



World Customs  
Organization

ENFORCEMENT  
AND COMPLIANCE

# Illicit Trade Report 2023







# 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.







**In response to the escalating challenges related to this phenomenon, Customs have expanded their role to include robust security responses.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At borders, Customs administrations play a pivotal role in comprehensive governmental efforts to mitigate these threats. The Punta Cana Resolution<sup>1</sup>, 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.

<sup>1</sup> Punta Cana Resolution – Resolution of the Policy Commission of the World Customs Organization on the role of Customs in the security context. Accessible here: <https://www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/public/global/pdf/about-us/legal-instruments/resolutions/resolution-of-the-wco-policy-commission-on-the-role-of-customs-in-the-security-context.pdf?la=en>

## 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)<sup>2</sup>. 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.

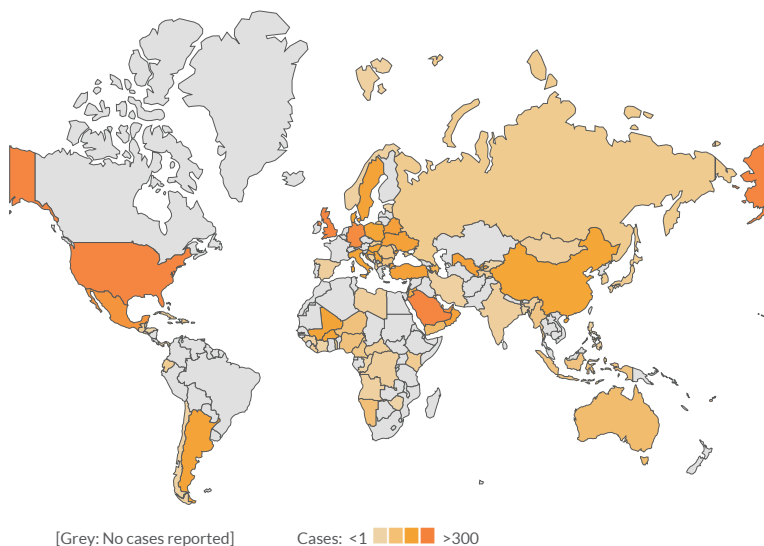
- a) “**Small arms**” are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for individual use. They include, inter alia, revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns;
- b) “**Light weapons**” are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for use by two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

<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup>) 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.

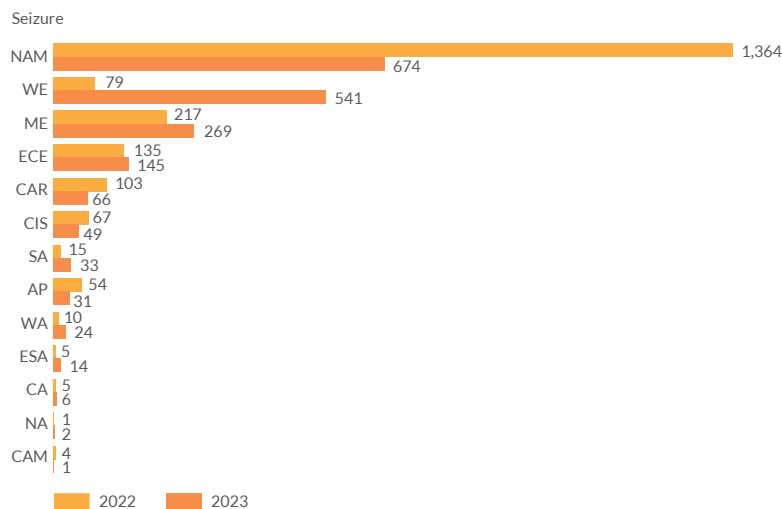
Conversely, other components, including parts and accessories of small arms (like aiming devices and magazines) and other SALW types, including their ammunition, saw a decrease in both seizures and quantities interdicted.

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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

Figure 2 outlines the distribution of weapon seizures by different regions from 2022 to 2023, capturing significant regional variations in the enforcement outcomes. In North America, there were significant declines, notably a 50 per cent reduction in weapon seizures.

**Figure 2: Number of weapon seizures by region**



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.

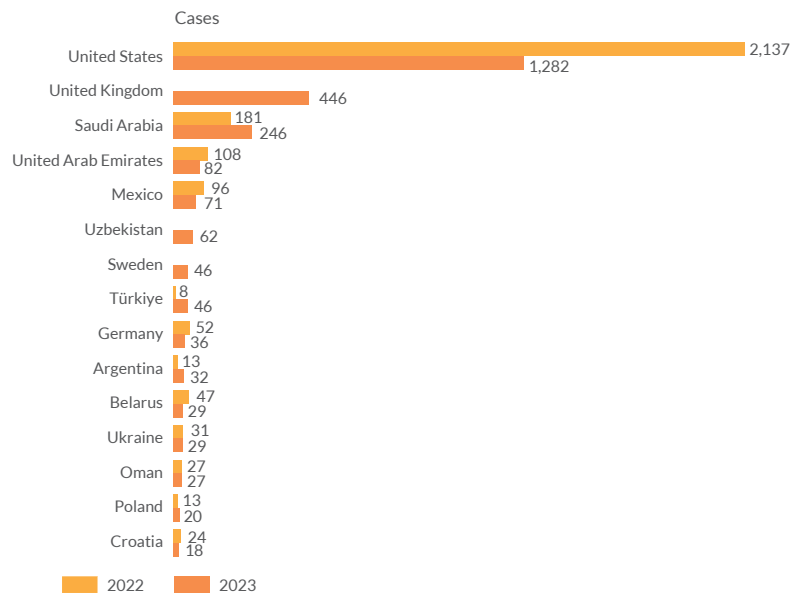
South America (SA) also reported a decrease, with seizures falling from 33 in 2022 to 15 in 2023. The Asia-Pacific (AP) region saw a minor increase, with seizures rising from 31 in 2022 to 34 in 2023. West Africa (WA) experienced a slight increase, moving from 10 in 2022 to 24 in 2023. Eastern and Southern 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).

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Figure 3 presents the 15 WCO Members that reported the most weapon cases in 2023. It provides a comparative analysis for these Member countries for the years 2022 and 2023. It illustrates changes in the number of reported cases, highlighting which countries have experienced an increase or decrease in the reported cases over the two years.

**Figure 3: Top 15 reporting countries by number of weapon cases**

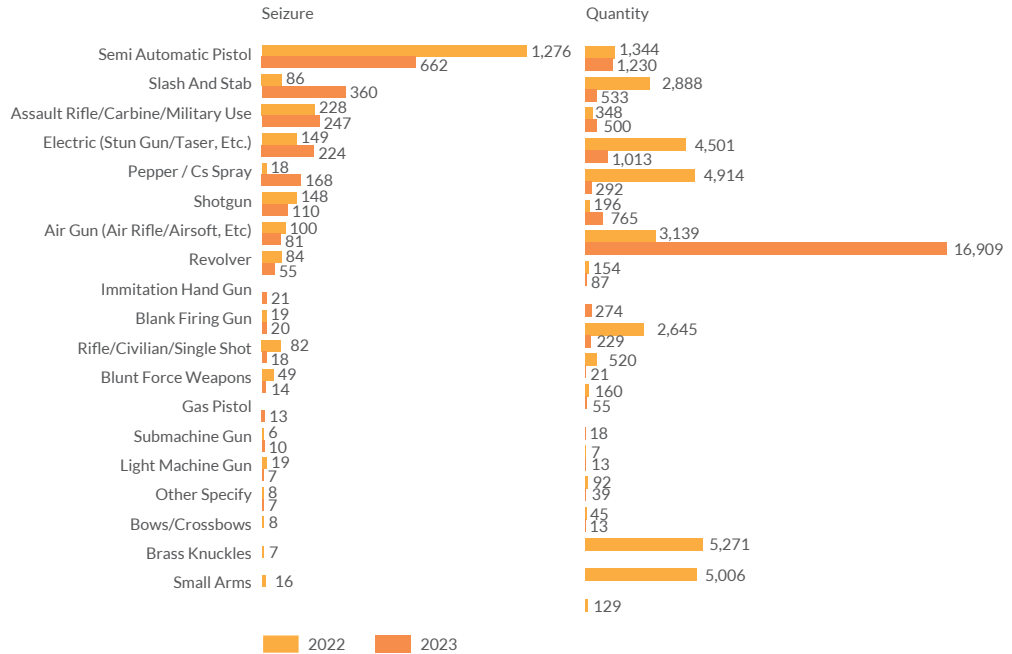


The data indicates varying trends across these Members, with significant decreases noted in countries such as the United States and increases in countries like Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. These trends may reflect changes in enforcement effectiveness, policy shifts, or alterations in trafficking routes 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.



**Figure 4: Weapon type by seizure and quantity in 2022 and 2023**



**Figure 4 compares the seizure of various types of weapons over two years, 2022 and 2023.**

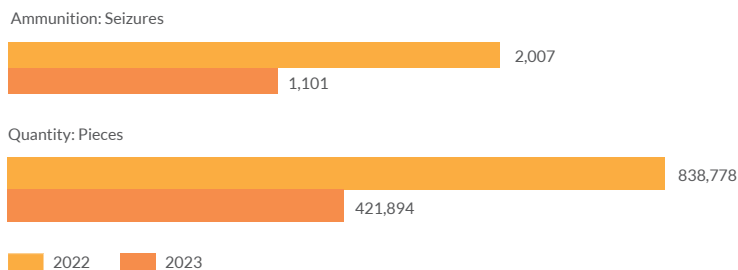
The analysis shows a noticeable increase in seizures across various weapon categories between 2022 and 2023. Among these categories, semi-automatic pistols were the most frequently seized type in both years, even while exhibiting a notable decline from 1,276 seizures in 2022 to 662 in 2023. Additionally, 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.

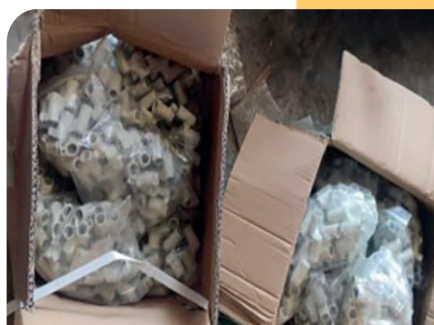
Some weapon types such as gas pistols and submachine guns remain relatively rare in terms of seizures, with gas pistols at 13 and submachine guns at 10 in 2023.

Figure 5 demonstrates the number of seizures and quantity of ammunition in 2022 and 2023.

**Figure 5: Number of seizures and quantity of ammunition**



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.



*Courtesy of Yemen Customs Authority.*

### Case study 1.

#### YEMEN CUSTOMS AUTHORITY SEIZE 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.*



Copyright:  
SL/Haitilibre

## Case study 2.

### MORE THAN 22,000 PIECES OF AMMUNITION INTERCEPTED IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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

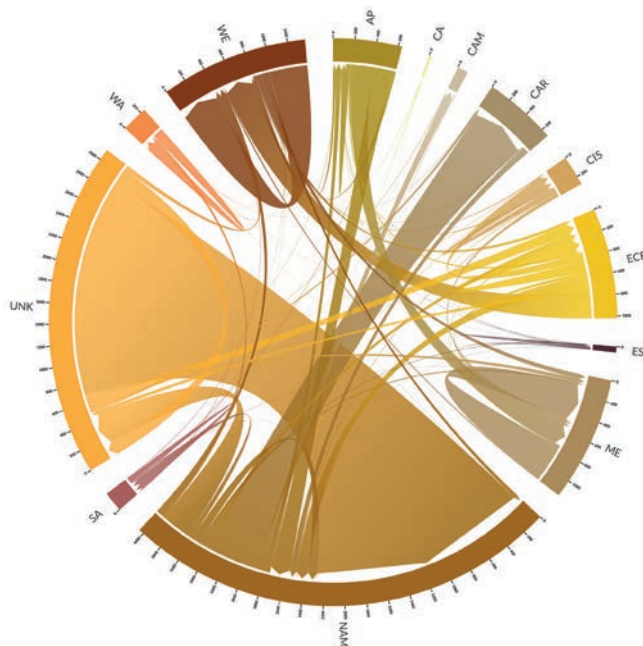


### 3. TRAFFICKING ROUTES

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

The data from 2022 to 2023 provides insights into the routing of smuggled weapons, revealing several critical patterns and gaps in data reporting.

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

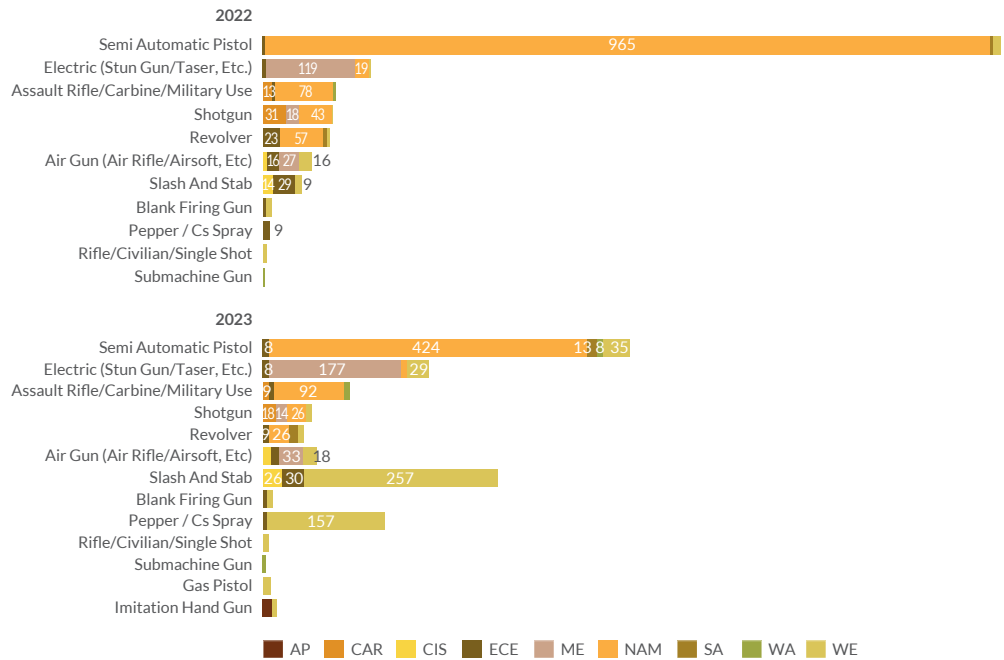


Figure 7 illustrates the weapon type and regional distribution of weapon seizures for the years 2022 and 2023.

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.

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.

Courtesy of  
Albanian Customs.



### 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.

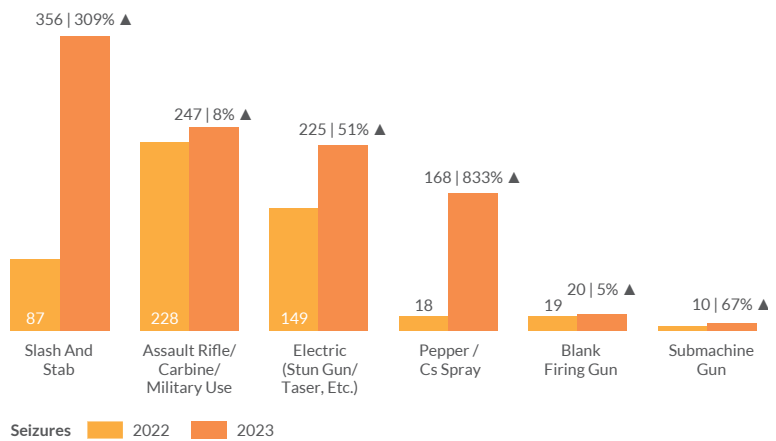
*Source: CEN database*





**Figure 8:** Increases in year on year seizures by weapon type

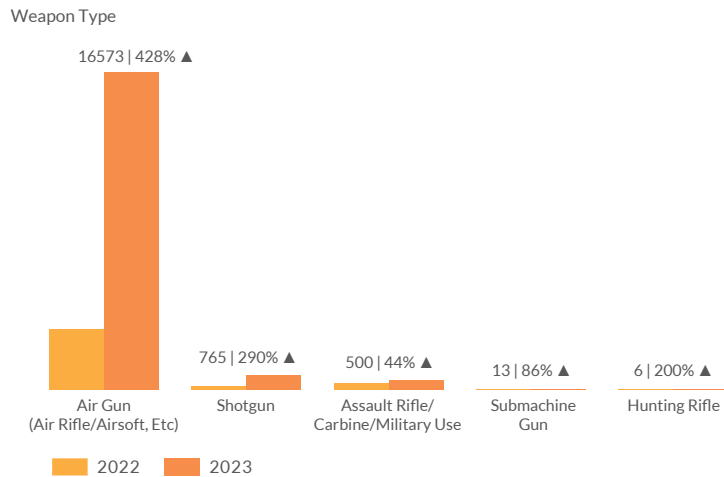
Figure 8 illustrates the changes in the number of seizures of various types weapons from 2022 to 2023. The graph showcases significant increases in certain weapon types, indicating shifts in enforcement focus or trafficking patterns.



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 18 in 2022 to 168 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.

Figure 9 offers a stark depiction of the increases in the quantities.

**Figure 9: Weapon types demonstrating the highest increase in quantity from 2022 to 2023**

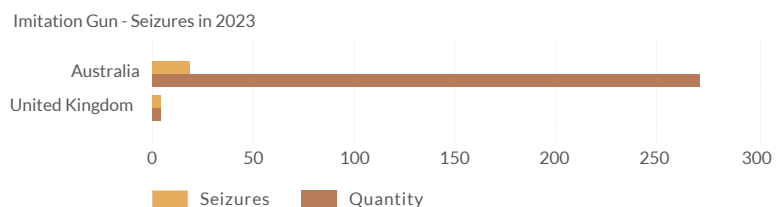


The data reveals notable trends: air gun types, including air rifle and airsoft, experienced the most significant spike with a staggering 428 per cent increase in seized quantities, indicative of high enforcement focus or enhanced availability. Shotgun seizures soared by 290 per cent, showcasing a substantial 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: Imitation gun seizures in 2023**

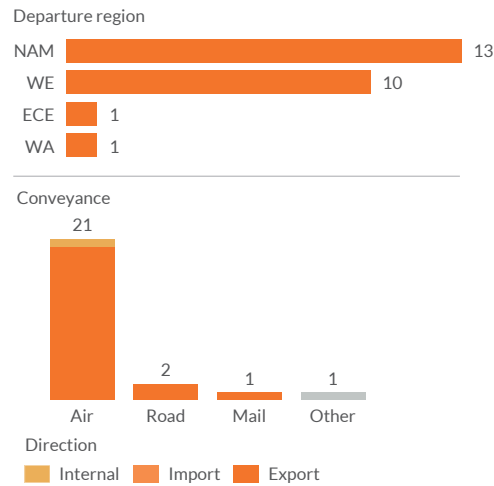
Figure 10 provides a clear depiction of the seizure statistics related to imitation hand guns in 2023, which had no reported cases in 2022.



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 shows the predominant method of conveyance for the seizures above is via air, both commercial and general aviation, with a total of 21 cases noted, of which 20 are imports.

**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.

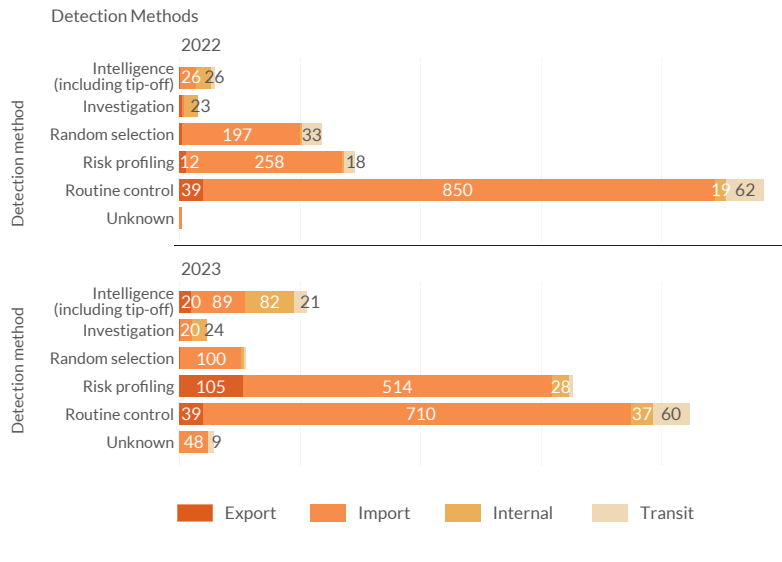
There has been mass proliferation of these types of weapons reported by WCO Members in maritime mode, with cases of thousands of alarm pistols being seized from a single container. (See Case studies 1 and 3.)



## 5. DETECTION METHODS, LOCATION AND CONVEYANCE

Figure 12: Detection methods by number of cases in 2022 and 2023<sup>4</sup>

Figure 12 illustrates the distribution of detection methods for cases, categorized by the type of seizure: at export, import, internal or transit. It provides insight into the strategic approaches employed to identify and intercept illicit arms shipments.



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.

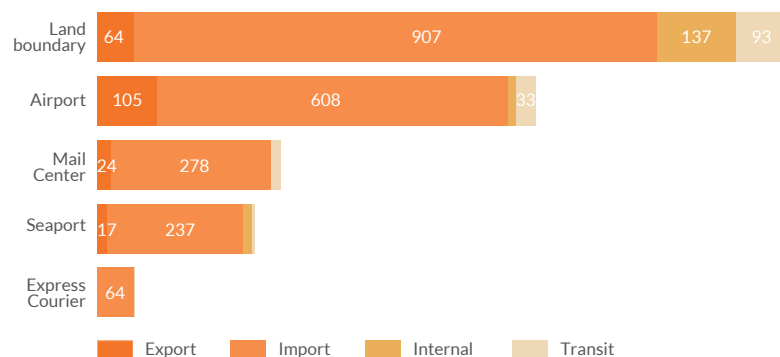
<sup>4</sup> The data excludes the US data who reported that all seizures were made using risk profiling.



Courtesy of WCO.

Figure 13 showcases locations where weapons are most intercepted. The highest number of cases was detected at the land boundaries, while airports and mail centres remain important locations as well.

**Figure 13:** Detection locations by number of cases in 2022 and 2023

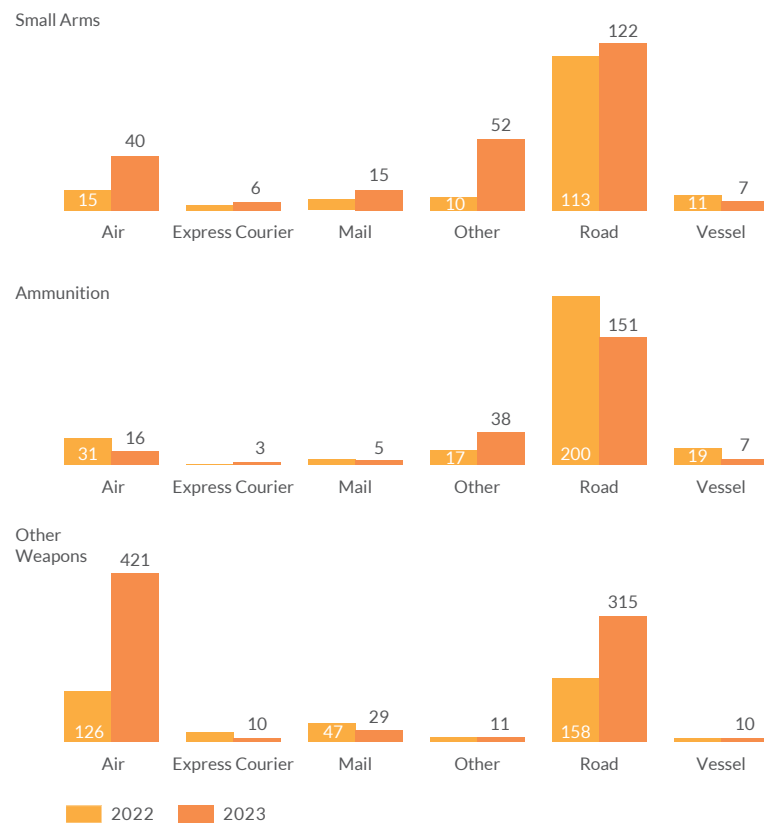


The prominence of airports and seaports in import seizures indicates the global nature of arms trafficking and the necessity of enhanced security measures at these entry points.

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.

Figure 14 offers a detailed view of the variations in types of weapons and the conveyance methods used between 2022 and 2023. This analysis provides insights into the trends that may influence future enforcement and regulatory strategies.

**Figure 14:** Number of seizures by conveyance and type of weapons in 2022 and 2023



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 experienced 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.

### **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.

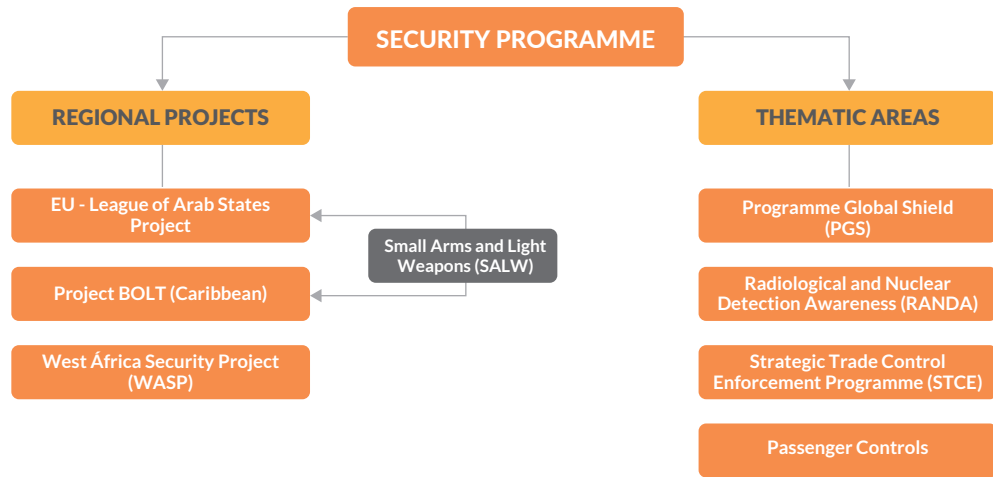
More surprising is that large scale movement of illicit firearm component parts is occurring through maritime trafficking. The illicit shipment of firearm component parts in containerized traffic through Less than Container Load (LCL), also known as consolidated shipments, or even Full Container Load (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).

## **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.

**Figure 15:** Organic structure of the WCO Security Programme



**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.





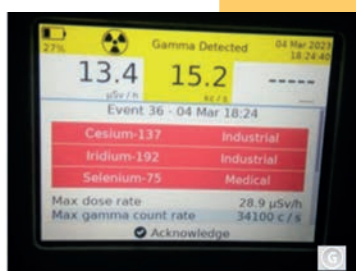
### Operation Cosmo Mediterranean (Cosmo Med), 2023.

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).

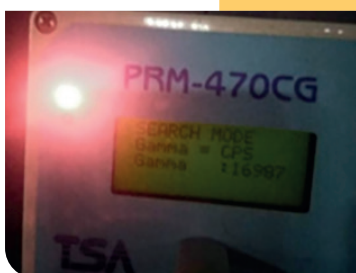


## Case study 4. DETECTION OF A RADIOACTIVE SOURCE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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 ARENA BLANCA 2023

Programme Global Shield initiated Operation ARENA BLANCA which 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<sup>5</sup>. 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.



5 WCO, Programme Global Shield, Operation ARENA BLANCA, Final Report, April/May 2023, available at <[https://www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/public/global/pdf/topics/enforcement-and-compliance/activities-and-programmes/security-programme/pgs/op-arena-blanca\\_final-report\\_en.pdf?la=en](https://www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/public/global/pdf/topics/enforcement-and-compliance/activities-and-programmes/security-programme/pgs/op-arena-blanca_final-report_en.pdf?la=en)>



Courtesy of  
Togo Customs.

## Case study 5.

### TOGO CUSTOMS SEIZE EXPLOSIVES AT THE BORDER WITH BURKINA FASO

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 6.

### NIGERIAN CUSTOMS SERVICE INTERCEPTED 34.9 TONNES OF UREA

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.

Courtesy of Nigerian Customs.

# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AML</b>	Anti-Money Laundering
<b>AMS</b>	Americas
<b>AP</b>	Asia-Pacific
<b>BCP</b>	Border Crossing Point
<b>BJL</b>	Banjul Seaport
<b>CAM</b>	Central America
<b>CAR</b>	Caribbean
<b>CCF-China</b>	Customs Cooperation Fund of China
<b>CCP</b>	Container Control Programme
<b>CESFRONT</b>	Specialized Corps for Land Border Security
<b>CIS</b>	Commonwealth of Independent States
<b>CITES</b>	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
<b>CNE</b>	National Energy Commission
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus Disease 2019
<b>CTF</b>	Counter-terrorism Financing
<b>DNRED</b>	La Direction Nationale du Renseignement et des Enquêtes Douanières (National Directorate of Intelligence and Customs Investigations)
<b>DRI</b>	Directorate of Revenue Intelligence
<b>ECE</b>	Eastern and Central Europe
<b>EGATTT</b>	Expert Group against Theft, Trafficking and Tampering of Documentary Heritage
<b>ESA</b>	East and Southern Africa
<b>ESC</b>	Environmentally Sensitive Commodities
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUR</b>	Euro
<b>FBI</b>	Federal Bureau of Investigation
<b>FCL</b>	Full Container Load
<b>FIUs</b>	Financial Intelligence Units
<b>GC</b>	Gran Canaria
<b>GIA</b>	Gemmological Institute of America
<b>GIFP</b>	Global Illicit Flows Programme
<b>GMU TraCCC</b>	George Mason University Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center
<b>HFCs</b>	Hydrofluorocarbons
<b>HKD</b>	Hong Kong Dollar
<b>HS</b>	Harmonized System
<b>HZPF</b>	Hot Zone Prioritisation Forum
<b>ICCWC</b>	International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime
<b>ICG</b>	Indian Coast Guard
<b>IED</b>	Improvised Explosive Device
<b>ILEN</b>	Informal Law Enforcement Network on Minerals-Related Crime
<b>INAMA</b>	Initiative Against Illegal Wildlife Trade in Sub-Saharan Africa
<b>INCB</b>	International Narcotics Control Board

<b>INL</b>	International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
<b>INTERPOL</b>	International Criminal Police Organization
<b>IPR</b>	Intellectual Property Rights
<b>ITR</b>	Illicit Trade Report
<b>ITI</b>	International Tracing Instrument
<b>JAITF</b>	Joint Airport Interdiction Task Force
<b>LCL</b>	Less than Container Load
<b>LPA</b>	Las Palmas Airport
<b>MAOC-N</b>	Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre - Narcotics
<b>ME</b>	Middle East
<b>MEAs</b>	Multilateral Environmental Agreements
<b>MENA</b>	Middle East and North Africa
<b>NA</b>	North Africa
<b>NAM</b>	North America
<b>NPS</b>	New Psychoactive Substances
<b>ODS</b>	Ozone Depleting Substances
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OLAF</b>	European Anti-Fraud Office
<b>OTR</b>	Over the Road (transportation)
<b>PCCP</b>	Passenger and Cargo Control Programme
<b>PF</b>	Programme of Action on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT)
<b>PGS</b>	Programme Global Shield
<b>PITCH</b>	Preventing Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Heritage
<b>PPP</b>	Public Private Partnership
<b>PT</b>	Portugal
<b>R2</b>	South African Rand
<b>RANDA</b>	Radiological and Nuclear Detection Awareness
<b>RILO</b>	Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices
<b>SA</b>	South America
<b>SALW</b>	Small Arms and Light Weapons
<b>SG</b>	Singapore Port
<b>SIDA</b>	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
<b>STCE</b>	Strategic Trade Control Enforcement
<b>TBML</b>	Trade-Based Money Laundering
<b>TCOs</b>	Transnational Criminal Organizations
<b>TOs</b>	Terrorist Organizations
<b>UNK</b>	Unknown
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Programme
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNODC</b>	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
<b>UPU</b>	Universal Postal Union
<b>USD</b>	United States Dollar
<b>WA</b>	West Africa
<b>WASP</b>	West Africa Security Project
<b>WCA</b>	West and Central Africa
<b>WCO</b>	World Customs Organization
<b>WE</b>	Western Europe
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>WMD</b>	Weapons of Mass Destruction





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