 2023), and Asia-Pacific (from 30,853.29 Kg in 2022 to 20,367.73 Kg in 2023). However, some regions reveal important increases such as Western Europe (from 110,110.52 Kg in 2022 to 144,134.27 Kg in 2023) and South America (from 13,376.53 Kg in 2022 to 22,148.19 Kg in 2023).

Similarly, the decline in cocaine seizures in 2023 is explained mainly by variations in the key regions of South America (from 260,345.15 Kg in 2022 to 112,025.27 Kg in 2023) and Central America (from 38,837.31 Kg in 2022 to 11,158.22 Kg in 2023). The decline in khat is largely explained by the drops in North America and the Middle East.

Synthetic drug reduction was particularly prominent in the Middle East and North America.

In contrast to the overall downtrend, opioids and opiates increase was especially notable in the Commonwealth of Independent States and West Africa.
Concerning flow quantities among regions, the largest amount was displayed by South America as the departure region, and Western Europe as the destination region for both 2022 and 2023. However, there was a shift from North America to the Caribbean as a destination region for South American departures.

It is noteworthy the increase in internal transactions within the Asia-Pacific region and from the Middle East to Western Europe and South America to the Caribbean. Conversely, transactions from Western Europe to Eastern and Central Europe and from South America to Eastern and Central Europe diminished considerably.

Some new regional routes came up in the year 2023, including flows from Asia-Pacific to Central Africa or from Central America to the Commonwealth of Independent States, suggesting shifts in regional dynamics and potential new markets. Simultaneously, specific routes active in 2022, such as those from Asia-Pacific to North Africa, and from North Africa to West Africa, did not register in 2023.
Apropos the flow direction, drug seizures in imports represented 57.85% of the total and increased by 14.7%, from 523,317 kg in 2022 to 600,401 kg in 2023. There was, however, a significant reduction in drug seizures during transit and in exports. Seizures in transit decreased sharply by 49.6%, from 334,857 kg to 168,724 kg. Exports decreased 47.9%, from 306,431 kg to 159,745 kg. Internal drug seizures more than doubled with an increase of 151.3%, from 43,363 kg in 2022 to 108,973 kg in 2023.
Regarding trends across regions and drug types, cocaine and heroin trafficking patterns elucidate a more ominous aspect of the drug trade, with cocaine showing significant transit through Western Europe, connecting production zones in South America to major consumption markets. Heroin is primarily imported into the Asia-Pacific region.

Cannabis witnessed a decrease in exports from 31,657.26 kilogrammes in 2022 to 15,837.87 kilogrammes in 2023, marking a 50.03% reduction. Africa, notably a principal producer of cannabis, saw a significant downturn in North Africa, which contributed to a regional drop of 25.52%, descending from 17,405.95 kilogrammes in 2022 to 2,931.23 kilogrammes in 2023. Meanwhile, cannabis imports surged by 15.41%, ascending from 165,778.61 kilogrammes in 2022 to 191,341.40 kilogrammes in 2023. Conversely, internal seizures diminished by 14.88% from 35,642.18 kilogrammes to 30,435.06 kilogrammes, whilst transit seizures experienced a Western Europe emerged as a crucial node in the cannabis trade.
Cocaine exports notably decreased by 58.78% from 257,798.15 kilogrammes to 106,218.54 kilogrammes. The South American region, globally recognised as the primary cocaine source, saw its export seizures fall by 60%, decreasing from 243,549.36 kilogrammes to 97,622.60 kilogrammes. However, cocaine imports witnessed an increase of 117.47% from 110,680.44 kilogrammes to 240,641.09 kilogrammes. Internal seizures slightly increased by 173% from 3,511.96 kilogrammes to 9,597.73 kilogrammes, whereas transit seizures decreased by 31% from 177,942.81 kilogrammes to 123,294.50 kilogrammes.

Khat exports significantly increased by 60.47% from 1,294.36 kilogrammes in 2022 to 2,076.74 kilogrammes in 2023. Khat imports experienced a decrease of 20.88% from 86,442.37 kilogrammes to 68,734.87 kilogrammes. Internal seizures rose by 99.20% from 25.10 kilogrammes to 50.00 kilogrammes, whilst transit seizures dramatically reduced by 86.05% from 11,231.42 kilogrammes to 1,563.75 kilogrammes.

Synthetic drugs are prominently featured, indicating a robust and extensive. Synthetic drugs saw exports surge by 162.32% from 12,742.86 kilogrammes to 33,427.24 kilogrammes. Imports, however, experienced a decrease of 41.68% from 144,853.73 kilogrammes to 84,448.01 kilogrammes. Internal seizures saw a significant increase from 3,763.60 kilogrammes to 67,099.18 kilogrammes. Transit seizures declined by 62.57% from 11,231.42 kilogrammes to 25,274.56 kilogrammes.

Opioids and opiates experienced varied changes in their global movement between 2022 and 2023. Exports decreased significantly by approximately 24.20%, from 2,852.68 kg in 2022 to 2,162.42 kg in 2023. Conversely, imports slightly increased by about 3.08%, rising from 14,553.20 kg to 15,000.75 kg. Internal seizures demonstrated the most dramatic increase, surging from 371.34 kg in 2022 to 1,774.97 kg in 2023. Transit seizures also increased by about 22.13%, from 10,425.38 kg to 12,732.79 kg.

**Figure 9.** Percentage of quantity of drugs seized by Detection Method (in kilogrammes), 2022-2023
Concerning detection methods, Intelligence and Investigation experienced an increase in relative participation, from 75.48% in 2022 to 88.17% in 2023, suggesting these methods have become more effective in identifying and intercepting drug shipments. Routine control was still a prevalent method but decreased in participation, declining from 24.21% in 2022 to 10.89% in 2023.

**Figure 10.** Drugs seized by Concealment method (in cases), 2022-2023

Overall, the total number of concealment cases significantly declined from 41,677 in 2022 to 27,519 in 2023, a 34% reduction. Baggage rose from 6,040 cases in 2022 to 6,655 in 2023, representing a share growth from 14.5% to 24.2%. Concealment in premises, for instance, increased by 160 cases, with its participation rate effectively doubling, albeit from a relatively minor base. Similarly, concealment on the person increased by 84 cases, increasing participation from 4.4% to 7.0% of total cases.

Conversely, the use of mail for concealment witnessed a dramatic decrease, with cases plummeting from 23,787 to 11,892 cases, a halving of its previous figures. In transport method decreased by 2,140 cases.
Apropos of conveyance in volume terms, the vessel is the main method, registering approximately 58% of participation of the seized drugs in both 2022 and 2023. Air transport increased by 13.53% to 150,554.40 Kg in 2023, up from 132,608.85 Kg in the previous year. Rail transport declined by 92.86% to just 1,122.01 Kg in 2023. Pedestrian methods increased by 6.20% to 35,657.35 Kg in 2023.

In the matter of methods of conveyance, in the number of cases air transport remains the predominant method, although it has experienced a notable decline of nearly 40%, decreasing from 31,306 in 2022 to 18,864 in 2023. Despite this decrease, air transport continued to dominate the conveyance methods, comprising approximately 68.55% of the total cases in 2023, down from 75.12% in the previous year.
Conversely, the use of vehicles decreased by 25.83%, falling from 6,931 cases in 2022 to 5,141 in 2023. Pedestrian conveyance showed a unique trend, where not only did the number of cases increase by 20.88% from 1,140 in 2022 to 1,378 in 2023, but its participation more than doubled from 2.74% to 5.01%. Despite Vessels decreased in the number of cases by 16.05% to 1,015 in 2023 from 1,209 in 2022, relative participation increased from 2.90% to 3.69%.

Figure 13. Top 15 countries reporting the most significant drug seizures in kilogrammes, 2022

United States
Colombia
Spain
Belgium
Ecuador
Hong Kong, China
Poland
Saudi Arabia
Brazil
Netherlands
Panama
United Kingdom
Italy
India
Türkiye

Figure 14. Top 15 countries reporting the most significant drug seizures in kilogrammes, 2023

Spain
Belgium
United Kingdom
Ecuador
Mexico
Indonesia
United States
Netherlands
Bangladesh
Brazil
Hong Kong, China
Germany
Lebanon
Türkiye
Colombia
The analysis of trends between the top 15 countries comparing 2022 and 2023 showed that 10 countries continued in rank. However, there were significant variations in the position of some countries. Mexico, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Germany, and Lebanon were introduced in the ranking, to the detriment of Poland, Saudi Arabia, Panama, Italy, and India. The top 5 list for 2023 is led by Spain, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Ecuador, and Mexico.

Spain and the United Kingdom reported considerable increases, with Spain recording an uptick of approximately 62,976 kg and the United Kingdom following closely with an increase of 60,564 kg. The Netherlands and Belgium also observed more modest increases, with around 10,049 kg and 7,867 kg, respectively. In contrast, the United States decreased by approximately 94,629 kg and Colombia dropped by 119,467 kg. Other countries, including Brazil, Ecuador, and Hong Kong, China, reported decreases in total drug seizures.

Regarding drug export dynamics, Ecuador, Mexico, and Colombia were the top 3 leaders in 2023. Meanwhile in imports, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Belgium reported the largest figures. The patterns of transit seizures varied, with Belgium witnessing a decrease of around 19% but still reporting 73,254.12 Kg in 2023. The Netherlands and Hong Kong, China, are also critical in transit flows.

2. Trends in drug trafficking by category

2.1 Cocaine

Figure 16. Quantity of cocaine seized by conveyance method (in kilogrammes), 2022-2023

Total cocaine conveyance dropped from 549,933 kg in 2022 to 479,752 kg in 2023. Vessel conveyance decreased by 23.25% from about 514,024 kg to 417,054 kg. Despite this reduction, vessel transport
remains the predominant method, although its proportional participation decreased from 93.47% to 86.93%. On the contrary, trafficking via air increased from approximately 9,427 kg in 2022 to 14,607 kg in 2023, equivalent to a 35.46% rise.

Figure 16: Top 10 countries by number of cocaine seizures and quantity seized (in kilogrammes), 2022-2023

Regarding the top 10 countries for seized cocaine in 2023, Mexico and Argentina were included. Mexico recorded a volume of 35,277 kg and placed 4th. Conversely, Italy and Peru were classified in the top 10 in 2022, but not in 2023.

Belgium experienced an increase in the quantity of cocaine intercepted, ascending from 110,702 kg in 2022 to 119,965 kg in 2023, becoming 1st place. Spain, traditionally a significant entry point for narcotics into Europe from South America, also saw an appreciable rise in seized quantities, with figures nearly doubling from 40,048 kg in 2022 to 90,381 kg in 2023. The Netherlands exhibited a substantial increase in seizures from 28,695 kg to 45,379 kg, while Ecuador observed a decrease to 62,464 kg from a previous 76,434 kg.
Box 1: Cocaine routes from South America in 2023

A. Ecuador
Ecuador is an important departure point for cocaine to various European countries, with significant volumes destined for Spain, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany. Air transport, while frequent, involves smaller quantities of cocaine. In contrast, maritime transport accounts for much larger volumes, with over 52 tonnes seized route to Spain and around 45 tonnes to Belgium.

B. Colombia
Cocaine trafficking from Colombia primarily targets Europe and the Asia-Pacific via sea and air routes. Europe, especially Spain, is a major hub, receiving over 12 tonnes by sea and smaller quantities by air, distributing further across the continent. Other European nations like the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and the United Kingdom also receive significant amounts through maritime routes. In contrast, the Asia-Pacific experiences are related to more sporadic trafficking, with smaller amounts intercepted by air. Australia, New Zealand, and Thailand see only minor interceptions.
C. Brazil

Brazil’s cocaine trafficking routes are primarily directed towards Europe, with significant quantities intercepted. Portugal sees around 439,984 Kilogrammes by air and 269,60 Kilogrammes by vessel. The United Kingdom and Spain are also major destinations, with the United Kingdom receiving 122,6433 Kilogrammes by air and 278.35 Kilogrammes by vessel, and Spain intercepting 96.151 Kilogrammes by air and 4,895.45 Kilogrammes by vessel. Beyond Europe, Australia records 41.374 Kilogrammes by air and 220 Kilogrammes by vessel, while the Russian Federation intercepted 759 Kilogrammes transported by vessel.

On July 13th, 2023, at the Port of Algeciras, a container declared as containing personal effects was intercepted by Spanish authorities. Upon inspection, 129.65 kg of cocaine was discovered concealed within the declared goods. The container originated from Manzanillo, Mexico, with both loading and transhipment occurring at the same port.

Case study 1.

129.65 KG OF COCAINE SEIZED AT ALGECIRAS PORT

On July 13th, 2023, at the Port of Algeciras, a container declared as containing personal effects was intercepted by Spanish authorities. Upon inspection, 129.65 kg of cocaine was discovered concealed within the declared goods. The container originated from Manzanillo, Mexico, with both loading and transhipment occurring at the same port.

_Courtesy of Spanish Customs (Agencia Tributaria)._
2.2 Cannabis

Figure 17: Quantity of cannabis seized by conveyance method (in kilogrammes), 2022-2023

Examining the conveyance of cannabis, vehicles were the predominant method for cannabis conveyance in 2022, accounting for 165,240.85 kg of the total transported volume. However, by 2023, the figure had markedly decreased to 116,369.09 kg, representing a substantial decline of approximately 42%. This reduction from 54.93% to 47.80% of the total conveyance, suggests a potential shift towards alternative routes or methods.

Contrasting with other methods, air conveyance significantly increased from 22,992.89 kg in 2022 to 33,117.33 kg in 2023, a growth of over 30%.

Maritime transport demonstrated a relatively stable trend with a modest decrease from 65,926.56 kg to 60,892.50 kg, approximately an 8% reduction.

Pedestrian conveyance saw the most drastic reduction, plummeting from 25,360.24 kg in 2022 to just 11,904.96 kg in 2023. This sharp decline reduced its contribution from 8.43% to 4.89%.
The top 3 countries for cannabis seizures in 2022 were Spain, Poland, and the United States. For 2023, they were Spain, Brazil, and the United Kingdom. In the top 10 for 2023, there are 4 newcomers: The United Kingdom, The United Arab Emirates, Sweden, and Belgium. Bangladesh and Morocco presented contrasting trajectories. Bangladesh’s seizures increased from 8,005 Kilogrammes to 11,523 Kilogrammes, while Morocco experienced a decline from 16,826 Kilogrammes to 7,833 Kilogrammes.

Spain emerged as the leader in cannabis seizures, registering an increase from 87,933 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 100,881 Kilogrammes in 2023. The number of seizure cases also rose significantly from 1,285 to 1,761. Brazilian seizures from 7,044 Kilogrammes to 17,402 Kilogrammes. Similarly, the cases increased from 305 to 515. Conversely, the United States experienced a dramatic downturn in cannabis seizures, with quantities plummeting from 44,551 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 14,363 Kilogrammes in 2023. The associated cases decreased significantly, from 2,204 in 2022 to 332 reported cases. Similarly, India witnessed a reduction in seizures, with figures declining from 17,013 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 17,402 Kilogrammes. Similarly, the cases increased from 305 to 515.

Conversely, the United States experienced a dramatic downturn in cannabis seizures, with quantities plummeting from 44,551 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 14,363 Kilogrammes in 2023. The associated cases decreased significantly, from 2,204 in 2022 to 332 reported cases. Similarly, India witnessed a reduction in seizures, with figures declining from 17,013 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 17,402 Kilogrammes. Similarly, the cases increased from 305 to 515. The United Arab Emirates and Sweden reported significant cannabis seizures amounting to 7,710 Kilogrammes and 7,528 Kilogrammes, respectively. Additionally, the United Kingdom recorded seizures totalling 17,006 Kilogrammes across 439 cases. Belgium also reported that 5,030 Kilogrammes.
Box 2: Cannabis routes in 2023

A. Morocco
Cannabis trafficking from Morocco predominantly targets European and Middle Eastern countries, with Spain, the United Kingdom, Italy, the United Arab Emirates, and Cameroon being the primary destinations. The trafficking largely employs maritime and aerial routes, with significant seizures reported in both. More than 34,040 Kilogrammes were seized on vessel routes to Spain.

B. Spain
Spain is a key hub in the trafficking of cannabis to various European countries including Italy, Germany, France, Austria, and Ireland, which serve as major distribution points. Air transport is the most common method, with significant amounts being seized, for example, 141.63 kg to Italy and 1,194.12 kg to Germany. Although less common, maritime transport is used for larger shipments.
In August 2023, the Russian customs authorities inspected a lorry that arrived from Estonia. Customs examination resulted in a seizure of 265 polymer bags with 812 kg of cannabis resin hidden in the vehicle’s caches. Three members of the criminal group were arrested.
In January 2023, Customs in Norway and Sweden made three seizures using the same modus operandi. The consignor in all three cases was the same male private individual in Spain with addresses in Malaga and Granada. The content was declared slightly differently, but all consignments had electric equipment as part of the declaration. All consignments contained an electric heater. On the X-ray images anomalies and organic material was detected. In all cases, the cannabis resin (hashish) was identically packed with the logo “Joker” on the packaging.

**Case study 3.**
IDENTICAL CANNABIS RESIN SMUGGLING ATTEMPTS FOILED IN NORWAY AND SWEDEN

**2.3 Opioids and Opiates**

*Figure 19.* Quantity of Opioids and Opiates seized by conveyance method (in kilogrammes), 2022-2023
In 2022, air conveyance accounted for 4,605.49 Kilogrammes of opioids, which significantly increased to 17,873.60 Kilogrammes in 2023, an increase of 287.44%. Conversely, vehicle transportation exhibited a marginal decrease from 8,140.61 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 7,968.25 Kilogrammes in 2023, a reduction of 2.16%. Vessel-based transport saw a substantial decline, with volumes decreasing from 5,315.31 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 3,544.61 Kilogrammes in 2023, marking a reduction of nearly 50%. The pedestrian method experienced the steepest decline in relative terms among all categories, plummeting by 74.06% from 908.63 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 522.01 Kilogrammes in 2023. The pronounced increase in air transport and the significant decline in pedestrian and vessel use are noteworthy and can suggest changing logistics strategies.

**Figure 20.** Top 10 countries by number of Opioids and Opiates seizures and quantity seized (in kilogrammes), 2022-2023

In 2022, Uzbekistan emerged as the predominant hotspot for opioid and opiate seizures, confiscating a remarkable 9,206 Kilogrammes. The United States followed with significant seizures amounting to 6,729 Kilogrammes, indicative of its ongoing battle against opioid distribution networks.

The transition into 2023 saw Uzbekistan retaining its top position, albeit with a slightly reduced total of 8,727 Kilogrammes. Notably, Kyrgyzstan catapulted into prominence with an extraordinary seizure of 6,000 Kilogrammes from a single case, suggesting a potential shift in trafficking dynamics or the emergence of a new trafficking hub. The United States, while still among the top three, witnessed a decrease to 3,474 Kilogrammes. Other significant contributors in 2023 included Belgium and India, which seized 2,921 and 1,786 Kilogrammes respectively, pointing to their critical roles in the European and Asian drug interception efforts.
In 2022, Fentanyl seizures amounted to approximately 3,084 Kilogrammes, which escalated to 3,356 Kilogrammes in 2023, indicating a notable increase in the volume seized. Interestingly, this increase in quantity comes against the backdrop of a substantial reduction in the number of cases, from 688 in 2022 to 391 in 2023. This paradox suggests that while fewer seizures occurred, those that did were of significantly larger quantities, possibly indicating a consolidation of trafficking operations into larger shipments.

Conversely, Heroin presented a contrasting trend. There were 20,711 seized kilogrammes in 2022, a figure that sharply declined to 9,113 kilogrammes in 2023. This dramatic decrease in seized quantities was accompanied by a relatively stable number of seizure cases—749 in 2022 versus 699 in 2023.
Box 3: Heroin routes in 2023

A. Pakistan
Heroin trafficking from Pakistan predominantly targets destinations like Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the Maldives, utilizing both air and maritime transport methods. Significant seizures include 9.55 kg by air to Saudi Arabia, a major seizure of 388 kg by vessel to the United Kingdom, and 18.02 kg by air to the Maldives.

B. Thailand – Malaysia
Thailand and Malaysia serve as significant transit points in the distribution of heroin, primarily through air routes, with key destinations including Australia and Hong Kong. In Thailand, major trafficking operations to Australia result in notable seizures by both air and sea, cumulatively surpassing 223 kg of heroin. This reflects established and voluminous trafficking channels. Meanwhile, Malaysia’s involvement mainly entails air shipments, dispatching over 111 kg of heroin to Australia.
In November 2023 the Tajikistan Customs seized 71.1 kg of heroin smuggled from Uzbekistan. The drugs were hidden in cashes of the road cargo vehicle.

Case study 4.
HEROIN SMUGGLED IN CARGO VEHICLE SEIZED BY TAJIKISTAN CUSTOMS

Case study 5.
NEARLY 900,000 FENTANYL PILLS HIDDEN IN PORCELAIN SINKS SEIZED AT OTAY MESA PORT

OTAY MESA, Calif. – U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers at the Otay Mesa port of entry’s cargo facility intercepted a narcotic smuggling attempt of nearly 900,000 fentanyl pills that were concealed inside porcelain sinks.

The incident occurred on June 26, when a 45-year-old male applied for entry into the United States via the Otay Mesa Port of Entry while driving a white 2000 Ford cargo van. The driver presented a valid border crossing card and a shipping manifest for two porcelain sinks. A CBP officer referred the driver along with the vehicle and shipment for further inspection.

While screening the vehicle using a port imaging system, CBP officers discovered anomalies within the shipment. Upon further inspection, a canine detection team was alerted to the porcelain sinks. A thorough examination of the sinks revealed a total of 12 packages containing approximately 858,000 blue pills that tested positive for fentanyl. The total weight of the fentanyl was 189.15 pounds with an estimated street value of $2,574,000.
2.4 Synthetic drugs

Figure 23. Quantity of Synthetic drugs seized by conveyance method (in kilogrammes), 2022-2023

In 2023, the conveyance of synthetic drugs via vessels experienced a marked increase, ascending from 83,704.64 kg to 114,795.21 kg, a surge of 37.14%. This method’s share of total drug transportation also expanded significantly, from 36.57% to 54.60%. Conversely, the use of vehicles for drug conveyance demonstrated a sharp decline, plummeting by 88.46% from 85,710.31 kg to 45,478.14 kg. The proportion of drugs transported by vehicles correspondingly decreased from 37.44% to 21.63%.

The role of pedestrians in drug trafficking has also evolved, with an 80.66% increase in the amount carried, from 4,436.23 kg to 22,940.92 kg. This shift is reflected in the growing participation rate of pedestrians, which more than quintupled from 1.94% to 10.91%. Air transport saw a significant downturn in its usage for drug conveyance, with amounts decreasing by 78.32% from 33,937.68 kg to 19,031.30 kg. The participation of air transport decreased from 14.83% to 9.05%.
In 2022, the United States reported a significant volume of seizures, amounting to 44,006.51 Kilogrammes, but this figure saw a reduction by 2023 to 16,882.38 Kilogrammes. Despite the reduction, the United States and Saudi Arabia, which saw their seizures decrease from 39,841.45 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 10,969.14 Kilogrammes in 2023, remained major players. Conversely, Indonesia emerged distinctly in 2023 with 58,776.49 Kilogrammes seized.

Hong Kong experienced a decline in the volume seized from 53,089.84 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 22,438.72 Kilogrammes in 2023, yet the number of seizure cases escalated from 46 in 2022 to 146 in 2023, suggesting increased but smaller-scale seizures. Meanwhile, Bangladesh saw its seizure volume skyrocket from 3,997.86 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 22,602.82 Kilogrammes in 2023, with cases increasing from 164 to 251, signalling a significant rise in synthetic drug activity.

The variability in synthetic drug trafficking patterns is evident with several countries prominent in 2022 disappearing from the 2023 data. The disappearance of countries like the Russian Federation, Iran, Jordan, Malta, and Sudan from the top 10 in 2022 might reflect changes in trafficking routes. In contrast, new entrants in 2023 such as Lebanon (10,367.40 Kilogrammes), Mexico (22,609.49 Kilogrammes), and the United Kingdom (7,484.21 Kilogrammes) suggest evolving dynamics within the synthetic drug trade.
Concerning the trends of the top five synthetic drugs—Methamphetamine, Captagon, MDMA (Ecstasy), Ketamine, and Tramadol—between the years 2022 and 2023, one observes marked variations in the quantities apprehended. These fluctuations are not merely numerical but reflect deeper shifts in the narcotics landscape. In 2022, a staggering 63,888.83 kg of Methamphetamine was seized, which soared by an impressive 108.94% to 133,486.56 kg in 2023. Conversely, Captagon witnessed a substantial reduction in seizures, plummeting from 49,949.48 kg in 2022 to 21,940.28 kg in 2023, marking a 56.08% decrease.

The data for MDMA (Ecstasy) suggests a moderate increase in focus or availability, with seizures growing from 4,951.80 kg to 5,953.62 kg, an increment of 20.23%. Ketamine also showed an increase in seizures, from 3,724.56 kg in 2022 to 5,456.49 kg in 2023, a rise of 46.50%. In stark contrast, Tramadol experienced a significant downturn, with seizures reducing by 40.82% from 3,420.30 kg to 2,023.97 kg.
Box 4: Synthetic drugs routes in 2023

A. Captagon (Lebanon, Türkiye, and the Syrian Arab Republic)
Lebanon, Türkiye, and the Syrian Arab Republic are central origins in the trafficking network for Captagon, distributing significant shipments globally to destinations including Nigeria, Egypt, Qatar, Guinea, and Kuwait. A variety of transportation methods are employed, with air transport used for rapid and smaller shipments, and maritime routes for larger volumes. Key seizures noted include 145.2 kg to Nigeria, 575.7 kg to Egypt, 26,462.2 kg to Qatar, and 36,465 kg to Guinea.

B. Ketamine (Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands)
Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands emerge as significant hubs in the European Ketamine distribution network, predominantly utilizing air transport to dispatch the drug globally. Germany leads as the principal exporter, with approximately 585,865 kg seized in 145 incidents, targeting destinations like the United States, Hong Kong, Austria, Canada, and Israel. Belgium and the Netherlands also play crucial roles, with Belgium seizing around 341,978 kg in 76 incidents and the Netherlands about 333,253 kg in 83 incidents.
C. MDMA (Netherlands)

MDMA routes from the Netherlands extend to diverse international destinations such as Malaysia, Chile, Suriname, New Zealand, and Vietnam. Seizures highlight the extensive use of air transport, with notable shipments including approximately 773.9 kg to Malaysia and smaller but substantial quantities to other nations.

D. Methamphetamine (Mexico and Malaysia)

The trafficking patterns of methamphetamine originating from Malaysia and Mexico exhibit distinct characteristics. Malaysia primarily traffics to destinations within Asia and Oceania, with notable quantities sent to Indonesia, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Bahrain, Hong Kong, China, and domestically. Transportation modes include both air and vessel, with larger shipments occasionally sent via vessel, such as 980 kg to Indonesia. In contrast, Mexico's trafficking operations extend to various continents including Europe, Asia, and Oceania, with major destinations including the Netherlands Antilles, Hong Kong, China, Australia, and Germany. Mexico tends to transport larger quantities of methamphetamine, often via vessels, as evidenced by a massive shipment of 20,207 kg to the Netherlands Antilles.
2.5 Khat

Figure 27. Quantity of Khat seized by conveyance method (in kilogrammes), 2022-2023

The majority of Khat seizures occurred through air conveyances, with totals of approximately 61,211.42 kg in 2022 and 65,771.16 kg in 2023. This represents an increase of about 7.45%, indicating a growing preference for air routes for Khat smuggling. The participation of air conveyance in total seizures increased from 61.83% in 2022 to 90.81% in 2023. Rail conveyance, while not a major channel in absolute terms, showed an increase in seizures from 12 kg in 2022 to 42.05 kg in 2023.

Seizures via vessels saw a drastic decrease, from 29,940.25 kg in 2022 to 6,273.15 kg in 2023, lowering the participation from 30.24% in 2022 to 8.66% in 2023. There was a remarkable decline in seizures by vehicle, dropping from 7,428.58 kg in 2022 to just 267.50 kg in 2023.
In 2022, the United States led the rank with a remarkable 45,395 Kilogrammes of Khat seized across 362 cases. In stark contrast, 2023 saw a dramatic reduction, with only 4,925 Kilogrammes seized from a single incident.

Conversely, the United Kingdom demonstrated a contrasting trend. While it seized 26,618 Kilogrammes in 2022 across 1,421 cases, indicating smaller and more frequent interceptions, 2023 saw an exponential increase in seizure quantities to 58,156 Kilogrammes, albeit with a reduced number of incidents (396).

The year 2023 marked the entry of new focal points such as India, Denmark, and Norway, highlighting a possible diversification in trafficking routes. Countries like Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands showed consistent appearances in the top lists for both years, though the scale and frequency of seizures varied. Germany, for example, saw a modest decrease in seizures from 2,303 Kilogrammes in 2022 to 1,462 Kilogrammes in 2023, with a reduction in cases.
On March 29, 2023, a courier was stopped with two textile suitcases at Oslo Airport (Norway). Both suitcases contained carpets that smelted of khat. In total, the courier brought 3 sets of two carpets sewn together with fresh khat in between. The flight route was Nairobi (Kenya) - Doha (Qatar) - Oslo (Norway).

3. WCO Drugs Programme to support members in containing drug trafficking

The WCO Drugs Programme has advanced various initiatives to support global collaboration and foster capacity building among its Members to fight against drug trafficking, each designed to address specific aspects of this phenomenon. Project COLIBRI focuses on monitoring and controlling the movement of small aircrafts that may be used for illicit drug transport, while SDDP (Synthetic Drugs Detection Project) focus on stopping the illegal trafficking of synthetic drugs. AIRCOP strengthens security at major international airports to intercept drug trafficking, and CCP (Container Control Programme) targets illicit drug movements.

3.1 COLIBRI

Launched in 2019, the COLIBRI project is a collaborative initiative between the World Customs Organization (WCO) and the European Union (EU) that focuses on the monitoring and control of General Aviation (GA) that covers all civil aviation activities except commercial transport. Many international airports and secondary aerodromes are subject to less stringent security measures and inspection mechanisms, the General Aviation vector, due to its speed, agility, and ability to cover vast distances, can be a very attractive and efficient means for organized criminal groups for their clandestine activities. The collection of information about this discreet means of transportation also represents a challenge for the law enforcement community.
The overarching goal of the COLIBRI project is to combat transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking across Latin America, the Caribbean and West and Central Africa, with a particular focus on enhancing cross-border law enforcement cooperation. The COLIBRI initiative seeks to enhance the capacities of partner national administrations to monitor and control this specific transportation channel, General Aviation, which is pivotal for security, trafficking, and tax purposes.

The COLIBRI project has a trans-regional coverage and, with the start of its 2nd phase, the number of its partner countries rose from 15 to 19: in Latin America and the Caribbean: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay; and in West and Central Africa: Benin, Cape Verde, Cote d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo.

With a total of EUR 7.3 million committed since 2019, COLIBRI addresses four main aspects:

• Raise Awareness about the Threat: National administrations and LEAs with mandates on General Aviation and the fight against organized crime recognize GA as a threat and a driver of illicit trafficking and promote regular controls and inter-agency cooperation.
• Foster Intelligence and Information sharing: LEAs and other competent authorities consistently share data and strengthen their risk analysis capabilities to target high-risk flights at national, regional, and intercontinental levels.
• Strengthen coordination: Improved operational coordination among agencies competent in GA across the different regions involved in the Project.
• Empower field officers: Field officers receive regular and comprehensive training to better understand the activities of GA in their territory and how to carry out effective controls at airport infrastructures (particularly in border areas).

In 2022, COLIBRI launched the Geoportal, an innovative mapping and geolocation tool that supports law enforcement agencies in collecting data, analysing information, and producing intelligence for efficient risk assessment and control of GA. It plays an instrumental role in information sharing on national, regional, and international levels.

In January 2023, COLIBRI completed a 9-day Operation RUTILANT where it collaborated with the EU-funded Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre - Narcotics (MAOC-N) and partner countries within Latin America, the Caribbean, and West & Central Africa. Operation Rutilant, the first international coordinated effort on General Aviation led by the COLIBRI project, involved 60+ administrations from 15 countries, resulting in 1,435 events recorded in the Geoportal, and the significant seizure of 948 kg of cocaine, furthermore clandestine runways were discovered, and aircraft immobilized.
Beyond these operational achievements, Phase I of the COLIBRI project resulted in the publication of a Technical Handbook for Training on Monitoring and Controlling General Aviation, an E-learning course of 6 hours and the Geoportal Manual for users. All resources were made available in four languages.

Within Phase II which started in April 2023, the COLIBRI project mobilised its efforts and resources to consolidate the results of the previous phase and increase the level of proficiency of partners in the use of techniques and tools adapted to the GA problematics. Over its 1st year of implementation, the project succeeded in defining the COLIBRI Strategy and its monitoring mechanism, strengthening the network of contacts and experts across the regions, and fostering activity at national and regional levels through training and participation in other international law enforcement operations. Thus, over the past year, no less than 2540 events were reported in the Geoportal by the partners, with an increase in the level of activity over the past months, auguring well of the cooperation between partners for the security of our societies. Be noted the extended number and variety of actors with whom COLIBRI succeeded in establishing a partnership with law enforcement agencies, starting with customs, police, gendarmerie, and anti-narcotics, but also other relevant entities such as the air force, civil aviation authorities, etc. This process will be further sustained over the next years.
3.2 Synthetic Drugs Detection Project

Synthetic drugs are playing an increasingly important role in the illicit drug market. Their production is more flexible, and they can come in a variety of forms, which makes interdiction measures more difficult. Many of these products are much more powerful and therefore much more dangerous than plant-based drugs.

Realizing the alarming trend and severe threats posed by synthetic drugs, on 23rd October 2023, the World Customs Organization (WCO) with generous funding from the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) of the U.S. Department of State, launched the Synthetic Drugs Detection Project (SDDP).

To respond to the threat, the Project identified high-risk vectors and therefore adopted a holistic approach towards stopping the illegal trafficking of synthetic drugs via two main pillars:

1. It identifies and targets two high-risk conveyances: General Aviation and the Mail-Channel.
2. It builds on the canine forces’ competencies and values to support control and inspection operations.

Ultimately, SDDP comprises three components and covers the following regions:

**Component 1:** General Aviation Initiative - Central America and Caribbean Regions. As highlighted by the DEA, a significant part of synthetic drugs is brought into the country via this specific fast and discreet means of transport.

**Component 2:** Mail Channel Initiative - WCO-UPU-INCB Collaboration on Mail Channel - Asia and the Pacific Regions. Trafficking of illicit drugs through the mail channel has been emerging drastically over the past years and it is expected this trend to continue.
Component 3: Canine Initiative - Canine Forces - Synthetic Drug Detection – Global Initiative. Canine forces have been proven to be a very effective partner of Customs. Their swift actions are ideal for conducting rapid screening of fast-moving goods and travellers. Flexibility and efficiency make the Canine Force an ideal support to Customs operations including controls in general aviation and the mail channel.

The SDDP consists of three main activities:

• Raise awareness about the threat
• Capacity building for Law Enforcement officials
• Coordinated regional and inter-regional enforcement operations targeting the illegal trafficking of synthetic drugs

The Synthetic Drugs Detection Project will also and foremost build on technology to support partners’ efforts to tackle synthetic drug trafficking. Through the use of the Geoportal, the mapping and geo-localisation tool developed to control and monitor General Aviation, and the WCO CENcomm, secure real-time communication system, partners will be able to plan and organise their control operations, and also reinforce their risk analysis capacity, along with secure communication and exchange of information.

The new WCO-INL initiative aims to disrupt Organised Crime Activities and protect our societies from the major threat posed by Synthetic Drugs.

3.3 Passenger and Cargo Control Program (PCCP)

In 2023, the fusion of AIRCOP and CCP moved forward under a new Passenger and Cargo Control Programme (PCCP) to ensure a comprehensive approach for passengers and cargo.

AIRCOP

AIRCOP is a multi-agency project implemented by UNODC in partnership with INTERPOL and the WCO. It aims to strengthen the capacities of international airports in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean to target and intercept high-risk passengers, cargo, and mail as a contribution to the fight against illicit drugs and other illicit commodities (such as wildlife products or falsified medical products), terrorism-related threats (such as arms or potential foreign terrorist fighters), trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants. It also aims to facilitate communication and coordination between origin, transit, and destination countries to disrupt illicit cross-border flows and criminal networks.

This project was funded by the European Union, Canada, France, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United States (INL). AIRCOP is part of the EU’s Global Illicit Flows Programme (GIFP) to combat transnational crime and foster South-South, regional and transregional cooperation.

AIRCOP has been implemented in 41 airports in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, South-Eastern Europe, and South-East Asia.
AIRCOP facilitates secure real-time transmission and sharing of information between law enforcement services at national, regional, and international levels. The WCO provides CENcomm, the secure communication tool to exchange operational details through the secure transmission of warning and seizure messages within a closed network of control units in international airports, allowing decision-makers to make informed decisions.

In 2023, the Joint Airport Interdiction Task Forces (JAITFs) disclosed 188 drug seizures in CENcomm. JAITFs in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region contributed 28.19%, whereas those in Africa contributed 71.81%. The quantities of seized substances in 2023 were as follows: 321.25 Kilogrammes of cocaine, 1.104 Kilogrammes of cannabis, 31.3 Kilogrammes of heroin, 109.21 Kilogrammes of synthetic drugs, and 17.3 Kilogrammes of khat.

In 2023, three training sessions were held in different locations to benefit the Joint Airport Interdiction Task Forces (JAITFs) of Ecuador (Quito-Guayaquil), Barbados, and North Macedonia, with active participation from Bosnia and Serbia. Moreover, to enhance data collection capabilities and complete the migration from CENcomm2 to CENcomm 3 among JAITFs in West and Central Africa, the WCO and the UNODC organized a series of virtual meetings with JAITF managers and CENcomm national contact points in April and June 2023. It’s crucial to underscore the dedication of all participants in fortifying the CENcomm network.

In 2024, the AIRCOP project will focus on three key initiatives:

a) **Strengthening and improving CENcomm**: The WCO is dedicated to enhancing CENcomm, a platform that enables secure, real-time communication for Joint Airport Interdiction Task Forces (JAITFs). CENcomm 3 has been enhanced with user-friendly interfaces and improved software functionalities to ensure the validation of data entered by users. The goal for 2024 is to consolidate the utilization of CENcomm3, thereby adding significant value to the AIRCOP Project.

b) **Simplifying data analysis**: Effective data analysis is paramount for project success in 2024. This includes:

i) Increased validation of data registration in CENcomm 3.0 to streamline information analysis tasks.

ii) Publication of a quarterly newsletter highlighting the most pertinent data entered in CENcomm 3.0 and trends analysis.

Training efforts will focus on optimizing data collection processes to achieve more parameterized registers, minimize noise in data analysis, and provide decision-makers with valuable insights to enhance law enforcement services and identify traffic trends.

Furthermore, the WCO places a strong emphasis on data protection. Workshops will include exercises aimed at raising awareness about handling sensitive data and ensuring compliance with data protection regulations when registering data in CENcomm3.
c) Cocair Operation: With generous support from donors, the WCO and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) are poised to launch COCAIR VIII in 2024. Before the operation, a global workshop will be convened for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and Africa, offering multilanguage support (Spanish, English, and French), thereby ensuring effective collaboration and coordination among stakeholders.

Container Control Programme (CCP)

The Container Control Programme (CCP), a robust multiannual collaboration between the World Customs Organization (WCO) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), aims to enhance capacity in participating nations. Since its inception in 2004, the initiative has focused on bolstering risk management, supply chain security, and border control across seaports, airports, dry ports, rail terminals, and land border crossings. The overarching goals are to thwart the trafficking of illicit commodities, combat organized crime and terrorism, and simultaneously facilitate legitimate trade. The CCP unites 73 countries globally and has successfully established over 130 specialized Port Control and Air Cargo Control Units.

Throughout 2023, the CCP achieved unprecedented success in confiscating illicit substances, particularly drugs and chemical precursors. The units operating under the CCP’s framework intercepted over 250 tonnes of cocaine, 61.2 tonnes of various opioids, 905 kilograms of heroin, 107 kilograms of synthetic drugs, 8 tonnes of new psychoactive substances (NPS), 1.5 tonnes of amphetamine, 732 units of hallucinogens, and 339.5 tonnes of chemical precursors. These significant accomplishments underscore the effectiveness of the CCP’s operational and networking strategies, solidifying its reputation as one of the most impactful initiatives in curbing illicit cross-border trade.

In 2023, the CCP facilitated over 342 training activities, including train-the-trainer sessions and study visits, predominantly conducted in person. These sessions engaged more than 5,109 participants, with a gender distribution of 23% female and 77% male, to enhance customs officials’ risk management and control expertise. Additionally, the CCP’s commitment to gender equality was evident in the expansion of the Women’s Network, which hosted several events designed to provide specialized training for female officers. These initiatives seek to address and narrow the gaps in training and career progression women may encounter during their professional journeys.
CONCLUSION

Drug trafficking presents a global challenge that requires a multifaceted and interdisciplinary approach. The diversity of drugs, distribution mechanisms, and use of multimodal transportation methods challenge the efforts of Customs and Law Enforcement agencies to combat organised crime.

In 2023, cocaine continued as the most seized substance globally, especially from South America to key European hubs like Spain, Belgium, and the Netherlands, primarily via maritime. Air transport is essential to transfer smaller quantities and spread the distribution network across Europe.

The WCO Drugs Programme actively collaborates with its members, partners, and donors to devise customised initiatives that address the dynamic challenges of drug enforcement. Recognising the rapid expansion of e-commerce recently, in 2023, the WCO introduced a specialised initiative aimed at intercepting synthetic drugs, such as Fentanyl, distributed through mail channels and general aviation. The integration of canine units bolsters this effort.

The registration of drug interceptions by World Customs Organization (WCO) Members on the Customs Enforcement Network (CEN) is crucial for identifying and designing strategies to face emerging trends in cross-border crime and enhancing precision in addressing high-risk trafficking routes. Strengthening border controls, fostering cooperation between agencies, and integrating more comprehensive data analysis is imperative to tackling transnational crime.
ENVIRONMENT
Environmental crimes continue to pose significant challenges to global sustainability and security. As we delve into the environmental chapter of the Illicit Trade Report 2023, it is evident that the illicit trafficking of Environmentally Sensitive Commodities (ESC) remains a pressing issue.
INTRODUCTION

Trafficking of Environmentally Sensitive Commodities

The trafficking of ESC, ranging from wildlife and timber to hazardous chemicals and waste, represents a multifaceted threat to our planet. Wildlife trafficking, characterized by poaching and the illegal trade of endangered species, not only drives biodiversity loss but also poses risks of zoonotic disease transmission. Similarly, the illegal trade in waste and hazardous chemicals jeopardizes environmental integrity through pollution of air, water, and soil, exacerbating global environmental challenges such as climate change and marine pollution.

Challenges and Enforcement Efforts

Customs administrations play a pivotal role in the enforcement of trade-related measures governed by Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) and national environmental legislation. Combating illegal trade in ESC presents ongoing challenges which call for concerted multi-agency law enforcement actions. Limited resources coupled with the sheer volume and the complexity of traded goods demand innovative approaches to enforcement. Despite these challenges, Customs remain committed to its mandate of monitoring trade, conducting risk assessments, and taking decisive actions to intercept illicit consignments.

Insights from 2023

In 2023, the WCO received reports of numerous infractions related to environmental regulations through the Customs Enforcement Network (CEN) database. These reports derived from both global and regional enforcement Operations as well as the WCO Annual Survey, revealed a wide spectrum of illicit activities. The illicit trafficking of wildlife, timber, waste, and controlled substances such as Ozone Depleting Substances...
(ODS) and Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) - potent greenhouse gases, hazardous chemicals, and pesticides, underscores the persistent threats posed by environmental crime.

Figure 1: Overview of Environmentally Sensitive Commodities (ESC) seizures in CEN, 2022-2023

The analysis of CEN data spanning from 2022 to 2023 reveals some noteworthy increases across various seizure categories.

In 2023, wildlife and timber seizures saw a rise of 378 incidents, representing an 11% increase from 2022. Waste seizures escalated significantly by 133 incidents, reaching a total of 437 seizures, translating to a substantial 44% spike. Moreover, there was a notable uptick in seizures of other hazardous chemicals, increasing by 100 incidents and a percentage surge of 39%. Substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol (ODS & HFCs) witnessed a significant increase of 70 seizures, reflecting a remarkable 159% upsurge. In terms of quantities, the following commodities saw substantial increases: waste had a 347% rise, hazardous chemicals had a 340% surge, and mercury/mercury-added products had a 192% uptick. Conversely, pesticide quantities notably decreased by 84%.

As we confront the urgent realities of environmental degradation and climate change, the imperative for decisive action becomes increasingly urgent. The findings presented in this chapter underscore the critical need for strengthened collaboration among Customs, other law enforcement agencies, and environmental stakeholders to combat illicit trade and safeguard the well-being of our planet for future generations.

The ensuing sections of the Environment Chapter, focus on the trafficking of wildlife and timber, waste, substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol, and hazardous materials, and are organised as follows: 1. Overall trends in the trafficking of environmental commodities, including insights obtained from the WCO Annual Survey.
and, 2. Operations coordinated by the WCO Environment Programme and its partners, related to wildlife (Operation THUNDER 2023), and waste and substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol (Operation DEMETER IX).

1. Wildlife and timber

This section provides insights into the trafficking of various species listed and protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). These include the following categories:

- Flora,
- Mammals,
- Reptiles,
- Aves (birds),
- Amphibians,
- Arthropods,
- Anthozoa (a diverse array of marine invertebrates, primarily comprising different species of corals),
- Actinopterygii (a broad group of fishes characterized by having fins supported by bony rays, notably European eels, seahorses, pipefish, and a range of sturgeon),
- Gastropoda (a class of molluscs commonly known as snails, notably Queen Conchs),
- Leguminosae, notably rosewood tree species, which is presented separately from the broader flora category.

The category indicated as "other" refers to a wide range of species not covered explicitly by the mentioned classifications. This category includes diverse marine organisms such as sharks, shark fins, sea cucumbers, black teatfish, nautilus, caviar, and other related products.

The analysis also includes seizures of non-CITES species reported in the CEN database and during Operation THUNDER 2023.
1.1 Overall analysis of wildlife and timber seizures

Figure 2: Number of wildlife and timber seizures by CITES Appendices, 2023

Flora and Reptilia stood out as the most frequently seized species categories under CITES, comprising 34% and 20% of all seizures respectively. Mammalia accounted for 18% of the total seizures. Additionally, Anthozoa (corals) and Aves (birds) demonstrated significant trafficking patterns as reflected by the seizures, with percentages of 12% and 5% respectively. Moderate levels of trafficking were observed for Actinopterygii (ray-finned fishes) and Leguminosae (rosewood tree species). Conversely, Gastropoda (snails) and the category “other” exhibited lower levels of trafficking within the CITES seizures. Amphibia (amphibians) and Arthropods (insects and arachnids) had minimal seizures in 2023.

The statistical analysis of the seizure data reveals that 89% of seizures involved CITES-protected species delineated under Appendices I, II, and III, while 11% of seizures involved non-CITES commodities.
An in-depth analysis shows that there was an increase in the number of seizures from 2022 to 2023. The total seizures increased from 3,393 to 3,741, representing a 11% increase.

Flora, Reptilia, and Mammalia categories consistently had the highest numbers of seizures in both years. However, in 2023, they saw a slight increase, of 8%, 9% and 6% respectively. Conversely, the most substantial increases in the number of seizures involved Leguminosae (rosewood tree species) that rose by 96% and Amphibia by 73%. The category “other” increased by 52%, Anthozoa (corals) by 47% and Arthropods (insects and arachnids) by 19%. On the other hand, the share of Gastropoda (snails) seizures decreased by 12%. Actinopterygii (ray-finned fishes) seizures dropped by 1% and Aves (birds) by 0.40%.

Figure 3: Number of wildlife and timber seizures by category, 2022-2023

Figure 4: Quantity of wildlife and timber seizures by category, 2022-2023
Among the categories examined, five reflected an increase in seized quantities, while six had a decrease over the same period. Gastropoda had the most remarkable increase in the seized quantity, escalating from 839 units in 2022 to 5,990 units in 2023, marking a notable 613% surge. In addition, Flora quantities surged from 522,895 units in 2022 to 849,826 units in 2023, marking a 63% rise. The quantities in the category “other” rose from 16,094 units in 2022 to 23,410 units in 2023, reflecting a 45% increase. The Anthozoa category recorded a moderate increase in seized quantity, rising from 3,991 units in 2022 to 4,634 units in 2023, indicative of a 16% rise. Aves (birds) also saw an uptick in the seized quantity, increasing from 4,794 units in 2022 to 5,038 units in 2023, representing a 5% rise.

Conversely, Mammalia had a significant decrease in the seized quantity, declining from 74,202 units in 2022 to 21,440 units in 2023, reflecting a 71% decrease. Similar levels of decrease in the seized quantity involved the following categories:

- Arthropods, decreasing from 4,337 units in 2022 to 1,374 units in 2023 by 68%,
- Actinopterygii, declining from 10,712 units in 2022 to 4,035 units in 2023 by 62%,
- Leguminosae, plummeting from 430,572 units in 2022 to 166,172 units in 2023 by 61%,
- Reptilia, dropping from 64,271 units in 2022 to 26,572 units in 2023 by 58%,
- Amphibia, declining from 232 units in 2022 to 131 units in 2023 by 43%.

Overall, the fluctuations in the seized quantities across different categories highlight the dynamic nature of illegal wildlife trade.

1 In the analysis, “unit” is used as a generalized term to encompass kilograms and pieces.
1.2 Analysis of Fauna seizures

Figure 5: Number of Fauna seizures by species type, 2022-2023

Several species exhibited significant fluctuations in seizure numbers during this period. The most notable increase was observed in the Minke Whale (Balaenoptera acutorostrata) seizures, soaring from 10 to 78, representing a staggering 680% surge. King Cobra (Ophiophagus hannah) seizures rose from 23 to 37, marking a significant 61% increase. Rock Pigeon (Columba livia) seizures increased from 25 to 37, showing a 48% rise. Seizures of Stony corals (Scleractinia spp.) surged from 251 in 2022 to 361 in 2023, marking a 44% rise. Musk Deer (Moschus spp.) seizures climbed from 43 to 55, indicating a notable 28% rise. Crocodile (Crocodylia spp.) seizures rose from 220 to 249, reflecting a 13% increase. While specific data was unavailable for 2022, seizures of Shingleback Skink (Tiliqua Rogosa) in 2023 also revealed an uptick. Conversely, there was a significant 53% drop in seizures of the American Alligator (Alligator mississippiensis) which declined from 62 to 29, and the Grey Junglefowl (Gallus sonneratii) whose seizures decreased from 32 to 15. The African Elephant (Loxodonta africana) seizures decreased from 310 to 174, indicating a 43% decline. Python (Pythonidae spp.) seizures dropped from 118 to 74, reflecting a 37% decrease. Monitor Lizard (Varanus spp.) seizures decreased from 29 to 21, indicating a 28% decline, while Spur-thighed Tortoise (Testudo graeca) seizures decreased from 25 to 20, reflecting a 20% drop.

In the assessment of the number of seizures concerning specific species of Fauna, distinct trends of both increases and decreases in seizures were observed from 2022 to 2023.
These include the Carcharhinus longimanus (Oceanic Whitetip Shark) which had a substantial quantity of 18,151 units seized in 2023, Chamaeleo africanus (African chameleon) which recorded a seizure quantity of 15,040 units, Hippopus porcellanus (Bear paw clam) with a seized quantity of 4,378 units, Streptopelia turtur (European Turtle Dove) with a quantity of 2,157 units seized, Alopias vulpinus (Thresher Shark) was seized in a quantity of 1,912 units, Nyctereutes procyonoides (raccoon dog) recorded a seizure quantity of 1,450 units, Carassius auratus (Goldfish) was seized in a quantity of 1,350 units, and Woodworthia spp. (Woodworthia skinks) was seized in a quantity of 1,233 units.

Additionally, there were significant increases and decreases in seizure quantities in 2023 compared to the previous year. Among CITES species, the Crocodylia spp. (Crocodiles) quantity seized increased from 492 in 2022 to 1,515 units in 2023, indicating a significant over 207% rise. The Scleractinia spp. (Stony corals) quantity intercepted increased from 3,583 in 2022 to 4,124 units in 2023, marking a 15% rise. Conversely, the Testudinidae spp. (Tortoises) quantity intercepted decreased from 2,351 in 2022 to 1,223 units in 2023, representing a significant 48% decrease, while the Alligator mississippiensis (American Alligator) quantity seized decreased from 763 in 2022 to 1,300 units in 2023, indicating a decline of roughly 41%. The Strombus gigas (Queen Conch) quantity intercepted decreased from 198 in 2022 to 1,469 units in 2023, marking a 25% decline. The Saiga tatarica (Saiga Antelope) quantity seized declined from 1,589 in 2022 to 1,367 units in 2023, reflecting a decrease of 14%.
Case study 1.
SEIZURE OF IVORY AT HAIPHONG SEAPORT

In March 2023, Vietnam Customs seized 490 kg of ivory at Haiphong seaport. The shipment departed from Apapa seaport in Nigeria and was mis-declared as cow horn, with the ivory hidden in containers, mixed with cow horns. The seizure was made based on risk profiling.

Case study 2.
SMUGGLING OF RHINO HORNS IN MAIL PARCELS

In July 2023, Portugal Customs seized at a mail centre, 2.8 kg of rhino horns without a CITES permit worth EUR 168,000 in value, concealed in a mail parcel. The parcel was being exported from a mail centre in Portugal destined for Hong Kong (China).
In September 2023, South Africa Customs seized 23.6 kg of rhino horns worth USD 149,297 concealed in air freight, at Johannesburg airport. The airline representative accompanied two boxes that were offloaded from the flight en route to Dubai to the Customs area. The boxes were examined and revealed 15 pieces of rhino horns, weighing 23.6 kg with an estimated street value of R2,832,000 (USD 14,9297).

In September 2023, Kenya Customs seized 38.5 kg of ivory concealed in baggage that was in transit through Kenya. The ivory departed from Bangui airport in the Central African Republic, via Nairobi airport (Kenya) as the transit point and destined for Jakarta airport in Indonesia. The seizure was made based on a routine control.
1.3 Analysis of Flora seizures

The Chinese ground orchid (Bletilla striata) seizures rose from 3 to 11, indicating the most significant increase of 266%, followed by Red sandalwood (Pterocarpus santalinus) seizures that surged from 18 to 41, marking a 128% increase and Beech (Fagus) seizures surged from 6 to 13, representing a 116% rise, and Hoodia (Hoodia gordonii) seizures rose from 10 to 19, indicating a 90% increase. In addition, the African cherry (Prunus africana) seizures increased from 87 to 127, marking a 46% rise, while Venus flytrap (Dionaea muscipula) seizures increased from 8 to 11, marking a 37% rise. Moderate levels of increased quantities seized were evident in Aloe (Aloe spp.) seizures, which increased from 8 to 10, marking a 25% rise, and Orchids (Orchidaceae spp.) seizures that rose from 73 to 88, indicating a 20% increase. Woolly fern (Cibotium barometz) seizures increased from 15 to 17, marking a 13% rise. The Desert broomrape (Cistanche deserticola) seizures increased from 28 to 29, reflecting a 4% rise. Teak (Tectona grandis) seizures surged from 0 to 12 in 2023.

Among the categories with a decrease in seizure numbers, Agarwood (Aquilaria spp.) seizures decreased from 109 to 93, indicating a 14% decrease, while Costus (Saussurea costus) seizures decreased from 210 to 189, reflecting a 10% decline. Cactus (Cactaceae spp.) seizures declined from 367 in 2022 to 355 in 2023, marking a 3% decrease. American ginseng (Panax quinquefolius) seizures dropped from 40 to 38, representing a 5% decrease.
The analysis of seized Flora quantities across specific plant species reveals significant fluctuations in confiscations from 2022 to 2023, encompassing categories with and without records in 2022. Notable increases in quantities include the Hevea brasiliensis (Rubber tree), with 366,100 units confiscated in 2023, signalling the necessity of heightened attention to rubber tree trafficking. The Pinus sylvestris (Scots pine) witnessed 81,651 units seized in 2023, also highlighting concerns over illegal logging and trafficking. The Cyathea arborea (Tree fern) and Tulip saw 47,541 and 40,182 units confiscated, respectively, in 2023.

Meanwhile, some categories experienced seizure declines, such as Fagus (Beech), Saussurea costus (Costus), and Dalbergia abrahamii (Abraham wood). Additionally, categories with records in both years 2022 & 2023 with notable seizure increases, included the Pterocarpus santalinus (Red sandalwood), Cactaceae spp. (Cactus), Dalbergia sissoo (Indian rosewood), Prunus africana (African cherry), Quercus (Oak), and Cedrela odorata (Spanish cedar).
In March 2023, a shipment from Zambia via South Africa destined for China was intercepted by South Africa Customs at the Johannesburg airport. Upon inspection, a Rosewood container weighing 22,000 kg, valued at USD 4,917,010 was found with misleading documentation and without a CITES permit, as required.

In December 2023, Malaysia Customs seized 10.4 tons of Rosewood originating from India which had departed from Jawaharlal Nehru Seaport via a vessel to Westport/ seaport Malaysia. The seizure was made based on intelligence.
Case study 7.
ROSEWOOD DISGUISED AS SESAME SEIZED AT LAS PALMAS DE GRAN CANARIA SEAPORT

In February 2022, Spain Customs seized 306.4 tons of Rosewood worth EUR 3,780,000 in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, GC Seaport. The consignment was declared as sesame and was in a container. The consignment departed from Banjul (BJL) Seaport in the Gambia and reached Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, GC (LPA) Seaport in transit, with the final destination being Shanghai Pt, 31 (SGP) Seaport, China. The seizure was detected through risk profiling.

1.4 Modus operandi of wildlife and timber trafficking

Figure 9: Wildlife and timber seizures by category and location, 2023
The Flora category saw substantial seizures across various Members with Germany leading with 639 instances. Notable instances were also recorded in the Netherlands with 136 instances and the United Kingdom with 194 instances. Reptilia seizures were prominent in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Australia, with Spain and Czech Republic. Mammalia seizures were widespread, with significant numbers reported in Germany, the United Kingdom, Namibia, and Czech Republic, and instances also noted in Spain, Netherlands, China, and Saudi Arabia. Anthozoa seizures were prevalent in Germany, Spain, and Netherlands. Notable Aves (birds) seizures occurred in the United Kingdom, Spain, and Saudi Arabia. Actinopterygii seizures were reported in Germany and Spain, while Leguminosae seizures were prominent in the United Kingdom and India. Gastropoda seizures were mainly reported in Netherlands, Germany, and Spain. Amphibia seizures were observed in Spain, the United Kingdom, and Germany, and Arthropod seizures were concentrated in Germany and the United Kingdom.

**Figure 10:** Number of wildlife and timber seizures by location, 2022-2023 (top 15 locations)

An overall increase in seizures was observed during 2023, in comparison to 2022, with a total rise of 378 seizures, representing an approximate 11% increase.

The analysis of seizure data across various locations highlights significant trends in wildlife trafficking. Vietnam observed the most substantial increase from 4 to 42 seizures, signifying a rise of approximately 950%. Similarly, Australia observed a significant surge from 12 to 117 seizures, marking an increase of approximately 875%. Additionally, North Macedonia (Republic of) reported an increase from 13 to 47 seizures, marking a notable rise of approximately 262%. India reported an increase from 14 to 37 seizures, indicating a rise of roughly 164%. Saudi Arabia also reported a notable rise from 39 to 79 seizures, reflecting an increase of 103%. Namibia reported an increase from 34 to 58 seizures, signifying a rise of 24 seizures or approximately 71%. Similarly, Netherlands experienced a substantial uptick from 161 seizures in 2022 to 259 seizures in 2023, indicating an increase of 98 seizures or roughly 61%.
A moderate increase in interceptions was witnessed in China, from 33 to 51 seizures, reflecting a rise of 55%. Spain witnessed a rise from 164 to 242 seizures, reflecting an increase of approximately 48%. Germany saw a notable increase from 1,134 seizures in 2022 to 1,369 seizures in 2023, marking a rise of 235 seizures or approximately 21%. Lastly, Czech Republic reported a modest increase from 162 to 175 seizures, representing a rise of 13 seizures or approximately 8%.

Conversely, Hungary had a decrease from 70 to 44 seizures, reflecting a decline of 26 seizures or roughly 37%, while the United Kingdom had a decrease from 971 seizures in 2022 to 670 seizures in 2023, reflecting a decline of approximately 31%. Italy witnessed a marginal decrease from 53 to 52 seizures.

Figure 11: Seizure locations of illicit wildlife and timber trade, 2023

In 2023, a total of 64 WCO Members reported wildlife seizures, with Europe accounting for the majority of seizure locations comprising 26, followed by Africa with 15 and the Asia-Pacific (A/P) region with 13. Among these regions, Europe reported the highest number of seizures, totalling 3,140, which represented 83% of the total seizures recorded.
Notably, Germany reported 44% of the region’s total seizures, followed by the United Kingdom with 21%. Other European countries such as Netherlands, Spain, and Czech Republic were also frequent locations for wildlife trafficking offences. The A/P region reported 10% of the total seizures in 2023, while the East and Southern Africa (ESA) region followed with 3%. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region reported 2.4%, while the Americas and the West and Central Africa (WCA) regions each reported less than 1% of the total number of seizures.

Figure 12: Number of wildlife and timber seizures by location and direction, 2023

Export seizures made up 12% of the total, while transit seizures constituted 10%, and internal seizures 8%. The analysis of seizures by location and direction revealed diverse patterns in the transnational movements of illicit wildlife and timber products. Germany recorded a substantial number of seizures across all directions (import, export, transit and internal), with a significant proportion of seizures effected at imports and transits. Similarly, the United Kingdom had notable seizures, particularly at imports and exports. Other countries such as Netherlands, Spain, and Czech Republic saw more seizures in imports compared to other directions. Regarding export seizures, the United Kingdom and Australia emerged as notable seizure locations, intercepting 227 and 117 seizures, respectively.

In contrast, most wildlife seizures in Namibia, North Macedonia, Vietnam, and India were classified as internal seizures. Import seizures constituted the majority of illegal wildlife interceptions in Saudi Arabia, Italy, China, and Hungary. Germany served as the primary transit point for wildlife seizures, representing 73% of the total transit seizures. Additionally, the United Kingdom, Austria, Poland, and Netherlands collectively accounted for 19% of the transit seizures, reflecting that these locations served as secondary transit points.

In total, the majority of seizures in 2023 were effected at import, comprising 69% of all reported incidents.
Figure 13: Number and quantity of wildlife and timber seizures by category and region, 2022-2023
Overall, there were notable trends in seizures and quantities of various categories of illegally traded wildlife from 2022 to 2023. Flora seizures saw an 8% increase, with a significant surge in the seizures reported by the RILO Western Europe (WE) Members and a notable decrease in the seizures reported by the RILO South America (SA) Members. Similarly, the quantity of Flora seizures witnessed a remarkable surge of 63%, with the RILO Asia-Pacific (A/P) Members having the highest increase.

Reptilia seizures also increased by 8%, primarily driven by a surge in the reported seizures from the RILO Asia-Pacific (A/P) Members, while the quantity of seizures for Reptilia saw a substantial decrease of 59%. Mammalia seizures increased by 6%, particularly in the cases reported by the RILO East and Southern Africa (ESA) and the RILO A/P Members, whereas the quantity of seizures for Mammalia had a significant drop of 71%, notably in the locations of the RILO West and Central Africa (WCA) Members. Aves (birds) seizures remained relatively constant, but with regional variations, while the quantities seized slightly increased by 5%. Anthozoa (corals) seizures, both in terms of the number and quantity, saw increases, with the RILO WE Members witnessing the most significant surge. Leguminosae seizures surged by 49%, mainly reported by the RILO WE and RILO A/P Members, while Leguminosae seizure quantities drastically decreased by 61%, particularly in the various locations of the RILO WE Members.

Figure 14: Wildlife trafficking flows by Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILOs), 2023

In 2023, the RILO A/P Members accounted for a significant proportion of total seizures, comprising 40% of the 3,761 recorded incidents.
Of these, 74% were destined for the RILO WE Members, totalling 1,110 seizures, while 20% (297 seizures) remained within the RILO A/P Members. Conversely, only a small number of seizures were destined for the RILO Eastern and Central Europe (ECE) Members. The RILO WE Members had 722 seizures, representing 20% of the total, with 60% (438 seizures) remaining within the WE region and 33% (238 seizures) destined for territories that were not affiliated with any RILO. The RILO ECE Members were the destination for 22 illegal shipments, while the RILO A/P Members were the destination for 15 seizures. Seizures originating from other locations not listed in any of the above-mentioned RILOs accounted for 13% of the total, with 80% of the total seizures directed to locations of the RILO WE Members.

6% of illegal shipments originated from the RILO ESA Members. Among these seizures, 42% remained within various Member locations of the RILO ESA. Additionally, 34% of the seizures from the RILO ESA Members were directed towards Western Europe. Overall, the RILO WE Members emerged as the primary destinations, recording 67% of the total seizures. In contrast, 10% of the illegal shipments were destined for the A/P region, followed by Eastern and Central Europe with 5%, Middle East with 3%, and East and Southern Africa with 3%.

Figure 15: Departure locations and number of wildlife and timber seizures, 2023
In 2023, wildlife trafficking had 139 departure points worldwide, with Europe having 36, Africa 29, the Asia-Pacific 23, the Americas 21, and the Middle East and North Africa region 16. Of the 3,761 recorded seizures that year, 40% originated from the Asia-Pacific region, 26% from Europe, 13% from the Americas, 7% from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), 6% from ESA, and 2% from WCA.

Notably, in the Asia-Pacific region, frequent departure points included Thailand, Vietnam, India, Australia, and China. Similarly, in Europe, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Norway, and Spain served as common departure locations. The United States dominated in the Americas, accounting for 53% of seizures departing from this location, with additional departure locations from Cuba, Mexico, Suriname, and Brazil. In the MENA region, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates were the primary departure points.

**Figure 16: Number and quantity of wildlife and timber seizures by category and conveyance methods, 2023**

In total, 36% of the illegal consignments were transported by air, while another 20% were conveyed through express courier services. Additionally, a similar percentage, 20% were dispatched through traditional mail services. On the other hand, 11% of the illegal shipments were transported via vehicles, while vessels accounted for 4% of the total seizures.

The primary modes of transportation for trafficked Flora were via express courier, mail, and air, which collectively accounted for 87%
of all Flora seizures. Express courier and mail were the predominant transportation methods for Reptilia, comprising 70% of the total seizures, while air transport accounted for 20%. Air transport was the primary mode for transporting Mammalia, constituting 40% of the total seizures. In 30% of the cases, the goods were transported via vehicles and vessels. Mail and express courier services were less commonly used for trafficking Mammalia, accounting for a smaller percentage of the total seizures. Air transportation emerged as the predominant mode used for trafficking Anthozoa, Actinopterygii, and Gastropoda, accounting for 87%, 74%, and 86% of the respective total seizures. The transportation mode used for trafficking Aves was primarily facilitated by vehicles and air transport, whereas Leguminosae was predominantly transported via vehicles, mail, and vessels.

Figure 17: Wildlife and timber seizures by detection method, 2023

The majority of seizures, comprising 60%, were attributed to routine control measures, indicating that a significant portion of seizures occurred as part of regular monitoring and inspection processes. Following routine controls, the next significant detection method for illegal consignments was risk profiling, which accounted for 32% of the total seizures. Intelligence-based seizures contributed 6% to the total interceptions, while random selection accounted for 2% of seizures. Lastly, investigations accounted for 1% of seizures.
Despite experiencing a 23% decline compared to the previous year, mail seizures remained significant, constituting 22% of all seizures in 2023. Express courier seizures had a notable 106% increase compared to the previous year, accounting for 20% of all seizures in 2023. This indicates the exploitation of expedited delivery for wildlife trafficking, necessitating collaboration between law enforcement and courier companies. Wildlife concealed in freight through air, road, and sea transportation, collectively constituted 8% of all seizures in 2023. Specifically, road freight seizures witnessed a significant surge of 192% compared to the previous year, whereas air and sea freight seizures witnessed a reduction. Trafficked specimens concealed in transport, which included trucks, cars, vessels, containers, and aircrafts, collectively accounted for 6% of all seizures in 2023. Majority of these transportation-related seizures had notable increases, ranging from 33% to 166%.
Despite being less frequent, the Flora quantity concealed in freight, specifically transported through sea and road, accounted for 70% of the total quantity seized in this category.

Reptilia was predominantly concealed in mail and express couriers, collectively constituting 73% of the total seizures within this category. In terms of quantity, the majority of the seized quantity of Reptilia was concealed in freight, specifically coach freight, which accounted for 70% of the total category’s quantity, while 10% of the quantity was concealed in baggage.

The primary concealment method for Mammalia was in baggage, comprising 40% of the category’s total. Additionally, 11% of these intercepted commodities were not concealed, while 15% were concealed in mail and express couriers. Despite not being a frequent concealment method for this category, more than half of the Mammalia quantity seized was concealed in air freight, and 10% concealed in sea freight.

Anthozoa was predominantly concealed in baggage, accounting for 89% of the total category’s seizures. Additionally, 10% was concealed in mail and express couriers. Concealing Anthozoa in baggage was not only frequent in terms of the number of seizures, but also dominant in terms of quantity, as 88% of the quantity seized in this category was concealed in baggage.

Baggage, mail, trucks, and premises served as the primary concealment methods for Aves (birds), collectively constituting 70% of the total
category’s seizures. Seizures of Aves (birds) in baggage was not only frequent but was also used to conceal the majority of the seized commodities in this category, with 10% of the category’s quantity being concealed in cars.

70% of illegal shipments of Actinopterygii were concealed in baggage, while 10% were in mail and express couriers.

**Operation THUNDER 2023**

**Figure 20: Main outcomes of Operation THUNDER 2023**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Number of seizures</th>
<th>kg</th>
<th>Pieces</th>
<th>M3</th>
<th>Total quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timber</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>556,482</td>
<td>19,890</td>
<td>2,624</td>
<td>578,996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other mammals</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>209,259</td>
<td>4,163</td>
<td></td>
<td>213,422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marine</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>20,034</td>
<td>40,431</td>
<td></td>
<td>60,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>16,041</td>
<td>15,214</td>
<td></td>
<td>31,255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turtles/Tortoises</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9,458</td>
<td></td>
<td>9,481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropods</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8,961</td>
<td></td>
<td>9,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reptiles</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7,781</td>
<td></td>
<td>7,802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birds</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3,451</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primates</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1,909</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,945</td>
</tr>
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<td>Equipment</td>
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<td>726</td>
<td></td>
<td>726</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amphibians</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>437</td>
<td></td>
<td>490</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elephants (Ivory)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>293</td>
<td></td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pangolins</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Cats &amp; felines</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhinoceroses</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,112</td>
<td>802,528</td>
<td>112,935</td>
<td>2,624</td>
<td>918,086</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Operation THUNDER 2023 marked a significant milestone with the highest global participation to date, involving 136 countries and territories, including 115 WCO Member Customs administrations. The Operation recorded a total of 2,112 incidents, revealing the scale of illicit transnational activities. Notably, significant seizures of ivory, totalling...
313 kilograms and 125 pieces, were predominantly sourced from East and Southern Africa, comprising 70% of confiscations. However, Europe, particularly Slovakia and France, also reported notable offences. Cross-border trafficking was evident with 32 seizures involving multiple locations, highlighting the imperative for international cooperation. Common concealment methods such as baggage and mail were prevalent, emphasizing the pivotal role of airports and mail centres in intercepting illicit ivory shipments.

Other mammal trafficking involved substantial quantities, with over 209.2 tonnes and 4,163 pieces seized. Ecuador and the United States emerged as hotspots, especially through their mail centres. Transnational offences were widespread, while internal seizures predominated in Africa. Airports and mail centres were crucial locations in intercepting mammal trafficking.

Pangolin trafficking, comprising 21 pieces and 196 kilograms across 31 incidents, primarily originated from Africa. The Asia-Pacific region accounted for 40% of transnational pangolin trafficking, highlighting the importance of regional collaboration to address internal seizures in Africa.

Rhinoceros-related products, including 8 kilograms of rhino horns trafficked transnationally, emphasized the grave threats faced by these animals. Reptile trafficking, facilitated by mail centres across 37 countries, involved 286 seizures. Turtle and tortoise trafficking exhibited diverse patterns across continents, with concealment methods including mail parcels and baggage.

Bird trafficking was rampant globally, particularly in the Americas, with airports serving as primary seizure locations. Big cat trafficking involved live animals seized in Europe and Africa, with transnational routes originating from Asia. Significant interceptions of primate trafficking were reported in the United States and Ecuador, with transnational routes from Vietnam, Canada, and Brazil.

Marine trafficking occurred mainly in the Americas, with destinations including Bangladesh and Philippines. Timber and plant trafficking surged, with the Asia-Pacific and Europe regions emerging as hotspots. Overall, the findings from Operation THUNDER 2023 underscore the multifaceted nature of wildlife trafficking and the urgent need for coordinated multi-agency international efforts to combat it effectively.

**Operation PRAESIDIO II**

In 2023, the WCO Environment Programme organized and coordinated a regional enforcement Operation, PRAESIDIO II focused on combatting illegal wildlife trade in the East and Southern Africa region. The Operation was executed in June and July 2023 and resulted in 70 seizures (57 CITES-related and 13 non-CITES), with most seizures being: Elephants’ related sub-categories (Tusks, Carvings (Ivory), Jewellery); Big Cats (Bones, Claws, Teeth, skins, skull); Pangolins (Scales, living, skin) and, Shark fins.
Case study 8.
DETECTOR DOG UNIT SEIZED PARCEL WITH MARINE SPECIES BOUND FOR HONG KONG

On 27 June 2023, the Detector Dog Unit intercepted a parcel in a mail centre declared as “dry seafood” departing from South Africa, destined for Hong Kong, China. Upon inspection, Sea Cucumbers/Shark Fins and Bladers weighing 240 kg, with an estimated value of R744 471, were found concealed in boxes.

2. Waste

This section analyses both CEN and Operation DEMETER IX data to provide a comprehensive view of global waste trafficking. The international trade of waste poses pressing challenges to environmental sustainability and public health. With substantial volumes of hazardous and non-hazardous wastes transferred across borders countries and regions, the risks of environmental pollution and transboundary hazards looms large.
While the number of waste seizures increased by 44%, reaching 437 seizures, the most notable change occurred in the quantity seized. The quantity of waste seized experienced a notable surge of 347%, rising from 4,905 tons and 80,092 pieces in 2022 to 21,872 tons and 386,192 pieces in 2023.

The top 15 reporters collectively accounted for 75% of total waste seizures in 2023, a slight uptick from 73% in 2022. Notably, seven Members maintained their positions among the top reporters in both years: South Africa, Poland, Belgium, China, Switzerland, Italy, and...
Canada, Senegal and Cameroon joined the top 15 reporters’ group in 2023. In addition, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom, despite not reporting any seizures in the previous year, collectively contributed 14% of total waste seizures in 2023. Poland followed closely with 29 seizures, and Canada reported 20. Gambia, Uganda, Sweden, and Türkiye, also absent from the previous year’s reports, collectively accounted for 15% of total waste seizures in 2023, with each Member reporting between 15 and 17 seizures. Both Belgium and China reported fewer seizures in 2023 compared to 2022. Belgium reported 18 seizures in 2022, which decreased to 14 in 2023. Similarly, China’s reported seizures dropped from 17 in 2022 to 13 in 2023.

Figure 23: Quantity and number of waste seizures by category, 2022-2023

The waste stream that experienced the highest increase in the number of seizures was paper waste, which increased by 320%. Among the quantities seized, textiles witnessed a remarkable surge of 6,019%, totalling 9,165 tons in 2023. On the other hand, medical waste saw a notable decrease in both the number of seizures and the quantity seized. Despite an uptick in incidents, the quantity of medical waste seized decreased by 56%, resulting in a reduction of 269 tons in 2023.
Certain waste streams, such as plastic and metal wastes, were reported by a broader range of Members. In contrast, waste streams, such as textile waste and E-waste showed a higher concentration of seizures among a smaller number of Members.

Seizures made at import constituted 56% of the total waste seizures, comprising 71% of the total quantity intercepted. Export seizures, on the other hand, accounted for 33% of the total seizures, containing 26% of the total quantity. Seizures in transit represented 7% of the total number of seizures, comprising less than 3% of the total quantity, while internal seizures made up 4% of the total number of waste seizures.
The majority of import seizures were reported by South Africa, Poland, Uganda, Gambia, Luxembourg, China, Türkiye, and Senegal, collectively accounting for 73% of the total import seizures. Notably, Türkiye and China reported the highest quantities, comprising 90% of the total quantity seized in the import direction.

Five European countries, namely the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Belgium, and Italy, along with Canada, collectively accounted for 70% of export seizures. Among these, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Italy constituted 75% of the total quantity seized in the export direction.

Sweden, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Slovakia, Belgium, and Poland, along with Peru, Cameroon, North Macedonia, and Ethiopia, served as transit points for movements of illegal waste. The majority of internal seizures were reported by African Members, specifically Gambia, Mali, Cote d’Ivoire, Senegal, and Cameroon. Additionally, internal seizures were notable in Latin America, particularly in Argentina, Peru, and Chile.

**Figure 26: Waste trafficking flows by region, 2023**

In 2023, waste trafficking activities were notably concentrated in Member locations of several RILO regions, including RILO Western Europe (RILO WE), RILO for Eastern and Southern Africa (RILO ESA), RILO Eastern and Central Europe (RILO ECE), RILO Asia/Pacific (RILO A/P), and RILO West Africa (RILO WA). Members of these RILOs collectively accounted for 86% of total seizures and 93% of the total quantity seized.
A significant increase in the number of waste seizures was observed by RILO WE, RILO ECE, and RILO WA Members in 2023 compared to the previous year, with a surge in both the number of incidents and the intercepted quantity. Despite a decrease in the number of seizures in the Asia/Pacific region, the seized quantity surged by 422% compared to 2022.

Departures for illegal waste shipments in 2023 spanned across nearly all the RILO regions. Among these, RILO WE, RILO ESA, RILO WA and RILO ECE, alongside Members not affiliated with any of the RILOs and unknown locations, emerged as the most frequent departure points for recorded waste seizures. These regions collectively accounted for 374 incidents, representing 86% of the total 437 seizures.

Despite being a less frequent departure point for waste, the RILO A/P Members accounted for almost 43% of the total waste quantity seized, comprising 9,372 tons and 109,0577 pieces of waste in 2023. A significant portion, 99% of this waste, was destined for the same region, with the remaining portion going to East and Central Europe and Western Africa regions.

RILO WE ranked first in terms of number of waste seizures and third in terms of waste quantity in 2023, following the RILO A/P and Members not affiliated with any RILO. RILO WE recorded 170 departing seizures involving more than 5,405 tons and 2,097 pieces of waste. Approximately 55% of this quantity was destined for the A/P region, while 33% went to Eastern and Central Europe.

Illegal waste shipments departing from locations specified in the report seizures as “unknown” were notable both in terms of the number of seizures, totalling 56, and waste quantity, which exceeded 5,601 tons and 81,549 pieces. 97% of this waste was destined for Eastern and Central Europe and the A/P region.
In terms of conveyance method, vehicles were used as the transportation modality for 58% of the total number of waste seizures, with 253 seizures out of 437. However, vessels ranked first in terms of the most used conveyance method by quantity, comprising 88% (19,012 tons and 152,720 pieces) of the total intercepted waste in 2023. This is despite vessels being less frequently used than vehicles, with 123 seizures, representing 30% of the total waste seizures. It is worth mentioning that, although not common, 199 kg and 200 pieces of E-waste were transported by air in two different incidents.
While random selection and routine control methods were utilized in almost 60% of the total waste seizures, they collectively detected only 15% of the total intercepted quantity. Although risk profiling, intelligence, and investigation methods were employed less frequently than traditional detection methods like routine control and random selection, they proved highly effective in waste detection. These methods accounted for 15% of the seizures but were accountable for identifying 84% of the seized quantity. Risk profiling was particularly effective in detecting textiles, metal, end-of-life vehicles, paper, E-waste, rubber, and batteries, while intelligence-based methods were more successful in identifying instances of medical waste. Routine controls and random selection were primarily responsible for detecting cases of glass, rubble, wood, and mixed waste.

Figure 29: Waste seizures by concealment method, 2022-2023

Despite the high frequency of concealing waste in transport means such as cars, trucks, coaches, and vans, which accounted for 162 seizures or 37% of the total seizures in 2023, the quantity concealed through this method represented only 4% of the total seized waste. Metal and wood were the largest categories concealed in this manner. Intercepting waste that was not concealed was common, accounting for 125 seizures in 2023, which constituted 29% of the waste seizures. Among the largest waste categories that were not concealed were textiles, plastic, metal, and paper. While the count of illegal consignments hidden within sea freight were relatively modest, constituting only 65 seizures or 15% of the total waste seizures in 2023, these incidents concealed a significant volume of waste, amounting to 31% of the total quantity. Notably, the items predominantly concealed within sea freight shipments comprised plastic, end-of-life vehicles, E-waste, and metal. Road freight concealed a mere 5% of the illegal shipments in 2023 and accounted for less than 2% of the total waste quantity, with metal emerging as the predominant...
category concealed through this method. The number of seizures concealed in sea freight and road freight saw substantial increases of 210% and 110%, respectively, in 2023 compared to the previous year. Meanwhile, illegal waste shipments not concealed and those concealed in transport vehicles witnessed more modest increases of 42% and 20%, respectively.

Figures 23 to 31 depict the dynamics of waste seizures across different categories, revealing intriguing trends and highlighting both surges and declines across different waste streams.

**Plastic Waste**

Plastic pollution has emerged as a pressing global concern due to its detrimental environmental impact across its life cycle, from production to disposal. In areas with inadequate waste management systems, particularly in developing countries, the risk of plastic waste finding its way into the oceans is heightened. In addition, limited disposal capacity often results in plastic dumping on land. However, there is also a potential to unlock economic value and environmental benefits through increased recycling rates and the use of recycled or renewable materials.

**Incidents and Quantity:** Data analysis revealed a significant increase in incidents related to plastic waste, more than doubling from 27 in 2022 to 69 in 2023. This surge was accompanied by a remarkable 168% increase in the quantity of plastic waste intercepted, amounting to a surge of 1,373 tons. However, despite this increase in quantity, the number of individual pieces decreased by 44,975, indicating potential shifts in reporting methods or the nature of intercepted plastic waste.
In 2023, plastic waste seizures were reported by 26 Members, underscoring the global nature of the issue and the widespread efforts to combat illicit trafficking. Several Members emerged as major contributors to reported plastic waste seizures. Canada, Cameroon, the United Kingdom, and Slovenia collectively accounted for 50% of all plastic seizures. Moreover, the top contributors to the seized quantity were the United Kingdom, Canada, Belgium, and Croatia, responsible for 73% of the total plastic waste seized. 36% of the plastic waste was destined to Türkiye and 32% to Malaysia. Western Europe, Eastern and Central Europe, and Central Africa emerged as the primary locations for plastic waste seizures, collectively constituting 55% of the total plastic seizures. In terms of quantity, Western Europe alone accounted for 50% of the total, followed by Eastern and Central Europe and the Asia-Pacific region with 14% and 9%, respectively.

Conveyance Methods and Detection Techniques: Vehicles and vessels were the most common conveyances for plastic waste. The vast majority of the seized quantity of plastic waste was transported via vessels. Generally, plastic waste was not concealed, but if it was, it was most often concealed within sea freight shipments.
E-Waste

Hazardous E-waste poses significant environmental and health risks due to the hazardous substances it contains.

Incidents and Quantity: The number of E-waste seizures rose from 21 in 2022 to 35 in 2023. However, there was a decrease in the quantity seized, dropping from 722,305 kg to 582,253 kg, marking a decrease of 19%.

Major Contributors:

Figure 31: Seizure locations of E-waste by number of seizures and quantity. 2023

Fifteen Members were identified as locations where E-waste offenses occurred, with the highest frequency observed in the United Kingdom, Cyprus, and Switzerland, collectively accounting for 46% of the total seizures. In terms of quantity, China, Cyprus, and the United Kingdom contributed to 80% of the total seized quantity. Western Europe remained the primary location for E-waste seizures in both 2022 and 2023, with 66% of the seizures occurring in this region in 2023, accounting for 63% of the total intercepted quantity. Despite E-waste occurrences being less frequent in the A/P region (11%), the region accounted for almost 30% of the total quantity intercepted. However, the number of seizures and quantity intercepted in the A/P region decreased from 9 seizures and 532 tons in 2022 to 4 seizures and 169 tons in 2023.

Conveyance Methods and Detection Techniques: The vast majority of the seized quantity of E-waste was conveyed in vessels and detected by risk profiling.
Metal Waste

The primary enforcement challenge concerning metal scrap is the differentiation between waste, scrap and secondary raw materials. Further, this differentiation needs to be made on whether metal scrap is classified as hazardous or non-hazardous waste, which depends on such factors such as its composition (e.g. whether it is mixed with other materials) and levels of contamination (e.g. presence of residue oils).

Incidents and Quantity: Incidents involving metal waste saw a significant rise from 35 to 52 between 2022 and 2023. This escalation in seizures was accompanied by a notable 47% increase in the quantity seized during the same period.

Major Contributors:

Figure 32: Seizure locations of Metal Waste by number of seizures and quantity. 2023

Twenty-five Members reported seizures of metal waste, with nine of them contributing to 60% of the total seizures and 74% of the total quantity seized. Luxemburg, Belgium, Sweden, Poland, Malaysia, China, and Italy were prominent contributors to metal seizures, with Belgium and Italy collectively reporting 60% of the total quantity seized. Notably, Oman, Qatar, Luxembourg, and Malaysia contributed to 25% of the seized quantity. Western Europe emerged as the primary location for metal waste seizures, accounting for 48% of the total incidents and 71% of the total quantity seized. The A/P region accounted for 17% of the total seizures and 7% of the total quantity seized. Despite infrequent
seizures in the Middle East region, the intercepted quantity in 2023 was substantial, totalling 426 tons.

**Conveyance Methods and Detection Techniques:** The majority of the seized quantity of metal waste was transported by vehicles, followed by vessels as a method of conveyance. Routine control, random selection, and intelligence were the main methods of detecting metal waste seizures.

**End-of-Life Vehicles and Machinery**

Every year, millions of vehicles reach the end of their life. Inadequate handling of these vehicles at the end of their life not only results in lost economic value but also contributes to pollution.

**Incidents and Quantity:** Incidents involving end-of-life vehicles and machinery saw a significant rise, with numbers climbing from 18 to 48. This escalation in seizures was also reflected in the quantities seized, with end-of-life vehicles experiencing a remarkable 697% increase in the quantity seized.

**Major Contributors:** The seizures of end-of-life vehicles and machinery were reported by 11 Members, collectively accounting for 81% of the total seizures in this waste category. Poland, the United Kingdom, and Sweden reported 60% of these seizures. China and the United Kingdom reported 81% of the seized quantity. China alone was the destination for 58% of the quantity of end-of-life vehicles/machinery, with Africa accounting for 21%.

End-of-life vehicles and machinery were primarily concentrated in four regions: Western Europe, Eastern and Central Europe, Asia/Pacific, and West Africa. Approximately 77% of the seizures occurred in Western Europe and Eastern and Central Europe, accounting for 41% of the intercepted quantity. Conversely, while the A/P region had fewer seizures (15% of the total), it accounted for approximately 60% of the total intercepted quantity.

**Conveyance Methods and Detection Techniques:** End-of-life vehicles were predominantly detected through routine control or risk profiling methods.

**Textiles**

Textiles constitute a significant and growing portion of municipal waste streams, with substantial management costs. The improper disposal and incineration of used textiles pose environmental risks, particularly in regions lacking robust waste management infrastructure, leading to issues such as open burning, uncontrolled landfilling, and the release of toxic chemicals from synthetic fibres, which contribute to pollution of air, soil, and water pollution. Moreover, second-hand textile waste often competes with domestic production and burdens importing countries with managing imported textiles once they become waste. In response to these challenges, some African nations have imposed bans or import taxes on second-hand textiles. Africa has been the primary recipient of the EU used textiles, followed closely by Asia, which has significantly increased its share over the years.
Textile Incidents and Quantity: Textile seizures exhibited contrasting trends between 2022 and 2023. While the number of incidents decreased, there was a remarkable surge in the seized quantity, escalating by an astounding 6,019% to an increase of 9,165 tons in 2023. This surge in quantity may suggest a significant increase in enforcement efforts targeting the trafficking of textiles, potentially driven by heightened awareness of the environmental and social impacts of textile waste.

Major Contributors: Ten Members reported textile seizures, with six of them among the top 15 reporting Members of waste, collectively responsible for 93% of the total textile seizures and 99% of the seized quantity. Notably, China reported a single seizure that accounted for 97% (9,000 tons) of the total quantity seized, indicating a concentrated interception of textile waste in a single incident. Despite the majority 73% of textile seizures occurring in Eastern and Central Africa, these seizures accounted for less than half a percent of the total quantity intercepted. This suggests that while there may be a high frequency of textile incidents in this region, the quantities intercepted are relatively low. Conversely, although only 4% of textile seizures were reported in the A/P region, it accounted for 97% of the total intercepted quantity. This indicates a disproportionate interception of large volumes of textile waste in the A/P region, potentially reflecting the region’s role as a destination for textile imports.

Conveyance Methods and Detection Techniques: The vast majority of the seized quantity of textiles was conveyed in vessels. Risk profiling emerged as the primary detection method for textiles.

Other waste streams

Rubber
Rubber seizures witnessed a notable increase in incidents and the quantity seized from 2022 to 2023. Incidents involving rubber rose from 10 in 2022 to 27 in 2023, indicating a significant uptick. The quantity of rubber seized also increased substantially by 264%, amounting to an increase of 216 tons in 2023. Fourteen Members reported rubber seizures, with frequent seizure locations including Russia, Switzerland, Kenya, Argentina, Italy, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, collectively accounting for 75% of the total seizures. Italy alone contributed to 50% of the seized quantity, while Russia and the United Kingdom accounted for 30%. Most of the intercepted rubber was concentrated in Western Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and East and Central Europe, collectively accounting for 99% of the quantity in 2023.

Paper
Paper seizures saw substantial increases in incidents and the quantity seized from 2022 to 2023. Incidents involving paper increased from 5 to 21, coinciding with a remarkable 325% increase, equivalent to 672 tons in 2023. 52% of this quantity was seized solely by Belgium.
Medical Waste
Medical waste incidents increased, but the quantity seized decreased from 2022 to 2023. Despite an uptick in incidents, the quantity of medical waste seized decreased by 56%, resulting in a reduction of 269 tons in 2023. Medical waste was recorded in West Africa, the A/P region, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), with Western Africa accounting for 83% of the total seizures and 99% of the intercepted quantity in 2023.

Waste seizures in Operation DEMETER IX
Operation DEMETER IX carried out in 2023 provided a comprehensive overview of the global landscape of illicit waste trade, shedding light on the intricate dynamics and patterns across various regions. Over the one-month operation, a total of 278 seizures were reported by 35 participating Members, resulting in the interception of 17,727,872 kg and 144,313 pieces of waste. These results represented a significant increase of 152.5% in the number of seizures and a surge of 385% in quantities compared to Operation DEMETER VIII in 2022.

Among the seized waste categories, plastic waste emerged as the most prevalent, comprising 19% of the total seizures, followed closely by metal waste at 15%, and end-of-life vehicles and machinery at 14%. Notably, textile waste stood out in terms of quantity, constituting a significant 52% of the overall weight.

Of particular significance was the distribution of seizures across export, import, and transit points, with 65% of seizures occurring at export and transit locations, indicating heightened vigilance and coordinated efforts. Upon closer examination, distinct regional patterns emerged, with Europe serving as a major departure and destination hub, with 66% of seizures originating from the region. Within Europe, Western Europe played a pivotal role as a major exporter to Central and Eastern Europe/CIS and Northern Europe.

Meanwhile, Asia remained a key destination, with Canada, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Cyprus, and Italy identified as primary sources of illicit waste shipments. Malaysia stood out among the top destinations in Asia. Other key destinations in Asia included Pakistan, India, China, and the United Arab Emirates. Africa showcased active engagement, with internal waste flows and imports from other regions.

South America, although associated with fewer seizures, exhibited diverse departure and destination patterns, underscoring its role in the global waste trade.

Detection methods employed varied, with risk profiling, routine control, and random selection being the predominant strategies utilized.
The collaborative efforts between Chilean Customs, the Chilean Police, the competent authority for the Basel Convention, the Circular Economy Office and the Ministry of Environment, within Operation DEMETER IX, resulted in the identification of illegal transboundary movements of waste.

**Outbound Smuggling of waste batteries**

A shipment containing 1,610 pieces of used batteries was intercepted by the Chilean Police while en route to Peru. During the inspection of the truck, alongside bundles of clothes, used batteries were discovered. Upon detection, the Police and the driver attempted to flee but were later apprehended. The incident brought to light an attempt to transport prohibited goods out of the country, namely, used lead-acid batteries, which are considered hazardous waste. As a result, the individuals involved faced charges under criminal law for trafficking hazardous waste without authorization.

**Inbound smuggling of used pneumatic tyres**

A container carrying 938 used pneumatic tyres from Japan was seized, destined for a dismantling plant in a city in Arica. Importing used tyres into Chile is prohibited.

**Violation of the Basel Convention due to lack of authorization for export of hazardous waste (PVC waste)**

The selectivity system flagged an outbound operation, revealing a shipment of 23,400 kg suspected to contain Polyvinyl Chloride wastes. Upon consulting with the competent authority of the Basel Convention, it was confirmed that the goods indeed constituted hazardous waste. Consequently, it was imperative to possess a movement document for hazardous waste from the Ministry of Environment for exportation, which was found to be missing. As a consequence of the absence of the required documentation for export, the goods were detained.
3. Substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol – Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) and Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs)

The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer mandates the phasing out of Ozone-Depleting Substances (ODS), including Hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), and a gradual reduction in the production and use of and Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) which contribute to global warming. ODS and HFCs are commonly used in refrigeration, foam blowing, and fire-fighting. The illegal trade in HCFCs and HFCs is fuelled by a combination of factors. Firstly, disparities in phase-out and phase-down schedules among developing countries, developed countries, and the European Union create opportunities for circumventing regulations. Additionally, the legal trade requires export and import licenses, albeit with exemptions for essential uses and recycled substances, adding complexity to the process. Profit margins entice illicit traders, as disparities in pricing across regions result in high profits in areas with shortages and elevated prices, contrasting with lower prices in others. Furthermore, lax enforcement, coupled with modest penalties and fines, reduce the risk of prosecution. Lastly, the continued demand for HCFCs and HFCs persists due to the prolonged lifespan of equipment and the significant costs associated with replacement or retrofitting, further incentivizing illegal trade.

Figure 33: Seizures and quantity of Substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol. 2022 - 2023

This section analyses both CEN and Operation DEMETER IX data to provide a more comprehensive view of global trafficking in controlled substances. The analysis of seizures in 2023 reveals significant shifts and trends compared to the previous year. In 2023, the total seizures of controlled substances increased by 159%, rising from 44 seizures in 2022 to 114 seizures in 2023. This increase was accompanied by a substantial surge in the seized quantity, marking a 33% increase from 138.8 tons and 7,439 pieces of products and equipment containing controlled substances in 2022 to 191 tons and 3,793 pieces in 2023.
In 2023, HFCs experienced a rise of 34 seizures, albeit with a decrease of 17.4 tons in quantity, despite an increase of 2,514 pieces of equipment. Similarly, ODS seizures increased from 3 to 10 seizures compared to the previous year, with the quantity surging from 41 kg to 22.8 tons.

Figure 34: Seizure locations of Substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol. 2023

The most frequent departure points for substances regulated by the Montreal Protocol in 2023 included Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, Ukraine, China, and Brazil. Transporting illegal substances by cars, vans, coaches, and trucks constituted the most common method, representing 60% of total seizures in 2023. Notably, 68% of seized HFC quantity in 2023 was not concealed. Despite being used only in 30% of cases, intelligence, risk profiling, and investigations collectively contributed to detecting 89% of the total seized quantity in 2023.

The majority of seizures involving controlled substances occurred in the import direction in both 2022 and 2023, comprising 55% and 79% of incidents, respectively. Furthermore, in terms of quantity, 98% of the seized amount was in the import direction in 2023, up from 84% in 2022. Seizures during transit were the second most frequent in both years, representing 34% and 18%, respectively, despite accounting for less than 1% of the total quantity. Common transit points for these substances included Bulgaria, Poland, Croatia, and Slovenia.
Based on responses to the WCO Annual Survey from various Members, it is also evident that ODS witnessed a significant increase in 2023 compared to 2022, both in terms of the number of seizures and quantities. The number of seizures surged from 17 to 72, marking a remarkable 324% increase, while the quantity skyrocketed from 203 kg to 31,194 kg, a staggering 15,366% increase. However, the number of pieces of products and equipment containing ODS decreased by 87%, from 64,999 pieces to 8,266 pieces. The quantity of illegal HFCs reported in the Survey decreased by 17%.

Case study 10.
SUBSTANCES CONTROLLED UNDER THE MONTREAL PROTOCOL, NORTH MACEDONIA

In July 2023, at the BCP Bogorodica, on the border with Greece, the Customs administration of North Macedonia seized a total of 1,150 cylinders (with a net mass of 13,640 kg) containing F-gases. This included 350 cylinders (with a net mass of 4,760 kg) of R-134a refrigerant, 400 cylinders (with a net mass of 4,360 kg) of R-404A refrigerant, 200 cylinders (with a net mass of 2260 kg) of R-410A refrigerant, 100 cylinders (with a net mass of 1130 kg) of R-507A refrigerant, and 100 cylinders of R-407C refrigerant (with a net mass of 1130 kg). The refrigerants were seized because they were stored in non-refillable cylinders, which are prohibited for use in the countries of the European Union and in North Macedonia.

These seized refrigerants were transported in a container, following a route from the Port of Jebel Ali (Dubai, United Arab Emirates) to the Port of Thessaloniki (Greece) by vessel, and further from the Port of Thessaloniki (Greece) to Evzonoi (Greece) and Bogorodica (North Macedonia) by truck and trailer.

During May and June 2023, the import company from North Macedonia was implicated in two seizures totalling 266 kg of cocaine. These seizures were carried out by Greek authorities during the inspection of three containers of bananas from Ecuador. A total of 10 individuals (7 Greek citizens and 3 Albanian citizens) were arrested by Greek authorities, while 4 citizens of North Macedonia, including the manager of the import company in question, were arrested by North Macedonian police. Criminal proceedings have been initiated against the import company and its manager.

Source: North Macedonia Customs
Operation DEMETER IX seizures of controlled substances

The 2023 edition of Operation DEMETER IX led to 46 seizures of substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol, along with equipment containing such substances. This represented a significant increase of over 250% compared to Operation DEMETER VIII in 2022. In terms of quantities, the cumulative total surpassed 130 MT of controlled substances seized, showing a substantial increase of more than 420% compared to the previous edition. Moreover, 575 pieces of appliances were seized during this operation. Seizures of HFCs accounted for 19 incidents, constituting 41% of the total number of seizures. The total quantity of HFCs exceeded 74 MT, constituting 57% of the total quantity of seized refrigerants.

Figure 35: Routes for controlled substances in Operation DEMETER IX

4. Other hazardous materials

WCO Members contributed data to the CEN database pertaining to seizures involving other environmentally sensitive commodities, primarily encompassing cases of illicit trade in pesticides or hazardous chemicals during 2023. These substances pose significant threats to both the environment and human health, potentially resulting in acute and chronic health issues, contamination of water and soil, or harm to biodiversity.

Regulating the international trade of chemicals is intricate, with many harmful substances either unregulated or only partially regulated under international law, often accompanied by various exemptions. MEAs such as the Montreal Protocol, the Rotterdam Convention, the Stockholm
Convention, and the Minamata Convention focus on addressing chemicals deemed the highest priority for environmental protection. Besides fulfilling international obligations, countries may establish domestic regulations determining the legality of trade in chemicals.

Identifying illegal chemicals can be challenging, as they may closely resemble legal counterparts. The extent of illicit trade in chemicals remains largely undocumented, making the CEN data invaluable for offering insights into potential illegal trade activities and guiding future enforcement strategies.

In this analysis, the term “Other Hazardous Materials” specifically refers to hazardous chemicals, pesticides, and mercury/mercury-added products.

**Figure 36: Seizures and quantities of other hazardous materials, 2022-2023**

The seizures of these three commodities witnessed a significant surge of 100 seizures, from 72 in 2022 to 172 in 2023. Similarly, the seized quantity of hazardous chemicals and mercury saw a notable increase, with seizures of hazardous chemicals rising by 459.8 tons and 767 pieces, and mercury/mercury-added products by 810 kg and 45 pieces in 2023.

However, it is noteworthy that despite the number of pesticide seizures increasing by 50 in 2023, the seized quantity decreased by 412.1 tons and 10,706 pieces. In terms of seizure frequency, pesticides were the dominant commodity among the three, comprising 62% of the seizures in 2023. However, in terms of quantity, hazardous chemicals constituted the majority, accounting for 88% of the combined quantity of these commodities, while pesticides represented 12% and mercury accounted for less than 1%.
In 2023, 20 WCO Members reported seizures involving one or more of these commodities, a notable increase from the 13 members in 2022. Poland had the highest number of seizures reported in 2023 with 40% (67 seizures) of the total seizures, followed by Kyrgyzstan with 15, Mali with 13, Cameroon with 10, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Gambia with 9 seizures each. Collectively, these Members reported 73% of the total seizures.

**Hazardous chemicals**

In 2023, seizures relating to hazardous chemicals saw a significant increase both in terms of seizure frequency and intercepted quantity. The number of seizures surged by 43 incidents, rising from 17 in 2022 to 60 in 2023. Additionally, the seized quantity soared from 135.6 tons and 308 pieces in 2022 to 595.5 tons and 1,075 pieces in 2023.

Mali, Poland, Cameroon, and Niger were the most frequent seizure locations for hazardous chemicals in 2023. However, in terms of seized quantities, Philippines stood out with 320 tons seized, constituting 54% of the total quantity. Following closely were Mali and Türkiye, as seizure locations for 107 tons and 69 tons, respectively.

Despite its lower frequency as a departure point compared to other locations China, with only four seizures reported, accounted for 54% of the hazardous chemicals seized in 2023, up from 48% in 2022. Additionally, Türkiye, Nigeria, and Niger emerged as significant departure locations for hazardous chemicals in 2023.
points, collectively accounting for approximately 40% of the total quantity seized in 2023, despite having no records in 2022, except for Türkiye, which reported two seizures in that year.

Ukraine emerged as a frequent departure point for hazardous materials, though for a relatively smaller quantity of 16.6 tons, which accounted for approximately 3% of the total quantity seized.

The Asia/Pacific region maintained its status as the primary departure point for hazardous chemicals, holding its significance in both 2022 and 2023, accounting for 66% and 53% of the total quantity seized, respectively. While the majority of these chemicals were destined for the same region in 2023, they were also directed towards the Middle East region in 2022. The Western Africa region emerged as the second-largest departure point for chemicals in 2023, accounting for 25% of the seized quantities. The majority of the seizures were destined for locations within the same region, with some of the seizures destined for Central Africa, and a smaller portion destined for Western Europe.

The Eastern and Central Europe region served as a departure point for 19% of the seized quantity, primarily destined for locations not affiliated with any RILO and the A/P region.

**Pesticides**

Despite a 104% increase in pesticide seizures in 2023 compared to the previous year, the intercepted quantity had a significant decrease of 84%. This decline saw the quantity drop from 485.9 tons and 17,494 pieces in 2022 to 73.7 tons and 6,788 pieces in 2023.

While Poland accounted for the majority of pesticide seizures, representing 51% of the total seizures in 2023, these seizures represented less than 1% of the total seized quantity, amounting to 229 kg and 433 pieces. Conversely, pesticide seizures were less frequent in Kyrgyzstan, representing only 14% of the total, yet comprised a significant portion of the total seized quantity, constituting 71% of the total in 2023 and 93% in 2022.

Pesticides trafficking emerged notably in Africa in 2023, with Members like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Gambia, Cote d’Ivoire, Namibia, and Mauritania being identified as offence locations, despite having no records of pesticide seizures in 2022. Seizures ranged from 5 tons to 500 kg in these regions, indicating a concerning trend in pesticide trafficking activities.

Members of the RILO ECE emerged as the primary departure locations for pesticide seizures in 2023, comprising 56% of the total seizures. However, despite their significant seizures, these seizures accounted for only approximately 2% of the intercepted pesticides in 2023 and less than 1% in 2022. In contrast, seizures departing from Members in the RILO Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region were less frequent, representing only 12% of the total seizures, but contributed to 53% of the total pesticides seized in 2023 and 77% in 2022. Key departure locations in these two regions included Ukraine, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan.
In 2023, half of the seized quantities departed from Uzbekistan and were destined for Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, 22% originated from unknown departures and were transported to Kyrgyzstan, Oman, and Yemen. Five percent of the seized pesticides departed from Tanzania, bound for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Similarly, another five percent originated from China and were transported to Namibia and Gambia.

**Mercury**

Seizures of mercury and mercury-added products remained infrequent in both 2022 and 2023, with only 2 seizures reported in 2022, which increased to 4 in 2023. However, despite the low number of seizures, the quantity intercepted saw a significant surge of 192%, rising from 421 kg in 2022 to 1.23 tons and 45 pieces in 2023.

In 2022, Mali stood out as the sole reporter of mercury and mercury-added products. However, in 2023, all the seizures reported originated from Africa, specifically Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, and Senegal. Remarkably, Burkina Faso accounted for 97% of the total quantity of mercury seizures in 2023, in transit from Niger to Mali.

The majority of the mercury seizures were transported via vehicles and concealed within this transportation means.

**5. Conclusions**

The Environment Chapter highlights a concerning trend of increasing environmental crimes, as depicted by data reported by the WCO Members. These crimes encompass transboundary illegal trade in wildlife and timber products, substances regulated under the Montreal Protocol, waste, and hazardous chemicals, which are the primary Environmentally Sensitive Commodities reported in the CEN database. In response to this growing threat, Customs enforcement efforts must prioritize awareness-raising, cooperation enhancement, data quality and quantity improvement, capacity building, and innovative solutions.

Given the inherently cross-border nature of environmental crimes, Customs plays a pivotal role in monitoring and controlling the trade in environmental goods.

Initiatives such as WCO Customs enforcement Operations THUNDER and DEMETER series play a crucial role in raising awareness about international and national legal frameworks, implementing risk-based control measures, enhancing the capacity of participating Customs administrations, and fostering cooperation at various levels. With the support of the WCO Secretariat, Members are urged to leverage available instruments, tools, and capacity-building opportunities, share seizure information via CEN, and actively participate in WCO global Operations targeting illegal wildlife trade and environmentally sensitive commodities.
6. Environment Programme Projects and Operations

Since 2012, the WCO Environment Programme has been contributing to the fight against environmental crime, focusing specifically on environmentally sensitive commodities encompassed in Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). The Programme focuses on wildlife, timber, waste, hazardous chemicals, Ozone-Depleting Substances (ODS), Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), and other commodities that contribute to environmental degradation. Through the implementation of various Projects and global enforcement Operations, it facilitates data collection on the trafficking of these sensitive commodities, provides technical assistance to Customs administrations, and supports intergovernmental and inter-agency cooperation. The Programme has implemented various Projects related to trafficking of wildlife and timber (INAMA\(^2\), ICCWC\(^3\) and Sida\(^4\)) and waste (Asia-Pacific Plastic Waste Project\(^5\)).

Through partnerships with various like-minded partners, it has also coordinated global enforcement Operations, including the DEMETER series targeting illegal waste and substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol, and THUNDER, centred on combatting wildlife trafficking of wild fauna and flora species that are listed and protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

**Operation THUNDER**

Operation THUNDER depicts a collaborative and globally coordinated enforcement initiative, which is jointly organized by the WCO and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) under the framework of the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC). This Operation is supported by other global partners, mainly the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade on Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The primary objective of this Operation is to combat the illicit trade of wildlife and timber on a global scale, with a specific emphasis on CITES-listed endangered and protected species of wild fauna and flora. The coordinated efforts of Customs and Police play a pivotal role in achieving this objective through strategic and tactical approaches.

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2 Funded by US DoS.
3 ICCWC is the collaborative effort of five intergovernmental organizations. The partner agencies to ICCWC are the CITES Secretariat, INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the World Bank and the World Customs Organization (WCO) https://cites.org/eng/prog/iccwc
4 Funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. The Project was finalized in August 2023.
5 Funded by the Government of Japan. The Project was finalized in June 2023.
Operation DEMETER

Operation DEMETER was first launched in 2009, targeting the illegal movement of environmentally sensitive commodities, particularly hazardous and other wastes regulated by the Basel Convention. Since 2019, the Operation’s scope expanded to encompass substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol, specifically targeting ODS and HFCs.

In 2023, Operation DEMETER IX marked its largest iteration yet, with the participation of a record number of 106 Customs administrations and a diverse array of international partners. These partners included the Basel Convention Secretariat; the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) OzonAction; the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF); the UNODC Unwaste Project; INTERPOL; the European Union Network for Implementation and Enforcement of Environmental Law (IMPEL); and the WCO Regional Intelligence Liaison Office (RILO) network. The outstanding results of DEMETER IX can be linked to increased capacity building provided by the Secretariat to its Members, with financial support from the China Cooperation Fund (CCF-China). Additionally, extensive collaboration between environmental authorities and Customs administrations in the operational efforts, through joint inspections, contributed significantly to the information reported during Operation DEMETER IX.

In addition to the commendable efforts of participating Customs administrations and their growing interest in fighting the trafficking of wastes and controlled substances, Operation DEMETER IX notably highlighted the need for implementing:

- Effective cooperation mechanisms: fostering collaboration among environmental authorities, other law enforcement agencies, the private sector, and the public.
• Training focused on risk analysis and intelligence sharing: empowering law enforcement officers to work more effectively and efficiently.
• Sound reporting mechanisms: increasing the submission of high-quality data to allow for a better grasp of the latest global trends in illicit trade.

WCO INAMA Project

The WCO INAMA Project was initiated in 2014 under the Environment Programme to tackle Illicit Wildlife Trade (IWT) and its detrimental impacts on various fronts, including environmental, socio-economic, public safety and health. It operates with a focus on bolstering enforcement of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The Project is composed of two distinct sub projects, namely INAMA Global, comprising 15 Customs administrations from South America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia, and INAMA India and South Asia, which targets 3 countries within the sub-region. The Project is currently funded by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs of the U.S. Department of State.

Activities within the INAMA Project are geared towards enhancing training capacity, improving risk management and case selection capabilities, fostering interagency and international cooperation, and strengthening operational capacities. In 2023 alone, the Project successfully implemented 39 activities, at national, regional and multi-regional levels, impacting over 430 officers across various units. These activities encompassed a wide range of training sessions in IWT and CITES enforcement, as well as initiatives such as IWT training and train the trainer programmes, risk management missions, enforcement operation activities, and training in evidence collection, and procedures related to IWT seizures, investigation and prosecution. Through regional and multi-regional activities, participants had the opportunity to exchange experiences, enhance cooperation, and establish networks that have proven instrumental in the ongoing fight against IWT.

6 Brazil, Cameroon, Colombia, DRC, Guyana, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Madagascar, Malaysia, Namibia, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Republic of the Congo, and Togo
7 India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.
The successful enforcement efforts of the Brazilian Customs in 2023 were facilitated by partnerships with international organizations such as the World Customs Organization’s (WCO) INAMA Project. In 2023, the Brazilian Customs officers participated in various capacity-building programs related to illicit wildlife trade (IWT) and collaborated on numerous international initiatives led by the WCO’s INAMA team. This collaboration has been instrumental in enhancing the skills of customs personnel and developing tools to combat the trafficking of endangered wildlife species. Today, Brazilian Customs has the CURUPIRA Group, reference to the Brazilian folklore character who protects the forests, which has a team of specialists responsible for carrying out various actions to strengthen the fight against wildlife trafficking in the Brazilian Customs.

Wildlife Eggs Seized in Guarulhos Airport / Brazil

In 2023, the Receita Federal do Brasil, in a joint Operation with the environmental authorities, made a significant seizure of 120 eggs of wild birds at Guarulhos Airport, the largest airport in South America. This law enforcement action underscores the ongoing efforts to combat the illicit trade in endangered wildlife species.

The first seizure occurred on 5 August 2023, following intelligence received by the Brazilian Customs from the Environmental authorities. A Taiwanese national, aged 51 and holding a Canadian passport, was flagged as suspicious due to his travel history and was intercepted while attempting to board a flight to Thailand carrying 60 eggs of scarlet macaws in a thermal bag as hand luggage.
The second seizure took place two months later, on 7 October 2023, as part of Operation THUNDER. During this law enforcement Operation, Customs and Environmental authorities confiscated an additional 60 eggs of blue macaws and toucans from another Taiwanese passenger, aged 26, who was destined for Hong Kong. The eggs were similarly concealed in a thermal bag as hand luggage.

The seized eggs were transferred to a breeding facility in São Paulo, where experts monitored their hatching and the birth of these bird species. While not all the eggs resulted in viable offspring, the successful hatching of several eggs, including 7 toucans, 3 blue macaws, and 43 scarlet macaws, underscores the importance of proactive enforcement measures in safeguarding endangered wildlife.

Breeding facility images

Courtesy of Federal Revenue of Brazil.
These seizures highlight the ongoing threat posed by wildlife trafficking and the sophistication of smuggling techniques employed by traffickers. The interception of these eggs prevents further exploitation of endangered species and contributes to the preservation of biodiversity.
5 IPR, HEALTH AND SAFETY
As the global centre of Customs expertise, the World Customs Organization (WCO), with the support of its Members, is responsible for ensuring efficient and safe trade while protecting consumers and businesses from the risk of harm. Unfortunately, counterfeiting and piracy pose a serious threat to national economies, the health of citizens and to global security, given the ramifications of the existing relationships between counterfeiters and criminal/terrorist networks.
INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the continued excellent reporting of IPR, health and safety data by WCO Members to CEN, and based on the results of our ongoing global and regional operations with the support of the RILO network, the WCO Illicit Trade Report (ITR) is able to properly reflect the global landscape of IPR violations.

Although the first ITR was launched in 2012 and covered all types of fraud for the first time, the culture of analysing data on IPR infringements and health and safety can be traced back 20 years, when the WCO published the first global IPR report.

Since that time, the typology of counterfeiting and piracy fraud has undergone a significant transformation. The means of production used by counterfeiters are now very similar to those employed in the licit product market, and are based on the latest technology. The counterfeiters adopt an industrial approach, enabling them to improve both the quality and the quantity of counterfeit goods.

The evolution of the market has led to a heightened level of consumer scepticism, with some consumers unwittingly becoming victims or accomplices in counterfeit purchases.

At a glance in 2023, 98 million pieces were reported, with 48,061 seizures, showing an increase in the number of pieces but a decrease in the number of seizures compared to 2022. This may be explained by the fact that the data from the United States, the largest contributor of data, has not yet been submitted to the CEN for the last two quarters of 2023 at the time of drafting of this Report.
Following the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and a cross-reading of Customs seizure data, it is clear that e-commerce and the proliferation of small consignments remain the major challenge for Customs, not only in terms of IPR products, but also – and above all – for medical and pharmaceutical products.

Figures from 2023 indicate that mail and express couriers are the most commonly used forms of conveyance, corresponding to 77.6% of seizures involving offences reported by Members. The increase in seizures in e-commerce can be attributed, in part, to the Secretariat’s efforts to raise Members’ awareness and develop appropriate tools and risk indicators in this area. Additionally, this can be due to the impact of Operation STOP III, conducted in December 2023 and focused on e-commerce. The outcomes of the Operation will be outlined in this Report.

In terms of the number of seizures, accessories, clothing and footwear account for 77.7% of the total. With regard to the number of pieces seized, clothing (66.2%), “other” (15.5%) and games and toys (7.6%) are the top three. The United States, Austria, Germany, Chile, Spain, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Mexico and Slovakia, are the top 10 destinations for counterfeit goods in 2023.

With regard to medical and pharmaceutical products, the WHO\(^1\) has identified this issue as one of the urgent health challenges for the coming decade, “given that more than one in ten medicines in low- and middle-income countries are estimated to be substandard or falsified. No country remains untouched from this issue, and both generic and innovator medicines can be falsified, ranging from very expensive products for cancer to very inexpensive products for treatment of pain.”

In 2023, reported seizures amounted to 4,434, with more than 158 million pieces and 338 tons of illicit medicine, whereas 5,442 seizures, involving 221 million pieces and 195 tons of medicine, were seized in 2022. The reported seizures and pieces decreased by 18.5% and by 28.4% respectively, while kilograms increased by 73.5%.

The IPR, Health and Safety section of this Report examines the global illicit trade in counterfeit and medical goods in 2023. As such, this section is divided into two broad categories. The first category, IPR products, discusses counterfeit non-medical goods, including clothing and accessories, cosmetics and electronic appliances. The second category, medical products, looks at all illicitly traded and smuggled medical goods, such as medicines, pharmaceutical products and medical technologies, as well as products that are counterfeit, genuine products that lack appropriate authorization or licences, and undeclared products.

The analysis of the trends requires a few caveats. First, the conclusions below rely on case and seizure data voluntarily submitted at the discretion of WCO Member countries. There are many reasons why Customs administrations might not report or might under-report their data, including the need to maintain secrecy over ongoing investigations.

\(^1\) Substandard and falsified medical products (who.int)
As a result, the Figures in this section might not present a comprehensive view of IPR or medical products trafficking. Second, apparent increases in seizures of certain goods could reveal the increasing efficacy of Customs officers, rather than a genuinely upward trend in IPR or medical products trafficking.

This section is organized in the following manner:
- Overall trends in trafficking of IPR products.
- Overall trends in trafficking of medical products.

1. Overall trends in trafficking of IPR products

**Figure 1: Number of IPR products cases by country, 2022-2023**

Figure 1 shows the 15 countries that reported the most cases of IPR products trafficking in 2023 and compares the number of cases from 2022 to the number from 2023.

The United States reported by far the most cases in both years, though these fell dramatically, from 18,509 cases in 2022 to 8,199 in 2023 (-55.7%). Austria came second, with a significant increase in case numbers, from 3,974 in 2022 to 7,070 in 2023, up 77.9%.

Germany ranks third, with 1,772 cases, despite a negative difference of -30.2% compared to 2022, when 2,538 cases were reported. Chile ranks fourth, with 1,195 cases. This represents a decrease of 66.4% compared to 2022, when 3,557 cases were reported. Spain ranks fifth, with 918 cases compared to 994 the previous year, despite a decrease of 7.6% compared to 2022. With an increase of 8.8%, Italy ranks sixth. Luxembourg and the Netherlands, with 76.2% and 185.3% respectively, rank seventh and eighth. Jordan and Kuwait are the two countries in the MENA region in the top 15, with 325 cases reported. This is an increase of 31.0% compared to 2022, when only 248 cases were reported. Unfortunately, no Members from Africa and Asia/Pacific region are in the top 15.
In 2023, 48,061 seizures were reported by 62 countries, representing 98,211,095 pieces. Compared to 2022, the number of seizures decreased (-36.6%), while the number of pieces increased by 65.3%, rising from 59,426,982 pieces to 98,211,095 pieces. The most frequent seizures in 2023 were for accessories, clothing, footwear, watches, “other”, mobile phones and accessories, electronic appliances, games and toys, transportation and spare parts, and toiletries/cosmetics.

In terms of the number of seizures, accessories, clothing, and footwear account for 77.7% of the total, which is equivalent to 37,320 seizures. Accessories have the highest number of seizures, with 16,761 seizures, accounting for 1,902,974 pieces. Compared to 2022, there has been a decrease both in the number of seizures (-42.4%) and the number of pieces (-61.1%). Clothing is the second-most seized item, with 11,284 seizures, equating to 64,977,552 pieces. This represents 23.5% by number of seizures and 66.2% by number of pieces. In terms of the number of seizures, footwear comes third, with 9,275 seizures, accounting for 1,437,619 pieces. While the number of seizures is high, the number of pieces is relatively low, at 1.5% of total pieces. Watches rank fourth in terms of number of seizures (2,767, accounting for 235,114 pieces). “Other” ranks fifth, with 1,902 seizures, accounting for 15,242,093 pieces, showing a notable decrease for seizures (-49.4%) and for pieces (-49.7%).

The number of seizures in the games and toys sector is 1,072, accounting for 2.2% of total seizures, while showing a decrease of -37.9% compared to 2022. Despite this decrease, the number of pieces has increased, from 5,936,851 in 2022 to 7,437,615 in 2023.
In terms of the number of seizures, mail comes first, with 19,003 seizures, equivalent to 39.5%. Express courier comes second, with 18,310 seizures, equivalent to 38.1%. Mail and express courier are the most commonly used forms of conveyance, corresponding to 77.6% of seizures involving offences reported by Members.

In terms of the number of pieces seized by conveyance, express courier comes first, with 70,050,623 equivalent pieces, representing 71.3% of the total volume. Vessel comes second, with 14,647,567 pieces seized, representing 14.9% of the total volume. Vehicle comes third, with 6,791,111 pieces, representing 6.9% of the total.

**Figure 4:** Number of IPR products cases by Customs procedure and country, 2023
In 2023, the Customs procedure leading to the most counterfeit seizures is importation, accounting for 88.5% by direction, followed by transit at 10.5%, internal at 0.8% and export at 0.2%.

Countries such as the United States, Austria, Germany, Chile, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Jordan and Hungary have reported cases involving exports. Spain, Italy and Hungary have focused more on the domestic market to report cases, which is an interesting development. Italy and Hungary reported cases in all directions, including import, export, transit and internal.

Figure 5: Proportion of IPR products seizures by type and country, 2023

The United States reported the highest number of seizures, totalling 24,380, which represents 51.4% of all seizures. Austria, the country with the second-highest number of seizures, reported 10,940, representing 23.1% of all seizures. The most common seizure type for the United States was accessories (10,791 seizures), which made up 44.3% of its seizures and 64.4% of all accessories seizures. The United States also reported the greatest number of seizures in all other categories except footwear and games and toys.
North America reported the highest number of seizures in both years, decreasing from 52,428 in 2022 to 24,380 in 2023 (a 53.5% decrease). Western Europe saw an increase in seizures from 12,043 in 2022 to 17,938 in 2023 (a 48.9% increase). The quantity of pieces seized for almost all products (except for other products, mobile phones and accessories) saw a substantial rise, indicating ongoing issues with the counterfeit products. The Middle East saw a notable increase in seizures, from 399 in 2022 to 576 in 2023 (a 44.4% increase).

Eastern and Central Europe showed a slight decrease in seizures, from 1,488 in 2022 to 1,348 in 2023 (a 9.4% decrease). The region maintained substantial quantities of seized pieces. The Caribbean region reported a significant decrease in seizures, from 1,471 in 2022 to 266 in 2023 (an 81.9% decrease), despite a massive increase in the quantity of “other” products seized. The Asia/Pacific region saw a substantial increase in seizures, from 60 in 2022 to 172 in 2023 (a 186.7% increase). There was a notable rise in clothing and footwear seizures. South America registered a 30.5% decrease in seizures, from 3,537 in 2022 to 2,457 in 2023. The quantity of “other” products seized also saw a significant reduction. Central America saw a dramatic drop in seizures, from 53 in 2022 to 2 in 2023 (a 96.2% decrease), indicating a major change in seizure patterns.

Overall, the data for 2022 and 2023 reveals regional variations in seizure patterns and quantities. Despite the overall reduction in seizures, high numbers were consistently reported for accessories and clothing, highlighting these products as persistent targets in IPR enforcement efforts.
Asia/Pacific was the most common departure region, with 12,237 flows, making up 56.2% of all flows. Unknown departure, where the region was not reported, accounted for 8,129 flows (37.3%), and Eastern and Central Europe had 1,222 flows (5.6%).

Flows from Asia/Pacific reached 13 regions, including Western Europe, South America, and Eastern and Central Europe. Unknown departure primarily targeted North America. Eastern and Central Europe directed most flows to Western Europe. All regions, except Central Africa and Eastern and Southern Africa, had flows to at least four other regions.

The prominence of flows from Asia/Pacific to Western Europe highlights this route’s significance. The substantial flows having unknown departures suggest traceability issues, with North America as the main destination. Notably, there were more unknown departures (8,129 flows) than unknown destinations (1,101 flows), indicating gaps in reporting departure regions.

The wide destination range for Asia/Pacific flows reflects the global nature of IPR trafficking, emphasizing the need for international cooperation. Eastern and Central Europe’s significant activity, especially to Western Europe, points to complex trafficking networks.
Figure 8 is a heat map of IPR products trafficking instances in 2023, coloured by frequency. The colouring indicates the number of times the country was the departure, destination, or transit point for one or more seized shipments of IPR products, regardless of where the seizure took place or which country reported it. By disaggregating individual seizures in this way, the Figure depicts all countries in which IPR products were known or intended to have been trafficked in 2023.

China appeared in 10,461 instances, making it the country with the highest number of trafficking instances. The category “Unknown” had a significant number of instances (8,315), highlighting gaps in the available data. The United States followed closely, with 8,232 instances, reflecting a high level of involvement. Austria appeared in 7,602 instances; Germany (2,307 instances), Hong Kong, China (1,547 instances), and Chile (1,216 instances) were also notable for their frequent appearances.

Regarding regional distribution, Western Europe had the highest number of instances, with 14,352, indicating significant trafficking activity in this region. Asia/Pacific followed closely, with 12,689 instances, with China being the primary contributor; North America accounted for 8,295 instances, predominantly involving the United States. Eastern and Central Europe saw 2,655 instances, with notable activity in Austria and Germany. South America had 1,681 instances, with Chile being a significant contributor. The Middle East accounted for 696 instances, and the Caribbean had 546 instances. North Africa had 314 instances, while Eastern and Southern Africa and West Africa had 150 and 111 instances, respectively. Central America and Central Africa had relatively few instances, with 73 and 23, respectively. The Commonwealth of Independent States saw 59 instances.

In summary, while China and the United States were the most frequently occurring countries in instances of IPR products trafficking in 2023, Western Europe and Asia/Pacific were the regions with the highest trafficking activity. This highlights the global nature of IPR products trafficking and the need for comprehensive international cooperation to address this issue.
The United States reported the most medical products cases in both years, although the number of cases decreased by 57.8% in 2023. Italy reported the second-highest number of cases in both years and showed an increase of 8.5%, from 365 to 395. There was no Member listed from Asia/Pacific region in the 2022 ITR list in this category. However, Bangladesh increased its share and ranked among the top 15 countries in 2023. Saudi Arabia and Czech Republic showed a significant increase in reporting (375.0% and 505.6%, respectively). Five Members from the West and Central Africa region, namely, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Mali, Gabon and Democratic Republic of the Congo, listed in the graph, reported more than double the number, respectively, compared to the previous year. South Africa and Saudi Arabia are the only countries in ESA and MENA region among the top 15 which reported cases.
Urogenital agents (e.g. erectile dysfunction, kidneys, etc.) were the most common seizure type in 2023, with 1,239 seizures, representing 31.8% of the total number in 2023. This was a 73.0% increase from 2022, when urogenital agents accounted for 716 seizures. Conversely, seizures of nervous system agents (e.g. painkillers, sedatives, anti-Alzheimer) decreased dramatically by 59.9%, from 1,244 seizures in 2022 to 499 in 2023, making up 12.8% of the total in 2023. Health supplements (e.g. vitamins, herbal products) also saw a substantial increase, of 148.7%, rising from 156 seizures in 2022 to 388 in 2023, representing 10.0% of the total. Respiratory system agents (e.g. asthma, cough and cold, etc.) also increased, by 56.4%, from 236 seizures in 2022 to 369 in 2023, making up 9.5% of the total seizures. In addition, anti-infective agents (e.g. anti-malarial, antibiotics) rose by 42.6%, from 223 seizures in 2022 to 318 in 2023, accounting for 8.2% of the total in 2023. In contrast, the category “other” saw a decrease of 44.3%, from 431 seizures in 2022 to 240 in 2023, making up 6.2% of the total. Moreover, hormone agents (e.g. thyroid therapy) registered a significant decline of 74.5%, from 925 seizures in 2022 to 236 in 2023, which is 6.1% of the total. On the other hand, dermatological agents increased substantially by 220.5%, from 73 seizures in 2022 to 234 in 2023, representing 6.0% of the total in 2023. Additionally, metabolic agents (e.g. steroids, anti-diabetic) saw a decrease of 63.8%, from 639 seizures in 2022 to 231 in 2023, making up 5.9% of the total. Finally, musculo-skeletal agents (e.g. anti-inflammatory, bone disease) registered a notable decrease of 56.0%, from 327 seizures in 2022 to 144 in 2023, which is 3.7% of the total.

In summary, the data indicates a significant shift in the types of medical products seized in 2023 compared to 2022. While some categories, such as urogenital agents and health supplements, saw substantial increases, others like nervous system agents and hormone agents registered notable declines. These trends underscore the dynamic nature of product seizures and highlight the need for adaptive strategies in enforcement efforts.
Overall, across the top 10 categories seized, in the context of a decrease of 21.6% in the number of seizures, the number of pieces seized decreased by 28.2% between 2022 and 2023, from 207,845,003 pieces to 149,221,073 pieces, while the weight seized rose by 115.0%, from 151,983 kg to 326,770 kg.

It should be noted that dermatological agents saw substantial increases in both pieces and weight, with pieces rising by 2,309.4%, from 230,850 in 2022 to 5,562,005 in 2023, and weight increasing by 239.9%, from 10,151 kg to 34,502 kg, following the significant increase in the number of seizures from 73 in 2022 to 234 in 2023. Similarly, health supplements (e.g. vitamins, herbal products) registered significant growth both in pieces and weight, with pieces increasing by 304.9% and weight increasing by 377.0%, in correlation with the increase in the number of seizures.

With the growth in the number of seizures, urogenital agents (e.g. erectile dysfunction, kidneys, etc.) registered a notable increase in the number of pieces seized, rising by 536.7%, from 3,283,566 in 2022 to 20,906,764 in 2023, despite the weight decreasing by 42.6%, from 2,122 kg to 1,218 kg.
Figure 12 separates the number of medical product seizures and the quantity seized (in pieces and kilograms), by conveyance method and type of medical product. Mail, vehicle, and air seizures yielded the greatest number of seizures, number of pieces seized, and quantity seized.

Mail searches resulted in 1,384 seizures (35.5%), 707,179 pieces seized (0.5%), and 115 kg seized (0.04%). Vehicle searches led to 1,109 seizures (28.5% of all seizures), 124,317,157 pieces seized (83.3%), and 31,160 kg seized (9.5%). Air searches accounted for 793 seizures (20.3%), 10,214,300 pieces seized (6.8%), and 9,871 kg seized (3.0%). Seizures of different products were relatively evenly distributed across a number of conveyance methods. Vehicle, mail, passenger, pedestrian, express courier, and rail conveyance methods all saw seizures from various medical product categories listed in the figure. Mail seizures were primarily of urogenital agents (63.8% of mail seizures), while vehicle seizures were mostly of anti-infective agents (18.6% of vehicle seizures), and air seizures were mainly of urogenital agents (17.0% of air seizures). The number of pieces seized and quantity seized were more skewed towards a single type for the top three conveyance methods.

The number of pieces seized equated to 66.3% urogenital agents for mail seizures, 42.7% nervous system agents for vehicle seizures, and 52.5% dermatological agents for air seizures. Meanwhile, the weight of pieces seized equated to 79.1% metabolic agents for mail seizures, 34.0% health supplements for vehicle seizures, and 27.8% health supplements agents for air seizures. Overall, this analysis highlights the diverse nature of medical product seizures across different conveyance methods and underscores the need for targeted enforcement strategies to address the specific trends and challenges associated with each method.
In 2023, the Customs procedure that led to the most medical products seizures was import, accounting for 86.7% of the cases. Internal procedures came second, at 6.8%, followed by transit at 3.9%, and export at 2.6%.

Poland and Mali were the only two countries among the top 15 that reported cases for all four Customs procedures. Nine of the top 15 countries reported cases involving internal procedures: Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Gabon, Argentina, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ireland, Bangladesh and Poland. Additionally, South Africa and Argentina each reported more than 10 cases related to export procedures.
Western Europe region ranks first, with 921 seizures, accounting for 23.6% of total seizures of the top 10 commodities seized. North America ranks second, with 814 seizures, equivalent to 20.9%. West Africa ranks third, with 495 seizures, accounting for 12.7% of the total.

Health supplements and hormone agents are mostly reported by Western Europe. Anti-infective agents were mostly reported by West Africa, with 137 seizures, and Central Africa, with 106 seizures. Dermatological agents were mostly reported in Central Africa, with 70 seizures. Musculo-skeletal agents were often reported by Central Africa, with 62 seizures. With regard to nervous system agents, the figures show Western Europe as the region with the highest number of seizures (143 seizures). Asia/Pacific comes first with regard to respiratory system agents, with 185 seizures. In terms of urogenital agents, North America region is first so far, with 766 seizures.

In terms of pieces, West Africa far and away comes first, with 115,920,026, equivalent to 77.7% of total pieces.

Although West Africa ranks the highest in most categories, Eastern and Central Europe rank first for metabolic agents, with 46,052 pieces, and Western Europe comes first for dermatological agents, with 5,365,483 pieces.
In 2023, 3,321 trafficking flows of medical products were reported across various regions. The majority (26.5%) departed from unknown regions (UNK), with 91.1% of these directed to North America (NAM), accounting for 802 cases. Asia/Pacific (AP) was a major source, with 758 flows (22.8%), primarily to Western Europe (WE) with 286 flows (8.6%), the Middle East (ME) with 102 flows (3.1%), and Eastern and Central Europe (ECE) with 39 flows (1.2%). Internal flows within AP totalled 240 (7.2%). Western Europe was significant both as a departure and destination, with 304 flows departing there (9.2%), and 225 internal flows (6.8%). WE received 904 flows (27.2%), making it the leading destination. NAM was the second most popular destination, with 821 flows (24.7%), mainly from unknown regions (802 flows), and was the departure for only 76 flows (2.3%), indicating high import dependency. West Africa (WA) had the highest intra-regional flow, with 335 cases (10.1%). Major inter-regional flows included AP to WE, with 286 cases (8.6%), and UNK to NAM, with 802 cases (24.1%). Less active regions included Central America (CAM) and the Caribbean (CAR) which, combined, had 19 flows (0.6%), primarily to WE, and South America (SA), with lower trafficking activity both as a departure and destination.

The data highlights a complex network of medical products trafficking, with significant intra-regional flows in WA, AP, and WE, and major inter-regional flows from AP to WE, and unknown regions to NAM. North America stands out as the primary destination, while Western Europe and Asia/Pacific are key hubs both for departure and destination, highlighting areas for increased scrutiny and enforcement.
In 2023, Hong Kong Customs conducted three rounds of Operation “Tracer”, with a view to combating transnational counterfeit activities, especially those involving high-value counterfeit consumer electronic goods and luxury accessories which were imported into Hong Kong, China and re-exported to America and the EU, as well as member countries of the Belt and Road Initiative. Application of big data and intelligence analysis successfully revealed the trend of using the sea-cargo transportation mode to evade detection by Hong Kong Customs. In this regard, prompt and accurate raid plans were executed at targeted hidden and remote downtown devanning warehouses, as well as at high-risk air cargo warehouses. This yielded fruitful results, with the seizure of 246,200 pieces of counterfeit goods, valued at over HKD 150 million.
Argentina Customs initiated its IPR enforcement based on risk analysis, which led to the seizure of a large volume of counterfeit goods. The declared merchandise (computer cabinets) did not correspond to the main activity of the importing firm (cereal marketing), and considering the shipping route, an alert was issued and a thorough inspection of the cargo ordered.

From the controls carried out, it was detected that the merchandise differed substantially from what was declared, firstly, a difference in weight of four (4) tons or more was verified. Once the cargo was inspected, a significant amount of clothing (sports clothing), sports shoes, telephone accessories and sunglasses were observed. In terms of presentation, packaging and quality of finish, these turned out to be products with counterfeit brands, and prohibited.

Details of the seized products are as follows: 2,214 pairs of footwear; 1,538 jackets; 24,210 telephone accessories; 4,500 glasses; 660 sweaters; and 209 t-shirts.

Finally, the following were detected without a declaration: tattoo machines, laser hair removal machines, electronic cigarettes, hair straighteners and massagers, with no health and safety authorizations, implying a serious risk to users.
Following the success of Operations STOP I and II, the WCO launched STOP III, with a special focus on e-commerce, with financial support from Japan Customs.

Operation STOP III ran from 4 to 15 December 2023, with the participation of 111 Customs administrations, and covered not only pharmaceuticals, vaccines and medical devices, but also all everyday consumer products that could endanger the health and safety of consumers. Its aim was to leverage best practices and sophisticated risk management and targeting methods to identify and inspect high-risk consignments delivered via e-commerce. The WCO’s secure communication tool, IPR CENcomm, was used to carry out Operation STOP III.

To give a general overview: during the operational phase, 48 Customs administrations reported seizures to IPR CENcomm, relating to 894 cases. A total of 1,488 seizures were reported, involving 45 million pieces.

Europe led in the number of cases (448), followed by Asia/Pacific (171), MENA (92), WCA (88), AMS (66) and ESA (29). All WCO regions reported some cases related to e-commerce.

In accordance with the expansion of the targeted scope, various categories of products were reported, including clothes, footwear, watches, transportation and spare parts, toys, and electronic products. However, seizure reports regarding medicines and pharmaceutical products were notable in terms of quantity.

Anti-infective agents were the most seized commodities in terms of quantity. Guinea Customs seized anti-bacterial/antibiotic products transported by express courier. This was detected through risk profiling.
Portugal Customs reported the seizure of metabolic agents with soluble solution for injections and syringes in air cargo.

*Courtesy of Guinea Customs.*  
*Courtesy of Portugal Customs.*
6 Revenue
Customs administrations worldwide play a pivotal role in monitoring international cross-border movements, ensuring all due taxes are collected. The ever-evolving landscape of global trade presents numerous challenges, particularly from transnational criminal organizations seeking to exploit weaknesses in Customs, revenue, and border controls to amass profits.
INTRODUCTION

Revenue risks in this context involve the smuggling of highly taxed goods, and various forms of commercial fraud such as undervaluation, misclassification, misuse of origin and preferential duties, and drawback fraud. The primary goods subject to these taxes include alcohol and tobacco products. The illicit trade of excise goods poses significant challenges to governments’ efforts to secure global supply chains, and deprives them of essential revenues needed for public services. Increasingly sophisticated smuggling techniques and well-networked traffickers complicate enforcement efforts.

In 2023, 90 Customs administrations reported 40,037 cases comprising 46,844 seizures of alcohol and tobacco products in the CEN database. Among these, alcohol products accounted for 2,069 cases, while tobacco products comprised 38,022 cases. In comparison, the data for 2022 indicate 5,133 cases of alcohol products and 24,693 cases of tobacco products. This represents a 59.7% decrease in the number of alcohol-related cases and a 54.0% increase in tobacco-related cases. Overall, there was a 35.7% increase in the total number of cases from 2022 to 2023.

Additionally, the number of reporting countries varied between the two years. In 2023, there were 90 reporting countries, compared to 96 in 2022. Notably, new reporting countries in 2023 included Greece, Comoros, Armenia, Belgium, Ethiopia, United Kingdom, Lebanon, Liberia, Luxembourg, Thailand, Angola, Niger, and Switzerland. Conversely, countries that reported in 2022 but not in 2023 included Albania,
The overall trend indicates a significant increase in the total number of cases from 2022 to 2023, with tobacco-related cases seeing a substantial rise, while cases involving beverages have decreased. The changing landscape of reporting countries further reflects the dynamic nature of global trade and the ongoing challenges in combating illicit activities.

These data highlight a growing trend in the number of cases and the volume of illicit goods being seized, particularly in the tobacco sector, indicating a persistent and increasing threat from smuggling and other forms of commercial fraud. The analysis of the data for 2023, in comparison with 2022, will explore the trends and patterns in these activities, providing insights into the evolving landscape of illicit trade and the effectiveness of enforcement actions. This comparison underscores the importance of continued vigilance and adaptation in Customs practices to combat these sophisticated and persistent threats.

The following sections will delve into the specifics of the CEN data:

- Overall trends in the trafficking of tobacco products.
- Overall trends in the trafficking of alcohol products.

Figure 1: Percentage of seizures by product, 2023

Cigarettes seizures represented 66.71% of all seizures, up from 58.83% in 2022. This increase suggests a growing focus on smuggling cigarettes. The primary concealment methods for cigarettes in 2023 were “In transport” (48.95%) and “In baggage” (44.37%), compared to 2022, when “In transport” (45.28%) and “In baggage” (41.70%) were also prevalent.

Other tobacco products accounted for 24.38% of the seizures in 2023, a significant increase from 18.83% in 2022. These products were mostly

Figure 1 separates all seizures of excise goods in 2023 into four categories: alcohol products, cigarettes, cigars and e-cigarettes, and other tobacco products.
concealed “In baggage” (55.19%) and “In transport” (33.37%) in 2023, which is similar to 2022, when “In baggage” (46.24%) and “In transport” (26.83%) were common.

Alcohol products seizures decreased to 5.89% in 2023, from 18.76% in 2022. Concealment methods in 2023 primarily included “In baggage” (41.47%) and “In transport” (35.28%), while in 2022, the methods were more varied, with “In transport” (39.15%), “In mail” (30.44%), and “In baggage” (19.73%). Cigars and e-cigarettes seizures were 3.01% in 2023, slightly down from 3.58% in 2022. The concealment methods in 2023 included “In baggage” (37.89%) and “In transport” (35.13%), compared to 2022, when the methods were “In transport” (41.26%) and “In mail” (22.68%). These comparisons highlight an increase in the seizure of cigarettes and other tobacco products in 2023, with consistent concealment methods across both years. Conversely, there was a notable decrease in the seizure of alcohol products.

Figure 2: Percentage of cases by detection method, 2023

In 2023, the detection of smuggled goods by Customs administrations shows that routine control accounted for 58.44% of the cases. This method remains the most effective and has increased from 53.27% in 2022. Risk profiling was the second most common detection method, comprising 38.33% of cases in 2023, a decrease from 44.08% in 2022. This indicates a shift towards more routine controls. Intelligence-led investigations made up 3.23% of detections in 2023, up from 2.65% in 2022. The rise reflects an increasing reliance on intelligence and investigative techniques to uncover smuggling activities.

The distribution by detection method highlights the dominance of routine control and risk profiling, with an increase in the use of intelligence-led investigations. This shift in detection strategies underscores the importance of balancing routine checks with targeted intelligence efforts to effectively combat smuggling activities.
Case study 1.
SEIZURE OF 9.8 MILLION CIGARETTES IN NOVEMBER 2023, IRELAND

In November 2023, a joint operation involving Irish Customs and Irish Police resulted in the detection and seizure of 9.8 million illicit cigarettes branded “Platinum Seven” within a vehicle in County Louth, Ireland.

Irish Customs’ investigation identified that the consignment of illicit cigarettes originated in Dubai and had arrived in Ireland via the port of Rotterdam, Netherlands. The illicit cigarettes had an estimated value of over €8.2 million and a potential loss to the Irish Exchequer of approximately €6.4 million. This seizure is part of Irish Customs’ ongoing operations targeting the shadow economy and the supply of illegal tobacco products. Investigations into the criminal gang behind this smuggling activity are currently ongoing.
1. Overall trends in the trafficking of tobacco products

Figure 3: Number of tobacco products cases by country, 2022-2023

In 2023, 86 countries reported 38,022 tobacco cases, a significant increase from the 24,693 cases reported by 88 countries in 2022, despite a slight decrease of 2.27% in the number of reporting countries.

Saudi Arabia, the leading country, reported 15,967 cases in 2023, up 58.86% from 10,054 in 2022. The United Kingdom ranked second, with 11,738 cases in 2023. Kuwait saw a 40.23% increase, to 2,806 cases, while Austria and Italy had moderate increases of 11.04% and 9.16%, respectively. Slovakia’s cases rose by 14.26%.

Oman experienced a slight decrease of 0.32%, while the United Arab Emirates and Jordan saw substantial increases of 155.64% and 207.25%, respectively. Sweden reported a dramatic 955.56% increase. Poland and Qatar saw declines, with Qatar’s cases decreasing by 24.03%. The Russian Federation and Azerbaijan reported increases of 25.21% and 270.27%, respectively.
Case study 2.

SEIZURE OF 987 KILOGRAMS OF CHEWING TOBACCO
IN NOVEMBER 2023, IRELAND

In November 2023, during a routine inspection at a temporary storage facility in Dublin, a detector dog identified 987 kilograms of chewing tobacco branded “Tulsi Royal” and “Vimal”. Irish Customs’ investigation identified that the consignment originated in India, and had then travelled through the Czech Republic and the Netherlands, before arriving in Ireland. The illicit tobacco products represented a potential loss to the Irish Exchequer of €542,850.

This seizure followed a previous seizure of 664 kilograms of chewing tobacco in October 2023. Oral chewing tobacco is a prohibited product in Ireland, and as chewing tobacco is not a product that is traditionally smuggled into Ireland on a large scale, these seizures resulted in a new trend being identified in the smuggling of tobacco products into Ireland.
In 2023, there was a notable increase in seizures and quantities seized for most tobacco products categories compared to 2022. Chewing and dipping tobacco saw a 45.8% increase in seizures, a 2,409.9% rise in pieces, and a 199.2% increase in quantity. Hand rolling and pipe tobacco seizures rose by 74.4%, with an 81.0% increase in quantity, despite a 79.3% drop in pieces. Water-pipe tobacco experienced a 132.5% increase in seizures and a 514.0% rise in pieces, but a 46.2% decrease in quantity.

Electronic cigarettes and cartridges had a slight decrease in seizures, by 1.4%, with a 20.9% rise in pieces and a 2,793.1% increase in quantity. Cigars and cheroots seizures increased by 26.0% and pieces by 394.4%, while the quantity dropped by 99.0%. Smoking tobacco seizures fell by 7.4%, with pieces decreasing by 99.99% and quantity by 80.5%. Raw tobacco seizures dropped by 7.0%, with pieces down by 99.6% and quantity by 44.8%.

Other tobacco products saw a 32.4% decrease in seizures and a 98.5% drop in pieces, but a 219.8% rise in quantity. Tobacco components like paper and filters saw a 66.7% decrease in seizures, a 95.4% drop in pieces, and an 89.7% decrease in quantity. These trends highlight significant increases in categories like chewing and dipping tobacco, hand rolling and pipe tobacco, and electronic cigarettes, while other categories saw substantial decreases, reflecting varied smuggling activities and enforcement efforts.
Case study 3.
ARMENIAN CUSTOMS DETECT CIGARETTE SHIPMENT MISCLASSIFIED AS “FRUIT”

In February 2023, during a Customs inspection at “Bagratachen” Customs post of a truck being driven by an Armenian citizen to the Russian Federation, Armenia Customs discovered six million cigarettes bearing the “Magnus”, “Arto Silver”, “Arto White” and “Legend” trademarks. They were concealed in boxes of fruit [CEN ID 1641847].

Courtesy of Armenia Customs.
Cigarettes seizures constituted a significant portion of total tobacco products seized in both 2022 and 2023. In 2023, the number of seizures increased by 39.2% to 31,250, while the total quantity of cigarettes seized rose by 45.7% to 3,137,579,858 pieces. These trends indicate ongoing challenges in combating cigarette smuggling and the need for continued focus on large-scale operations to disrupt major trafficking networks. Overall, the increase both in the number of seizures and the total quantity seized reflects heightened enforcement efforts and the persistent high demand for illicit cigarettes.

**Raw tobacco from Türkiye in sofas**

Since 2022, Israeli Customs has reported three similar seizures of raw tobacco (HS Code 24.01) hidden in sofas (declared as furniture HS Code 94.03) arriving in sea containers from Türkiye.

**In the pictures** CEN ID 1547988, 28 March 2023, Ashdod seaport (Israel), arriving from Ambarli (Türkiye). The container was physically inspected and 875 kg of raw tobacco was found to have been smuggled inside the sofas.
In 2023, most tobacco products seizures (92.9% or 40,958 of 44,083) were from vehicles and air. Vehicles accounted for 49.2% (21,698) of all seizures, primarily involving cigarettes (16,337), followed by chewing and dipping tobacco (2,806), water-pipe tobacco (1,110), and electronic cigarettes and cartridges (636). Air conveyances made up 43.7% (19,260) of seizures, with cigarettes comprising the majority (12,835), followed by hand rolling and pipe tobacco (2,597) and chewing and dipping tobacco (2,409). Unknown conveyances accounted for 2.4% (1,037) of seizures, including notable seizures of cigarettes (735) and electronic cigarettes and cartridges (88). Pedestrian seizures constituted 1.6% (713), mainly cigarettes (511). Vessels accounted for 0.7% (329), mostly cigarettes.

The dominance of vehicles and air conveyances highlights these as primary smuggling methods, consistent with known routes and the ability to transport large quantities. Cigarettes were the most seized product across all methods, reflecting their high demand and profitability in the illicit market. The high percentage of vehicle and air seizures indicates a need for focused enforcement regarding these methods, including enhanced inspections, risk profiling, and intelligence-led operations. While vehicles and air dominate, seizures across diverse conveyance methods, like pedestrian and rail, indicate varied smuggling tactics, necessitating a comprehensive enforcement approach to cover all potential routes.

This analysis emphasizes the importance of continuing and enhancing targeted enforcement regarding the most common conveyance methods to effectively combat tobacco smuggling.
On 13 July 2023, Czech Customs in Petrovice (Czech Republic) checked a Volvo truck registered in Bulgaria. First, the truck was checked with the mobile cargo X-ray scanner, then the detector dog was called in to check the cargo. A total of 13.5 tonnes of raw smoking tobacco was discovered. The tobacco had been transported in 90 cardboard boxes on 32 pallets. The CMR document indicated a Bulgarian company as the consignor, although the tobacco was loaded in Lajosmisze (Hungary). The tobacco was to be unloaded in Antwerp (Belgium). The Bulgarian driver stated that he had transported the original cargo from Bulgaria to Hungary. Then he was sent to Lajosmisze (Hungary) by a forwarding company because the truck was broken. There he had loaded the new shipment and was heading to Belgium (CEN ID 1588923).
Nearly 22 tonnes of tobacco products in the stable

On 10 December 2023, officers of the National Revenue Administration in Łódź, in cooperation with the Provincial Police Headquarters in Łódź and the Independent Counter-Terrorist Sub-Division of the Police, detected an illegal cigarettes factory in a stable. The factory was situated in the west of Poland, in the Jarocin district. They discovered a tobacco processing line in the stable attic. It was operated by three men, aged 42, 48 and 50. They were assisted by a 32-year-old woman, who was found with 30 grams of cannabis. All four were taken into police custody. The men were charged with tax evasion and participating in an organized criminal group. The woman was also charged with drug possession. Officers seized almost 22 tonnes of dried and smoking tobacco and a complex of tobacco processing equipment: drum heater, four tobacco cutting machines, two heaters, an oil-lubricated compressor, four rollers (elements of the tobacco grinder) and three electronic scales. The total amount of the excise tax evasion is at least EUR 3,200,000.

Case study 5.
ILLEGAL CIGARETTE FACTORY IN POLAND

1 Article from HERALD Issue 4/2023 - RILO ECE
Case study 6.
COVER-LOAD OF DRINKING WATER YIELD OVER 6 MILLION CIGARETTES MOVING FROM BELARUS TO RUSSIA

In May 2023, Belarus Customs at Vitebsk Customs point suppressed the illegal movement of tobacco products from Belarus to Russia in a cargo vehicle. Customs control of the vehicle revealed that “drinking still water with and without gas” had been installed as a cover good for tobacco products. 6,496,000 cigarettes were hidden under the bottles of water in the back of the vehicle (CEN ID 1648166).

Courtesy of Belarus Customs.
Figure 6: Number of tobacco products cases by Customs procedure and country, 2023

Figure 6 shows the 15 countries that reported the most tobacco products cases in 2023 and indicates the direction in which target shipments were moving when recovered.

Of the 36,613 cases reported by these 15 countries, 32,501 (88.7%) occurred at import. Only 2,798 cases (7.6%) occurred at export, 895 (2.4%) in transit, and 419 (1.1%) internally.

Saudi Arabia reported the highest number of cases, with 15,958 (99.9%) occurring at import. The United Kingdom followed, with 11,534 cases (98.3%) at import. Austria reported the third highest number of cases, with 1,678 (73.2%) at import, while Kuwait reported the fourth highest, with 2,725 cases (97.1%) at export and only 81 (2.9%) at import. For Italy and Slovakia, the majority of cases occurred at import. Of their combined 1,551 cases, 1,361 (87.7%) occurred at import. Similarly, Oman reported 561 (90.2%) of its 622 cases at import. Poland was notable for having a significant portion of its cases occur internally and in transit. Of Poland’s 181 cases, 63 (34.8%) occurred internally and 10 (5.5%) in transit, with only 106 (58.6%) at import. This contrasts with the trend seen in most other countries, where import cases predominate. Belgium and Sweden reported higher percentages of transit cases. Belgium reported 145 of its 156 cases (92.9%) as being in transit, while Sweden reported four out of 285 cases (1.4%) as in transit.

This analysis underscores the importance of targeting import procedures, which account for the vast majority of tobacco products seizures. However, significant cases occurring at export, in transit, and internally indicate the need for comprehensive enforcement strategies that address all points in the supply chain.
Among the 23 countries that reported at least 100 seizures, 19 (82.6%) reported cases in at least five of the categories shown. The five countries that reported the most seizures in 2023 – Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, Kuwait, Austria, and Italy – all reported the majority of their seizures as cigarettes.

Not all countries reported primarily cigarettes, however. In the United Kingdom, 21.8% of reported seizures were of hand rolling and pipe tobacco, and 2.9% were of water-pipe tobacco. Oman reported 148 of its 677 seizures (21.9%) as chewing and dipping tobacco. In Qatar, 57.5% of the reported seizures were of chewing and dipping tobacco, while in Slovakia, 11.6% of the seizures were of electronic cigarettes and cartridges.
In both years, the Middle East, Western Europe, and Eastern and Central Europe reported the first-, second-, and third-most seizures of tobacco products, respectively. These three regions reported 42,864 of 44,083 seizures (97.2%) in 2023. In the same year, the Middle East reported 48.0% of tobacco products seizures, Western Europe reported 44.8%, and Eastern and Central Europe reported 4.5%. The number of seizures reported in the Middle East increased from 2022 to 2023, and the quantity of pieces seized also increased significantly. The Middle East reported the recovery of significant quantities of various tobacco products in 2023, including 5,109 seizures of chewing and dipping tobacco and 1,256 seizures of water-pipe tobacco. In Western Europe, the number of seizures also increased, with a notable number of seizures involving cigarettes (14,574) and hand rolling and pipe tobacco (3,305). The region reported a high number of seizures across various tobacco products, reflecting continued enforcement efforts. Eastern and Central Europe saw a stable number of seizures, with 1,554 seizures of cigarettes and a notable amount of hand rolling and pipe tobacco (63 seizures). The region’s enforcement continues to be strong in targeting various types of tobacco products.
This analysis highlights the ongoing prevalence of tobacco smuggling in the Middle East, Western Europe, and Eastern and Central Europe, underscoring the need for continued and enhanced enforcement efforts in these regions.

Figure 9: Tobacco products trafficking flows by region, 2023

The Middle East and Eastern and Central Europe emerged as the most significant origin regions, with 19,745 flows originating from the Middle East and 7,224 from Eastern and Central Europe, representing 51.9% and 19.0% of all 38,022 flows, respectively. Most trafficking was intra-regional, with the vast majority of the Middle East’s outward flows (17,940 flows, or 90.9%) destined for locations within the same region. In total, 23,701 flows, accounting for 62.3% of all movements, involved departures from or destinations within the Middle East. The Middle East was also the leading destination, with 20,251 flows (53.3%) ending there. Western Europe followed as the second-most popular destination, with 15,326 flows (40.3%). Of the 34,720 flows originating outside Western Europe, 25.3% ended in this region. Western Europe was a primary destination for flows from various regions, including Central Africa, North America, Eastern and Central Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and West Africa. Notably, Western Europe had the greatest disparity between the number of flows starting within the region (4,302) and those ending there (15,326).
This analysis underscores the ongoing prevalence of intra-regional trafficking within the Middle East and Western Europe, highlighting the need for focused enforcement strategies to combat these movements. The substantial number of flows terminating in Western Europe further underscores its role as a key destination for trafficked tobacco products.

**Figure 10: Heat map of tobacco products trafficking instances by country, 2023**

The map indicates the number of times each country was the origin, destination, or transit point for one or more seized shipments of tobacco products, regardless of where the seizure took place or which country reported it. By breaking down individual seizures this way, the Figure depicts all countries where tobacco products were known or intended to have been trafficked in 2023.

Of the 172 countries for which trafficking instances were reported, 24 had more than 500 instances, 44 had between 51 and 500 instances, 57 had between five and 50 instances, and 47 had fewer than five instances. The data show that the top 24 countries involved in the highest number of trafficking instances were also among the most significant in reporting cases. For instance, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and Kuwait were prominent, with each country recording more than 500 instances. Other notable countries with over 500 instances included United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, Spain, Austria, Poland, and France.
2. Overall trends in the trafficking of alcohol products

Figure 11: Number of alcohol products cases by country, 2022-2023

In 2023, 43 countries reported 2,069 alcohol products cases, a significant decrease of 59.7% from the 5,133 cases reported by 48 countries in 2022. Slovakia reported the highest number of cases in 2023, with 592 cases, up by 277% from 157 cases in 2022. Saudi Arabia followed, with 423 cases in 2023, an increase of 38.2% from 306 cases in the previous year. Belgium reported 215 cases in 2023, having no reported cases in 2022, and the United Kingdom reported 169 cases in 2023. Other notable changes include Oman, which showed a slight increase of 9.2%, from 109 cases in 2022 to 119 cases in 2023, and Italy, whose cases increased by 30.2%, from 86 cases in 2022 to 112 in 2023. South Africa saw a decrease of 42.4%, from 170 cases in 2022 to 98 cases in 2023, while Bangladesh reported a slight decrease of 5.3%, from 57 cases in 2022 to 54 in 2023. Countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, Uzbekistan, and Croatia saw increases in reported cases in 2023 by 73.3%, 100%, and 13.6% respectively, while Argentina and Cameroon also reported more cases compared to the previous year, with decreases of 56.8% and increases of 275%, respectively. Poland, Montenegro, Kuwait, and Belarus saw decreases in their reported cases in 2023 compared to 2022, by 48.1%, 67.5%, 42.9%, and 26.7%, respectively.
Figure 12: Number of alcohol products seizures and quantity seized by category, 2022-2023
In 2023, Customs officials reported 2,761 seizures of 3,818,257.1 litres of alcohol products, a 61.4% decrease in seizures but a 118% increase in volume compared to 2022.

Grape distilled spirits had a sharp decline in seizures, from 4,669 to 567, but saw a volume surge from 213,477.36 litres to 2,433,977.79 litres, a 1,040.5% increase. Beer had 359 seizures, with a volume of 795,712.58 litres. Liqueur seizures rose from 312 to 529, with volumes increasing from 115,379.75 litres to 213,458.19 litres. Whiskey seizures increased from 424 to 492, but volume fell from 430,299.95 litres to 242,202.27 litres. Vodka seizures nearly doubled, from 227 to 428, though volume decreased from 179,572.13 litres to 103,090.53 litres. Undenatured ethyl alcohol saw seizures rise from 109 to 198, but volume fell from 37,714.37 litres to 19,196.86 litres. The “Other” category increased in seizures, from 36 to 55, but saw volume drop from 71,497 litres to 1,986.9 litres. Wine seizures slightly decreased, from 10 to 8, with volume dropping from 1,148.7 litres to 37.5 litres.

Overall, fewer seizures were reported, but the volume of alcohol products seized increased significantly, mainly due to the rise in grape distilled spirits, indicating a trend towards fewer but larger volume seizures.

Figure 13: Number of alcohol products seizures and quantity seized by type and conveyance method, 2023
In 2023, the total number of alcohol products seizures was 2,761, distributed across various conveyance methods. Vehicle seizures were the most prevalent, with 1,767 seizures, accounting for 64% of the total. These included 261 beer seizures, 388 grape distilled spirits seizures, and 233 liqueur seizures. Air seizures followed, making up 406 of the total (14.7%). This category included 112 grape distilled spirits seizures and 118 whisky seizures. Unknown conveyance methods accounted for 377 seizures (13.7%), with significant amounts of liqueur (60) and undenatured ethyl alcohol (106). Pedestrian seizures amounted to 65, primarily involving liqueur (58 seizures). Vessel seizures were fewer in number, totalling 49, including 12 beer and 20 whisky seizures. Other methods, such as express courier, rail train, and regular mail, had minimal seizures.

Overall, vehicle seizures dominated in number, while air and unknown conveyances also played significant roles, particularly in the trafficking of specific alcohol products like grape distilled spirits and whisky. The data indicate that vehicle and air conveyances were key methods for alcohol trafficking in 2023.

Figure 14: Number of alcohol products seizures by Customs procedure and country, 2023

The vast majority of recoveries occurred at import. Of the 1,940 cases reported by these 15 countries, 1,586 (81.8%) occurred at import. Only 29 cases (1.5%) occurred in transit, 303 (15.6%) occurred internally, and 22 (1.1%) occurred at export.
Slovakia, with the most reported cases, had 555 cases (93.7% of its cases) at import, 21 internally, 13 in transit, and three at export. Saudi Arabia reported 421 cases (99.5%) at import. Similarly, Oman and Italy reported the majority of their cases at import, with 88 (73.9%) and 98 (87.5%) cases, respectively. Belgium was notable for having the majority of its cases internally (213 cases, 99.1%), while the United Kingdom had 168 cases at import and only one internally. Croatia and Côte d’Ivoire also showed a mix of import and internal cases. Argentina had a unique distribution, with 15 export cases, three at import, and one internal.

The data indicate that while most alcohol products recoveries occur at import, a significant number also happen internally within countries, reflecting diverse smuggling strategies.

Case study 7.
UNACCOMPANIED GOODS CONTINUE TO REMAIN A THREAT AS HIGHLIGHTED BY IRISH CUSTOMS

On 28 April 2023, Customs officers at Rosslare Europort, Ireland, seized approximately 26,092 litres of beer with a retail value of over €104,000. There were multiple brands involved in the detection. This consignment arrived in an unaccompanied trailer that had disembarked a ferry from Dunkirk, France. The trailer carrying the alcoholic products was also seized.

*Courtesy of Ireland Customs.*
Two men have been charged over an alleged conspiracy to defraud the Federal Government of $337 million in an alcohol importation fraud. The men are accused of orchestrating a complex scheme to avoid paying duty on alcohol which was being imported into the country, and then fraudulently claiming duty refunds on alcohol they exported. The men, aged 49 and 50 from Caroline Springs in Victoria, have each been charged with conspiracy to defraud the Commonwealth and with dishonestly causing a loss by way of joint commission offending. Following an Australian Border Force (ABF) investigation, it is alleged that between 2017 and 2019, the two men operated a business out of several warehouses in Ravenhall, Victoria. The ABF operation uncovered evidence that the men conspired to illegally smuggle alcohol into Australia, and then export substituted alcohol from Australia, claiming back duty from the Commonwealth that had not been paid in the first instance. The men would import spirits and beer, pay the duty on wrongly declared goods at a reduced value, then remove the spirits, including gin, whiskey and vodka, and sell them into the Australian domestic market. They would then export the beer, claiming there were spirits in the containers, which allowed them to claim a higher amount of duty back from the Commonwealth. Once the alcohol was imported into their licensed warehouse, the men would move the goods to another warehouse they operated, smuggling out spirits and packing containers with beer before exporting those containers wrongly declared as spirits. The alleged fraud is calculated at $337,860,406.19 over the period.
In 2023, the analysis of alcohol products seizures shows diverse patterns across 43 countries. Slovakia, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, Belgium, and South Africa were the top five countries in terms of the number of seizures. Slovakia reported the highest number of seizures, totalling 951. Notably, vodka and grape distilled spirits constituted 28.1% and 24.3% of Slovakia’s seizures, respectively. Saudi Arabia followed, with 472 seizures, with whiskey making up 34.5% and beer 28.6% of the seizures. The United Kingdom recorded 235 seizures, with grape distilled spirits accounting for 46.4% and beer accounting for 26.8%. Belgium had 215 seizures, predominantly liqueur and whisky, each representing 18.1%. South Africa’s 203 seizures were largely liqueur (63.5%) and whisky (28.1%). Interestingly, Bangladesh reported all 54 seizures as liqueur, while Italy’s seizures were primarily grape distilled spirits (92%). Oman, with 154 seizures, focused on beer (36.4%) and whisky (57.1%).

Overall, the data show that while certain countries have a diverse range of seized alcohol products, others show a strong preference for specific categories. This highlights the varied enforcement priorities and potential trafficking patterns in different regions.
On Friday 21 April 2023, the Rwanda National Police (RNP) Anti-Smuggling and Organized Crime (ASOC) Department bust ed a house in Rukiri village, Kabeza cell of Kanombe sector, Kicukiro District, which was being used as a store for smuggled wines and liquors. The ASOC officers raided the rental house at about 8 p.m. and recovered 406 bottles of assorted smuggled wines and spirits, all valued at Frw 15 million, as well as 360 packets of cigarettes. Four people, including a woman and her daughter, the alleged owner of the seized smuggled goods, as well as two of their brokers, have so far been arrested. One of the suspects said that they had suppliers in the DRC who made sure that the liquors were smuggled into Rwanda and delivered to them in Kigali.

The suspect said, “Our suppliers face all the hurdles to smuggle them into Rwanda and to Kigali. They work with drivers of transit trucks from DRC to Kigali. We don't pay for the transportation; we pay for products when they are successfully delivered to us. For this consignment only, which was delivered to us in small quantities for a period of one month, we paid Frw 7 million.” Article 87 of the law on tax procedures provides for imprisonment of between two and five years for tax evasion.
In 2023, Eastern and Central Europe reported the most seizures, with 1,021 (37.0% of the total 2,761 seizures), followed by the Middle East with 670 seizures (24.3%) and Western Europe with 597 seizures (21.6%). Although the number of seizures in Eastern and Central Europe increased significantly, from 371 in 2022 to 1,021 in 2023, the quantity of alcohol seized decreased, from 102,297.68 litres to 11,863.1 litres. The Middle East saw a slight increase in seizures, from 599 to 670, with a notable rise in the quantity seized, from 398,516.16 litres to 692,303.19 litres. Western Europe experienced a substantial decrease in the number of seizures, from 5,522 to 597, but the quantity seized remained relatively stable, increasing slightly from 664,818.28 litres to 671,266.29 litres. The East and Southern Africa region saw a decrease in both the number of seizures (from 386 to 265) and the quantity seized (from 34,839.07 litres to 19,104.27 litres). The Asia Pacific region also reported decreases in both metrics, with seizures dropping from 97 to 67 and the quantity seized decreasing from 62,532.39 litres to 44,362.1 litres. Conversely, the Central Africa region reported an increase both in the number of seizures (from 10 to 28) and the quantity seized (from 320,125 litres to 2,335,750.5 litres), highlighting significant enforcement efforts.

Figure 16 compares the number of seizures of alcohol products and the quantity seized (in litres) by reporting region between 2022 and 2023.
This analysis underscores the varying trends in alcohol products seizures across different regions, indicating shifts in smuggling activities and enforcement efforts. Enhanced strategies are necessary to address these changes effectively.

**Figure 17**: Alcohol products trafficking flows by region, 2023

Eastern and Central Europe and Western Europe emerged as the most significant origin regions, with 643 and 482 flows originating from these regions, representing 31.1% and 23.3% of all 2,069 flows, respectively. The Middle East (ME) followed closely, with 427 flows, accounting for 20.6% of all movements. Intra-regional trafficking was prominent, particularly in the Middle East, where 99.8% of its outward flows were destined for locations within the same region. Western Europe also exhibited significant intra-regional movement, with 74.3% of flows staying within the region. In Eastern and Central Europe, 79.0% of flows were intra-regional. Eastern and Central Europe was also the leading destination, with 641 flows ending there, making up 31.0% of the total. The Middle East followed, with 582 flows (28.1%), then Western Europe, with 513 flows (24.8%).

This analysis underscores the ongoing prevalence of intra-regional trafficking within the Middle East and Western Europe, highlighting the need for focused enforcement strategies to combat these movements. The substantial number of flows terminating in Europe further underscores its role as a key destination for trafficked alcohol products.
The map shows how often each country was involved as the origin, destination, or transit point for seized shipments of alcohol products, irrespective of the location of seizure or reporting country. This breakdown provides a comprehensive view of the countries where alcohol trafficking occurred or was intended to occur in 2023.

Out of 106 countries for which trafficking instances were reported, two had more than 500 instances, 16 had between 51 and 500 instances, 38 had between five and 50 instances, and 50 had fewer than five instances. Slovakia and Belgium were particularly prominent, each recording over 500 instances. Other notable countries with significant trafficking activity included Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, all reporting between 51 and 500 instances. These data highlight the widespread nature of alcohol trafficking across various regions, with certain countries standing out as major hubs for these illicit activities.
Case study 10.
OPERATION “BAD DRINK” – ITALY: GUARDIA DI FINANZA\(^2\) AND ICQRF\(^3\)

Denatured alcohol and anti-COVID-19 alcohol products intended for the clandestine production of wines and spirits

In March 2023, Guardia di Finanza of Naples and the Central Inspectorate for the Protection of Quality and Fraud Repression of Agri-Food Products (ICQRF) of the Ministry of Agriculture, led by the Public Prosecutor’s Office of North Naples, executed an order of application of personal and real precautionary measures against 12 persons.

Investigations which had already started in 2021 revealed that the criminal association was responsible for the offences of adulteration

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\(^2\) Italian economic and financial police

\(^3\) ICQRF, the central inspectorate for the protection of quality and the prevention of fraud in agri-food products, is one of the major European agri-food control bodies in Italy.
and smuggling of alcoholic products, evasion of the assessment and payment of excise duty on alcohol and alcoholic beverages, trade fraud, receiving stolen goods, self-laundering, fraudulent transfer of valuables, and counterfeiting of trademarks and distinctive signs.

The subject of the investigation was the introduction into the national territory of large quantities of disinfectant and denatured alcohol of foreign origin that were used for the production of alcoholic beverages.

In particular, it was possible to ascertain how the criminal association, also taking advantage of the emergency context connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, had procured large quantities of denatured alcohol of illegal foreign origin, through the preparation of false transport documents and the use of companies fictitiously registered in the name of third parties, in order to smuggle a product ostensibly intended for sanitization into the territory of the State.

Denatured alcohol was then used for the production of counterfeit and adulterated alcoholic beverages, which were produced in clandestine factories, where the material counterfeiting of the product also took place, through the use of counterfeit material useful for bottling (distinctive signs, caps and labels). The counterfeit and adulterated drinks were then placed on the market to evade VAT and excise duty on alcoholic products, through sales activities carried out vis-à-vis wineries, distilleries, wholesalers and retailers located in southern Italy.

Chemical analyses carried out by the ICQRF laboratories on the seized bottles revealed an alcoholic strength that differed from the one indicated on the labels affixed to the products, as well as the addition of raw materials unfit for human consumption and dangerous to health, traceable to a hidden, parallel market.

The harmful substances found in the beverages marketed by the association (isopropyl alcohol and methyl ethyl ketone) are, in fact, typical of the composition of alcohol intended for the production of chemical disinfectants, and hence substances that cannot be used in the food production cycle. In one case, the handling of the seized sparkling wines and spirits was done by removing the seals affixed to a tanker previously seized by the Judicial Authority, removing the alcohol contained therein and replacing it with denatured alcohol supplied by the associates, which had physical and organoleptic requirements unsuitable for commercial purposes.

The thorough investigation also revealed the counterfeiting of the state marks that must be affixed to alcohol products by law, as the coupons used by the association were materially counterfeited by a print shop run by another suspect.
The results of the investigations revealed not only the production of counterfeit beverages containing alcohol processed with materials hazardous to human health, but also the illegal activity of counterfeiting champagne bottles apparently bearing the names of well-known international brands; bottles which, although they illegally displayed the PDO mark, in reality contained only “generic” sparkling wine, and bore labels lacking the indications prescribed by the European regulations for the sector.

In some cases, moreover, the bottles marketed by the members constituted proceeds of theft, as certified by the manufacturers of the alcoholic beverages found in the possession of the association.

The search and seizure activities carried out in the course of the investigation also revealed the production and marketing of olive oil that was not genuine and did not comply with the typical standards of such foodstuffs.

In particular, technical checks on the contents of the bottles found on the premises available to the suspects showed that, despite the wording “olive oil”, they actually contained seed oil.
The falsity of this foodstuff not only concerned the nature and origin, but also the packaging of the product, since the seed oil was placed in bottles apparently identical to those marketed by the respective parent companies, on which false labels were also affixed.

On this basis, in addition to the personal precautionary measures, the preventive seizure of the evaded taxes, quantified at approximately EUR 250,000, was ordered against the suspects.

In addition, a liquor factory, a printing works, a wine house and three clandestine factories with an estimated value of more than EUR 10 million, were seized.

Previously, during the course of the investigation, approximately 22,000 bottles of various alcoholic beverages, 650 bottles of counterfeit champagne, 900 bottles of oil bearing false distinguishing marks, 800 bottles of liqueur and grappa found to be stolen, and over 300,000 counterfeit state marks, as well as punches and clichés necessary for the production of typical labels for champagne and fine spirits, produced by well-known national and international brands, had been seized. At present, the Court of Naples has convicted several defendants in first instance for the financial crimes in dispute, imposing sentences on the promoters of the association, ranging from seven years and six months to nine years’ imprisonment.
7 SECURITY
The threat of terrorism remains at the forefront of global security, and in particular the ability of terrorists to acquire weapons. The diversion of small arms and light weapons (SALW), the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and proliferation of components to produce weapons of mass destruction (WMD) pose real threats to national and global security.
1. INTRODUCTION

At borders, Customs administrations play a pivotal role in comprehensive governmental efforts to mitigate these threats. The Punta Cana Resolution¹, adopted by the WCO Policy Commission in 2015, underscored the critical importance of Customs in border security and counter-terrorism efforts. This resolution prompted the launch of the WCO Security Programme, designed to enhance Customs capabilities in tackling security risks effectively.

This section seeks to promote a better-informed and cohesive global approach to combatting the threat of the illicit trafficking of weapons. The analysis is particularly focused on emphasising shifts in trafficking routes and methods, as well as on the adoption of new concealment and transportation strategies by smugglers.

This section relies on data from the WCO Customs Enforcement Network (CEN). Data submission is voluntary, leading to potential variability and gaps in year-to-year comparisons. Due to its Customs focused aspect, the data may not fully represent trafficking trends and enforcement efforts. It is influenced by different factors, for example, the discretion of the reporting administration and variations in enforcement effectiveness. Finally, the dataset primarily covers Customs seizures and does not include seizures made by other agencies involved in controlling illicit arms. These limitations are crucial for understanding the context and interpreting trends in global illicit arms trafficking.

Definition of Small Arms and Light Weapons

The term “Small Arms and Light Weapons” is defined by the United Nations in the International Tracing Instrument (ITI). This instrument was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 8 December 2005. It defines SALW as: any man-portable lethal weapon that expels or launches, is designed to expel or launch, or may be readily converted to expel or launch a shot, bullet or projectile by the action of an explosive.

a) “Small arms” are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for individual use. They include, inter alia, revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns;

b) “Light weapons” are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for use by two or three persons serving as a crew, although some may be carried and used by a single person. They include, inter alia, general purpose or universal machine guns, medium machine guns, heavy machine guns, rifle grenades, under-barrel grenade launchers and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, man portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems, man portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of a calibre of less than 100 millimetres.

Therefore, non-lethal firearms, such as alarm pistols (also known as blank firing guns), imitation firearms, air guns, and others are not included under the SALW definition. Other weapons, such as knives, swords, knuckledusters, stun guns, throwing stars and similar items are also not included but seizure data is of interest to WCO Members and will be included in this section.

2 International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons. Accessible here: https://www.unodc.org/documents/organized-crime/Firearms/ITI.pdf
2. OVERALL TRENDS IN WEAPONS TRAFFICKING IN 2022-2023

Figure 1: Heat map of weapons cases reported by the WCO Member administrations

The combined data from 81 reporting WCO Member countries highlights a total of 5,676 unique weapon cases (11,175 seizures) in 2022 and 2023, with a staggering 2,388,036 items interdicted, of which approximately 2,054,605 are ammunition.

From 2022 to 2023, an increase was observed in lethal small arms, particularly in categories like semi-automatic pistols, assault rifles, shotguns, and also in realistic imitation handguns. Notably, the data suggests new trends as there has been increased seizures and quantities in air guns and realistic imitation firearms.

Conversely, other components, including parts and accessories of small arms (like aiming devices and magazines) and other SALW types, including their ammunition, saw a decrease in both seizures and quantities interdicted.

The total number of cases reported by WCO Members decreased by 11 per cent, from 3,001 in 2022 to 2,675 in 2023. Similarly, seizures dropped by 13 per cent year-over-year, from 6,323 in 2022 to 4,852 in 2023.

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3 One case may comprise seizures of multiple types of commodities. For example, one case may include seizures of a gun, ammunition and cash, therefore comprising of three seizures. This differentiation is important to understand the analysis in this section.
In 2023, North America (NAM) saw a significant decrease in the number of seizures for weapons, dropping from 1,364 seizures in 2022 to 674 in 2023. Western Europe (WE) displayed a substantial increase, with seizures rising from 79 in 2022 to 541 in 2023. The Middle East (ME) also saw an increase in weapon seizures, moving from 217 in 2022 to 269 in 2023. Eastern and Central Europe (ECE) experienced a slight increase, with seizures rising from 135 in 2022 to 145 in 2023. The Caribbean (CAR) region reported a decrease, with seizures dropping from 103 in 2022 to 66 in 2023. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) showed a minor decline in seizure, from 67 in 2022 to 49 in 2023. South America (SA) also reported a decrease, with seizures falling from 33 in 2022 to 15 in 2023. The Asia-Pacific (AP) region saw a minor increase, with seizures rising from 31 in 2022 to 34 in 2023. West Africa (WA) experienced a slight increase, moving from 10 in 2022 to 24 in 2023. Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) reported an increase from 5 in 2022 to 14 in 2023. Central America (CA), North Africa (NA), and Central America (CAM) maintained low numbers in reported seizures.

This overview provides insights into the regional patterns of weapons trafficking. It underscores the significant role of major contributors like the North America (NAM) region in shaping the seizure landscape, while highlighting the intense fluctuations in seizure activities in regions such as Western Europe (WE), Middle East (ME), and West Africa (WA).
The data indicates varying trends across these Members, with significant decreases noted in countries such as the United States and increases in countries like Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. These trends may reflect changes in enforcement effectiveness, policy shifts, or alterations in trafficking routes and methods. In general, 14 WCO Member countries constituted 80 per cent of the total cases reported over the span of two years. Notably, the United States experienced a decrease in reported cases, dropping from 2,136 in 2022 to 1,282 in 2023, marking a notable 40 per cent change. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Mexico exhibited significant fluctuations in seizure data: the United Kingdom reported 446 cases in 2023, Saudi Arabia saw an increase by 28 per cent from 181 cases in 2022 to 247 in 2023, the United Arab Emirates witnessed a rise by 42 per cent from 108 cases in 2022 to 182 in 2023, and Mexico reported a decrease by 27 per cent from 96 cases in 2022 to 71 in 2023. Kosovo, Türkiye, Oman, Argentina, Sweden, Croatia, and Ukraine displayed varying trends, with Türkiye notably experiencing a substantial surge from 8 reported cases in 2022 to 48 in 2023.

Furthermore, the increase in reported cases within certain countries and regions in both Figure 2 and Figure 3 may signal either a surge in trafficking activity or enhanced enforcement measures, whereas the overall decrease in incidents and seizures could signify either a genuine reduction in trafficking or potential difficulties in detection and reporting. Sustained collaboration and information exchange among WCO Members, along with engagement with the WCO CEN system, are imperative for deepening comprehension and formulating effective strategies to combat the illicit trafficking of weapons.
The analysis shows a noticeable increase in seizures across various weapon categories between 2022 and 2023. Among these categories, semi-automatic pistols were the most frequently seized type in both years, even while exhibiting a notable decline from 1,276 seizures in 2022 to 662 in 2023. Additionally, electric weapons, including stun guns and tasers, saw a substantial increase from 149 seizures in 2022 to 225 in 2023. Pepper/CS spray seizures also experienced a significant surge, escalating from 18 instances in 2022 to 168 pieces in 2023.

Moreover, assault rifles, carbines, and other military-use weapons, which constitute another significant category, demonstrated a minor increase from 228 seizures in 2022 to 247 in 2023.

Other notable changes include a substantial increase in slash and stab weapons (such as knives) going from 87 seizures in 2022 to 356 in 2023. The number of seizures of air guns (air rifles/airsoft, etc.) decreased from 100 instances in 2022 to 78 instances in 2023, but the number of pieces seized exponentially increased around fivefold.

Some weapon types such as gas pistols and submachine guns remain relatively rare in terms of seizures, with gas pistols at 13 and submachine guns at 10 in 2023.
In December 2022, officers of the Yemen Customs Authority intercepted a container shipped from Ningbo, China via the Port of Jebel Ali to Aden Port in Yemen. The container was declared on the Bill of Lading as, “1234 Packages. Hardware. Lamp.” The goods were entered to HS Code 8206 (hand tools). Upon examination, officers detected more than 17,700 firearm components concealed within cartons of other items including sewing machine parts. The components appeared to be for the Kalashnikov family of rifles and included internal components vital for the operation of the firearm such as sears and hammers.

Source: Yemen Customs Authority.

A significant case showcasing the seizure of a large quantity of ammunition was reported by The Dominican Republic (see Case study 2). Ammunition seizures saw a notable decline by over 40 per cent in seizures from 2022 to 2023. Specifically, the quantity of the ammunition significantly decreased by over 75 per cent from 1,638,774 to 415,831 pieces from 2022 to 2023.

Case study 1.
Yemen Customs Authority Seizes More Than 17,000 Pieces of Firearm Components

In December 2022, officers of the Yemen Customs Authority intercepted a container shipped from Ningbo, China via the Port of Jebel Ali to Aden Port in Yemen. The container was declared on the Bill of Lading as, “1234 Packages. Hardware. Lamp.” The goods were entered to HS Code 8206 (hand tools). Upon examination, officers detected more than 17,700 firearm components concealed within cartons of other items including sewing machine parts. The components appeared to be for the Kalashnikov family of rifles and included internal components vital for the operation of the firearm such as sears and hammers.

Source: Yemen Customs Authority.
On 8 November 2022, officers from the Specialized Corps for Land Border Security (CESFRONT) assigned to the border operations base of Colonel Elías Piña, Dominican Republic, arrested two women of Haitian nationality during a check at the El Carrizal border post. During the search of the vehicle, a shipment of illicit ammunition that the two women intended to smuggle into Haiti was discovered. The cargo included 22,160 munitions including 12,000 7.62 mm calibre bullets and 10,160 5.56 mm calibre bullets. In addition, five cell phones were also seized.

Sources: SL/Haiti Libre (2022, November 9). Haiti - FLASH : More than 22,000 ammunitions intercepted in the DR, two Haitian traffickers arrested. Haitilibre Haiti - FLASH : More than 22,000 ammunitions intercepted in the DR, two Haitian traffickers arrested - HaitiLibre.com : Haiti news 7/7

Case study 2. MORE THAN 22,000 PIECES OF AMMUNITION INTERCEPTED IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
3. TRAFFICKING ROUTES

This section focuses on general routing in weapon cases with the most reported departure and destination regions.

Figure 6: Trafficking route by regions in 2022 and 2023

A significant portion of the data is categorized under unknown countries, with 48.63 percent of cases having unknown departure countries and 9.82 percent having unknown destination countries. This indicates a major gap in data reporting that needs to be addressed for more accurate monitoring and analysis.

In the different regions, North America stands out as the largest hub for both departures and destinations. North America accounts for 26.87 percent of total departures and 52.70 percent of total destinations. Eastern and Central Europe and Asia-Pacific are also significant departure regions, with 6.09 percent and 4.99 percent of total cases, respectively. The Caribbean is another notable region, particularly as a destination for smuggled weapons. It accounts for 13.29 percent of total cases, indicating a route from the Caribbean to North America. Regions such as Central America, Eastern and Southern Africa, and North Africa have relatively low numbers of cases.

Overall, the data indicates that North America, Asia-Pacific, and Eastern Europe are key regions in the smuggling network. The high percentage of unknown data points underscores the need for better data reporting mechanisms to improve the accuracy.
4. WEAPON TYPES AND QUANTITY

Figure 7: Seizure of weapon by types and regions in 2022 and 2023

In 2022 the largest category of weapons seizures were semi-automatic pistols. The second highest were electric weapons in Middle East assault rifles/carbines intended for military use, especially in the North America and the Caribbean.

The year 2023 saw a decline in the seizure of semi-automatic pistols but they remained as the most seized weapon type. Additionally, slash and stab weapons saw a significant rise in seizures, becoming the second most common type. Shotguns and revolvers also saw significant numbers, though fewer were seized in 2023 compared to 2022. Assault rifles and submachine guns, while less common than semi-automatic pistols, still represent a significant risk.

In contrast, 2023 marked an increase in the seizure of non-lethal weapons such as air guns and blank firing guns, which became more prominent compared to the previous year. The rise in these confiscations are particularly notable in countries like Qatar, Türkiye, Libya, and Germany. Meanwhile, the confiscation of electric weapons like stun guns and tasers, as well as blunt force instruments, declined compared to 2022.

Additionally, 2023 experienced a surge in the seizure of imitation hand guns marking a significant increase in both frequency and volume of seizures from the previous year. Despite a reduction in the frequency of air gun seizures, their total quantity seized in 2023 escalated markedly.

Figure 7 illustrates the weapon type and regional distribution of weapon seizures for the years 2022 and 2023.
Regional variations persisted with North America, Western Europe, and the Middle East consistently showing high rates of weapon seizures. A notable increase in weapon seizures was observed in Western Europe in 2023, in part due to the large increase of seizure of slash and stab weapons, potentially indicating increased law enforcement activities or rising illegal weapon trafficking in the region.

This analysis highlights a shift in the types of weapons being confiscated, with a particular rise in the seizure of imitation handguns and air guns. This may indicate a rise in demand for these types of weapons due to their ability to be converted to lethal fire, and the restrictions at import being less regulated than their lethal counterparts.

Case study 3.

FIREARMS SEIZURES DUE TO THE USE OF X-RAY SCANNER

On 10 April 2023, officers from the General Directorate of Customs of Albania selected a postal company’s van for inspection. The van was travelling between Albania and the United Kingdom. During the inspection the X-ray scanner indicated an inconsistency between the declared goods and the image. Subsequently Customs officers, in collaboration with the Albanian State Police, thoroughly examined the vehicle. They detected eight pistols concealed within a piece of furniture, specifically a second-hand table. The individual responsible for shipping the parcel was apprehended, and the case was transferred to the Police and Prosecutor for further investigation and legal action.

Source: Albanian Customs

On 25 January 2022, a routine control procedure conducted by Customs officials at Al’qabah Seaport in Jordan led to the interception of 1,253 pieces of blank firing guns. These were identified as semi-automatic blank firing guns of the Blow TR 92 model. Also, 173,240 pieces of ammunition were seized. The firearms were manufactured in Türkiye with the declared destination of Al’qabah, Jordan. The seizure was detected by X-ray technology.

Source: CEN database
Figure 8 illustrates the changes in the number of seizures of various types of weapons from 2022 to 2023. The graph showcases significant increases in certain weapon types, indicating shifts in enforcement focus or trafficking patterns.

Notably, slash and stab weapons exhibited a dramatic surge, coming from Western Europe, escalating from 87 seizures in 2022 to 356 in 2023 and representing a 309 per cent increase. Similarly, assault rifles, carbines, and military-grade weaponry experienced a slight growth in seizures from 228 in 2022 to 247 in 2023, an eight per cent rise. Electric weapons, including stun guns and tasers, showed an increase of seizures, up by 51 per cent from 149 in 2022 to 225 in 2023. Pepper and CS spray recorded a substantial surge, with seizures climbing from 168 in 2022 to 309 in 2023, marking an 83 per cent jump. Blank firing guns saw minimal growth, increasing from 19 in 2022 to 20 in 2023, representing a five per cent rise, while submachine guns witnessed an increase in seizures, from 10 in 2022 to 17 in 2023, marking a 67 per cent rise.
The data reveals notable trends: air gun types, including air rifle and airsoft, experienced the most significant spike with a staggering 428 per cent increase in seized quantities, indicative of high enforcement focus or enhanced availability. Shotgun seizures soared by 290 per cent, showcasing a substantial rise in interception efforts. Assault rifle, carbine, and military use categories witnessed a 44 per cent rise in seized quantities, underscoring ongoing endeavours to intercept these formidable weapons. Meanwhile, hunting rifles saw a notable 200 per cent increase.

These figures illustrate a substantial shift in the types of weapons being seized in larger quantities, suggesting possible changes in smuggling tactics or increased effectiveness in law enforcement efforts to intercept these weapons. The data from Figure 9 reinforces the necessity for continued vigilance and strategic focus in combating the illicit trade, as highlighted by the trends in weapon quantity seizures.

Figure 10 provides a clear depiction of the seizure statistics related to imitation hand guns in 2023, which had no reported cases in 2022.

There were only 25 reported seizures of imitation hand guns in 2023, however the quantity of these guns amounted to nearly 280 pieces.
Figure 11: Departure region and conveyance of imitation gun in 2023

Other methods such as by road (car, bus, motorcycle etc.) and mail are far less common, with two and one instances respectively. Finally, occasional use of alternative or less typical methods of transport were used with one instance.

**Firearms conversion is a challenge in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa**

While this trend has been observed in the countries with the most strict firearms laws, both the relative ease of access to converted firearms and their cheap prices make them attractive alternatives to traditionally manufactured lethal firearms. Converted firearms, since they are not subject to the laws regarding serial numbers and record keeping, are also challenging to investigate, which reinforces their appeal among criminals.

The types of converted firearms include imitation guns such as alarm weapons and deactivated firearms that have been modified to function as real, lethal-purpose weapons. Alarm weapons are also known as blank-firing guns, such as those fired at the beginning of a race. They are similar in design and shape to lethal firearms but manufactured to be unable to fire a bullet or projectile. Criminal elements have found methods of converting these type of weapons to be able to fire lethal ammunition. Basic engineering skills, available workshop space, and commonly used tools are often all that is required to perform some conversions.

There has been mass proliferation of these types of weapons reported by WCO Members in maritime mode, with cases of thousands of alarm pistols being seized from a single container. (See Case studies 1 and 3.)
5. DETECTION METHODS, LOCATION AND CONVEYANCE

Figure 12: Detection methods by number of cases in 2022 and 2023

Routine control emerged as the most prevalent method for detection at import. Risk profiling resulted in 512 cases, also predominantly on import. There was a noticeable shift in its utilisation from 2022 to 2023, indicating an increased reliance on risk analysis to enhance inspection. Intelligence gathering, including tip-offs, played a significant role in import and internal seizures in 2023, showcasing a notable increase. This underscores the value of shared operational intelligence and public reporting in thwarting illicit arms trafficking and managing domestic threats. Random selection, primarily employed for import checks in 2023, accounted for 100 cases in import direction, marking a decrease from the previous year.

In directional analysis, the intercepting method varies across export, import, transit, and internal movements. Export data often exhibits fewer detections, hinting at less frequent scrutiny compared to imports and internal transfers. Imports tend to yield significant detections due to risk profiling and intelligence, highlighting proactive border entry measures aimed at curbing illegal arms trafficking. Transit and internal movements are primarily governed by routine checks and random selection processes.

4 The data excludes the US data who reported that all seizures were made using risk profiling.
The prominence of airports and seaports in import seizures indicates the global nature of arms trafficking and the necessity of enhanced security measures at these entry points.

Airports and mail centres emerge as crucial in combating illicit weapon importations, with airports serving as primary hubs for import-related cases. These totalled 760 cases, and also registering notable cases in export (105) and import (608) contexts, highlighting their pivotal role in global arms trafficking networks. Additionally, mail centres exhibit significant activity in total with 318 cases, emphasizing the utilization of postal and courier services in illicit weapon trafficking. Seaports recorded 274 cases predominantly in the import direction, demonstrating the importance of maritime routes in the international arms trade and the need for targeted maritime security measures.
The analysis reveals that in terms of ammunition, there is a general decrease in seizures across most conveyance types, particularly notable in air and vessel transport. Conversely, the category of Other Weapons, encompassing air guns among others, presents a stark contrast, demonstrating a substantial overall increase. This is particularly pronounced in air and road conveyance, which witnessed an overall rise. Similarly, small arms also indicate an overall uptick in seizures, with air couriers experiencing a significant surge. Notably, vehicle transport remains the predominant conveyance method across all areas, consistent with the cases observed in 2022.

Analysis by conveyance type reveals significant trends: commercial and general aviation saw substantial rises in weapon seizures, posing a notable challenge to air transit security; express courier services witnessed remarkable increases, especially in small arms seizures, suggesting traffickers might be exploiting these services due to their global reach and frequency of shipments. Mail services exhibited mixed outcomes, with notable increase in ammunition seizures; rail showed moderate increases in small arms seizures, while other conveyance methods demonstrated minimal alterations, indicating consistent detection or trafficking patterns.
6. OPERATIONS/ PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS

The Security Programme encompasses a comprehensive array of regional projects and thematic initiatives aimed at strengthening global security measures. Comprising three regional projects and four thematic programmes, the Security Programme is strategically designed to address diverse security challenges prevalent across regions shown in Figure 15. Each project and programme within the framework is tailored to achieve specific objectives vital for enhancing the role of Customs in international security. Through collaborative efforts and targeted interventions, the Security Programme attempts to mitigate threats while fostering cooperation.

Changing trends in traditional trafficking methodology for modes of transport

Traditionally, the modes of transport for illicit firearms, ammunition and component parts trafficking have remained relatively static. Complete firearms are trafficked across borders in vehicles through land borders, and through containers in maritime mode. Ammunition and component parts have generally been seen in passenger baggage, mail and courier shipments.

In this period there have been reports from Members of outliers to these trends. The breaking down of a single firearm into its component parts and then shipping that weapon through multiple mail or courier packages, or even in multiple pieces of passenger baggage on the same aircraft, have been reported by Members.

More surprising is that large scale movement of illicit firearm component parts is occurring through maritime trafficking. The illicit shipment of firearm component parts in containerized traffic through Less than Container Load (LCL), also known as consolidated shipments, or even Full Container Load (FCL) shipments is necessarily much more difficult to detect, especially when using scanning technology on the entire container.

Instances are being reported by Members of thousands of illicit SALW component parts being detected in container traffic (Case study 1).
Project and Programme objectives:
1. Addressing the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) via the implementation of the WCO Strategic Trade Control Enforcement (STCE) Programme activities.
2. Combatting the threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) through the implementation of the WCO Programme Global Shield (PGS) activities.
3. Curbing the illicit trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) by providing SALW training to Customs administrations.
4. Raising global awareness of the increased threat posed by radio nuclear materials out of regulatory controls; through the Radiological and Nuclear Detection Awareness (RANDA) Project.
5. Tackling key issues in the thematic areas of SALW and narcotics within the Caribbean region through WCO Project BOLT.
6. Enhancing border security and promote gender equality in West African Customs administrations, with the implementation of the West Africa Security Project (WASP).

Operations
In 2023 two pivotal operations aimed at bolstering regional security and enhancing international cooperation were conducted: Operation Cosmo Mediterranean (Cosmo Med), a key initiative under the WCO Strategic Trade Control Enforcement Programme, and Operation ARENA BLANCA, for Programme Global Shield. These operations represent concerted efforts to combat emerging threats and safeguard global stability through collaborative action.
On 4 March 2023, officers of the General Directorate of Customs - Green Customs Department conducted a procedure that involved the detection and subsequent handling of a radioactive source found in a container at the Caucedo Multimodal Port in Santo Domingo Province. A gamma alarm was detected by the radiation meter portal during the inspection of a container marked for export as containing “Scrap Metals.” The Customs administration, contacted the National Energy Commission (CNE) upon discovery of the alarm. Further analysis confirmed the presence of radioactive sources, identified as Cesium-137, Iridium-192, and Selenium-75. The container was subjected to secondary inspection.

Failure to identify such sources could inadvertently introduce hazardous materials into metal melting processes, thereby jeopardizing the safety of everyday items such as utensils and construction materials.

Source: Dominican Republic – General Directorate of Customs

Case study 4.
DETECTION OF A RADIOACTIVE SOURCE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

On 4 March 2023, officers of the General Directorate of Customs - Green Customs Department conducted a procedure that involved the detection and subsequent handling of a radioactive source found in a container at the Caucedo Multimodal Port in Santo Domingo Province.

A gamma alarm was detected by the radiation meter portal during the inspection of a container marked for export as containing “Scrap Metals.” The Customs administration, contacted the National Energy Commission (CNE) upon discovery of the alarm. Further analysis confirmed the presence of radioactive sources, identified as Cesium-137, Iridium-192, and Selenium-75. The container was subjected to secondary inspection.

Failure to identify such sources could inadvertently introduce hazardous materials into metal melting processes, thereby jeopardizing the safety of everyday items such as utensils and construction materials.

Source: Dominican Republic – General Directorate of Customs

Courtesy of Dominican Republic - General Directorate of Customs.

Operation Cosmo Mediterranean (Cosmo Med), 2023.

The STCE Programme introduced the concept of Cosmo operations and organized the first global operation in 2014. As Cosmo operations evolved, there was a growing necessity to transition towards regional or sub-regional activities. Operation Cosmo Med, the most recent endeavour of this kind, took place in 2023 spanning several months. The primary objective of this Operation was to enhance operational coordination and communication, as well as to utilize the operational capabilities of countries in and around the Mediterranean region. This was conducted against the backdrop of evolving geo political dynamics to ensure that Customs administrations were equipped to prevent the proliferation of strategic goods. In 2023, the Dominican Republic also reported a case of detection of the radionuclear material (see Case study 4).
Operation ARENA BLANCA 2023

Programme Global Shield initiated Operation ARENA BLANCA was focused in the Americas and the Caribbean. This Operation specifically targets the movement of explosive precursors and other equipment essential for Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) production. Its primary objective is to foster cooperation and coordination among law enforcement officers across the participating countries. Operation ARENA BLANCA builds upon the foundation laid by regional safety and security workshops conducted as part of Programme Global Shield in Guadalajara, Mexico, in October and November 2022, along with the regional analysis of the IED threat.

The overall objectives of the Operation were to curb the unauthorized diversion of chemical precursors and other components used in improvised explosive devices (IEDs). It aimed to enhance collaboration and information sharing among Customs administrations and other law enforcement and intelligence agencies, facilitated by the Regional Intelligence Liaison Office (RILO) network and INTERPOL. The Operation also sought to strengthen cooperation between border agencies across member states to detect, intercept, and seize illegal shipments of explosive precursors used in manufacturing IEDs. This would further support investigations aimed at identifying, disrupting, and dismantling transnational illicit networks. Additionally, the Operation intended to increase the utilization of INTERPOL’s resources, particularly its databases.

Operational results:
12 out of 24 participating Members contributed a total of 110 seizures reported to the WCO CENcomm platform. Mexico recorded the highest percentage of seizures at 45.3 per cent, followed by Panama at 12.5 per cent and Belize at 10.4 per cent. In particular, the seized commodities during this phase included 830 kg of explosive precursors, 20,000 detonators, over 18,000 kg of drugs, almost 7,000,000 pieces of IPR infringing goods, as well as cigarettes, weapons, ammunition, and currency. Most of the seized commodities originated from the US and China and were predominantly imported into Mexico, Panama, and Belize.

Other significant operational results related to IED components were reported in Africa (see Case studies 5 and 6).

1. Courtesy of Ecuador Customs.
2. Courtesy of Honduras Customs.

On 11 November, 2023, Togo Customs intercepted 25 kg of explosives, including 167 detonators and 150 explosive wires, in a passenger van in Dapaong, at the border between Burkina Faso and Togo. The detection was made based on intelligence.

Source: CEN database

Case study 5.
Togo Customs seize explosives at the border with Burkina Faso

On 5 May 2022 officers from the Nigeria Customs Service intercepted a shipment of 34.9 tonnes of urea at the Yola land border. The urea was being transported locally from Port Harcourt to Yola via a trailer truck. The interception was made possible through intelligence exchange with other law enforcement agencies. This indicated the goods were related to terrorism, and further indicated to be related to the manufacturing of IEDs.

Case study 6.
Nigerian Customs Service intercepted 34.9 tonnes of urea

 Courtesy of Togo Customs.

 Courtesy of Nigerian Customs.
ABBREVIATIONS

AML Anti-Money Laundering
AMS Americas
AP Asia-Pacific
BCP Border Crossing Point
BJL Banjul Seaport
CAM Central America
CAR Caribbean
CCF-China Customs Cooperation Fund of China
CCP Container Control Programme
CESFRONT Specialized Corps for Land Border Security
CIS Commonwealth of Independent States
CITES Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CNE National Energy Commission
COVID-19 Coronavirus Disease 2019
CTF Counter-terrorism Financing
DNRED La Direction Nationale du Renseignement et des Enquêtes Douanières (National Directorate of Intelligence and Customs Investigations)
DRI Directorate of Revenue Intelligence
ECE Eastern and Central Europe
EGATT Expert Group against Theft, Trafficking and Tampering of Documentary Heritage
ESA East and Southern Africa
ESC Environmentally Sensitive Commodities
EU European Union
EUR Euro
FBI Federal Bureau of Investigation
FCL Full Container Load
FIUs Financial Intelligence Units
GC Gran Canaria
GIA Gemmological Institute of America
GIFP Global Illicit Flows Programme
GMU TraCCC George Mason University Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center
HFCs Hydrofluorocarbons
HKD Hong Kong Dollar
HS Harmonized System
HZPF Hot Zone Prioritisation Forum
ICCCWC International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime
ICG Indian Coast Guard
IED Improvised Explosive Device
ILEN Informal Law Enforcement Network on Minerals-Related Crime
INAMA Initiative Against Illegal Wildlife Trade in Sub-Saharan Africa
INCB International Narcotics Control Board
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>INL</td>
<td>International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs</td>
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<td>INTERPOL</td>
<td>International Criminal Police Organization</td>
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<td>IPR</td>
<td>Intellectual Property Rights</td>
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<td>ITR</td>
<td>Illicit Trade Report</td>
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<td>ITI</td>
<td>International Tracing Instrument</td>
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<td>JAITF</td>
<td>Joint Airport Interdiction Task Force</td>
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<td>LCL</td>
<td>Less than Container Load</td>
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<td>LPA</td>
<td>Las Palmas Airport</td>
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<td>MAOC-N</td>
<td>Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre - Narcotics</td>
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<td>ME</td>
<td>Middle East</td>
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<td>MEAs</td>
<td>Multilateral Environmental Agreements</td>
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<td>MENA</td>
<td>Middle East and North Africa</td>
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<td>NAM</td>
<td>North America</td>
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<td>NPS</td>
<td>New Psychoactive Substances</td>
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<td>ODS</td>
<td>Ozone Depleting Substances</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>OLAF</td>
<td>European Anti-Fraud Office</td>
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<td>OTR</td>
<td>Over the Road (transportation)</td>
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<td>PCCP</td>
<td>Passenger and Cargo Control Programme</td>
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<td>PF</td>
<td>Programme of Action on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT)</td>
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<td>PGS</td>
<td>Programme Global Shield</td>
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<td>PITCH</td>
<td>Preventing Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Heritage</td>
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<td>PPP</td>
<td>Public Private Partnership</td>
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<td>PT</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
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<td>R2</td>
<td>South African Rand</td>
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<td>RANDA</td>
<td>Radiological and Nuclear Detection Awareness</td>
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<td>RILO</td>
<td>Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices</td>
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<td>SA</td>
<td>South America</td>
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<td>SALW</td>
<td>Small Arms and Light Weapons</td>
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<td>SG</td>
<td>Singapore Port</td>
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<td>SIDA</td>
<td>Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency</td>
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<td>STCE</td>
<td>Strategic Trade Control Enforcement</td>
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<td>UPU</td>
<td>Universal Postal Union</td>
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<td>United States Dollar</td>
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<tr>
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