

Guyana: Struggling to Tame Lawless Waters

Guyana's coast guard commander freely admits that his surveillance and enforcement capabilities extend to just a fraction of the country's waters.

The sole vessel able to reach the deep seas of Guyana's 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is a repurposed minesweeper, a British naval warship that has been moored for nearly a decade, in constant need of repairs.

The other several-odd boats in the coast guard's fleet are designed for offshore patrols of some 40 nautical miles, said Lt. Col. Michael Shahoud, head of the Guyana Defense Force Coast Guard. The country also lacks radar and camera systems to track boats.

"We have a severe challenge monitoring our maritime space," Shahoud told InSight Crime.

With nearly 460 kilometers (285 miles) of coastline, Guyana claims some 50,000 square nautical miles of ocean. Officials can't say for sure whether vessels are fishing illegally in the country's ungoverned waters. National Security Adviser Gerald Gouveia suspects that they are. Gouveia, a retired army pilot, recalled a Canadian aerospace company finding them easily during a demonstration of its surveillance aircraft for Guyana's military.

"I think they were able to pick up close to 50 or 60 unauthorized vessels in the Guyanese EEZ," he told InSight Crime.

In 2020, Guyana's coast guard had 11 boats, including the minesweeper warship, according to a [report](#) of its monitoring and control capabilities by illegal fishing expert Pramöd Ganapathiraju. A monitoring vessel commissioned to the Fisheries Department [came online](#) last year, and further additions are underway. The government is in the process of purchasing an [\\$11.5 million patrol boat](#). The 115-foot vessel, scheduled to be delivered later this year, would be able to patrol Guyana's EEZ.

The absence of a long-range vessel "is troubling," Ganapathiraju told InSight Crime. But he said he was most concerned about a lack of information about how often the fleet was being used in patrols and whether boats fishing illegally were intercepted.

"It costs a lot of money to run those vessels," he said of Guyana's coast guard. "Just looking at the number of vessels or size of the vessels is not enough to say they are doing a good job at sea."

While Guyana has long been one of South America's poorest countries, the small Caribbean nation is seeing a windfall from new [oil wealth](#). Firms that move oil are adding to monitoring capabilities at sea, including with private aircraft that shuttle between the oil fields and the port of Georgetown, said National Security Advisor Gouveia.

Oil revenue, he said, is also to be used to ramp up maritime operations. Still, "the coast guard, with or without oil, will be needing to do these things," Gouveia said.

Meanwhile, inland waters are anarchic, said Pameshwar Jainarine, chairman of the Upper Corentyne Fishermen's Co-operative Society. Fishing grounds can have upwards of 200 boats in areas meant to support some 80 vessels, said Jainarine, who blamed a licensing system run amok, where boats are registered indiscriminately. Illegal landing spots also exist, and catch data is scant.

“It’s already maxed out,” Jainarine told InSight Crime. “And then more and more boats are being put in our area of operations.”

Piracy [has long been rife](#) in the lawless waters off Guyana, whose coastline sits between those of Suriname and Venezuela. Ambushes have turned deadly. A turf war among Guyana fishers was linked to a [fatal 2018 assault](#) in which fishers were burned, attacked with machetes and forced overboard, some with batteries strapped to their legs as weights.

Local fishers [have been robbed](#) of boats, expensive outboard motors and hundreds of dollars [of fish](#) and [cash](#).

In March of last year, officials said authorities had increased patrols along the country’s northwestern coast and rivers. According to Stabroek News, a Guyanese news outlet, fishers in the Waini River area, which abuts Venezuela, were reportedly being [preyed upon by armed gangs](#) from the neighboring country.

Fisherman Basdeo Sharma said he and his fishing colleagues still feel unprotected.

“When we go out there, we are defenseless,” he told InSight Crime. “We like sitting ducks on the water.”

Western Hemisphere Regional Illegal,
Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing
Assessment



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