

# Terror and the Social Accumulation of Fear: Criminal Governance in Three Paraguayan Border Cities with Argentina and Brazil

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**Entre o terror e a acumulação social do medo: Governança criminal em três cidades paraguaias fronteiriças com Argentina e Brasil** analisa e compara a governança criminal que condiciona a rotina e as atividades dos moradores e operadores do sistema de justiça e segurança em três cidades fronteiriças. Estratégias etnográficas como observações, entrevistas e conversas informais identificaram os atores, os bens e os serviços que exploram e os mecanismos de interação institucional e social. Eles atuam impunemente nesses territórios por meio da aquisição de mercadorias políticas, da infiltração institucional e de diversos mecanismos de coerção baseados na violência simbólica e brutal, bem como do acionamento de processos sancionadores criminais e disciplinares que geram terror e acumulam medo social.

**Palavras-chave:** governança criminal, crime organizado, Ciudad del Este, Saltos del Guairá, Pilar

This article analyses and compares the operation of the criminal governance that conditions the routine and activities of the residents and the justice and security system officials of three border cities. Ethnographic strategies, such as observation, interviews, and informal conversations identified the actors, the goods, and services they exploit, as well as the mechanisms of institutional and social interaction. They act with impunity in these territories due to the control of political commodities, institutional infiltration and different mechanisms of coercion based on symbolic and brutal violence, and the engagement of criminal and disciplinary sanctioning processes, which generate terror and accumulate social fear.

**Keywords:** criminal governance, organised crime, Ciudad del Este, Saltos del Guairá, Pilar

## Introduction

The violence witnessed in our cities and countries can only be understood by referring back to historical processes, narrating a history of the present. These were the words of advice given by Professor Michel Misse to one of the authors of this study at the pair met at the former's study centre at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in February 2019. Following that advice, this article begins by describing the model of criminal governance in force

during the dictatorship and then the reconfiguration implemented in the early years of the democratic process. It subsequently focuses on the forms that these models have acquired and currently operate in three border region urban centres.

Indeed, a dictatorship that imprisoned, assassinated, and disappeared its opponents ruled Paraguay between 1954 and 1989 (PARAGUAY TRUTH AND JUSTICE COMMISSION, 2008). During the regime, both the territory and institutions were under military power, headed by the President of the Republic, General Alfredo Stroessner, who also exercised direct control over local and regional governments. These were entrusted to government delegates, chosen for their personal and/or commercial affinity with the dictator. They oversaw all licit and illicit business in their jurisdictions. Thus, no one could operate without the authorisation of these representatives of “the General”<sup>1</sup>.

Government delegates from Amambay, Canindeyú and Alto Paraná, departments that border Brazil, were particularly influential, as they were the main logistical centres for business destined for Brazil, Paraguay’s largest trading partner since the 1970s (ABENTE, 2008). Moreover, from the 1980s onwards, the territory of Amambay became the main hub for farming marijuana farming and receiving cocaine from the Andes and shipping it to the United States and Europe, which also entailed the importation of various chemicals used for refining (FERNÁNDEZ PALACIOS, 2017).

The military also controlled smuggling in general and, in particular, the smuggling of electronics to Brazil. This enabled them to get rich without conspiring (GALEANO, 2021), but at the same time, they were the most bloodthirsty repressors of political and economic dissidence, “persecuting, eliminating, excluding, extirpating and even annihilating any focus on, attempt at or plan of opposition and struggle” (PARAGUAY TRUTH AND JUSTICE COMMISSION, 2008, p. 14). In the 1960s, General Patricio Colmán inaugurated the “death flights”, dropping the bodies of detainees, some of them still alive, from planes into the Paraná River or the jungle. In his office, he would exhibit the ears of his victims to foreign visitors as a prized war trophy (NICKSON, 2010).

In February 1989, another military officer, General Andrés Rodríguez, overthrew Stroessner and called for a general election, which led to his appointment as President of the Republic (1989–1993). The process of political democratisation began, which also put an end to the monopoly of the border criminal market, until then dominated by the military and its partners (PARAGUAY TRUTH AND JUSTICE COMMISSION, 2008). New actors emerged, vying for territorial control of the routes and border crossings, attacking each other with betrayals, disappearances, assassinations, dismemberments and massacres. Anyone who posed any kind of danger, real or presumed, no matter who they were, was eliminated (PARAGUAY TRUTH AND JUSTICE COMMISSION, 2008).

In April 1991, journalist and owner of Radio Mburucuyá, Santiago Leguizamón Zaván, was murdered in broad daylight in downtown Pedro Juan Caballero, capital of Amambay. In the last 30 years, several hypotheses have emerged regarding the motive, but there is consensus that it was ordered by the border mafia, linked to drug trafficking and its links with political and military power. Case number 13.030, Santiago Leguizamón Zaván and family, which was brought before the Commission, was submitted in February 2021 to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In August 2021, President Mario Abdo Benítez announced on Twitter that Paraguay would settle the lawsuit.

In the morning of 10 October 1994, the then head of Paraguay's National Anti-Drugs Agency, General Ramón Rosa Rodríguez, was also assassinated in an upmarket area of Asunción. The crime was also never solved, but those who analysed the case maintain that an official report prepared for the then president, Juan Carlos Wasmosy (1993–1998), which he was to deliver that morning, was behind his death. It contains a complete report on the dynamics of the cocaine trafficking and its main actors and protectors, including the former head of the executive branch, Andrés Rodríguez, and governors of border areas. Zulia Jiménez, then a journalist with *Diario Noticias*, assures that there is no doubt that the content of the report was the cause of her murder (interview conducted on 20 July 2021). In 1996 the press leaked the contents of the report, shedding light on the institutional involvement in the business.

With the break-up of the military monopoly, some family groups were strengthened and alliances with factions of Brazilian origin began. In the late 1990s, the Morel clan, which dominated southern Amambay and northern Canindeyú, hosted and provided protection to the historic *Comando Vermelho* (CV – Red Command) leader Fernandinho Beira-Mar (GARAT, 2016). In early 2000, the alliance was broken, and on 13 January 2001, the two sons of João Morel, who was killed a few days later in a Brazilian prison where he was serving his sentence, were murdered in their own home.

Líder Cabral, a former Morel collaborator, tried to take his place. Pursued by Beira-Mar, he took refuge in Argentina from where he continued to operate for more than ten years. He was arrested in Guaira-Paraná, on the other side of Saltos del Guairá, in July 2010 (TEJERO, 2010). Among those who started the dealings with Brazilian factions, Felipe “Baron” Escurra remains active. Linked to the *Comando Vermelho*, he has gone into hiding in recent years, after being arrested in August 2016, and released a year later by court order. Law enforcement agencies have considered him the king of marijuana since the death of Gerardo Sanchez in August 2010 (CANDIA, 2017).

Meanwhile, since the early years of the democratic transition, Jorge Rafaat Toumani had been exercising hegemonic power over various types of commerce in Pedro Juan Caballero, especially the black market, taxing other groups for the use of what he considered his territory. Since mid-2010, the *Primer Comando de la Capital* (PCC – First Capital Command), with its

Project Paraguay, has sought greater autonomy in the country in order to elevate its profits, which until then depended on local intermediaries. Thus, on 15 June 2016, Rafaat was ambushed and killed in the capital of Amambay, in an operation involving several groups and more than 50 people. The use of a 50mm anti-aircraft gun was required to neutralise the armoured van used for the attack (FELTRAN, 2018; MANSO and DIAS, 2018).

The northeast of Paraguay's Eastern Region, made up of the departments of San Pedro, Amambay and Canindeyú, has some characteristics that facilitate the activities of organised crime (CABRERA RODRÍGUEZ, 2017). It shares 438 kilometres of dry border with Brazil; 93.7% of cannabis farming is concentrated there, as well as the main routes for the reception of cocaine from Bolivia, Peru and Colombia; and illegal activities linked to drug trafficking and smuggling have become naturalised and socially and institutionally tolerated (MARTENS, 2019a).

These circumstances determine the strategic importance of this region in the country's black market, as the actions and disputes between groups operating in the area have the potential to influence and condition activities elsewhere. The Paraguayan-Brazilian border is, in turn, the region with the highest levels of lethal violence, with murder rates reaching 70 per 100,000 inhabitants, when the national average is only 7 (MARTENS, 2019a). Contract killing is the most common type of murder there. The perpetrators are neither known nor prosecuted, resulting in levels of impunity that exceed 90% of cases (MOLINAS, 2020).

Some of the goods received or produced in the northeast of the Eastern Region leave the country through border cities such as Saltos de Guairá, Ciudad del Este and Pilar. They have to be transported for up to 800 kilometres by road.

The geographical location and infrastructure offered by Saltos del Guairá, Ciudad del Este and Pilar as departmental capitals made them strategic points in the criminal market operating from Paraguay, as they are also major logistical centres for regular business activities. Ciudad del Este is the second largest city and economy in Paraguay, while Pilar has the only deep-water port area on the Paraguay River, the main export route for meat and grains, and Saltos del Guairá has wet and dry borders with the states of Paraná and Mato Grosso do Sul.

In the case of Ciudad del Este, as Cardin (2012) points out, illegal and clandestine practices, such as smuggling, drug trafficking and arms trafficking, have become commonplace in the border region between Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este. Other research has even linked it to terrorist activities (BARTOLOMÉ, 2019; CUERVO CEBALLOS, 2018).

In Pilar and Saltos del Guairá, Martens and Veloso (2019) and Martens (2021) documented the existence of organised criminal networks and *border region trade* linked to the trafficking of marijuana, cocaine, arms and cigarettes to Argentina, in the former, and Brazil, in the latter. Furthermore, whereas in Pilar the *combustiblero*<sup>2</sup> is an occupation exercised in a public and

systematic manner, in Saltos del Guairá it is the *cigarrillero*<sup>3</sup> who performs this role. Both are considered *border region trade*, that is, a set of economic activities carried out in different border areas where the boundaries between the legal and the illegal are blurred. They enjoy some degree of social and institutional tolerance, and state repression can even provoke rebuke among the public (MARTENS and VELOSO, 2019).

Likewise, Ciudad del Este forms the triple border, together with Foz de Iguazú (Brazil) and Puerto Iguazú (Argentina), as such it is a heterogeneous, diverse space that concentrates myriad processes and social situations of approximation, integration, conflict and differentiation, socially and institutionally practised, which differs from the boundary as a legal act that gives sovereignty to the States (ALBUQUERQUE, 2015). It is presented by state security services and a sector of the academia as the base for the operations of criminal groups such as Hezbollah, linked to international terrorism, and others such as the PCC and the CV, a danger to the entire region, where terrorists of different nationalities, organised crime and corrupt officials converge (BARTOLOMÉ, 2019; CUERVO CEBALLOS, 2018; FONSECA, 2020).

Saltos del Guairá also hosts much of the informal trade constantly relocating from Ciudad del Este, due to the pressures and controls exerted by both Paraguay and Brazil (CARDIN and FIOROTTI LIMA, 2018).

In recent years, empirical research such as those of Rabossi (2011), Renoldi (2015a, 2015b) and Cardin (2012) using analytical frameworks such as the concept of illegalism postulated by Foucault (2002), propose readings of the phenomenon of the triple border between Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina from an anthropological and criminological perspective, identifying the use or non-use of legal mechanisms as one of the forms of territorial management (BARBOSA, RENOLDI and VERÍSSIMO, 2013).

Against this background, this article analyses and compares how criminal governance functions in Ciudad del Este, Saltos del Guairá and Pilar, three cities on the border with Brazil and Argentina, based on the characterisation of the criminal groups that are active in and control their territories. Specifically, the aim is to identify the groups in operation, determining differences and similarities in their strategies and mechanisms for influencing the population and institutions such as the National Police, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the judiciary.

The analytical framework of the information produced integrates the concepts of criminal governance, that is, the imposition of rules of conduct or restrictions by a criminal organisation, of any nature whatsoever (LESSING, 2020), the state administration of illegalisms, punishing some and tolerating others (FOUCAULT, 2002), political commodities, made available by corrupt officials (MISSE, 2017), and hegemonic power networks. These are made up of state agents, politicians and the security forces, closely linked to businessmen who enable not only impunity, but

also the entry of capital from organised crime into legal economic channels (FLORES PÉREZ, 2019, 2020). It is therefore distanced from approaches that limit the perspective on organised crime to the lack of government institutions capable of dealing with it effectively through repression and the penal system (BARTOLOMÉ, 2019; CUERVO CEBALLOS, 2018; SAMPÓ, 2017).

## Methodology

A combination of methodological strategies and a longitudinal analysis is required to understand the aspects involved in criminal governance in the border territories studied, which are marked by fear (BODY-GENDROT, 2018) and the belief in the constant increase of violence (MARTENS, MOLINAS, RAMOS and ORREGO, 2018). Moreover, as a key link in the drug trafficking chain in South America, organised crime is constantly growing (BARTOLOMÉ, 2019; INSIGHT CRIME, 2021).

This work is unquestionably part of the line of research into violence and its actors. It was developed by the Department of Criminology and Security of the Faculty of Sciences, Technologies and Arts (FCTA) of the National University of Pilar (UNP). FCTA researchers have been joined by others from the Law Faculties of the Universidad Nacional del Este (UNE), based in Ciudad del Este, and the Universidad Nacional de Canindeyú (UNICAN), based in Saltos del Guairá. With the research team, over the past few years we have documented the armed actors operating on the northern border with Brazil and their impact on the population (MARTENS *et al.*, 2018; MARTENS, 2017); the dynamics surrounding the illegal extraction of fuels from ships navigating the Paraguay River on the border with Argentina (MARTENS and VELOSO, 2019); marijuana farming in the departments of San Pedro, Amambay and Canindeyú (MARTENS, 2021); and the actors and political and social impacts of violence on the north-western Paraguayan border with Brazil (MARTENS, 2019a).

In line with these previous studies, and taking advantage of the bonds of trust forged with institutional actors, members of the community and groups involved in the trade of illicit goods, various ethnographic strategies for the collection and production of information were used for this article, such as participant observation, interviews and informal conversations, supported by the permanent and/or continuous presence of the researchers in each of the cities analysed (CARDANO, 2017).

The fieldwork of this research was conducted in line with rules of traditional ethnography, such as safeguarding the quality of the researcher in some circumstances and informed consent (NOEL, 2011; OSORIO CAMPUSANO, 2013), and implemented measures recommended for the

study of armed groups in highly violent territories (ALARCÓN and BOURGOIS, 2010; CABRERA RODRÍGUEZ, 2017).

As such, observation and recording of activities in different border areas and crossings in each of the cities was prioritised, witnessing the reception, preparation, transportation and shipment of goods, by water and land, as well as the warehouses used for storage of the products. The researchers also made the most of these opportunities to hold informal conversations with workers and their respective managers and/or bosses. The observations were recorded in field notebooks.

Meanwhile, interviews were conducted with Paraguayan state agents from the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Judiciary, the National Police and the National Anti-Drug Secretariat (Senad), who agreed to share information and their perceptions of criminal governance in their spheres of engagement, and with bosses, entrepreneurs and labourers in the criminal markets operating in the area.

The term “boss” (*patrón*) refers to an employer in the legal economy and, in the illegal economy, to a businessman who moves large quantities of goods and has the capacity to negotiate and activate mechanisms of impunity so that his products can circulate without inconvenience. Several of these bosses are Brazilian nationals and belong to some of the criminal groups active in the cities under investigation. Family clans are led by bosses and are named after their members, as well as those who produce the goods for them, such as marijuana farmers. “Entrepreneurs” (*emprendedores*) are those who, without belonging to any clan or criminal group, take the risk of starting up in some area of the illegal economy in their city, so they must work on their own account and at their own risk. The “labourers” (*peones*) work for bosses or entrepreneurs, knowing the implications of the activity and the rules for their effective performance, aligned to the policy of remaining silent about their activities.

Interviews and informal conversations were also held with 30 members of the security forces or the justice system. Furthermore, following the interviews, constant conversations were held with some of these actors, in order to contrast the information that emerged from other sources or from the ethnographic fieldwork. Hence, these people became key informants in the work (SCRIBANO, 2008).

With regard to bosses, entrepreneurs and labourers, the snowball strategy enabled access to them, building on contacts made for previous studies. Some of the entrepreneurs and labourers who provided information are currently in prison and are part of or have contacts with members of the factions under investigation. These are people who have been collaborating with the research team for several years and to whom legal advice is occasionally provided, either regarding their case or the incarceration regime established in national law.

For ethical and security reasons, the public and private functions of the people who collaborated with the research are not precisely identified, and the report is written in the

masculine gender. Likewise, due to the nature of the study scope, informed consent, as required by the ethical recommendations of traditional ethnography, was considered inapplicable because of the risks involved, although collaborators, interviewees and key informants knew of the nature and objectives of the research in detail (RESTREPO, 2015).

In agreement with Rodgers (2004) in qualitative studies on violence, keeping the researcher's identity protected is sometimes a matter of survival, and the ethical dilemmas to be resolved are permanent when documenting the activities of actors involved in criminal activities (CABRERA RODRÍGUEZ, 2017; NOEL, 2011; OSORIO CAMPUSANO, 2013).

The interviews were coded and analysed with the help of Atlas.ti under the following categories: groups that operate, work dynamics, institutional infiltration, interaction with justice system operators, interaction with uniformed personnel (police, military and Senad agents), interaction with the population, mechanisms of criminal governance, illegal activities that they exploit, commercial activities that serve as fronts, networks that they are part of, and fears (RODRIGUES PEREIRA, 2004). These categories were constructed based on the literature and the analytical framework of the work underpinned by the concepts of criminal governance (LESSING, 2020), political commodities (MISSE, 2017), illegalisms (FOUCAULT, 2002), and hegemonic power networks (FLORES PÉREZ, 2009).

### **The setting**

The three cities studied comparatively in this paper are capitals of Departments, the political-administrative division adopted in Paraguay. Ciudad del Este (Alto Paraná) is one of the main points of connection with Brazil, by the Friendship Bridge, inaugurated in 1965, which led to the city's creation and subsequent strengthening until it became the second most important hub of economic development in Paraguay. The metropolitan area, made up of the riverside municipalities of Presidente Franco, Minga Guazú and Hernandarias, is home to roughly 800,000 people (INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTADÍSTICA, 2021). Its urban and commercial centre is located on the Paraná River, facing both Foz de Iguacu (Brazil) and Iguazú (Argentina), with which it shares several border crossings that are not legally authorised, but which operate continuously, at times varying in terms of their location.



Figure 1: Border checkpoint in Ciudad del Este on the Paraná River, in the vicinity of the Triple Border



Source: Personal archive of Juan A. Martens.

Salto del Guairá (Canindeyú), with just over 42,000 inhabitants (NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF STATISTICS, 2021), borders two Brazilian states, Paraná and Mato Grosso do Sul, respectively. It is separated from the former by the Paraná River and from Mato Grosso by imaginary landmarks, between which a long dirt road zigzags in and out of each territory. It also has *cigarrillero* ports from where light boats can reach the interior of Paraná and São Paulo in just a few minutes.

In Ciudad del Este and Salto del Guairá, the shopping is incessant, carried out by tourists and *compristas*<sup>4</sup>, both in large shops, from *mesitas* (tables)<sup>5</sup> or in the streets, where the conversation can be held in Portuguese and products can be paid for in reais, pesos or dollars, in addition to Guaraní. One can easily perceive the complexity of the border relations and identities (ALBUQUERQUE, 2015; CARDIN and FIOROTTI LIMA, 2018) and the dynamics of bottom-up integration, that is, trade and distribution at the micro or ant-like scale—underground economies (STEFONI, MARDONES and VALDEBENITO, 2021).

Mercosur citizens are not required to complete migration forms to enter and stay in the area. While there are no official reports on the cross-border movement of people, some estimates indicate that more than 20 million shoppers cross annually from Brazil (INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTADÍSTICA, 2019).

Pilar (Ñeembucú) is located on the left bank of the Paraguay River, at the confluence with the Ñeembucú stream. During the process of consolidation of the Paraguayan State, it was one of the main routes of access and connection to Buenos Aires. It has a population of 33,000. In the

region, there are five authorised crossing points for legal crossing into Argentina, where regular public transport services operate. However, Martens and Veloso (2019) identified 11 other ports used for the unloading of goods and fuels from ships traversing the Paraguay River.

### **Criminal groups and their characteristics**

In the three cities analysed, local and international groups are permanently engaged in illicit business and other legally questionable activities. However, Ciudad del Este has the greatest number and diversity of organisations linked to organised crime, as people of different nationalities and commercial purposes have chosen it as their operational base.

With regard to the composition of the groups identified, four types can be distinguished: 1) those made up exclusively of Paraguayans; 2) those led by people of different nationalities other than Paraguayan, which determine their identification; 3) those with their own identity and names, regardless of the nationality of their leaders or members; and 4) entrepreneurs, i.e., people who, without forming part of an association, venture into illegal business using their contacts or knowledge as inhabitants of border areas. Over time, an entrepreneur may become a clan leader.

The sources consulted referred to family “clans” as those made up exclusively of Paraguayans, while those led by people of other nationalities or members of the security forces were identified as “mafias”, including Chinese, Japanese and Bangladeshi, as well as the police. Those with their own names are the *Primer Comando Capital* (PCC), *Comando Vermelho* (CV), *Bala na Cara*, *Clan Rotela* and the *Primer Grupo Catarinense*. Of all these, the PCC has the greatest presence, both in prison and community spaces, with the first “baptisms” (admission of new members) outside of prison also being identified in poor neighbourhoods of Ciudad del Este (BIONDI, 2009; FELTRAN, 2018, MARTENS, 2019b). The naming of these groups does not imply that there are no others present in the cities investigated, but these are the only ones documented in our fieldwork. Certainly, the security agencies refer to other groups, about which we gained no information.

As mentioned above, and in contrast to Saltos del Guairá and Pilar, in Ciudad del Este we recorded the presence of the five groups identified in the previous paragraph, five family clans and two clans made up exclusively of members of the security forces, police and military, as well as elements of the Chinese, Japanese and Bangladeshi mafias.

In Saltos del Guairá, the PCC, the CV and some 20 family clans are at large, while in Pilar, we identified three organisations led by people from the region, but with close relations or associations on the other side of the border in Argentina. Although the clans in Saltos del Guairá

are more numerous, those operating in Ciudad del Este wield more power, due to their logistical capacity and domestic and international links.

The factions of Brazilian origin operate with Paraguayan members or collaborators, with the PCC having a national presence, as there are “PCC wings” in at least 14 of the 18 penitentiaries. These are spaces within the prisons which, housing actual or presumed members of the PCC, are subjected to a special system of living and security, with harsher conditions of confinement, even if they collaborate with the penitentiary government. Some of these wings are entirely populated by Paraguayans.

Furthermore, the PCC has a network of members and collaborators outside the prison system who carry out various activities, such as the supervision of cannabis farming, the reception of Andean cocaine, arms dealings and the daily shipment of large loads of cigarettes to Brazil, by water and land.

Unlike the PCC, the CV has little territorial penetration, although it works in a permanent and sustained manner and was the first to arrive in the country, in the mid-1990, in the region of Capitán Bado (Amambay), where Fernandinho Beira-Mar and others were taken in and offered shelter by the leader of the Morel clan, João Morel, as described in the first part of this article. However, it operates a scheme involving Paraguayan and Brazilian collaborators that allows it to acquire and ship different types of goods, especially handguns.

*Bala na Cara* and *Primer Grupo Catarinense* operate with Brazilian members who come to Paraguay to coordinate the logistics of shipping the goods they purchase. Once on national territory, they use intermediaries, either from local clans or even members of the state security forces.

The police and military clans operating in Ciudad del Este are composed exclusively of these uniformed officers. They work in coordination with members of the Public Prosecutor’s Office, the judiciary, the local media and members of the political establishment, who enable them to execute their activities with impunity.

Although with varying characteristics, the different groups identified exploit similar areas, as will be seen in the following section, which, in certain circumstances, produce disputes between factions that result in high rates of lethal violence and some symbolic executions, which often involve dismemberment.

## **Goods and services**

Marijuana, cigarettes, cocaine and guns are common commodities trafficked from Ciudad del Este, Saltos del Guairá, and Pilar to Brazil and Argentina. For the domestic and

international movement of these products, each of the groups relies on a complex network of cooperation, made up of state and private actors, whose links range from local and departmental governments to the national spheres, enabling them to develop their businesses (FLORES, 2009; SCHULTZE-KRAFT, 2016). The logistics deployed for large-scale cigarette smuggling facilitate the shipment of most other products<sup>6</sup>.

In Ciudad del Este, the five identified family clans are mostly involved in the sale of marijuana and cocaine, to both the domestic and international markets, and, when such orders are placed, in procuring and *sending* arms<sup>7</sup>. These clans also act as suppliers or intermediaries of the goods needed by groups with little attachment to the city, such as occasional buyers.

We also identified some entrepreneurs who act with the consent of the big *bosses*, who deal in other goods, such as the entry and reshipment of manufactured clothes to Brazil, electronic goods and controlled products such as testosterone, hormones, as well as car tyres.

The police and military group shares characteristics of the Rio de Janeiro militias, since in addition to being state agents in charge of repressing illegal activities, they offer political commodities and protection for sale so that other criminal groups can operate (HIRATA, 2021; MISSE, 2017; WOLFF, 2015). In the case of police officers behaving as a criminal association, they specialise in extorting money from local traders and tourists, after planting evidence and illegally depriving them of their freedom. Their contacts with corrupt officials from other institutions, local and national politicians, as well as members of the media, allow them to continue operating, even after some of their members have been reported and criminally prosecuted. Criminal prosecutions went unsanctioned, due to the trickery of some agents of the Public Prosecutor's Office who use them as a mechanism of impunity.

The military operates exclusively on the Paraná River and the riverside portion of land where the *Prefectura General Naval* has jurisdiction. This is where the infrastructures are located that allow the goods to be loaded onto the vessels that then make the international crossing. Their territorial control is absolute, to the extent that they control the exact number of trips made by the different canoes and boats, as well as the boxes they carry. For this purpose, the military commanders order soldiers in official vessels to be deployed in the port areas so as to register the corresponding control. They bring their institutional power to bear on any attempt to break the rules they impose.

Figure 2: Loaded trucks in the downtown Saltos del Guairá waiting for the scheduled time to begin the journey to the dry border with Brazil



Source: Personal archive of Juan A. Martens.

Those named after the nationalities of their bosses, such as the Chinese, Japanese and Bangladeshi mafias, exert pressure on their countrymen, and specialise in issuing Paraguayan identity documents, from birth certificates and identity cards to passports, even to people outside the country. With these fake documents, they gain entry to European and North American countries.

With regard to the PCC and the Rotela Clan, they control prison and community spaces, both in Ciudad del Este and in other areas of the country, from where they coordinate their businesses linked to drugs and other illicit goods. Unlike the PCC, the Rotela Clan specialises in small-scale drug dealing<sup>8</sup>. The CV, the *Bala na Cara* and the *Primer Grupo Catarinense* are primarily involved in drug and arms trafficking.

In Saltos del Guairá, cigarettes are the main product, both for local bosses and for the PCC and CV. Electronics, arms, cocaine and marijuana are also shipped using the infrastructure set up for the cigarette operation. The work in this area involves receiving goods from the tobacco factories located in Alto Paraná or in the south of the Department of Canindeyú, storing or fractioning them and then sending them to Brazil, either by water or land. To a lesser extent, there are groups linked to other commodities, such as agricultural supplies, fertilisers and hormones. Our team identified 24 major bosses operating on the dry or river border, some of them specialising in electronics, some in arms, but all of them using the cigarette business as a front.

In Pilar, meanwhile, the identified family clans exploit the trafficking of marijuana, cocaine and cigarettes to Argentina. There is also a complex network of *combustibleros*, a group of traders

whose main activity is the illegal extraction, storage, distribution and sale of diesel fuel from merchant ships that navigate the shared space of the Paraguay River to or from the Río de la Plata. Some of these are also linked to marijuana and cocaine trafficking (MARTENS and VELOSO, 2019). In Pilar ni Saltos del Guairá we identified the presence of the Rotela clan.

Figure 3: Small boats at the mouth of the Paraguay River into the Paraná River, a few kilometres from Pilar and in front of the Argentinean city of Paso de la Patria, Corrientes Province



Source: Personal archive of Juan A. Martens.

### **Mechanisms of institutional and social interaction**

All the groups that operate in these cities develop their activities without any major obstacles due to the institutional and/or social collaboration, participation and silence, and the involvement of hegemonic power networks, in the terms of Flores (2009), according to whom organised crime is possible due to the cooperation of state and non-state actors.

The degrees and modes of institutional and social cooperation are diverse, as are the motives for providing assistance, although according to the findings, they can be grouped into the following: fear, convenience and justification or naturalisation of the phenomenon.

The fear of justice and security agents alike, as well as the general public, is of reprisals in case their actions are detrimental to the interests of the groups operating in their cities. Cases of murders, dismemberments, assassinations, attacks, transfers and dismissals of officials such as

judges, prosecutors and police officers, either for collaborating with the justice apparatus or for carrying out work that helped to dismantle these networks, remain fresh in the public's memory.

In this regard, a member of the Public Prosecutor's Office reported that he received threats and was harassed through the media to withdraw from a case involving the police mafia. When he failed to do so, he was removed by his boss, who, without explanation, assigned the investigation to someone else. In a similar vein, one uniformed officer recalls that he happily gave his immediate superior a full account of the dynamics of a group operating in the city where he worked. The next day, he received information that his main informant, whose identity his boss had requested, had been ambushed and killed by hired assassins.

Interaction for convenience or political bargaining occurs in the same way all the cities. In all three cases, it was found that much of the border region activity is enabled by the cooperation of the police and military personnel, whether from the army or the navy, who are responsible for guarding the border, in similar conditions as observed in other locations by Flores Pérez (2009, 2019), Duque Daza (2021) and Flores Pérez (2020).

In the operations to carry merchandise across the river, be that the Paraná (bordering with Brazil) or the Paraguay (bordering with Argentina), the military commanders of the different units have developed a work scheme that allows them to accurately account for the volumes transported, since they should receive a certain amount of money for each box.

In Saltos del Guairá, at the time the information was collected, in May 2021, the Paraguayan Navy River Police had arranged for officers to conduct daily supervision of the quantity of goods shipped through Puerto Tigre or at Ground Zero, since they were to receive US\$1 for each box. Hence, they collect around 100,000 dollars a month in lean times (low demand). These cash-laden briefcases reach the navy's coffers as far as the Command in Asunción, according to one of the senior officials who collaborated with the investigation, providing information he knew from his experience of witnessing the events and working in the area, which was verified and confirmed by other sources. Unlike in Ciudad del Este, the military officer in charge of counting the goods that cross the border is stationed at the port itself, interacting with the stevedores.

In the dry border area, there are two exit points, where the army and the national police are responsible for control and authorisation. Based on the accounts collected, we constructed the dynamics of the transport operations and identified the routine of those who take the goods into Brazil. On two occasions, in May and July 2021, we accompanied loaded trucks to observe the behaviour at the checkpoints and border crossings. During the journey that takes just over an hour, despite the high visibility of the transporter and various police and military checkpoints, no-one checked the contents of the cargo, and the truck entered Brazilian territory without any setbacks whatsoever.

The collaborator who served as our guide commented that this is the same route followed by those who bring stolen vehicles and any type of contraband from Brazil into Paraguay, and through which cigarettes as well as marijuana, arms, cocaine and other illegally traded goods leave the country.

— What about the Brazilian police? (Interviewer)

— It works pretty much the same as the Paraguayan setup. Everything is coordinated and it is a long-standing structure, which works thanks to the coordination with uniformed officers on both sides of the border. (Interviewee) (Interview conducted on 21 May 2021)

Coinciding with this account is the comment made by one of the city's great patrons when we went to visit him. When we arrived, he was sat in front of his home, relaxing. He knew our escort, whom he asked if we were trustworthy, to which he replied: "Absolutely", that we just wanted to understand how the city works, what its rules are. He examined us with his gaze, looking at each of us (there were two of us). We smiled and nodded at what our colleague had said. He stared at the guide and said: "If you say so, brother, it must be so. I trust them." (Field notebook entries of 23 May 2021).

Now in a friendly manner he began to recount his experience of the previous night, due to which he was tired, as he had practically spent the whole night working.

To tell you the truth, I didn't sleep at all. I had problems 30 kilometres from the border, on the Brazilian side. One of my trucks toppled, full of goods. You can't imagine what was in that vehicle (laughs). I could not leave it like that until dawn, as we can only operate in that area at night. 15 of us went to reload the goods and tow the vehicle away. I just got back a few minutes ago [the conversation took place around 11:00 a.m.]. (Field notebook entries of 23 May 2021)

As Misse (2017) explains, the acquisition of political commodities, both on the Paraguayan and Brazilian sides, is what allows products to cross the border and reach consumer centres in Brazil, as well as the cooperation of networks involving public officials and private actors from different levels and tiers (FLORES, 2009).

When using the second terrestrial exit point from Saltos del Guairá, via Pindoty Porã/Sete Quedas, the trip takes about 90 minutes from the city centre warehouses. There are police and customs posts located at the entrance to the city. As the route is mostly through territory which is not on the borderline, the head of the Departmental Police Directorate must authorise the transfers. In this case, the military is not involved.



Figure 4: Demarcation marker between Paraguay and Brazil and part of the road along the border line



Source: Personal archive of Juan A. Martens.

Although the transit of goods is daily and notorious, we were unable to identify any criminal or administrative proceedings opened at the behest of the institutional decision-makers stationed there. One of our interlocutors explained why:

This is because everything is coordinated and paid for, and any official who does not want to partake in the scheme does not last a month in the position. In this part of the country, criminal prosecution does not depend on the occurrence of relevant criminal offences, as the rule books say, but on other factors, such as non-compliance with the de facto rules governing the region's criminal economy. (Field notebook entry of 22 July 2021)

In Pilar, a justice official acknowledged that the scheme of police and military involvement is similar to that of Saltos del Guairá and Ciudad del Este, as both the navy and the police receive an influx of cash, which is distributed at various levels. All interviewees, whether from the institutional sector or the criminal market, agreed with his account.

— I was just a swallow trying to make a difference by not getting involved in receiving what they said I was entitled to [money collected from bosses in the area]. What else could I do if they have the whole structure in their favour? It was a way of saying that not everything is rotten within the Paraguayan state. (Interview conducted on 03 April 2021)

These stories and experiences reveal that the mechanisms of social and institutional interaction are similar in the three cities analysed, and that there is an intertwined relationship between public and private actors, business and interests, which enable a criminal market to

survive. Furthermore, beyond the official narrative, there is a conviction that some local economies depend on illicit activities or activities whose boundaries between the legal and illegal are blurred, and that indiscriminate persecution, as mandated by law, would render a large portion of the population unemployed. This is also why they not only collaborate for the illicit market to continue, but also publicly defend the activity and its actors.

Thus, several patrons are community leaders, constantly collaborating with social and religious activities and participating in works of social interest or for the common good. On the outskirts of Pilar and other cities, they help needy or vulnerable groups who might be afflicted by tragic situations such as death and serious illnesses.

The social and institutional relationship with these businessmen is complex, because, in addition to generating fear, there is a kind of dependence and tolerance, as explained by a member of the Public Prosecutor's Office, who said that in 15 years of work he had never found anyone who would testify against any of them.

In Ciudad del Este, an entrepreneur in a poor neighbourhood suggested that his good relationship with the authorities, particularly the police, through the purchase of political commodities (MISSE, 2017) meant that his illegal activities would be tolerated (FOUCAULT, 2002; RENOLDI, 2017), and business would be allowed to run smoothly. He also argued that fear is not enough to obtain the silence and cooperation of the citizens, but that it is essential to serve the community, making references to concrete material aid, and to contribute to maintaining a certain order in the neighbourhoods.

In the middle of the interview, he recalled one of the events through which he contributed to the community's state of peace. It happened when a stranger entered the neighbourhood with his car at full speed, endangering passers-by and neighbours, as well as playing loud music.

— It was disrespectful to the neighbourhood. I had to react quickly. I could not allow that kind of insecurity in my area. From a few phone calls I found out who he was and where he was from. I made him come and apologise to the community [he explained that the apology was made to him, as a community representative]. It was not necessary to call the police, but the [drugs] boss of the area where the subject in question lived. He never came back, and we haven't had any more problems like that. (Interview conducted on 27 May 2021)

### **Mechanisms of criminal governance**

The mechanisms of criminal governance used by the groups operating in the border cities investigated share the same characteristics and are based on two types of actions: on the one hand, those that generate fear among the population, the justice officials and security system; and on the other, those that contribute to the strengthening of a social imaginary according to which

everything that is done to contain them will be insufficient, since they are part of power networks that guarantee them impunity (LESSING, 2020; FLORES, 2009).

Therefore, the research team recorded retaliatory actions or actions aimed at social and institutional disciplining, ranging from kidnappings, murders, dismemberments, the transfer of public officials, the dismissal of justice officials, “media lynchings” and the instrumentalisation of criminal or administrative sanctioning processes for the purpose of persecution. It was found that these mechanisms of criminal governance operate when the acquisition of political commodities is insufficient or when there is a need to send a message to reassert the territorial control which is subject to the rules of coexistence imposed by the illicit trade in the area (MISSE, 2017).

The department of Ñeembucú and its capital, Pilar, are nationally recognised for their tranquillity and low rates of lethal violence, with no murders for a few years, unlike the other two border cities studied. However, two crimes are recurrent in the interviewees’ recollections when dealing with the actions of organised groups dedicated to illicit trade.

The first case concerns the kidnapping and murder of Pili Aliana, the son of a shopkeeper, in October 2003. There are several stories surrounding the event and, although some perpetrators were convicted, perceptions and accounts link this death to arms trafficking and other illicit businesses; ultimately a settling of scores. The second development is recent. It happened on 13 August 2020, when Celsa Chávez was gunned down in the city centre. The intervening prosecutor recalled that the victim had publicly denounced a multi-million dollar fuel trafficking scheme, indicating members of the Armed Forces, the National Police and the Public Prosecutor’s Office as participants. In March 2019, she and her husband had already suffered an assault, in which her husband was seriously injured. These types of events are exceptional, but they have the capacity to contribute to a build-up of fear and a sense of impunity.

The most frequent mechanisms of criminal governance are threats and the use of the judicial system to exert pressure. One of the interviewees recalled that he spent eight years on trial before the Jurado de Enjuiciamiento de Magistrados (JEM)<sup>9</sup> for initiating the investigation of a case linked to a local clan. The prosecutor who replaced him in the case dismissed the complaint within a few months.

This story is similar to the practice used in Ciudad del Este, not only by organised crime, but also by the police mafia. Another interviewee recalled that when he took over the investigation of a case and did not want to accept money, the press started accusing him of being linked to shady business dealings. Since they could not get him to withdraw from the investigation, they reported him to his superior, who, without any justification, removed him from the case. He recalled with sadness that

— the prosecutor who took over the case requested the acquittal of the accused due to lack of evidence, despite the fact that there was a wealth of incriminating evidence. And so they went unpunished, with a wealth of incriminating evidence. All the work done was thrown in the bin... [silence]. The scheme is powerful and reaches

all the way to Asunción. It is difficult to confront them. What I want now is to keep my job and not have problems. (Interview conducted on 10 August 2021)

The fear of being the victim of homicides and attacks against one's personal integrity is expressed by workers in Ciudad del Este, in contrast to Pilar and Saltos del Guairá, where they see this possibility as more remote—although some of them said that they do not risk it either, because they know where they stand, in allusion to the territorial and institutional control exercised by the *de facto* powers. However, their stories all feature homicides, contract killings, and the discovery of bodies with signs of violence and dismemberment. They recall extremely violent events that have occurred since the 1990s and have remained engraved in the memory of the people of Ciudad de Este:

— And, of course, we, as officials, do not escape that fear, that danger. Here you have to know how to live, to respect the rules of the border in order to stay in office and to stay alive. (Interview conducted on 20 June 2021)

They also cited cases of prosecutions of magistrates, indictments and transfers of police officers who dared to stand up to local and international groups that run the city's illicit businesses. One of the interviewees recalled the situation of an official who disobeyed an order to release a load of drugs. As he failed to comply with his boss's orders, when he arrived at the institution, he was handed his commission 900 kilometres from his home, on the Bolivian border. He was also advised to leave the city that night to stay alive.

Another story which is very vivid in the memories of the uniformed officers of Ciudad del Este is the death of the two daughters and the wife of the then Commissioner, Salcedo, in August 2009. They were killed and burned to death in an arson attack on their home. The information gathered indicates links to organised crime, as the father, in his role as commissioner, had caused damage. Speaking to the media, Commissioner Salcedo said: "I know who did this to me; they dealt me a heavy blow, but I will charge them" (DIARIO ABC COLOR, 18/08/2009).

Some justice officials in Saltos del Guairá described as absolutely obscene the institutional involvement—mainly of the National Police, the Navy, the Army and the special anti-drug agents—with the whole trafficking and smuggling scheme that is rampant and allows the city to live, but that, regardless, enjoys social protection. One justice official summed up his experience in the following terms:

— Here you can't mess with them [border traders, drug dealers, cigarette smugglers]. The same people will publicly lynch you if you engage any institutional mechanism of control or repression. In the years I've been here, I've realised that you can't even ask questions about many things. (Interview conducted on 15 July 2021)

Officials from Saltos del Guairá remember the demonstrations and road blockades with thousands of people that took place in February 2019 and 2020, following the seizure of nearly 100 million cigarette packs that were about to be smuggled into Brazilian territory. These facts support the conviction that these businesses and their bosses enjoy social and institutional protection.

One of the interviewees, who arrived from another border city in one of the cities studied 15 years ago, explained the mechanism for remaining in your job:

— When you live in a society where the rules written in the codes are not the ones that are enforced, the first thing you have to identify in order to survive is the law that is enforced: what is the rule that has to be followed, by whom and how they are dictated, as they vary as well, depending on several factors... once you have identified it, if you stay in line, you will be a civil servant until you retire... You will never have a problem. (Interview conducted on 24 July 2021)

### **Final reflections**

The criminal groups that operate in Saltos del Guairá, Ciudad del Este and Pilar, departmental capitals bordering Brazil and Argentina, are made up of family clans, mafias—including the police mafia—as well as prison-based groups from Brazil or Paraguay—such as the PCC, CV, Bala na Cara, Primer Grupo Catarinense, and Clan Rotela—and the entrepreneurs, who, without being connected to some of these groups, become involved in illicit activities, taking advantage of the opportunities that these cities offer for the criminal market.

Ciudad del Este, Saltos del Guairá and Pilar function as logistical centres for the international transfer of illicit or contraband products, which is possible thanks to the various forms of acquisition of political commodities, institutional infiltration and mechanisms of criminal governance that condition the lives of the inhabitants, as well as those of security and justice officials (FLORES, 2019; LESSING, 2020; MISSE, 2007), forcing them to remain silent or turn a blind eye to these activities. In other words, as Flores Pérez (2020) warns for the Mexican context and Duque Daza (2021) for the Colombian context, without the cooperation of political and economic power, organised crime would have no chance of success in these territories either.

The trafficking of marijuana, cocaine and arms is common in all three departmental capitals, as is the use of the cigarette smuggling business as a way of camouflaging the shipment of drugs, arms and other goods. In Ciudad del Este, mafias such as the Chinese, Japanese and police mafias operate primarily through extortion. The Bangladeshi mafia focuses on the forgery of Paraguayan identity documents.

None of these groups seeks to confront elements of the state, but rather to infiltrate them and incorporate them into their network of power and influence, especially those linked to the security

forces (FLORES PÉREZ, 2009). Certainly, as documented in this paper, police and military forces are aware of and/or involved in some way in the international movement of goods in the three cities, which would be difficult or frustrated without the acquiescence of these security forces.

In Ciudad del Este and Saltos del Guairá, the military, through soldiers and other subordinates, count the amount of merchandise dispatched day after day, in order to charge the fee they themselves establish, collecting millions of dollars on a monthly basis, distributed to different levels and spheres, even reaching the national headquarters in Asunción.

Finally, the groups operating in Ciudad del Este, Saltos del Guairá and Pilar employ various different criminal governance strategies that condition the lives and routines of the residents and authorities (LESSING, 2020). They are based on fear as their main mechanism, which stems from the use of symbolic and brutal violence, through dismemberments, murders, threats, harassment, “media lynchings” and the engagement of criminal and administrative sanctioning processes that can lead to the dismissal and transfer of public officials who do not yield to their rules.

In order to impose terror, they carry out particularly violent exemplary killings, in which the victim’s body, the manner or place of execution implicitly carries the message of who governs the city, installing and reinforcing in the imaginary that it makes no sense to confront them, because they are the ones who have the power over whether people live or die.

The permanent and continuous presence of these criminal groups that have been operating on the border for at least 30 years and the impunity of their acts have produced a social accumulation of fear among inhabitants and authorities, who have already internalised the border advice to “see, listen to everything and keep quiet to avoid problems” when it comes to the businesses operated by these groups, thus guaranteeing the continuity of their activities.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One of the several names given to the dictator during his 35 years in power.

<sup>2</sup> “Combustiblero” is a generic expression used by local authorities and inhabitants of the southern Paraguayan border to refer to anyone involved in any part of the process of illegally extracting, storing, distributing and selling diesel fuel from the merchant ships that sail in the shared space of the Paraguay River to or from the Río de la Plata (MARTENS and VELOSO, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Expression used to refer to any person who participates in any stage of the work to smuggle cigarettes into Brazil.

<sup>4</sup> This is the name given to those who will resell the products in their country of origin.

<sup>5</sup> This refers to small stalls located in public spaces, especially on the pavements in the centre, where different types of merchandise are offered, generally of Chinese origin, displayed on tables of approximately one square metre. The urban intervention implemented by the local authorities from 2014 onwards replaced tables with boxes, which serve the same purpose and can also be used to store products inside them. These small merchants are generally Paraguayan, although in recent years migrants from India and Bangladesh have also been operating, renting stalls from concessionaires.

<sup>6</sup> Masi, Cresta, Ovando and Servín (2021) documented the growing trend of cigarette production and supply in Paraguay at the same time as the abrupt drop in exports, which would imply illegal channelling to other countries. The study documented the annual production of between 2.5 and 3 billion packets per year, while imports fail to exceed 500,000.

<sup>7</sup> This expression refers to international arms shipments.

<sup>8</sup> The Rotela Clan emerged within the penitentiary system as a reaction to the growing power of the PCC, with whom it maintains a fierce struggle, provoking, on 15 June 2019, a massacre in the San Pedro Regional Penitentiary (10 murders – seven of which were by decapitation, and the others burnt to death) and, on 17 February 2021, another in the Tacumbú National Penitentiary, the largest in the country (with seven deaths, three of them by decapitation) (CARNERI, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Jury for the Prosecution of Magistrates, which removes judges and prosecutors.

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**RESUMEN:** Este artículo analiza y compara de qué manera opera la gobernanza criminal que condiciona la rutina y actividades de pobladores y operadores del sistema de justicia y seguridad en tres ciudades fronterizas. Estrategias etnográficas, tales como observaciones, entrevistas y conversaciones informales identificaron a los actores, las mercancías y servicios que explotan, así como los mecanismos de interacción institucional y social. Actúan con impunidad en estos territorios debido a la adquisición de mercancías políticas, infiltración institucional y distintos mecanismos de coerción basados en la violencia simbólica y brutal, y la activación de procesos penales y disciplinarios sancionatorios, que generan terror y acumulan el miedo social.

**Palavras-chave:** gobernanza criminal, crimen organizado, Ciudad del Este, Saltos del Guairá, Pilar

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