

Shrimp bandits terrorise farmers

Lucrative income from 'pink gold' is fuelling violent crime that's threatening Ecuador's star export



Aerial view of production ponds at a shrimp farm in Taura, Ecuador.

FROM robberies on land to hold-ups at sea by rifle-toting hooded men, Ecuador's shrimp industry is facing a wave of violent crime that's threatening the country's star export.

The South American country is the world's largest shrimp exporter, putting one in every five crustaceans on tables around the world. And this "pink gold" raked in a record US\$7.3 billion last year, according to official figures.

However, shrimp farmers are being forced to shell out millions of dollars in private security, which could impact the industry's competitiveness compared with countries like India or Vietnam, where production is cheaper.

"We continue to be victims, daily, of criminals who are better armed than the

police," said Jose Antonio Camposano, president of the National Chamber of Aquaculture (CNA), which unites 4,000 shrimp producers and exporters.

In the first eight months of this year, the CNA registered 64 crimes against its members, including violent robberies at sea or along roads, some leaving deaths and injuries. In one attack, armed men shot at six shrimp workers at close range as they left southern Puerto Roma, stealing their cargo and racing off in speedboats.

The workers arrived bloodied at a dock in the port city of Guayaquil, which has become a hotbed of organised crime linked to international drug trafficking. Shrimp producers said that criminals were robbing their wares to finance other illicit business.

In another attack, a driver for a shrimp farm was seriously injured after being hijacked and robbed by armed men along a highway. According to the CNA, robberies also take place at production pools where shrimp are farmed on shore.

NO-MAN'S LAND

The criminals sell the shrimp at local markets or to traders who attempt to introduce them into the export chain.

"When we leave to take our merchandise to land, we work defensively and locate the risk points where we could be attacked," said a 51-year-old local from Puna, one of several islands near Guayaquil dedicated to shrimp, which has dethroned bananas as the country's main non-oil export.

Continuing, he shared: "The navy patrols, but doesn't dare to go near the shrimp farms." Navy officials said they could not take reporters on their patrols for security reasons.

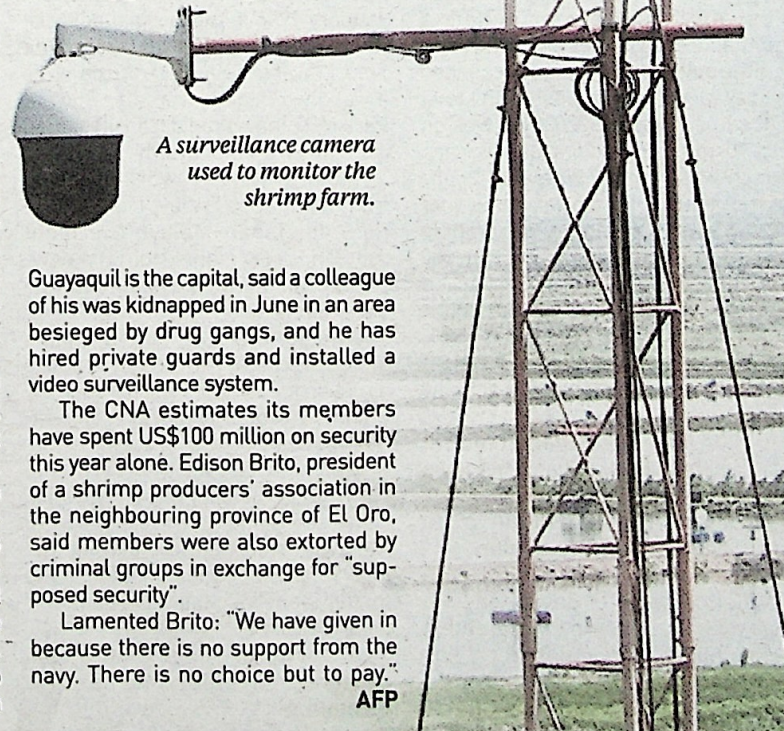
Camposano said that attacks typically take place in the same "red zones", such as Punta Roma in the gulf of Guayaquil, the southern Jambeli archipelago and two strategic coastal roads used to transport shrimp to packing plants.

Using radar and its own technology, the CNA has gathered information on the hotspots and passed them on to police. However, Camposano slammed the "total absence" of security forces in some areas, which he calls "no-man's land".

Kleber Siguenza, owner of a shrimp farm in the Guayas province of which



A security guard taking notes.



A surveillance camera used to monitor the shrimp farm.

Guayaquil is the capital, said a colleague of his who was kidnapped in June in an area besieged by drug gangs, and he has hired private guards and installed a video surveillance system.

The CNA estimates its members have spent US\$100 million on security this year alone. Edison Brito, president of a shrimp producers' association in the neighbouring province of El Oro, said members were also extorted by criminal groups in exchange for "supposed security".

Lamented Brito: "We have given in because there is no support from the navy. There is no choice but to pay."

AFP

Shrimp from a production pond.

An employee loading food into an automatic dispenser at a production pond.

