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# Security Challenges in the Caribbean: Threats, Migration, and International Cooperation

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## Summary

The Caribbean faces growing security challenges, ranging from geopolitical tensions to armed violence and the gang epidemic, exacerbated by drug trafficking and competition for drug routes. The region has also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, mass migration, and money laundering. Caribbean countries require integrated solutions to address these issues, including strengthening institutions, combating crime and corruption, and addressing underlying causes such as inequality and drug demand. International cooperation, particularly with the United States (USA), plays a crucial role in facing these challenges and restoring stability in the Caribbean region.

**Keywords:** Caribbean, Security Challenges, Geopolitical Tensions, Armed Violence, Gangs, COVID-19, Migration, Money Laundering, Integrated Solutions, Institutional Strengthening, Crime Prevention, Corruption, Inequality, Drug Demand, International Cooperation, United States, Stability.

## Introduction

The Institute of Caribbean Studies (INEC) convened a group of academics at the Rayburn Office Building in the United States on June 21, 2023, to discuss the growing security challenges facing the Caribbean. This event was part of the "Legislative Week"<sup>1</sup> during the National Caribbean Heritage Month,<sup>2</sup> aimed at focusing attention of Congress and U.S. policymakers on the issues and opportunities in the region.

The strategic location of the Caribbean and its maritime access to the continental United States closely interconnect prosperity and security between both territories, due to geographical, commercial, and familial ties.<sup>3</sup> However, they also face significant challenges, such as geopolitical tensions evidenced by the installation of an electronic intelligence collection base by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Republic of Cuba,<sup>4</sup> as well as negotiations with Russia and Iran for the establishment of military forces in the so-called Pearl of the Caribbean.

Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on the economies of the Caribbean, with a significant decline in tourism and a contraction of the Gross

Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>5</sup> The Russian invasion of Ukraine led to an increase in international food and oil prices, which affected a country that heavily relies on imports of these products.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the migration of Venezuelans, Cubans, and Haitians exacerbated tensions in the region and put a strain on the infrastructure of small island nations. It is important to note that these migratory flows have led to the infiltration of criminal groups, contributing to an increase of violence.

In relation to this issue, it is crucial to highlight that the availability of weapons, especially those originating from the US,<sup>7</sup> further exacerbates violence in the Caribbean region. In January 2023, the Prime Minister of the Bahamas, Philip Davis, addressed the issue of weapon smuggling during a meeting with US Vice President Kamala Harris.<sup>8</sup> As a result, five Caribbean states joined a legal presentation led by Mexico against American weapon manufacturers.

### **The Crisis of Violence and Gangs in the Caribbean**

The Caribbean is currently experiencing an epidemic of armed violence and gang activities, exacerbated by the influence of drug trafficking and intense competition for drug routes. Homicide rates in the region surpass those of Central and South America.<sup>9</sup> The unprecedented severity of this situation was the focus of the crime summit of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM),<sup>10</sup> held in April 2023 in Georgetown, Guyana. During the event, strategies and measures were discussed to address this challenge, and efforts were made to promote regional cooperation in the fight against crime and violence in the Caribbean.

In 2022, the once peaceful Turks and Caicos Islands experienced an alarming homicide rate of 77.6 per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> These islands are located on a drug trafficking route from Colombia and Venezuela to the Bahamas, making them a target for gangs from other parts of the Caribbean seeking to control the drug trade.<sup>12</sup>

In Jamaica, the homicide rate stands at 52.9 per 100,000 inhabitants,<sup>13</sup> and it is estimated that approximately 70% of the violence is related to criminal organizations.<sup>14</sup> The government has taken drastic measures to combat these gangs, implementing the Gang Suppression Act in 2014.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, states of emergency have been imposed and renewed repeatedly, and periodic military and police operations have been carried out, such as the "Operation Relentless" in April 2023.<sup>16</sup> Since 2022, Jamaican authorities have arrested 149 gang leaders and are attempting to curb the flow of weapons from Haiti.<sup>17</sup> However, these gangs continue to evolve with new leaders, and new firearms from go-fasts originating from Colombia, and from the USA continue to enter the country. Similarly, in Saint Lucia, which was previously peaceful, murders have increased to a rate of 42.3 per 100,000 inhabitants,<sup>18</sup> while in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, the rate reached 40.3 per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>19</sup>

In Trinidad and Tobago, the combination of firearms and the fragmentation of competing gangs has increased the murder rate to 39.4 per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>20</sup> The 614 homicides recorded in 2022 represented a 22% increase compared to the previous year.<sup>21</sup> Although the violent death of the leader of the Islamic gang, Anthony Boney, contributed to this fragmentation and violence, it did not accelerate pre-existing trends.

In Haiti, over 100 gangs operate exclusively in the capital,<sup>22</sup> Port-au-Prince, and are divided into two rival federations: one is the criminal alliance composed of nine of the most powerful gangs, known as the G9, and the other is the Patriotic Group for Change and Stability (G-PEP),<sup>23</sup> a political opposition faction that includes 400 Mawozo. The latter outnumber the Haitian national police, which has declared a strike in protest against the shortage of funds and weapons in their fight against these gangs.<sup>24</sup> Approximately 60% of the capital is under the control of these organizations.<sup>25</sup> It is estimated that around 1.5 million Haitians reside in neighborhoods controlled by gangs throughout the country.<sup>26</sup> Murders, kidnappings, and other serious crimes have seen a significant increase, with 1,600 incidents recorded in the first quarter of 2023 alone,<sup>27</sup> double the number from the same period last year.

In other words, the violence, kidnappings, and extortion perpetrated by the gangs have had a devastating impact on the local economy and the distribution of goods, leading to increased prices and shortages of food and fuel.<sup>28</sup> According to estimates from the United Nations (UN), 4.7 million out of Haiti's 11 million inhabitants suffer from malnutrition.<sup>29</sup> During a visit in June 2023, Catherine Russell, Executive Director of UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), highlighted that over 100,000 Haitian children are at risk of dying from hunger.<sup>30</sup> In addition to directly affecting Haiti, Haitian criminality, migration, and the spread of diseases such as cholera have repercussions throughout the region, including kidnappings and other crimes in the Dominican Republic.<sup>31</sup>

### Financial and Criminal Threats in the Caribbean

Money laundering poses another constant challenge that threatens the integrity of Caribbean economies. The region's reputation as a "tax haven" has led major banks to avoid establishing correspondent banking relationships in the Caribbean in an effort to "reduce risks",<sup>32</sup> which has had a negative impact on the financial health of the region. Haiti has been identified by the Financial Action Task Force as the worst-performing country in terms of money laundering,<sup>33</sup> with no successful measures taken against this crime. Suriname also faces issues in controlling its financial sector, preventing it from joining the Edgemont Group.<sup>34</sup> A prominent example of this issue was the embezzlement of \$100 million from the country's central bank.<sup>35</sup>

In the information technology sector, the Caribbean has also been affected by illicit activities, such as the notorious "lottery scam" in Jamaica, an annual business that generates \$300 million.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, piracy remains a challenge in the waters

off Venezuela, as well as in the Corentyne River delta between Guyana and Suriname, reflecting the desperation and criminality present in the area. However, the increase in oil prosperity in Guyana has managed to somewhat alleviate this problem.

### Conclusion

Integrated solutions are required to address the growing security challenges in the Caribbean. These challenges have deep-rooted causes ranging from lack of economic opportunities to the risks faced by youth, along with the effects of corruption, prison overcrowding, and difficulties in the judicial system in prosecuting criminals, among others. In response to these issues, the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other U.S. government organizations, in collaboration with non-governmental organizations and like-minded democratic partners, play a crucial role in addressing humanitarian needs in the Caribbean, combating drug trafficking and other criminal activities, and strengthening regional institutions in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), launched in 2010, the U.S. has allocated \$923 million to the region through Fiscal Year 2023. However, while this funding amount may seem small compared to the region's challenges and the commitments made by the United States in other parts of the world, it is necessary to assess the agility and potential limitations of available tools in terms of the nations, groups, and economic sectors that can receive assistance. For example, the relatively high income of most Caribbean states makes it difficult to use the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) as a conduit for private capital into the region. In addition to addressing the symptoms of problems in the Caribbean and strengthening management capacity, the U.S. must do more to tackle underlying causes such as inequality, corruption, and drug demand originating from the mentioned country. The importance of restoring democratic governance in Venezuela and Cuba, as well as making Haiti an economically viable democratic entity cannot be overlooked. Given the magnitude of these tasks, it is likely that future forums, such as panels during Legislative Week, will discuss these issues for many months, becoming part of the Caribbean-American heritage.

### About the author:

Robert Evan Ellis is a renowned American academic and public policies analyst who specializes in Latin America and the Caribbean. His extensive experience tackles topics on security, defense, and international relations in the region. He has worked in prestigious academic and government institutions, counseling the Department of Defense and the Department of State. His publications and conferences focus on issues like Chinese influence, drug trafficking and hemispheric cooperation. As a professor of National Security Studies at the World Studies Institute of the National

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World College of the United States, his perspective is valued in academic and political circles related to Latin America and the Caribbean.

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