

‘We only know the ones we get, there could be stuff landing on beaches every night’

After the successes against cocaine gangs last week, Security Correspondent **Cormac O’Keeffe** talks to investigators about the ‘unending tidal wave’ of cocaine hitting Ireland and how not enough is being done

AMID all the recognition last week of a job well done — first with the 440kg cocaine haul in Cork and then the sentencing in the MV Matthew case — is the knowledge that an unending tidal wave of cocaine is coming across the Atlantic. “The interception on Tuesday of the near-half tonne in Courtmacsherry was a great result for the JTF [joint task-force],” a security source said. “And to have that topped off with the sentencing on Friday of the MV Matthew, again a JTF operation, was icing on the cake.” “The one Tuesday was a lot of co-ordination and logistics among the gardai, on the surveillance and operational sides of the house, and also Customs and the Defence Forces — the naval service and the air corps.” The dramatic military intervention of the army rangers, fast-roping from a helicopter onto the deck of the MV Matthew in September 2023, is etched in people’s memories. That too was a JTF operation (gardai, Revenue, and Defence Forces) and the LE William Butler Yeats was involved in both. The sprawling international investigation into the MV Matthew — as first revealed at the time in the *Irish Examiner* — identified Iranian and Hezbollah fixers and traffickers and the power of the Dubai-based Kinahan cartel. As Detective Superintendent Keith Halley of the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau (DOCB) said after the sentencing, these trans-national organised crime networks have “immense capabilities, unlimited resources, and global reach”.

Lessons from MV Matthew
In the case of the MV Matthew, the traffickers had even gone to the expense and work of buying and registering their own bulk cargo vessel and directly hiring and running crews to operate it. Sources said that particular smuggling operation was “overly complicated” and that the cartels have learned from this mistake. More recently, the cartels are concentrating on corrupting/intimidating crews working on legitimate commercial vessels to do the work. Security sources were impressed with the operation at Broad Strand beach last Tuesday. “This gang ran a very smooth operation,” one source said. “The guys in the rigid hull inflatable boat [Rhib] were dressed all in black, come in slow, in the dead of night, on a low throttle. There’s a van waiting, the drugs are loaded, and the van is gone. They made it look very simple.” Unlucky for this gang, gardai had intelligence, assisted by the maritime tracking expertise of MAOC-N, the EU drug interdiction agency. And watching the gang’s “maritime team” on their fast boat as they approached Broad Strand beach, not far from the town of Courtmacsherry, and the “ground team” waiting in the van, was the Garda national surveillance unit. The Defence Forces had the LE William Butler Yeats deployed at sea and the air corps was requested, with the Casa 284 taking off from Baldonnell at 3.50am (more on this later). Two Rhibs on the Butler Yeats engaged in a high-speed chase of the gang’s Rhib as it sped away along the coast, towards Waterford. But they were no match for the armed naval service maritime interdiction team and were caught. Meanwhile, the two-man landing team were brought to an abrupt halt by the emergency response unit and DOCB on the road to Courtmacsherry. However, experienced officers know that, for every good catch, they have, multiples are getting through. **All you need is a beach** “The reality is we only know the ones we get,” a security source said. “And, given how simple this gang made it look, there could be stuff landing on beaches every night. The fact is you don’t need a pier anymore. There used to be talk of all the remote piers across the country and how can you watch them. Now, all the gangs need is a beach.” There are an estimated 25 ports in the Republic. According to the Ireland Walking Guide, there are 300 beaches dotted along the coast. The threat posed by gangs using fast boats is affecting much of Europe. Last February, MAOC-N organised an operational workshop because of the “growing use” of fast boats in maritime cocaine smuggling. It noted the “expanding operational range” of these boats, adding they were “increasingly difficult to track and intercept”. As mentioned, South American cartels are using legitimate commercial vessels to smuggle their consignments to Ireland. When the vessels near whatever Irish port they are scheduled to go to, the maritime team takes off and speeds towards it. “The vessel doesn’t even need to



Major Cocaine Hauls in Ireland since 2023

- 1 July 2025**
440kgs seized in **Courtmacsherry, Co Cork**, in intelligence-led operation by Joint Task Force (Garda, Revenue and Defence Forces). Drugs brought from mothership at sea by RHIB to Broad Strand beach, near Courtmacsherry. Mothership is a bulk cargo container and registered in Barbados.
- 18 March 2025**
152kgs of cocaine seized by Garda Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau (DOCB) in sophisticated concealment inside a heavy goods vehicle on the M9 in **Co Waterford**. Consignment linked to Irish drug trafficking network known as ‘the Family’, led by brothers from the Ballyfermot and Clondalkin area of west Dublin, who dominate the cocaine market in Ireland.
- 14 February 2025**
182kgs of cocaine seized in **Co Laois** by Dublin Regional Crime Response Team. Eastern European importation gang and Irish crime gang believed to be behind the huge haul.
- 12 February 2025**
72kgs of cocaine seized in **Allenwood, north Kildare**, by DOCB. A gang based in Tallaght is believed to have linked up with the above mentioned Eastern European gang. The Tallaght gang was not known previously as a major player.

stop,” a source said. “The Rhib comes up behind the vessel, the consignment is lowered down by the crew and the ship continues to port, where it offloads its legitimate cargo.” That happened in the Courtmacsherry haul, with the bulk carrier, coming from Argentina, scheduled to dock at Ringaskiddy Port in Cork.

Cell structures
Cell structures are not necessarily new in trafficking and the MV Matthew showed that — with bosses in Dubai calling the shots over encrypted phones. The structure often breaks down as follows: ■ A ‘control team’ orchestrating everything by encrypted phones, in contact with the captain or crew of a mother ship, and tracking its movements, and the various teams at the receiving end; ■ A ‘boat team’ on the vessel, which exits a South American port, either with the drugs already on board or collected en route and rendezvous with a team at the receiving country; ■ A ‘maritime team’ based on a departure point on the coast of the country and, when told by the control team, leaves on a Rhib to a designated area at sea and collects the drugs and brings them to a landing point — separate to the departure point. This team then travels either back to the original starting point or another one and leaves; ■ A ‘ground team’ collects the drugs from the maritime team and loads the cargo into a waiting van, and typically in Ireland’s case, drives by motorway to the North and gets a ferry to Scotland, unless some or all the haul is for Ireland. In some cases, the control team might have a second ground team ready, just in case. In addition, authorities are aware of specialist “all-Ireland” gangs, typically based along the border, that provide the ground team service. “This is a sophisticated system,” said a security source. “It doesn’t always work, as we know, but they don’t need it to work all the time and they factor in that shipments will be lost, but that have billions to throw at this.”

Bombardment
Ireland is being bombed by huge cocaine shipments coming across the Atlantic. Estimates based on Garda and Revenue figures indicate that around 930kg of cocaine has been seized so far this year, compared to about 760kg of cocaine in 2024. There was a record haul in 2023, with approximately 3.45 tonnes of cocaine seized. Even excluding the MV Matthew’s 2.25 tonnes, an additional 1.2 tonnes was seized during the rest of the year. There has been a massive rise in seizures on just five or 10 years ago. From 2016 to 2021, the annual total seized ranged from a low of 52kg in 2017 to a

high of 138kg in 2020. Trying to estimate just how much gets in without being seized is very difficult. “You are never certain how much we are seizing and how much is getting in, but the 10%-15% estimate is probably true,” said one security source. The consignments of cocaine bound for Europe that are being seized indicates the sheer scale of cocaine smuggling. As the panel shows, MAOC-N made two record hauls of cocaine last year — each of them a colossal 10.5 tonnes. Both consignments were seized by the French navy, one in the Caribbean and the other Gulf of Guinea, off west Africa, a major supply route to Europe. In all, MAOC-N and partner countries seized a total of around 70 tonnes of cocaine in 2024. So far this year, the figure stands at 34.5 tonnes, including one nine-tonne haul, again by the French navy in the Caribbean, and a 6.4-tonne seizure by the French in the Gulf of Guinea.

Cocaine consignments seized en route to Europe	
Data from the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre — Narcotics (MAOC-N), an EU-UK drug interdiction agency. It does not include all cocaine seized on way to Europe or at European ports.	
2025 ■ June 26: 1.66 tonnes of cocaine seized by Portuguese agencies from a sailing vessel near the Azores in the North Atlantic. MAOC-N said 34.5 tonnes of cocaine have been seized to date; ■ June 11: 3.8 tonnes of cocaine seized by Spanish authorities in the Canary Islands in the North Atlantic from high-speed vessels coming from South America; ■ March 26: 6.5 tonnes of cocaine seized, in what MAOC-N called an “extraordinary operation”, when Portuguese authorities successfully intercepted a semi-submersible near the Azores. The narco sub had travelled from Brazil with five crew members, from Brazil, Colombia, and Spain; ■ March 22: 1.2 tonnes of cocaine seized by French forces stationed in the Caribbean from a fishing vessel, which was coming from Brazil; ■ March 17: 6.4 tonnes of cocaine seized from a fishing vessel by the French navy in the Gulf of Guinea, West Africa — a key route into Europe from South America; ■ March 17: 1.1 tonnes of cocaine seized by Spanish authorities off the	
Galician coast. Seven Albanians arrested; ■ January 20: 9 tonnes of cocaine seized from merchant vessel by French navy in the Caribbean. Three Colombians and one Spanish national arrested.	
2024 ■ December 20: 3.5 tonnes of cocaine seized by Portuguese police hidden inside bananas in a container from South America. MAOC-N seized a total of around 70 tonnes of cocaine in 2024; ■ December 7: 3.3 tonnes of cocaine seized by Spanish authorities inside a Venezuelan-flagged fishing vessel in the Canary Islands. Nine Venezuelans and one Colombian arrested; ■ December 3: 1.6 tonnes of cocaine seized by Portuguese authorities from a Brazilian-flagged fishing vessel near Cape Verde, off West Africa; ■ November 18: Four tonnes of cocaine seized from a fishing vessel by Spanish authorities near the Canary Islands. Fourteen Ecuadorian nationals and one French man arrested; ■ October 9: 3.3 tonnes of cocaine seized from a cargo vessel by Spanish authorities in the Canary Islands; ■ August 15: 10.5 tonnes of cocaine seized from a fishing vessel by the French Navy in the Caribbean. Six Brazilians, two Colombians, and one Venezuelans arrested; ■ March 14: 10.7 tonnes of cocaine — MAOC-N’s largest capture — seized by the French Navy in the Gulf of Guinea off a fishing vessel that had departed from Brazil.	

- 17 January 2025**
A consignment of cocaine – estimated to be in the region of **500kg** to a tonne or more – is suspected to have landed off the **west coast**, before being brought across the border and ferried to Scotland. Mothership had sailed from Brazil.
- 11 December 2024**
43kgs at **Cork Port**, concealed in a container of bananas from South America. Revenue seizure.
- 16 September 2024**
100kgs of cocaine seized in **Co Wexford** by DOCB. Ireland’s biggest gang, The Family, behind the haul. Part of International operation targeting use of ‘Ghost’ encrypted phone network.
- 13 August 2024**
150kgs of cocaine seized at **Dublin Port** in joint operation by DOCB and Revenue.
- 11 August 2024**
104kgs of cocaine seized at **Rosslare Port** in joint operation by DOCB and Revenue.
- 15 March 2024**
Gardaí prevented an importation operation in village of Tragumna, near Skibbereen on the **Cork coast** when they swooped on a gang, suspected of either about to carry out the importation or conducting a trial run. Given the scale of the operation, gardai suspect over a tonne of cocaine was due to the smuggled in.
- 12 January 2024**
49kgs of cocaine seized at **Rosslare Port** by Revenue Customs.
- 20 December 2023**
300kgs of cocaine seized at **Foynes Port**, Co Limerick, by Revenue Customs.
- 25 September 2023**
2.25 tonnes of cocaine – the largest ever in Ireland – seized on board the MV Matthew **off the Cork coast** after a dramatic military boarding by elite Army Rangers of the massive bulk Panama-registered cargo ship.

- 5 August 2023**
60kgs of cocaine seized in **Cork** by DOCB and Revenue.
- 2 August 2023**
133kgs of cocaine seized at **Rosslare Port** by Revenue.
- 19 July 2023**
60kgs of cocaine found in packages washed up along the coast of **Donegal**. Searches conducted in Louth the following year in relation to it.
- 14 July 2023**
163kgs of cocaine seized at **Rosslare Port** by Revenue Customs.
- 14 April 2023**
55kgs of cocaine seized at **Ringaskiddy Port, Cork**, by DOCB and Revenue inside maritime container from Ecuador.



The dramatic military intervention of the army rangers, fast-roping from a helicopter onto the deck of the MV Matthew in September 2023, is etched in people’s memories.

they can find them.” **Weak spot**
Compounding this factor is the perceived poor levels of maritime security in Ireland. “Cartels see and hear that Ireland is a point of least resistance, with the well-publicised lack of naval assets and air cover and the crisis in staffing,” a source said. The naval service struggles to get more than one long-range patrol ship out at any one time, while a dire shortage of controllers at Baldonnell is restricting and delaying air corps patrols and their ability to respond to requests at speed. One security source said the drug operations do not always need a physical aircraft in the sky — namely the air corps’ Casa C295 — and that drones would do the job. “These gangs are so clever that a Rhib might leave point A and, you think, it’s to deliver to point B, say a beach, but the Rhib collects the drugs from the vessel and drops the load at point C, somewhere else, to be picked up by another vessel that you don’t know about. If you don’t have air surveillance we don’t know this.” Some other sources differ to a degree, saying the Casa may actually be cheaper than similar military-grade drones with a similar sensor suite. There can also be issues with endurance of drones and their sensor payload. **Drone space**
Another source with knowledge of the air corps said that the Defence Forces was “years behind” where they should be in MALE (medium altitude long endurance) drone space. “They are like little small planes and have endurance for 9-12 hours and can give persistence in an operating area in surveillance, say over a mothership,” the source said. “You could then bring a Casa in, which could react quicker and have better sensors, at least in radar.” The source said that the central problem limiting the air corps — which has received extensive publicity recently — is the lack of controllers, operating, thought to be at less than 50% capacity. “Without controllers you can’t dispatch a Casa, so if there is a call from the gardai or Customs for air cover outside 9-to-5 Monday to Friday, there is going to be a delay as you have to call in a controller on a rest day and scramble a crew. “Now they did it on Tuesday [CASA departed at 3.50am, although not clear when request came in] but, generally, there’s a significant issue there.” This source blamed “inaction and mostly lack of ambition” at both Defence Forces HQ and Department of Defence level in pushing the need to invest in a military-grade maritime drone. A second source agreed: “We need drones now, but there seems to be very little movement.”

Promises
The programme for government makes the following commitment: “Fund innovative law enforcement technologies including unmanned drones to patrol our coast and ports and detect the trafficking of illegal drugs. “This will supplement the work of our air and naval services in this sphere.” Asked about steps to implement this pledge, the Department of Justice did not say if was not working on this area and said queries around the operational requirements of gardai were a matter for Garda HQ. It said the procurement and use of drones by the Defence Forces in an Aid to the Civil Power (ATCP) capacity, including drug interdiction at sea, was a matter Department of Defence and De-

fence Forces. In a statement, the Department of Defence said: “The air corps currently does not operate unmanned aerial drones for the patrolling of Irish territorial airspace or waters. “However it is proposed that this capability will be developed in future in line with a specific recommendation in this regard made by the commission on the Defence Forces. “The timeframe for this will be outlined in the updated *Detailed Implementation Plan for the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces*, which is due to be published shortly.” It said the two C295 maritime aircraft, specially equipped with state-of-the-art surveillance and communication equipment, were delivered to the air corps in 2023. “These new aircraft provide a significantly enhanced maritime surveillance capability and, like all Defence Forces capabilities, can be deployed in an ATCP role in support of An Garda Síochána and in support of the Joint Task Force on Drug Interdiction,” it said. It said that, at present, the naval service operates a selection of “non-military specification drones” for tasks such as search and rescue, intelligence gathering, and fishery protection. Sources have said that the necessary military-grade drones — one with the necessary technology, endurance, operational and regulatory capabilities — do not come cheap and that countries typically buy them in pairs. US prices would suggest two would cost around €100m. (The next Casa has a price-tag of €59m). European manufacturers, such as Airbus, also manufacture similar grade drones. **Security costs**
“It all depends on what exactly you want to do and what you want to spend,” one source said. “But a drone would not be just for counter-drug operations, it could also be used for fisheries and monitoring offshore and coastal critical infrastructure. “If you are serious about security, you need to spend the money. If you don’t, you pay the price.” Other sources point out that cartels are constantly improvising and investing in research and engineering — including in semi-submersibles. In December 2019, Spanish authorities intercepted the first ever transatlantic semi-submersible or “narcosub” in Europe. In March 2021, the first-ever semi-submersible being constructed in Europe was uncovered in Spain. In March this year, the Portuguese navy intercepted a narcosub in the Azores after travelling from Brazil with a colossal 6.5 tonnes of cocaine — and five crew — on board. Last week, the Colombian navy seized a narco-sub with a satellite antenna on the bow, possibly allowing it to be operated remotely by cartels without the need for a crew. Some sources here suspect cartels will also begin using drones to transport cocaine consignments. “The West African cocaine route is a major supplier to Europe, so use of drones across the Mediterranean is very possible,” said a security source. “You could also start seeing the likes of a cargo ship out in the Atlantic launching a drone — without the need for Rhibs.” Another source said: “Cartels are spending billions on technology. They have more cocaine than they know what to do with and people in Ireland and across Europe are desperate to shove it up their noses and not think about how it got there. “Meanwhile, our navy and air corps is depleted and the Government just makes statements and promises. This problem is getting bigger and bigger and we need action — now.”