

# GUN TRAFFICKING IN THE CARIBBEAN

The Message of the AR 15 to Trinidad and Tobago (T&T)

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## The message of the AR15 assault rifle to T&T

From 2013 to the present as reported in the public domain the state agencies of policing have seized <sup>(1)</sup> assault rifles built on the Colt AR15 platform on a continuing and increasing basis in T&T along with other makes and models of assault rifles as AK47s. Assault rifles seized jumped in 2012 with 12 weapons seized which was a 100% jump over 2011, 18 seized in 2013, 23 in 2014 and 5 already for 2016. Seizures of AR15 platform assault rifles have now outstripped those of AK47 assault rifles the long preferred assault rifle of choice in the criminal world which is sourced from multiple supply points. The new preference for AR15 platform assault rifles was potently illustrated by the use of this type of assault rifle to shoot twice <sup>(2)</sup> a police sergeant at Sea Lots, Port of Spain on May 26, 2016 in a desperate bid to prevent the seizure of the assault rifle by the police sergeant. Apparently the loss of the rifle posed an immediate potent threat to those entrusted with it and its safety that called for securing its safety by any means necessary even if it means breaking the rules of engagement with the police. Or are there new rules of engagement in gangland T&T today?

The US is the dominant platform for the production of and the illicit smuggling of AR15 platform assault rifles and the Mexican Transnational Trafficking Organisations (MTTOs) are the dominant traffickers of these weapons from the US to Mexico and the rest of the world. The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) in its report titled: "Firearms Trafficking" dated January 2016 (GAO-16-223) <sup>(3)</sup> states: "higher caliber rifles are the preferred weapons used by drug trafficking organisations. Most were purchased legally in gun shops and at gun shows in the US and then trafficked illegally to Mexico." The MTTOs have then a preference for assault rifles and since the dominant manufacturing platform for AR15 platform assault rifles is the US their premier drug market they then move their illicit drugs into the US purchase assault rifles then export these guns to Mexico. The GAO report states that 70% of the firearms seized in Mexico and submitted to the US for tracing for the period 2009-2014 came from the US. This includes AR15 platform assault rifles, AK47s assault rifles, handguns and shotguns. The GAO report states that whilst other smuggling organisations and individuals in the US specialize in smuggling handguns from the US the MTTOs are the only organisations that specialize in smuggling mainly assault rifles, AR15 platform rifles and AK47s, with handguns second to assault

rifles. The MTTOs have therefore amassed a considerable arsenal of AR15 platform assault rifles in Mexico and in areas around the world that are strategically important to their illicit drug trafficking networks primarily in the drug production and trafficking transition zones. The Caribbean island chain is now a drug transition zone for the MTTOs for the movement of product to the US north east.

In keeping with their strategic plans the MTTOs have evolved the next stage of gun smuggling which is the smuggling of assault rifle parts to Mexico and elsewhere where the final product is finished and assembled. The GAO report states: "weapon parts are being transported to Mexico to be later assembled into finished firearms." Under US law parts kits for assault rifles are not guns there are therefore no controls on purchases but exportation requires approval. The MTTOs then purchase parts kits in the US and smuggle them into Mexico and elsewhere. A parts kit for an AR15 platform assault rifle consists of: buttstocks, pistol grips, upper receiver, springs, hammers, triggers and bolts and pins. There is no rifled barrel and receiver or receiver with barrel fitted as they are prohibited for free sale as the receiver is classified as a gun. But castings of receivers and flats are openly traded including online sales as they are both semi-finished and are not classified as guns. The MTTOs purchase parts kits, castings and flats in the US smuggle them out of the US where they machine the castings and flats finishing them and then assembling the finished AR15 platform assault rifles with barrels purchased and smuggled from the US. An AR15 assault rifle finished in this manner has no markings and identification numbers stamped on its parts. As castings and flats carry no stamped markings and identification numbers this is a weapon that dispenses anonymous, unlisted death. The only way to profile this weapon is by its ballistic footprint created when it is fired but with parts kits, replacement barrels and receivers the weapon can literally be given a new ballistic footprint. The challenged forensic capacity of Caribbean states is then a Sicario's paradise premised on impunity.

The Small Arms Survey Issue Brief No. 17 <sup>(4)</sup> dated March 2016 titled: "Drips and Drabs the mechanics of small arms trafficking from the US" states: "Arms trafficking from the US goes well beyond gun-running to Mexico. Traffickers in the 159 cases studied shipped weapons, parts, ammunition and accessories to at least 46 countries and foreign territories on six continents." There are then acquisition

and trafficking networks based in the US that are involved in the same illicit small arms trafficking activities as those moving arms to Mexico. The study in fact shows specific Caribbean islands are recipients of illicitly trafficked arms of which T&T is one so named. The study continues as follows: "Illicit trade in parts and accessories is then more significant than commonly assumed. Networks that traffic in firearms parts are among the most prolific and geographically expansive of the smuggling operations studied." The trafficking of firearms parts and accessories is then a specialty niche of the illicit trade which is lucrative to the extent to foster and evolve significant trafficking networks based in the US. Guns in use must be serviced to ensure operational reliability and efficiency and this requires gunsmiths and parts. The availability of parts, accessories and gunsmiths enable the customization of ex-stock/ex-factory guns into specialized weapons with superior fire power and enhanced operational efficiency which sells for top dollar on illicit markets. Those who purchase arms in recipient countries without the services of gunsmiths and a supply of parts soon end up with non-functional rusting junk such is the reality that separates transnational organized crime groups from street hustlers.

The study states: "Indeed, rifles account for a relatively large proportion of seized weapons because Mexican drug traffickers acquire and use rifles at a higher rate than illicit users in other countries." The MTTOs unlike other transnational organized crime groups have devised an order of firepower that is heavily dependent on assault rifles preferably those of the AR15 platform and the AK47. This means in operational areas where it is strategically necessary especially in the trafficking routes the arming of the affiliates of the MTTOs will reflect this order of firepower of the MTTOs and this order will become apparent at the ground level as those charged with guarding the assets of the organization will carry the preferred assault rifles as those charged with eliminating threats to the organization professionally. The study continues as follows: "the most significant example of light weapons trafficking in the cases studied involved the smuggling of hand grenade parts to Mexico." In the arms bazaar of the US the MTTOs purchase bodies (baseball, lemon and pineapple), spoons, safety clips, spring kits, head assemblies and dummy grenade bodies and smuggle them to Mexico where they are finished by adding fuses and explosive material etc. and commissioned. As with assault rifles finished and commissioned in Mexico these

grenades carry no markings and identification numbers. The MTTOs are then implementing the means to acquire, fabricate, assemble and commission their own rifles and grenades at minimum as they seek to be independent of illicit markets for the supply of general issue armaments and suppliers within these markets as the dependence amounts to organizational weakness as they learned from the experience of the Colombian traffickers they replaced. One expects as is the case with assault rifles the affiliates of the MTTOs in the trafficking zones will also be armed with grenades as part of basic arms issue for foot soldiers of the affiliates of the MTTOs.

The creation of the Eastern Caribbean Trafficking Pipeline (ECTP) <sup>(5)</sup> to move cocaine and heroin into Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands (USVI) for entry into the drug markets of north east USA has yielded access to the MTTOs of a US arms market in both US Caribbean territories. In both US territories, Puerto Rico <sup>(6)</sup> and the USVI <sup>(7)</sup>, there are licit gun shops and extensive smuggling networks moving illicit arms into both of them with Puerto Rico having a comparatively huge licit arms users base. In both US territories the MTTOs can purchase legally parts kits, accessories, castings and flats to enable the production of AR15 platform assault rifles in Mexico and offshore Mexico even in the Caribbean island chain and this also applies to hand grenades. These small arms and light weapons can be distributed throughout the Caribbean Basin with the ECTP carrying these weapons southwards along the island chain to South America. Weapons acquired by the networks of the MTTOs are not for sale to the public which includes possible and probable enemies of the MTTOs. These are for the use of the MTTOs and their affiliates and the affiliates of their affiliates. Affiliates then enter and operate within a Caribbean island state armed in keeping with the order of firepower of the MTTOs and immediately trigger an arms race with those excluded from the networks of the MTTOs but involved in the illicit trades of the Caribbean. Those who choose to go to war with the affiliates of the MTTOs in the Caribbean Basin soon learn the hard way, some even lose their heads, that they simply do not have the resources to go up against a transnational criminal organization with the linkages and resources of the MTTOs. The MTTOs dry up the drug supply of their opponents robbing them of the means to purchase the firepower to prosecute their war against the MTTOs. The person/s wholesaling the weapons to the enemies of the MTTOs will then have their source/s of weapons supply dry up by

any means necessary including dropping a dime on their suppliers in the US if any. In the history of the illicit drug trade in the Caribbean these wars against the MTTOs have always been of very short duration and the price paid of long lasting impact on the groups at odds with the MTTOs and the social order in which they operated in as Guyana testifies to.

T&T since 2013 is now in the top tier of Caribbean island states inclusive of English, French and Dutch speaking states for seizures of assault rifles and in the top tier of Caribbean island states for seizures of AR15 platform assault rifles. T&T shares the first tier with Jamaica and Puerto Rico and the second only with Puerto Rico. Furthermore, T&T has now with the multiple shooting of the police officer joined the exclusive club of Caribbean states where police officers are shot with these assault rifles a position shared with Jamaica. Puerto Rico is the leading Caribbean state for seizures of assault rifles both AR15 platform rifles and AK47s whilst Jamaica has a history of the use of assault rifles by criminal groups against the JCF such as the M16 the mother of the AR15. There are also extensive arms trafficking networks from the US to Jamaica that mainly smuggle handguns into Jamaica. The reality is that with the public report of AR15 platform assault rifles seized in 2012 and 2013 there have been no further reports in the public domain in Jamaica in matching volume to the number of seizures in T&T since 2013 of AR15 assault rifles whilst the seizures of AK47s continue in Jamaica followed by M-16 assault rifles. AK47s are the dominant assault rifles of the Jamaican underworld. What then is happening in T&T that is not the reality of the rest of the English, French and Dutch speaking Caribbean island chain? It must be noted that this reality is absent from Guyana and Guyana is a premier trafficking node in the Caribbean Basin today for the MTTOs.

Did T&T in the 21<sup>st</sup> century suddenly develop trafficking networks with the US that supply gun markets on the ground in T&T with AR15 platform rifles that are separate and apart from the affiliates of the MTTOs? These non MTTOs trafficking networks are then so efficient and invisible that they move AR15 platform assault rifles from the US to T&T without interdiction in the US unlike MTTOs networks in the US. Are these gun markets external of the MTTOs so vibrant in their level of demand and the resources generated that they can traffic arms sustainably from the US to T&T? Issues that point to realities on the ground in T&T that must be understood as the nature of the illicit trades in T&T at

present will be illuminated. Officialdom mutters that the AR15 platform assault rifles are trafficked from the US yet they persist with the discursive line of the decade of the 1990s: the drugs and guns are coming from Venezuela and entering the south western and south coasts of Trinidad. Which guns and drugs? To say the AR15 platform assault rifles are coming from the US is to say that there is a pipeline from the US to T&T that predominantly moves assault rifles unlike the pattern of other traffickers where they predominantly move handguns. This pipeline is not under the control of the MTTOs as it is not strategic trafficking to set up a pipeline from the US to a small arms market that is T&T and MTTOs are not in the business of selling their arms to third parties. The official position is then insisting that a trafficking organization exists in T&T that is a carbon copy of the MTTOs as it utilizes the same methodology and has similar resources. In the world of the GAME in the Caribbean there is no such illicit organization as there is only room for a single hegemonic entity in the GAME much less one selling assault rifles for cash and KFC. If such an organization exists, then it survives and operates as a quasi-state entity. One can then posit that this challenger to the order of the MTTOs is bringing in parts kits, accessories, castings, flats and barrels to finish and assemble AR15 platform assault rifles in T&T. They are then on par and challenging the hegemony of the MTTOs and the MTTOs have failed to drop the dime on them in the US and Star Wars is real. The reality of T&T is the glib dismissal of the seizures of AR15 platform assault rifles by officialdom as public recognition of the potency of the threat posed is forbidden in the politics of crime in T&T.

Videos and photos in the public domain (8) of AR15 platform assault rifles seized in T&T reveal a variety of manufacturers, models and configurations made in the US. Most are configured as ex-factory/ex-stock but one video shows 4 rifles that have been customized as the barrels of these rifles are not the standard ex-stock barrels and an AR15 platform assault rifle of similar configuration was seized in St Kitts in 2013 (9). Some rifles seized show the outward signs of abuse and deterioration arising from improper storage away from the elements which are not common to weapons of the MTTOs and their affiliates. The abiding question for T&T is if among the assault rifles seized to-date assault rifles without markings and identification numbers were present. There is a vast difference between markings and identification numbers removed by various methods to

rifles without stamped markings and numbers. Assault rifles devoid of markings and stamped numbers point without doubt to the activities of the MTTOs and one such rifle seized in T&T confirms again the operational presence of the MTTOs in T&T. The results of tracing done by the US ATF on conventional rifles will provide insights into the process of acquisition in the US nothing else. Seizing AR15 platform assault rifles within our borders is no effective sustainable strategy of response to this threat. Likewise seeking to devote naval assets to close down the Gulf of Paria to stem the flow of fabled guns and drugs from Venezuela is also a failed strategy for as long as there is containerized cargo entering and leaving T&T the river of contraband flows. Where is the border protection agency? But the telling question remains as to why the flood of AR15 platform assault rifles and what is the operational strategy of the MTTOs in T&T? Then why in Jamaica which sits in the northern arc of the Caribbean island chain with established gun trafficking links to the US the AK47 assault rifle is the assault rifle of choice in the criminal underworld whilst in T&T which sits just off the coast of Venezuela the new assault rifle of choice is AR15 platform assault rifles? Why not purchase AK47 rifles that are supposedly available in droves from Venezuela? Those who play act at being in the know I hope they can provide realistic explanations not tired platitudes for this reality. On this issue I am silent as I have already spoken some time ago as I watch the new order exercising hegemony on the ground at present and the impact of the changes are now legion to those who have the eyes to see and the tension generated in the social order is palpable.

#### NOTES

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