

Programme Global Shield Operation ARENA BLANCA Final report

April/May 2023



World Customs Organization

Final Report



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Regional Operation on Programme Global Shield for the Americas and the Caribbean region (OP ARENA BLANCA)

1. Introduction

Serious and organized crime is an increasingly evolving and complex phenomenon, posing a significant threat to Americas and the Caribbean countries and prosperity. Terrorist mobility as well as trafficking of commodities that are used by terrorists and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) to manufacture improvised explosive devices (IEDs) pose serious security threats for the region. To tackle these threats, the WCO Programme Global Shield, project GLOBAL decided to launch Operation ARENA BLANCA, targeting movements of precursor chemicals and other equipment used to manufacture Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) as well as terrorist mobility in the region. Operation ARENA BLANCA aims at facilitating cooperation and coordination of law enforcement officers throughout the target countries. RILO CAM, DTRA as well as INTERPOL have been invited to contribute to this endeavor.

The Operation built on the regional Programme Global Shield safety and security - as well as PGS detection workshops held in Guadalajara/Mexico in October and November 2022 and the regional IED threat analysis, carried out by WCO PGS in concert with US DTRA.

2. Threat / Background

Transnational terrorism in all forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to global peace and security. Countering this threat requires collective efforts by the WCO, together with international law enforcement partners and member administrations. For this operation, the threat must be understood at the global, regional, and national levels.

IEDs are consistently used in the majority of terrorist attacks and cause the most civilian harm of any weapon category. According to Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), between 2011 and 2017, IEDs were responsible for over 54% of all global civilian death and injuries from explosive weapons. Only in 2017, civilian casualties from IEDs were 11,791. In addition, billions of euros worth of damage to economies was also incurred in countries affected by IED incidents.

Most of the terrorist attacks carried out with IEDs have a cross border component; meaning that part of the materials used to manufacture the IEDs were sourced outside of the country in which the attack occurred. This applies for both single attacks by individuals and large scale multiple attacks by terrorist organizations in conflict zones.

Between February 2022 and January 2023, there have been 138 IED events reported within Caribbean countries proximate to Panama and Guatemala. As a weapon of choice among many Violent

Extremist Organizations (VEO), these attacks have caused 47 fatalities. Across the region 12 IED attacks per month that result in about 4 fatalities per month, unsettle society and degrade confidence in the government. Some examples below illustrate the relevance and lethality of the IED in the region:

Colombia - On 2 September 2022, in the rural area of San Luis corregimiento (Huila), seven police officers were killed in an attack perpetrated by members of the Dagoberto Ramos FARC Dissident group in the Corozal vereda. The perpetrators ambushed the police unit by opening fire on them after detonating an explosive device. There were 7 fatalities.

Venezuela - On 6 November 2022, in Barcelona (Anzoategui), CICPC police clashed with members of El Zorrito gang in the Cruz Verde neighborhood. Three suspects were killed in the shootout, including the gang's leader. One suspect threatened to use an explosive device against the officers before police shot and killed them. There were 3 fatalities.

Mexico - On 4 January 2023, in Heroica Guaymas, Sonora, there was an armed clash between armed individuals and the military forces in Colonia Centro. Four military officers were injured. The armed individuals used an explosive device that they threw at the officers. There were 2 fatalities.

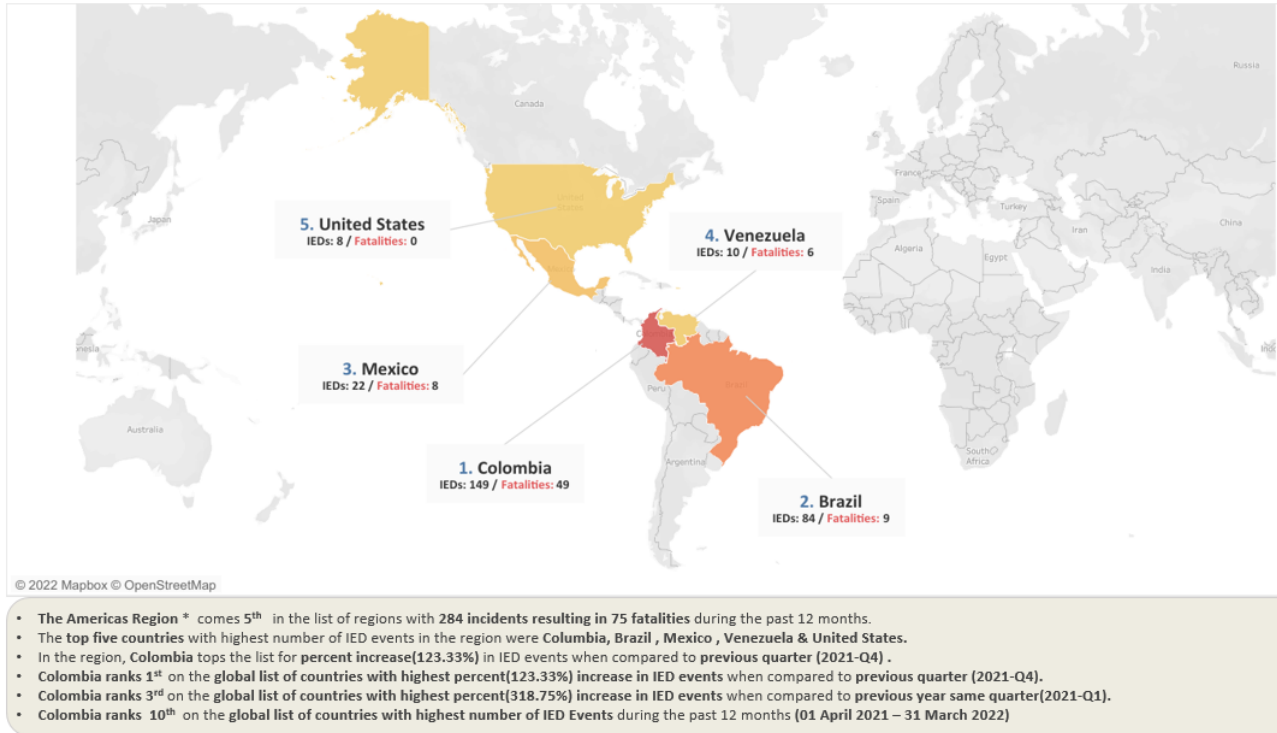
Against this global backdrop, specific regional considerations alter this general threat. Regional trading patterns, industrial activities, levels of development, areas of instability, and activities of non-State organizations should be taken into account in understanding and mapping the specific threat environment. PGS team in cooperation with DTRA and the Regional Intelligence Liaison Office for Central America (RILO CAM) are compiling these types of analyses.

At the national level, each country has unique strategic interests and security concerns, unique criminal organizations and activities, unique trade relationships and transportation systems, and unique commercial and industrial infrastructure. Prevention of smuggling and protection of legitimate business activities start with a comprehensive national threat assessment.

IEDs are the most prevalent form of explosives employed by terrorists around the world. They are manufactured using widely available precursor chemicals, detonators and transmitting devices. It is a cheap and easy way to inflict harm on populations, infrastructures and economies.

TOP 5 Countries : Americas Region

01 April 2021 – 31 March 2022



* Data From ACLED: "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)"; acleddata.com". Select countries covered by ACLED data. Threat Trends include IED Events

Chart 1: IED threat in the Americas and the Caribbean region: top 5 countries.

3. Objectives

The overall aim of the operation has been:

I. To reduce the illegal diversion of chemical precursors and additional IED components:

The operation aims at strengthening passenger as well as merchandise controls, mainly at seaports, land border crossings, as well as hot spots on certain smuggling routes within the participating countries in order to detect seize and destroy substances which are supposed to be used to manufacture IEDs (See detailed list under Targeted goods).

Moreover, the OP should identify and arrest potential culprits to link them to organized crime as well as identify, locate and intercept criminal organizers behind these activities.

To reach the aim, INTERPOL will support the efforts.

II. To promote and strengthen cooperation and exchange of information amongst Customs administrations, between Customs administrations and other law enforcement and intelligence agencies through the Regional Intelligence Liaison Office (RILO) network and with INTERPOL:

This operation involved several agencies such as law enforcement specialized security / counter terrorism of customs and police agencies. Selected airports, seaports, land borders and certain hot spots played a pivotal role in organizing and coordinating relevant agencies for this operation. In addition, cooperation between the participating countries as well as regional and international organizations (WCO / RILO / INTERPOL/ DTRA) cooperation needs to be enhanced.

III. Strengthen cooperation between border agencies in member states:

Especially by:

- Setting up National Contact Points (NCP) comprising representatives of all responsible agencies;
- Setting up joint police/customs teams at different border crossings in accordance with national legislation, in order to conduct joint checks if not already existing (e.g. JAITF);
- Improving information exchange between national law enforcement agencies (e.g. national police services, custom services, first responders, etc.) with WCO/RILO and INTERPOL, and vice-versa;
- Encouraging and intensifying regional cooperation and exchange of information among law enforcement authorities working on CT and CBRNE-related issues;
- Ensuring information exchange among all participating countries / agencies / organizations through secure communication platform (see Annex 1 communication strategy); and
- Developing relationships among agencies (e.g. police / customs) at national and regional level to detect, identify, disrupt and dismantle transnational networks. At international level, effective partnership especially between the WCO and INTERPOL should be strengthened to support these objectives.

IV. Detect, intercept and seize illicit shipments of commodities used to manufacture IEDs and support subsequent investigations with an aim to identify, disrupt and dismantle transnational illicit networks:

- Carrying out intensive and effective passenger controls, vessels, vehicle and luggage checks;
- Using appropriate detection devices (test kits, Raman Spectrometer) to identify precursor chemicals;
- Including passenger information (e.g. API/PNR) for appropriate risk assessment;
- Following defined seizure and evidence-proof mechanisms, as well as reporting chains to enable and support investigations;
- Facilitating information exchange between agencies; and
- Sharing information with related countries and the Operational Coordination Unit (OCU) through the secure communication platform for respective follow up investigations and analysis / statistics.

V. Monitor the licit movement of IED precursor chemicals and components:

To gain better understanding / overview of the precursor chemicals and components' movement and respective end use, it is important to monitor and analyse licit shipments among the focused region and beyond by:

- Checking and reporting all precursor chemicals and other IED components importations, transits, exportations in the participating countries including respective companies;
- Conducting end-user audits within the participating countries to ensure legal usage of material; and
- Reporting suspicious movements or usage to enable follow up investigations.

VI. Increase use of INTERPOL’s capabilities, in particular the use of INTERPOL’s databases:

During the operation, police forces and INTERPOL National Central Bureaus (NCB) of participating countries have been requested to regularly:

- Check voluminous amounts of data at the land borders as well as at the airports, seaports (passenger manifests) and other checkpoints (hotspots) within the countries in real time against INTERPOL’s databases, using I-Batch application if appropriate;
- Check all reported customs information on seizures and/or arrest against all INTERPOL databases;
- Store gathered information in the INTERPOL databases (NCB);
- Conduct systematic screening of individuals and their passports, entering/transiting and/or departing the participating countries against INTERPOL databases, including FTF work file (CAF); and
- Conduct systematic vehicle checks and search queries in the INTERPOL SMV database.

4. Targeted goods

The operation focused on following high risk precursor chemicals and components identified by industry experts as posing the greatest threat for use in IEDs. In addition to the 13 precursor chemicals and one metal (Aluminum powder, flakes and paste), detonators and transmitting devices currently monitored under PGS, this operation will also include aluminum paste (HS 3212 90) and commercial drones (HS 8806.100). Aluminum paste, like aluminum powder or flakes, can enhance the explosion capability of IEDs while commercially available drones can be used for delivery of IEDs or as an IED itself, set to detonate when picked up or examined. Both have been extensively used by ISIL in Syria and Iraq and there is a high probability that terrorist and/or violent extremist groups may replicate the use of these components in other countries.

| Precursor chemicals | CAS number | HS Code |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---------|
| Ammonium Nitrate | 6484-52-2 | 3102.30 |
| Nitromethane | 75-52-5 | 2904.20 |
| Sodium Nitrate | 7631-99-4 | 3102.50 |
| Potassium Nitrate | 7757-79-1 | 2834.21 |
| Sodium Chlorate | 7775-09-9 | 2829.11 |
| Potassium Chlorate | 3811-04-9 | 2829.19 |
| Potassium Perchlorate | 7778-74-7 | 2829.90 |
| Acetone | 67-64-1, 7217-25-6 | 2914.11 |

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------|
| Hydrogen Peroxide | 7722-84-1 | 2847.00 |
| Ammonium Calcium Nitrate double salt | 15245-12-2 | 3102.60 |
| Calcium Ammonium Nitrate | | 3102.90 |
| Nitric Acid | 7697-37-2/43625-06-5/13587-52-5 | 2808.00 |
| Urea | 57-13-6 | 3102.10 |

| Metal | CAS number | HS Code |
|----------------------------|------------|---------|
| Aluminum Paste | | 3212.90 |
| Aluminum Flakes and Powder | 7429-90-5 | 7603.10 |

Other IED components **HS Code**

Detonators, detonating cord, blasting caps, safety fuses, igniters 3603 00

Besides these targeted goods, this operational report includes all other seizures conducted and reported by the participating border points/check points during the operational phase in order to get an overall picture of licit and illicit movements of precursor chemicals and other merchandise in the focused region (Americas and Caribbean).

5. Phases

Three phases have been established for this operation:



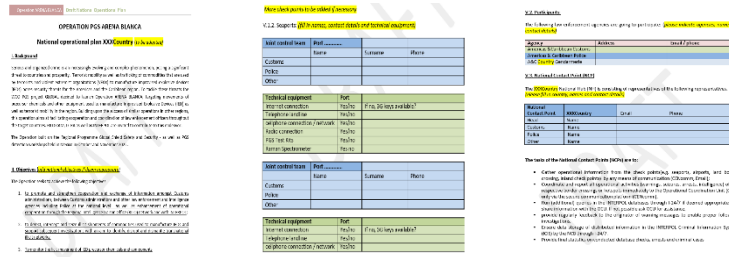
Chart 2: Phases of OP ARENA BLANCA

5.1. Pre-operational phase (October 2022 – April 2023):

5.1.1. Member invitation / preparation

After the conduct of the two regional PGS workshops in Guadalajara / Mexico in October and November 2022 and the WCO invitation sent to regional members end of December 2022, participating members were asked to:

- Create National Operational Implementation Plans based on respective templates provided.



- Identify other government agencies and respective contact details (e.g., police, licensing or permitting authority) to be included in the operation and to be added to national operational plans.
- Set up joint control units at selected border points if ever possible.



- Set up one National Contact Point (Hub) in each country consisting of all necessary agencies by end of March 2023.



Chart 3: set up of National Contact Points (Hubs) in participating member states.

- Establish a national workflow to address the comprehensive and accurate collection, recording, review and dissemination of information and intelligence;
- Provide full support and proper coordination to law enforcement services.
- Conduct trade and threat analysis to help develop and test risk indicators and profiles at national level.
- Conduct cascade training at national level prior to the operation if deemed appropriate.

5.1.2. Communication strategy during the operation:

To enable proper communication among participating agencies and to avoid unsecure data exchanges using normal Internet e-mail, WCO/PGS set up an OP ARENA BLANCA CENcomm3 platform (global secure operational communication platform / closed user group) to exchange operational information, while INTERPOL’s I-24/7 system was used as the medium for regular queries in the INTERPOL databases during the operation, as well as to capture and forward relevant data to be stored in INTERPOL’s ICIS.



Chart 4: CENcomm communication strategy.

5.1.3. Operational Coordination Unit (OCU) set up

WCO PGS established contact points within relevant international organizations (DTRA, RILO, INTERPOL etc.), and set up an Operational Coordination Unit (OCU), containing RILO CAM, DTRA, INTERPOL and Guatemala Customs representatives. OCU became operational during the operational phase at RILO CAM in Guatemala.

5.1.3. Pre-operational meeting

On 4th and 5th April 2023, a pre-operational meeting was conducted in Panama City, Panama. Representatives from 23 participating members as well as from RILO CAM and partner organizations (INTERPOL, DTRA) attended the meeting. During the two-day event:

- The operational concept and the communication strategy was introduced,
- National Operational Plans (NOP) were presented by participating members,
- WCO / PGS trained on integrity,
- The final overall operational plan was agreed upon,
- WCO / PGS trained on the use of CENComm3 communication Platform.

Finally, participants agreed upon to run the operational phase between **24th April and 04th May**.

5.2. Operational phase – high intense period (24th April – 04th May 2023)

5.2.1. Member activities

24 members out of the Americas and Caribbean region participated in the operation (see detailed list in below chart).

The geographical area of the operation focused on the selected international airports, seaports, land border crossings and inland checkpoints (hotpots) mentioned in members National Operational Plan (NOP).

The driving principle behind the operation was that each participating country has mobilized the appropriate resources in line with the purposes and objectives of the operation. In total, more than 186 customs officers and additional law enforcement directly carried out intensive border and inland checks with the focus on the above-mentioned IED components /precursor chemicals and terrorist movements.

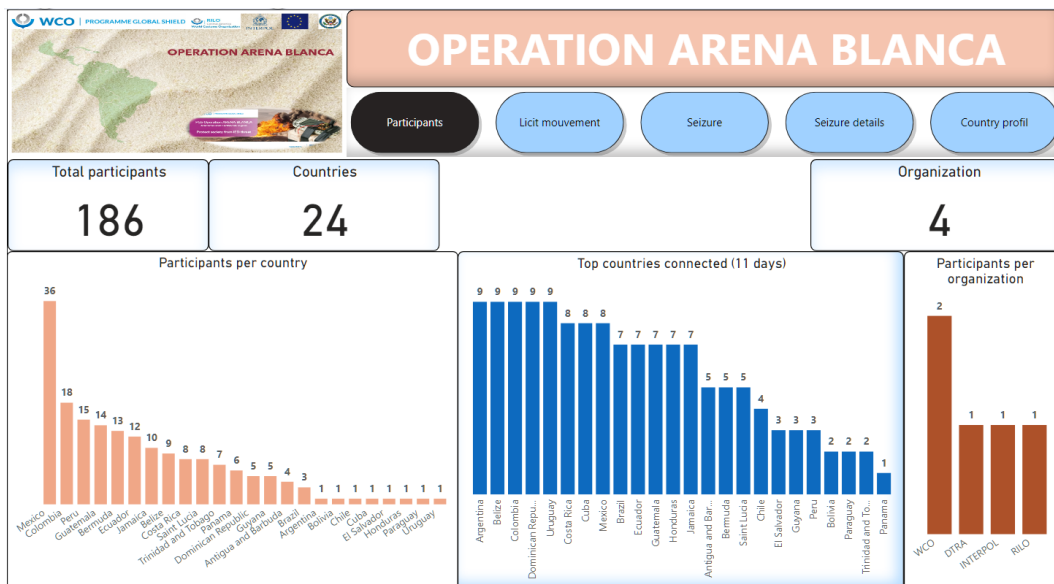


Chart 5: participating members and amount of involved customs staff, partner organisations



Chart 6: Different joint control units performing during the operational phase

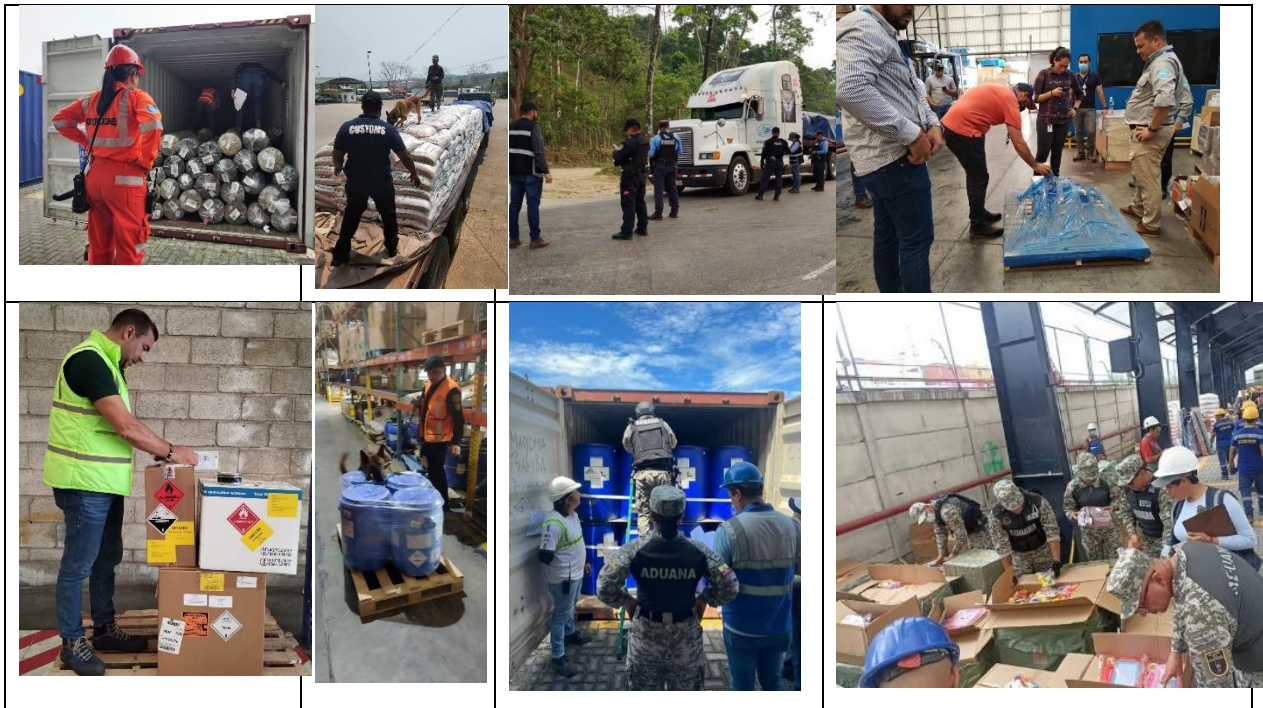


Chart 7: Different customs checks at borders

5.2.2. OCU activities

The Operational Coordination Unit (OCU) was set up at RILO Central America (CAM) in Guatemala City, Guatemala, consisting of WCO PGS coordinator, PGS analyst, DTRA expert, RILO CAM representative, and a Guatemala Customs analyst.

OCU was regularly in touch with all participating NCPs and regularly assisted members in uploading information on licit precursor chemicals and additional IED components movements as well as seizures to the CENcomm3 platform. In addition, OCU crosschecked nominal data in the INTERPOL databases, provided feedback, analyzed all shared and uploaded information and compiled regularly daily reports shared among participants.



Chart 8: OCU, set up in Guatemala City performing during the operational phase.

5. 3. Post-operational phase (4th May to 31rd July 2023)

After the end of the operational phase and prior to the post-operational meeting (debrief), participating members reported on additional seizures and licit movements on precursor chemicals and additional IED components and revised/updated shared information in CENcomm3. WCO/PGS analysed shared information and started drafting final operational report. An operational debriefing was held on May 23rd -24th 2023 in Panama City, Panama.

During the meeting, operational activities, results and first analysis were presented and discussed. Members presented on their preparation, conduct and national results of the operation as well as success stories and lessons learned.

WCO, RILO CAM, INTERPOL and DTRA provided feedback on their experiences and views out of OCU prospective.

Besides excellent reporting and visualization of the licit IED components movements, major seizures on detonators, chemical precursors, tons of drugs, firearms, tobacco, cigarettes and IPR goods contain the provisional results.

On the second day, lessons learned and the way forward were discussed. Strong and weak points were identified and a list of follow ups / recommendations was jointly compiled and agreed upon during the closing session: (see detailed results, analysis and follow ups below under item 6).



Chart 9: participants and DG Panama Customs during pre-and post-operational meeting.

6. Results

Operational results and respective analysis contain information gathered between **April 24th and June 1st 2023** (reporting phase). Participating members were asked to complete and upload respective licit precursor chemicals and additional IED components movements as well as seizures effected even after the operational phase until 1st June 2023.

The results and respective analysis are split into the licit trade of precursor chemicals and IED components in the region as well as seizures effected by members.

6.1. Licit precursor chemical movements

Licit precursor chemicals and additional IED components have been reported and uploaded to CENcomm3 OP ARENA BLANCA platform on a template especially developed for PGS in 2022 (“PGS monthly report”). Members filtered and downloaded respective information from their customs clearance databases and uploaded it to the CENcomm3 platform. This procedure is going to be continued after the operation on a monthly basis. Members promised to share this information on the permanent PGS CENcomm3 platform to ensure WCO/PGS is able to compile the regional and global quarterly report to be shared with members.

On the first days of the operation, OCU regularly assisted members in filtering and retrieving respective information from their member customs clearance database and to upload it into CENcomm3.

Nevertheless, 1,788 licit shipments have been identified in the region and uploaded to CENcomm during the reporting phase.

Among all PGS monitored goods, **Urea** was the most prominent traded commodity in the region for importation and exportation, followed by **ammonium nitrate** and **hydrogen peroxide**.

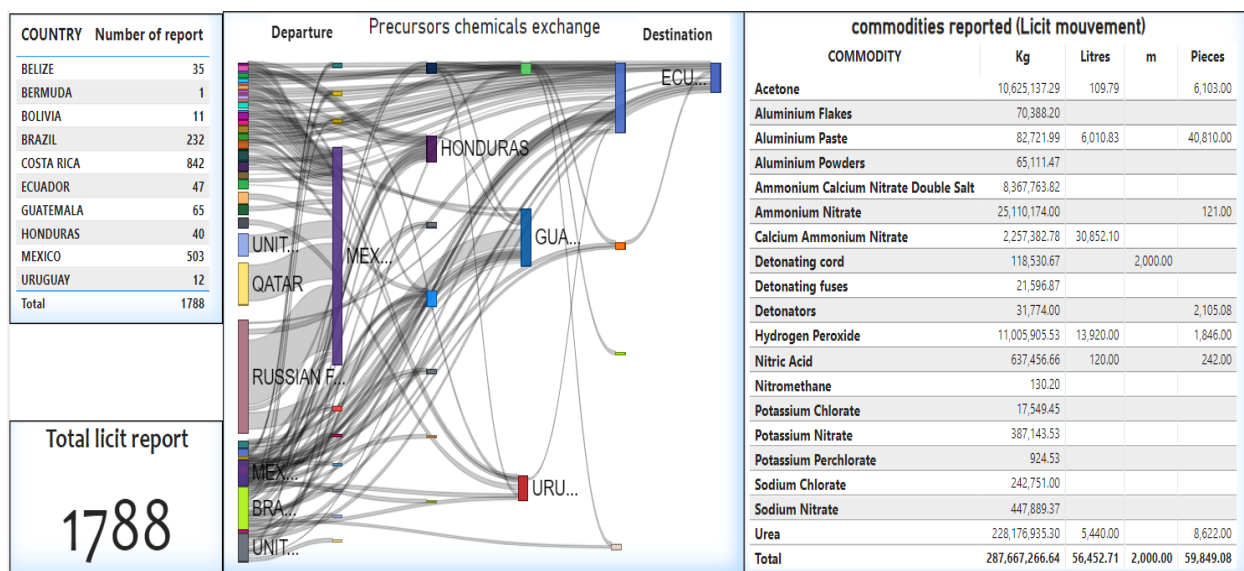


Chart10: exchange of precursor chemicals and IED components in the region during the reporting period.

More detailed and broken into importations and exportations, **Mexico** imported most precursor chemicals and IED components, followed by **Guatemala** and **Costa Rica**.

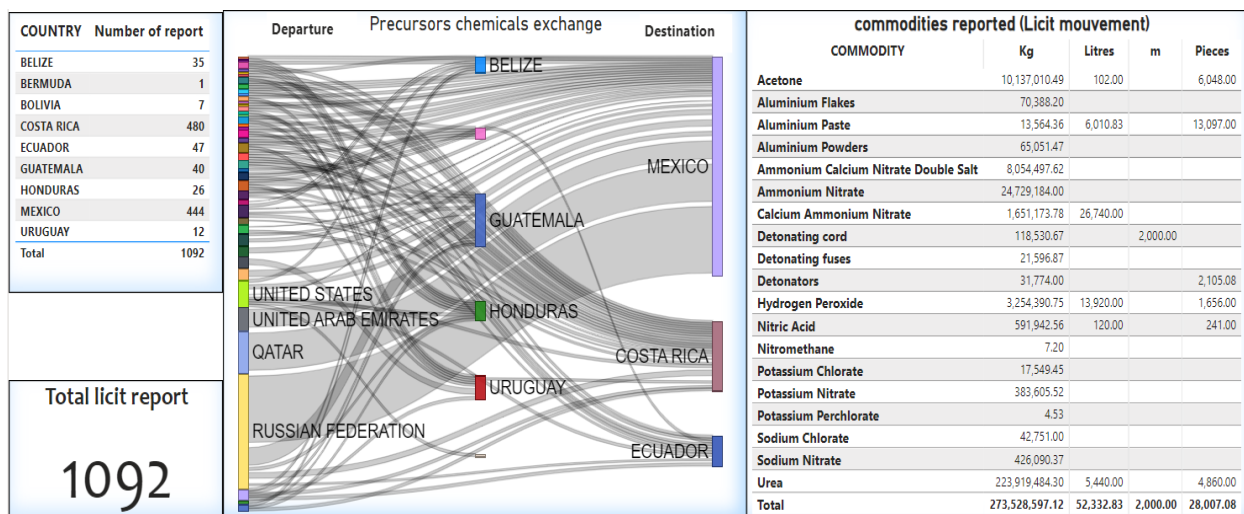


Chart 11: regional licit precursor chemical importations during the reporting period.

For exportations, **Brazil** exported the highest amount of precursor chemicals and additional IED component, followed by **Honduras**.

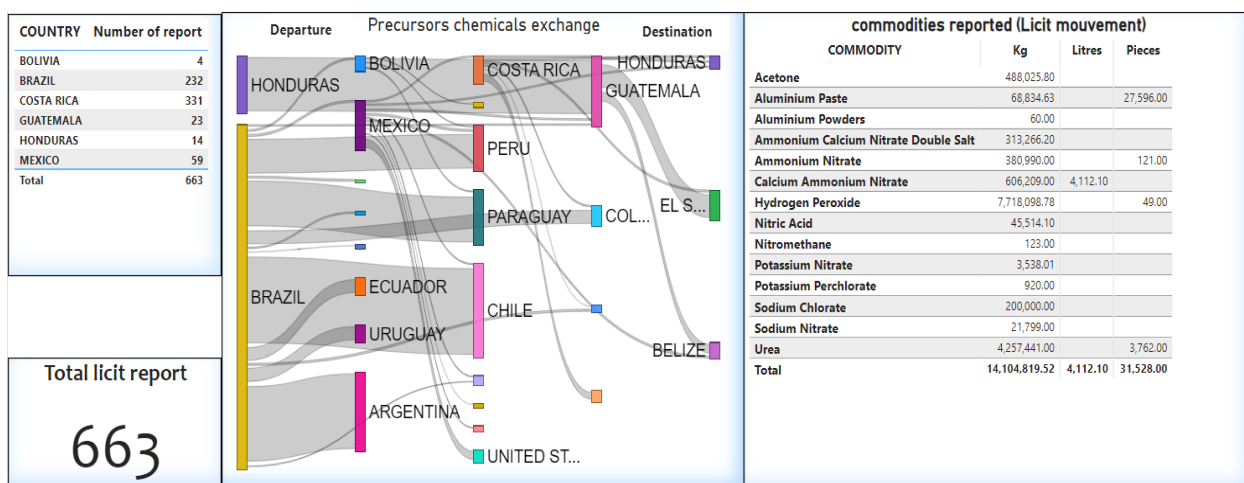


Chart 12: regional licit precursor chemical exportations during the reporting period.

6.2. Seizures effected

6.2.1. Overview

During the reporting phase, 12 of 24 participating member states uploaded in total **110 seizures** to the CENcomm platform. Mexico conducted most of all seizures (45.3%), followed by Panama (12.5%) and Belize (10.4%). Top commodities seized were drugs, chemical precursors, Tobacco and IPR merchandise.

In total, the following items were seized during the reporting phase of the operation (detailed summary see chart 13+17):

- **830kg of chemical precursors,**
- **20,000 detonators,**
- **more than 18,000 kg of drugs,**
- **nearly 7,000,000 pieces of IPR goods,**
- **cigarettes, weapons, ammunition and currency**

Most of the seized commodities were shipped from the US and China and were mainly imported to Mexico, Panama and Belize.

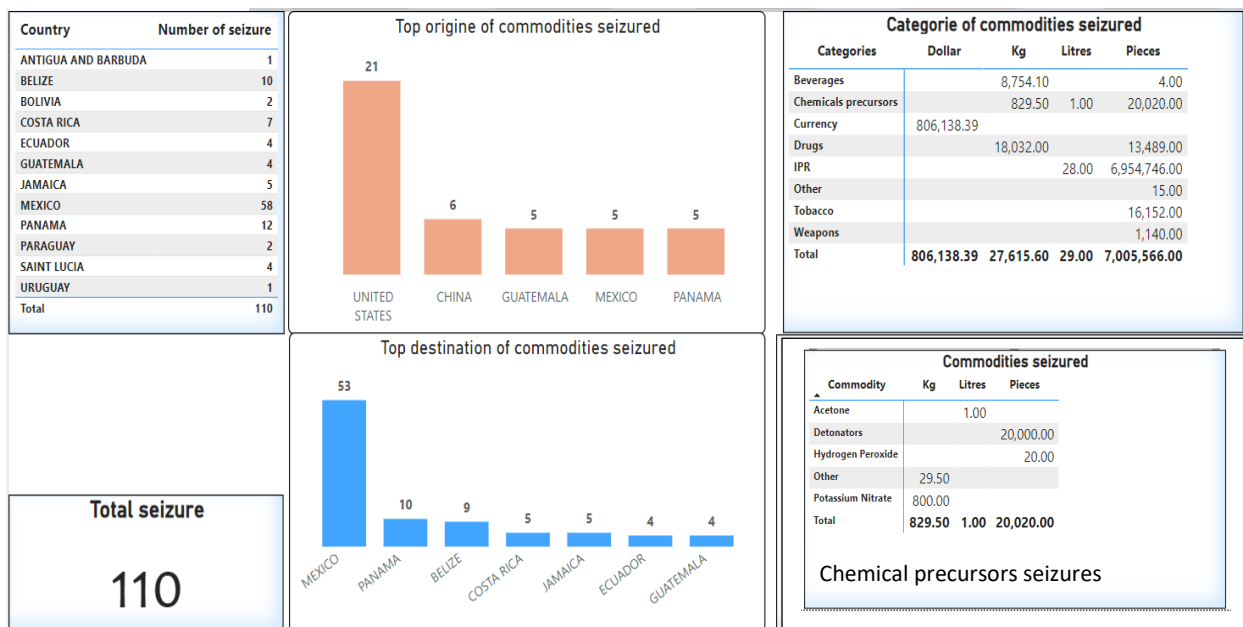


Chart 13: seizures effected and shared through CENcomm during the reporting period.

6.2.2. Detailed information on precursor chemical and additional IED components seizures:

800kgs of potassium nitrate were seized at Balboa seaport by Panama customs due to lack of declaration. It was hidden in a container of ammonium nitrate. The customs check was based on risk profiling.

20,000 detonators were seized during a routine control of an Ecuadorian coach by Peruvian Customs at Guayllabamba (inland Peru). The detonators were concealed in luggage bags.



| Commodity | Unit | Country of origin | Country of destination | Border point | Detection | Photos |
|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------|--------------|-----------------|---|
| Potassium Nitrate | 830 kg | China | Panama | Seaport | Risk profiling |  |
| Detonators | 20,000 pieces | Peru | Ecuador | Inland | Routine control |  |

Chart 15: precursor chemical and additional IED component seizures – details

6.2.3. Prominent seizures on other commodities:

Besides the huge seizure of detonators above, another prominent seizure was effected by Mexico Customs:

14,969 kg of Methamphetamine mixed with tequila was seized by Mexican Customs during an export control at Manzanillo seaport. The customs check was based on risk profiling and goods were supposed to be sent to Rotterdam /Netherlands.

In addition,

11,892 tablets of MDMA-ecstasy with a value of more than USD 350,000 was seized by Paraguay Customs at Asuncion airport in the luggage of a Dominican Republic woman traveling from Panama to Paraguay. The customs check was based on risk profiling.

236 Air guns were seized by Guatemala customs at Izabal port in a container imported from Miami /USA. The weapons were hidden in furniture. The customs check was based on risk profiling.

300 rounds of ammunitions were seized by Mexican customs at Nuevo Laredo land border crossing on a truck travelling from the US to Mexico. The customs check was based on random selection.

1,060,000 cigarillos were seized by Panama customs at Manzanillo seaport within a container shipped from Vietnam. The customs check was based on risk profiling.

6,695,000 pieces of different counterfeit goods (clothing, liquor and cigarillos) shipped from Panama, were seized by Ecuador customs at Balboa port. The customs check was based on intelligence.

5,650kg (7 pallets) undeclared bottles of mineral water, originated in France and shipped from Guadeloupe, were seized by Costa Rica Port Control Unit (PCU) at Puerto Limon seaport. The customs check was based on routine control.

Find more information on above prominent seizures in below chart:

| Category | seizure | Unit | Country of seizure | Country of destination | Border point | Detection | Photos |
|----------|-------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|------------------|---|
| Drugs | Meth-amphetamine (in liquors) | 14,969 kg | Mexico | Australia | seaport | Routine control |  |
| | MDMA-Ecstasy | 11,852 pieces | Paraguay | Paraguay | Airport | Risk profiling |  |
| Weapons | Ammunition | 300 pieces | Mexico | Mexico | Land border | Random selection |  |
| | Air guns | 236 pieces | Guatemala | Guatemala (origin US) | Seaport | Risk profiling |  |
| Tobacco | Cigarillos | 1,060,000 pieces | Panama | Panama origin Vietnam | seaport | Risk profiling |  |
| IPR | Different counterfeit goods | 6,695,000 pieces | Ecuador | Ecuador origin Panama | seaport | Intelligence |  |
| Beverage | Water bottles | 5 650 kg | Costa Rica | Costa Rica origin France | Seaport | Routine control |  |

Chart 16: most prominent seizures on other commodities

6.2.4. Summary of all seizures conducted during the reporting phase, listed by commodities

| Commodity per category | Dollar | Kg | Litres | Pieces |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---------------|-----------|------------------|
| Beverages | | 8,754 | | 4 |
| Maiz | | 2,850 | | |
| Mexican beers | | | | 4 |
| Vegetables | | 254 | | |
| Water consumption | | 5,650 | | |
| Chemicals precursors | | 830 | 1 | 20,020 |
| Acetone | | | 1 | |
| Detonators | | | | 20,000 |
| Hydrogen Peroxide | | | | 20 |
| Other | | 30 | | |
| Potassium Nitrate | | 800 | | |
| Currency | 806,138 | | | |
| Currency | 806,138 | | | |
| Drugs | | 18,032 | | 13,489 |
| Cannabis | | 105 | | 316 |
| Clozapine | | | | 45 |
| Cocaine | | 1,539 | | 1 |
| Drugs | | 950 | | |
| Ketamine | | 7 | | |
| Lighters | | | | 596 |
| Marihuana | | 423 | | |
| MDMA - Extasis | | | | 12,531 |
| Methamphetamine | | 38 | | |
| Opiates | | 1 | | |
| Psy drug | | 14,969 | | |
| IPR | | | 28 | 6,954,746 |
| Clothings | | | | 44 |
| Counterfeit goods | | | | 26 |
| Liquor | | | 28 | |
| Mobile phone accessories | | | | 579 |
| Other | | | | 6,950,000 |
| Pairs of sandals | | | | 1 |
| Perfumes | | | | 54 |
| Sneakers | | | | 341 |
| Sports articles | | | | 1,007 |
| Sports shoes | | | | 498 |
| Various garments | | | | 2,196 |
| Other | | | | 15 |
| Batteries for recycle | | | | 8 |
| Drone | | | | 1 |
| Stolen vehicle | | | | 1 |
| Tracer kits and cables | | | | 4 |
| Trigger mechanism | | | | 1 |
| Tobacco | | | | 1,075,092 |
| Cigarettes | | | | 15,000 |
| Cigarillos | | | | 1,060,000 |
| Medications | | | | 92 |
| Weapons | | | | 1,140 |
| Air gun | | | | 236 |
| Ammunition | | | | 863 |
| Assault Rifle/Carbine | | | | 2 |
| Bullet/Projectile | | | | 1 |
| Firearms | | | | 3 |
| Hand grenade | | | | 1 |
| Magazine | | | | 16 |
| Mechanism drawer | | | | 1 |
| Pistols | | | | 4 |
| Revolver | | | | 1 |
| Semi Automatic Pistol | | | | 1 |
| Shotgun | | | | 10 |
| Small Arms - Other specify | | | | 1 |
| Total | 806,138 | 27,616 | 29 | 8,064,506 |

Chart 17: seizure compilation in the order of commodities

6.2.5. Additional information and analysis on seizures conducted

During the reporting period, most of the seized goods were shipped from the United States and China with preferred destinations Mexico and Panama.

Most of the seized goods were checked in direction of importation (83.6 %).

The most frequent border crossings for all seizures conducted were land boundaries (32.7 %), followed by airports (30.9%), and seaports (29.1 %).

The methods used for detection are dominated by routine controls (43.6 %) followed by risk profiling (26.4%) random selection (24.5 %) and only a few by intelligence and investigation.

The first days of the operation, participants struggled in setting up the scene and correctly communicating through CENcomm. Beside issues in downloading licit trade information from their customs clearance database to be shared through CENcomm, participants struggled in filling and correctly sharing CENcomm templates. These are the main reasons why seizures have been mostly shared in the last days of the operational phase and even beyond.

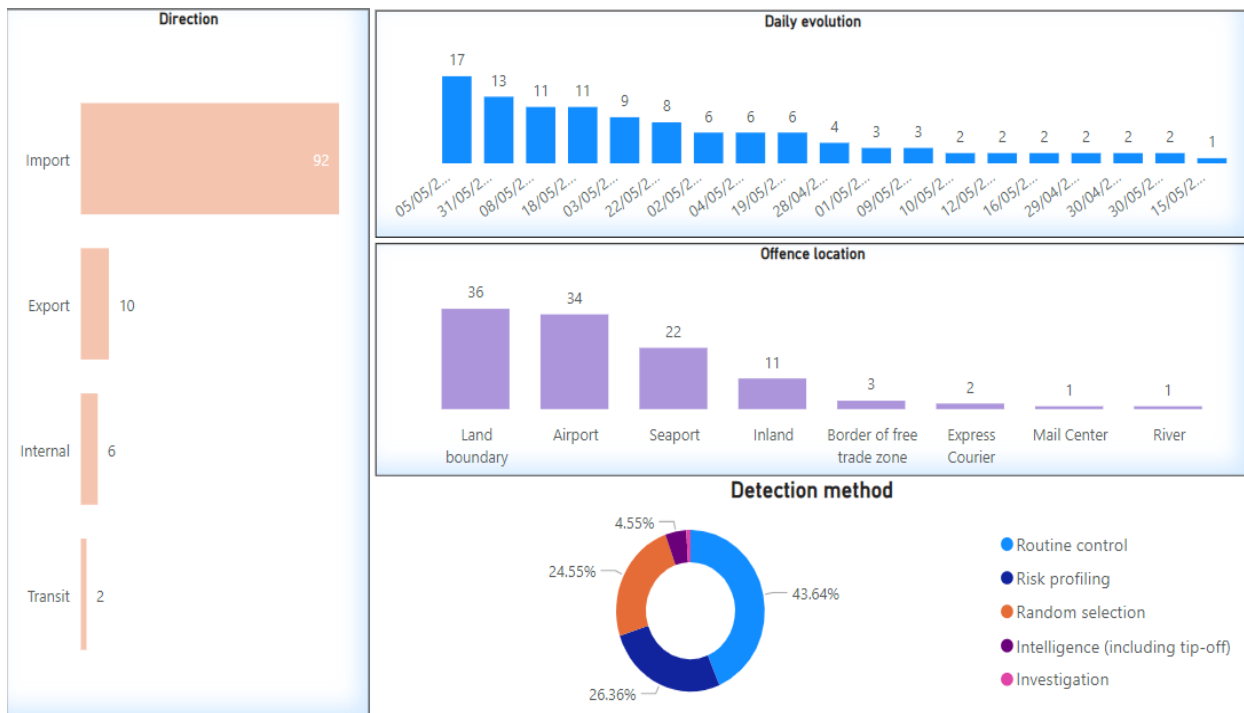


Chart 18: seizure details and detection methods

7. Conclusion

7.1. PGS assessment of the operation

7.1.1. Strong points

Participating members have been extremely motivated in preparing and conducting the operation. Due to their country presentations shown at the pre-operational meeting and their activities during the operational phase monitored by the OCU, most members spent excellent efforts on setting up joint law enforcement units, drafting an accurate national operational plan, including a lot of customs staff, license agencies representatives and other important stakeholder to run the operation.

During the operational phase, regular customs checks on the monitored goods were carried out and exemplarily documented. Hundreds of photographs were submitted to OCU, proving conduct of comprehensive customs checks at all border points included in the operation.

Whenever possible, members included additional law enforcement and other important agencies when conducting customs checks.

DTRA cooperation and assistance during all phases of the operation has been excellent and important. The outstanding contribution to all kinds of threat assessment, background information on IED events in the region as well as result analysis strongly contributed to the success of the operation.

WCO / INTERPOL as well as Customs/Police cooperation is extremely important in countering IED threats. During the operational phase all nominal provided by members was cross checked by INTERPOL against their databases.

RILO CAM cooperation and assistance was helpful, especially when compiling daily reports during the operational phase and in getting detailed Spanish / English translation on all kinds of documents and information shared by participants.

7.1.2. Room for improvement

Due to lack of funds in the past, both, OP ARENA BLANCA and the preceding workshops in fall 2022, have been the first PGS activities ever in the Americas and the Caribbean region, although the IED threat for the region is on a relevant level.

In addition, operational exercises on dual-use chemical precursors and additional IED components are different and more difficult to prepare and conduct as those in other crime areas (e.g. drugs and firearms) where customs only need to detect and seize prohibited goods as their importation/export or transit is per se illegal.

Dual-use precursor chemicals in general have industrial disposition. Thus, customs need to spend more efforts in detecting the illicit diversion of respective shipments, especially by a comprehensive risk assessment and profiling, license verification and post clearance audits, intelligence and close cooperation with additional law enforcement.

From an OCU prospective, members concentrated mainly on prominent, huge bulk deliveries of precursor chemicals and additional IED components rather than small quantities and unknown companies. Even if general customs risk indicators apply for precursor chemicals shipments as well, national risk assessment and profiling needs to be better understood and carried out, including comprehensive license checks and post clearance audits in concert with relevant agencies. As already mentioned above, most seizures were conducted due to routine controls rather than risk assessment.

Police and INTERPOL engagement has been weak. Only a few countries confirmed police /NCB participation. Consequently, no intelligence has been forwarded by police or INTERPOL. This may be due to the fact that PGS grants didn't include police participation in any workshops yet. Same for INTERPOL, project CHASE or WATCHMAKER workshops regularly don't include Customs participants.

Communication needs to be improved. Although PGS provided intensive CENcomm training during both workshops and at the pre-operational meeting and even developed new templates for reduced data entry, members struggled especially during the first days of the operational phase to connect to the platform, to correctly fill respective templates and to share information on licit trade as well as seizures.

In terms of cooperation with Police and INTERPOL, in order to disclose criminal networks, only few members provided nominal in their seizure messages.

As regards the submission on licit precursor chemical movements, members faced issues with their customs statistics and information service to get requested information.

7.2. Member assessment on the goals of the operation

During the post-operational meeting, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on the initial objectives of the operation and the level of achievement.

Due to their assessment, OP ARENA BLANCA mainly achieved its goals. Only the detection of illicit shipments and the disclosure of criminal networks were rated between 60-70%. All other operational goals were rated between 70 – 88% (see chart below).

In general, members admitted weak risk assessment and police cooperation. Most requested additional PGS as well as CENcomm training for the future.

| Goals | Grade of achievement |
|--|----------------------|
| 1. To strengthen cooperation between border agencies. | 83.89% |
| 2. To reduce the illegal diversion of chemical precursors. | 73.33% |
| 3. To strengthen cooperation and exchange of information among Customs administrations, between Customs administrations and other law enforcement and intelligence agencies and with INTERPOL. | 79.44% |
| 4. To strengthen cooperation within customs administrations between front line officers and central services (e.g. risk assessment and intelligence service). | 84.44% |
| 5. To detect, intercept and seize illicit shipments of commodities used to manufacture IEDs and support subsequent investigations with an aim to identify, disrupt and dismantle transnational illicit networks. | 63.33% |
| 6. To help members to monitor the licit movement of IED precursor chemicals and components. | 88.89% |
| 7. To increase use of INTERPOL's capabilities, in particular the use of INTERPOL's databases. | 68.33% |

Chart 19: member assessment on the goals of the operation.

7.3. Partner assessment

DTRA, INTERPOL and RILO CAM mainly stated the importance of conducting such kinds of operations, highlighted its success and the excellent inter-agency cooperation among Members as well as among international organizations involved.

INTERPOL appreciated PGS activities, promised closer cooperation in the future and apologized for the reluctant police engagement during the operation, mainly based on the fact that police regularly isn't included in PGS workshops and pre-ops meetings.

8. Lessons learned and follow up

Taking into consideration the above assessment, there is a strong argument to extend future PGS operation to at least 2 weeks to overcome member issues in setting up the scene and getting used to the communication strategy.

For the future, PGS National Contact Points (NCP) should consider closely working with their statistics or informatics services to ensure submission on licit precursor chemical and additional IED components movements on a monthly basis.

WCO / INTERPOL cooperation should be enhanced, especially by getting Police participating in PGS workshops and pre-operational meetings and vice versa (e.g. by joint funding proposals).

In addition, important follow ups were agreed upon during the post-operational meeting:

For Members:

- Continue reporting / uploading licit precursor chemical movements to CENcomm on a monthly basis to the permanent CENcomm platform.
- Future PGS seizures and intelligence to be uploaded and shared through the permanent PGS CENcomm platform.
- For future seizure messages, nominal to be included for INTERPOL to be able to cross check in their databases.
- Risk assessment and profiling as well as licensing procedures to be enhanced;
- Reaching out to industry – know your customer.
- Staying in touch with WCO PGS and other members
- Sharing a list of additional officers who would need to get CENcomm access.

For WCO:

- Train the Trainer workshop to be conducted in the region (depending on funds available).
- More online-training tools to be developed and to be accessible by customs frontline officers
- More CENcomm training, e.g. online trainings to be conducted for the region.
- Regularly (regional) NCP meetings (online).
- All RILOs of Americas and Caribbean region to be included in PGS information exchange.
- Drones to be included in the PGS monitored goods.

For RILO CAM

- Staying in touch with PGS NCPs.
- Assisting WCO in getting information on licit IED components movements in the region.
- Building network with additional RILOs in the region to gather and exchange information on IED components.