‘If you protest, you die’: drug gangs recruit Ecuador’s fishermen

AFP – With its idyllic, hotel-dotted coast, Ecuador’s beach town of Salinas is the setting of a brutal war that most tourists never get to see.
Here, gangs forcefully enlist fishermen in drug trafficking – a scourge that has transformed one of the most peaceful countries in Latin America into one of its most violent.

“If you protest, you die,” a 35-year-old fisherman in the area told AFP of the gangs’ recruitment methods, which entail force and fear but also large payments – though not always everything they are promised.

The fisherman, who declined to give his name for fear of retribution, works at the Santa Rosa pier in the town of 35,000 inhabitants in Ecuador’s western Santa Elena province.

The atmosphere at the port is silent, tense.

“We can’t stay here long,” the fisherman told AFP while looking around nervously, explaining how he and others are given the choice between transporting cocaine for lucrative compensation, or being killed if they refuse.

Sandwiched between Colombia and Peru – the world’s top cocaine producers – Ecuador has seen violence explode in recent years as enemy gangs with links to Mexican and Colombian cartels vie for control.

Salinas is about 150 kilometers (93 miles) west of Guayaquil, the country’s biggest city and main commercial port for exporting drugs and the epicenter of clashes between gangs that fight bloody battles over trafficking routes to the United States and Europe.

As the gangs have gained ground, homicides in Ecuador soared from six per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018 to a record 47 per 100,000 in 2023.

In the first four months of 2024 alone, about 1,900 homicides were recorded.

– Small-scale traffic –

Santa Elena is the political stronghold of President Daniel Noboa, who has declared a state of “internal armed conflict” in the government’s showdown with organized crime.

Unlike in Guayaquil, where drugs are smuggled by the tonne in large shipping containers, in Santa Elena trafficking is done “in a more improvised, smaller-scale way,” according to Glaeldys Gonzalez, a researcher at the Crisis Group think tank in Ecuador.

Small towns like Santa Elena have become “strategic points of export,” she added, from where the drugs are delivered in small batches to countries in Central America for export further abroad.

“They do it using fishing boats,” but increasingly also with larger, semi-submersible vessels, added Boris Rodas, captain of the Navy who commands the area.

Santa Elena has been overrun, the experts say, by Los Choneros, one of Ecuador’s biggest criminal gangs, as well as smaller ones such as Los Lagartos, Los Tiguerones, Los Chone Killers and Los Lobos.

– ‘Take the money or die’ –

Drug traffickers use locals “mainly for their knowledge of the sea” and local weather conditions, said Gonzalez.

For the fishermen, a shipment can earn as much as $10,000 – a figure that is hard to reject for workers in an industry hard

hit by ever-worsening fish shortages.

But even for those not tempted by the money, refusal is not an option.

“These people and their families are threatened, blackmailed,” and given the option of “plata o plomo” (take the money or you die) – the maxim of fallen Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar, said Gonzalez.

“We never know who is hiring us. There are intermediaries and we never know the boss,” the fisherman told AFP.

“Half the money is delivered before departure and the other half when we return to port with the work done,” he added, though payment is not always honored in full.

“And if you ask about the rest of the money, they will obviously do something to you,” said the fisherman. “A few days ago, they killed a fisherman,” he added in a low voice.

– Caught in the crossfire –

Offshore, the gangs fight over their routes just as they do on the mainland.

The fishermen talk about recently discovering a decapitated body in the water.

“When the gangs meet at sea, they open fire,” the Salinas fisherman told AFP, and sometimes, men like him get caught in the crossfire.

Other times, they get killed on mere suspicion of working for a rival group. And they are extorted for protection money.

In April 2023, about 30 gunmen opened fire on a small, man-made fishing port in Esmeraldas in Ecuador’s north, killing nine people.

AFP