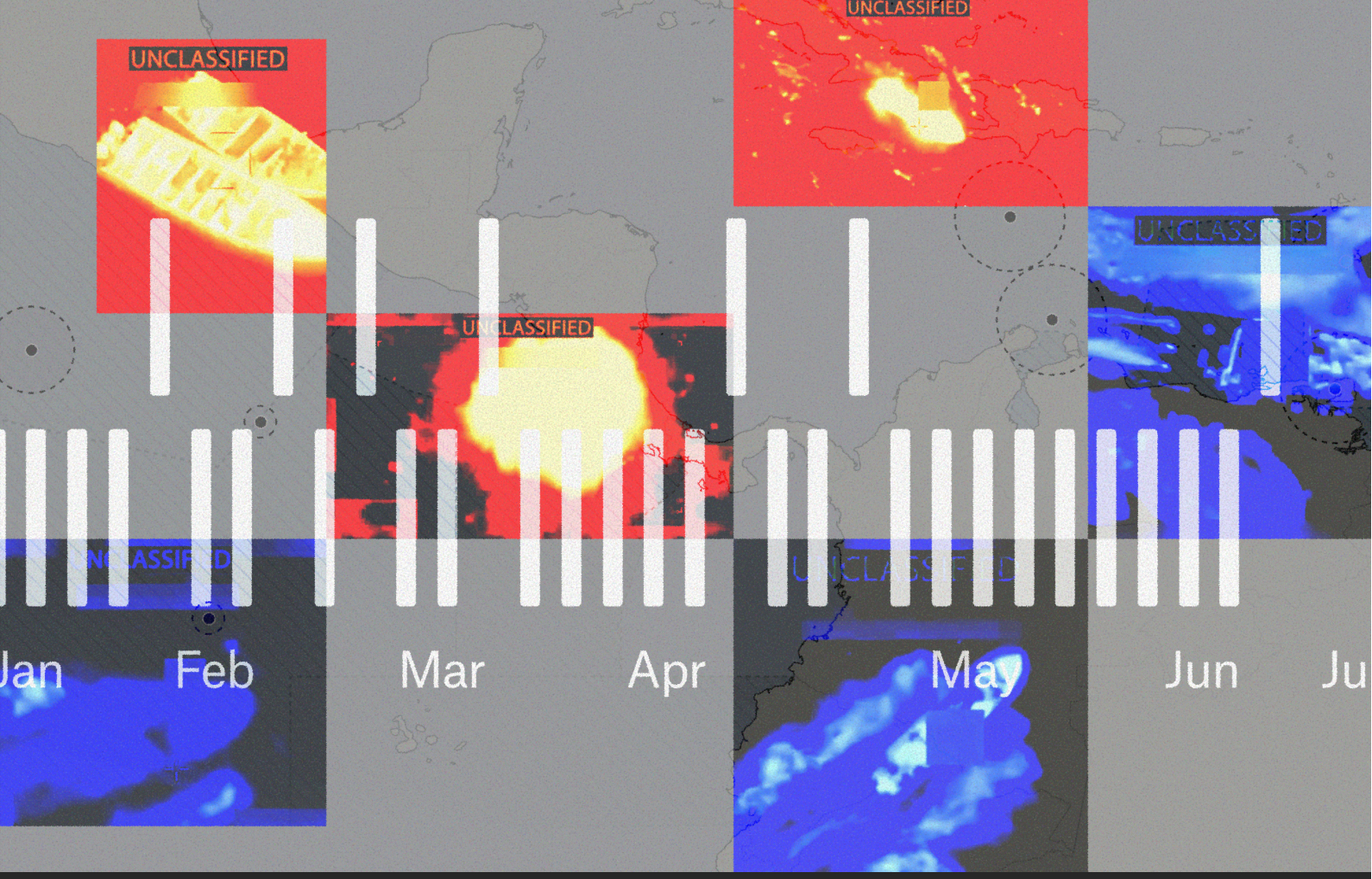


Unmarked watery graves

Tracking twelve months of fatal US strikes on small boats

by Tomi McCluskey

27 August 2026

Airwars

airwars.org

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On 2 September 2025 the United States struck a small boat in the Caribbean Sea. Eleven people were aboard. Nine were killed in the first strike. Two survived, clinging to the wreckage for around 45 minutes before a second 'double tap' strike killed them.

The announcement came that evening, from President Trump's Truth Social account. "The strike resulted in 11 terrorists killed in action." The U.S. had begun its first publicly acknowledged military campaign in the Western Hemisphere in decades.

Over the year that followed, the U.S. announced dozens more strikes on small vessels in the Caribbean and the Eastern Pacific - killing more than 200 people. As of time of publication in late August 2026, the strikes had just resumed after a two month pause.

Airwars is tracking the entire campaign - officially labelled Operation Southern Spear by the U.S. - and publishes incident by incident assessments. Ahead of the anniversary of the first strike, this report outlines the significant conclusions of that documentation.

Key findings include:

- In the 12 months since September 2025 the United States has declared destroying 69 small boats it accuses of being linked to drug smuggling.
- In those strikes, the U.S. has killed at least 227 people. None have been formally charged with any crime, and no attempts to detain any have been documented.
- The campaign peaked in December 2025, but appeared to have paused by mid June 2026 - with no strike recorded for two months. On August 24, the U.S. military resumed the campaign with a series of attacks over the course of the week.
- The campaign initially focussed on the Caribbean Sea but later pivoted to the Eastern Pacific. Over the year around two thirds of strikes occurred in the Pacific, and a third in the Caribbean.
- Airwars has been able to approximately geolocate seven of the 69 vessels, and narrowed down a further seven into broad areas of responsibility of regional nations.

- The vast majority of victims remain unidentified. Despite a major investigative effort by the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism and Airwars, only 26 of those killed have been publicly named. Those identified are predominantly from poor communities, and when connected to drug groups are recorded to be among the lowest ranked members.
- In addition to those 26 named victims, some have been referenced by their nationality. To date, Airwars has tracked 18 from Venezuela, 13 individuals from Mexico, three from Colombia, three from Ecuador, two from Trinidad and Tobago, and two from Saint Lucia.
- The U.S. Coast Guard and/or Navy conducted or coordinated 11 search-and-rescue operations over the year. In total, three survivors were rescued. None were charged with a crime: two were released, and one remains hospitalised.
- The U.S. has not typically declared which groups they are targeting in each strike - instead referring only to "designated terrorist organizations". Since the second Trump administration began in January 2025, the number of Latin American groups designated as DTOs has increased fivefold - from four to 24.

A developing methodology

Airwars has documented civilian harm from military action since 2014, including the U.S.-led Coalition in Iraq and Syria, the Russian military in Syria and Ukraine, Israeli forces in Gaza, U.S. forces in Yemen, and most recently from all actors in the 2026 Iran War. The documentation is primarily open source, and on land typically rests heavily on what an attack leaves behind; testimony of witnesses, relatives who bury the dead, photographs of munition fragments, rubble visible in satellite imagery.

At sea none of that exists. Airwars has been developing its maritime monitoring methodology prompted by this campaign, with later expansion into our documentation of attacks on seafarers during the Iran war. Below is a brief explanation of our documentation efforts, with a more detailed methodology note available here.

Tracking when strikes happen

In many cases, the only public evidence that a strike occurred is the U.S. military's own declaration and accompanying video clip seemingly filmed by a surveillance drone posted on social media. The images are stripped of coordinates and timestamps that would allow external verification.

The boats struck in this campaign are also small unregistered 'go-fast' vessels. Unlike larger vessels, such boats do not carry transponders that might reveal their locations through commercial trackers. Vast ocean expanses are also not typically captured by satellite imagery providers, and even where satellite imagery is available, often the boats are too small to see from space.

With an overreliance on U.S. admissions to detect incidents, there is a chance that strikes are being underreported. Recent investigations by DropSite, the Washington Post and the New York Times have suggested that additional local reports of harm in the Eastern Pacific may be affiliated with covert U.S. operations.

Local information environment

The first reports of the identities of those on the boats surfaced on social media soon after the first boat strike, but local communities quickly faced threats on multiple counts. From the National Guard to the cartels, association with the strikes quickly became dangerous for relatives and loved ones.

This has led to an information environment of unparalleled restrictions. To address these limitations, Airwars has supported a major collaborative effort led by the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism (CLIP) - a coalition of ten organisations including Airwars. The resulting series of investigations, *Los Bombardeados: sin derecho a la defensa* (The Bombed: No Right to Defense), was released in May this year and still represents the most reliable and comprehensive account of victims across the strikes.

Despite the efforts of Airwars and dozens of other organisations, there is much that remains unknown - and likely unknowable - about this campaign. The sheer challenge of documenting harm at sea means few definitive conclusions can be independently reached. Many of the figures in this report rely solely on the United States' own public declarations: an inherent accountability gap.

Key documentation trends

This section details a number of significant trends tracked over the year, including pace of strikes over time, geographical focus of the campaign, and the number of people killed per boat.

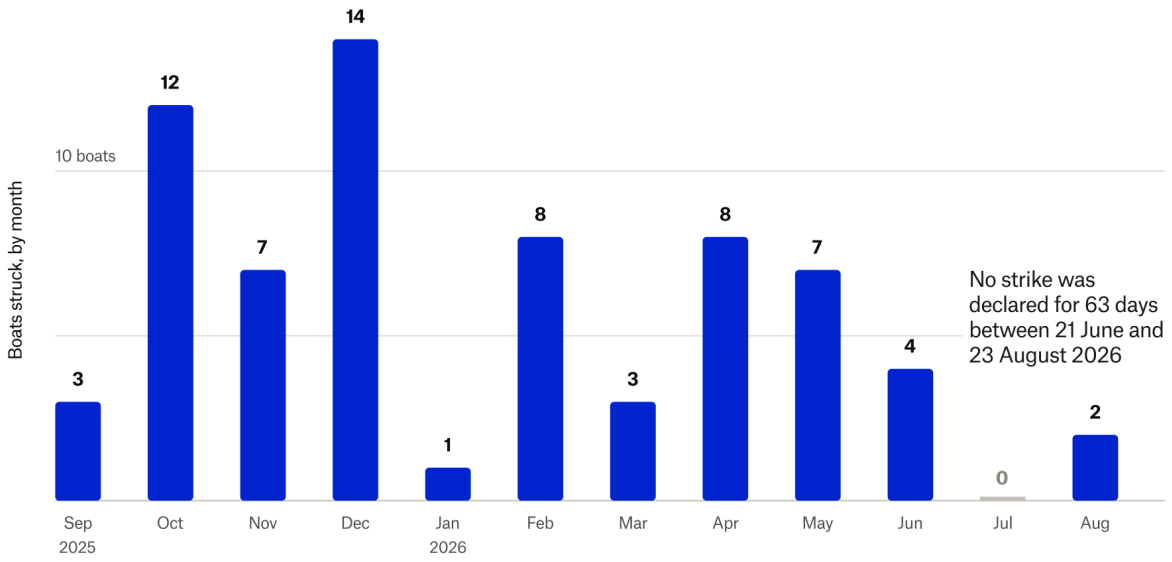
Strikes over time

The campaign launched in September 2025 and was at its most intense in the initial months. October 2025 was its deadliest month - 12 boats hit and 44 declared deaths - and December its busiest - with 14 vessels hit.

Then it slowed dramatically. In January 2026 the U.S. declared only one strike, on the 23rd, killing two people. The same month, U.S. forces seized the Venezuelan president: Nicolás Maduro was taken from a compound in Caracas on 3 January and flown to the United States to face charges.

Sixty-nine boats in twelve months

Boats the United States declared it struck, month by month, from the first strike on 2 September 2025.

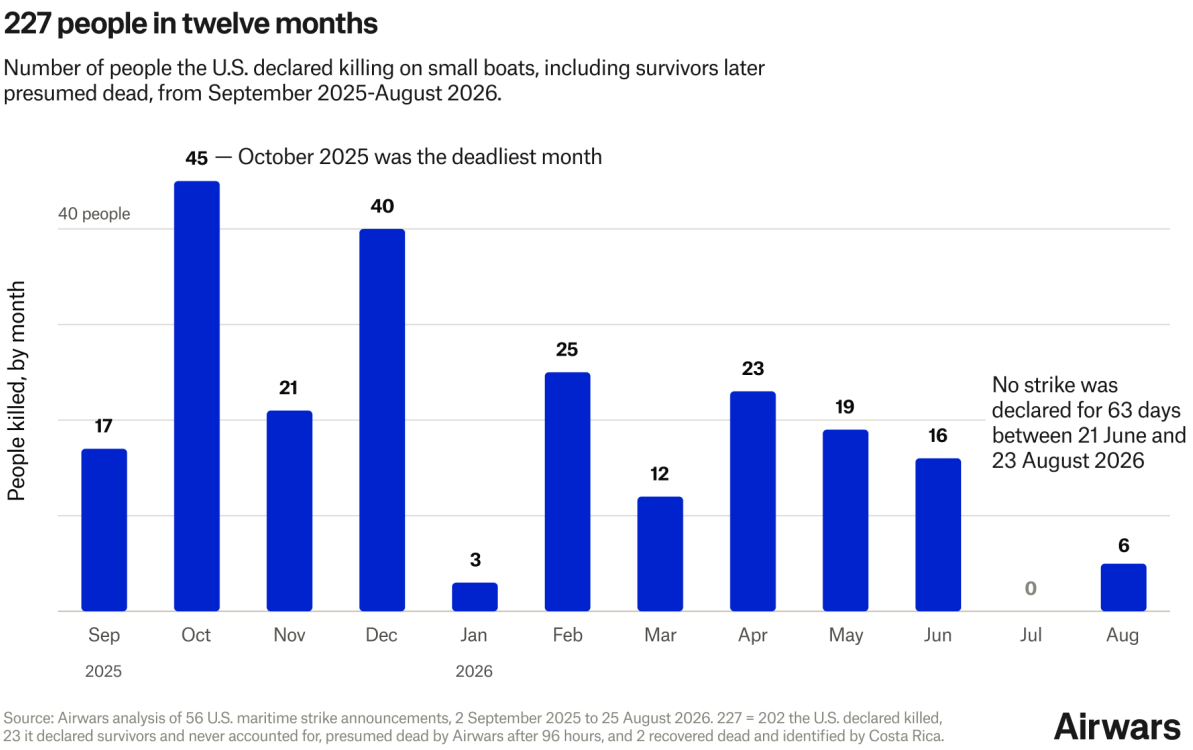


Source: Airwars analysis of 56 U.S. maritime strike announcements, 2 September 2025 to 25 August 2026. The announcements do not map one to one onto boats: some describe a single strike on two vessels, others three strikes on four. Airwars counts vessels, which the texts state plainly.

Airwars

The pace returned in February and rose again in the spring. The New York Times reported in April 2026 that the military had quietly increased its Reaper drones and secret fixed-wing attack aircraft in the region, reducing a boat's chance of evading attack to around 25 percent.

In late June 2026, the U.S. strikes stopped - prompting speculation that the campaign had ended. Pentagon officials downplayed this - telling The New York Times that crews and equipment had gone to earthquake relief in Venezuela. Then on 23 August the U.S. military announced a new strike - the first in over two months. It was quickly followed by another on 25 August, killing four people.



The campaign ran in bursts. Twenty of the 56 strike announcements fell on back-to-back days, while in many weeks no strikes were announced at all. The typical gap between strikes was three days; the longest was 63.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth continues to tout the effectiveness of the approach. As recently as 12 August, he said the campaign had produced "record drops in movements of narco vessels" - claiming, without providing evidence, of drop offs of 65 percent in the western Caribbean, 60 percent in the eastern Caribbean, and nearly 50 percent in the eastern Pacific. "This is a bad time to get in a drug boat in the Western Hemisphere."

The campaign moved west

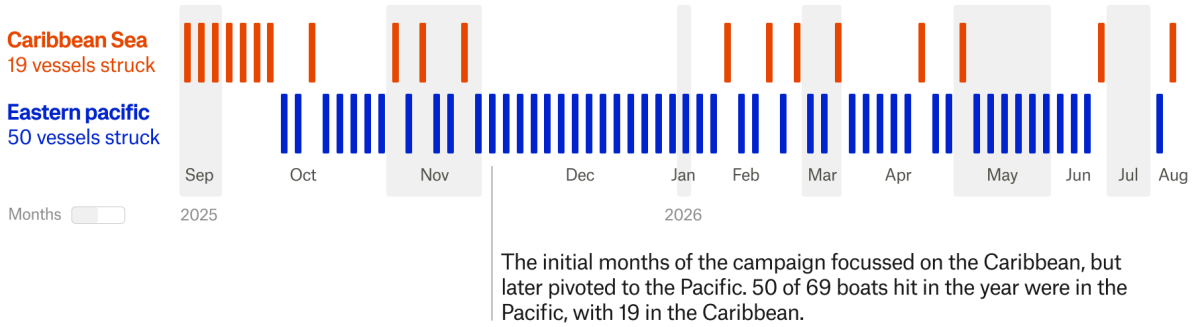
The announcements said little about where the strikes took place. Trump's first three social media posts placed the strikes only in the "SOUTHCOM area of responsibility" (an area of at least 15 million square kilometres), while Hegseth's early posts went no further than "just off the coast of Venezuela" (a coastline of about 2,800 kilometres). The first body of water the U.S. named was the Eastern Pacific, on 22 October 2025; the Caribbean Sea two days later.

An Airwars analysis found a significant shift in the geographical focus of the campaign. Every boat struck in September 2025 was in the Caribbean but gradually the strikes moved west. By December all 14 were in the Pacific, with the U.S. declaring no Caribbean strike that month. While subsequent months have seen sporadic Caribbean strikes, the Eastern Pacific remained the focus.

Airwars' record places 50 of the 69 boats hit in the Eastern Pacific. Including the latest strike at time of publication (25 August 2026), Airwars has tracked 19 vessels hit in the Caribbean.

The campaign changed oceans

Body of water each declared strike occurred in, according to Airwars analysis.



Source: Airwars analysis of 56 U.S. maritime strike announcements, 2 September 2025 to 25 August 2026. One mark per vessel, sea as named in the announcement. The first seven boats are the exception: no sea was stated for them and their Caribbean position is assessed from press reporting. Declared strikes only. No strike was declared in July 2026; the gap in the sequence is drawn to scale of nothing and marks the pause.

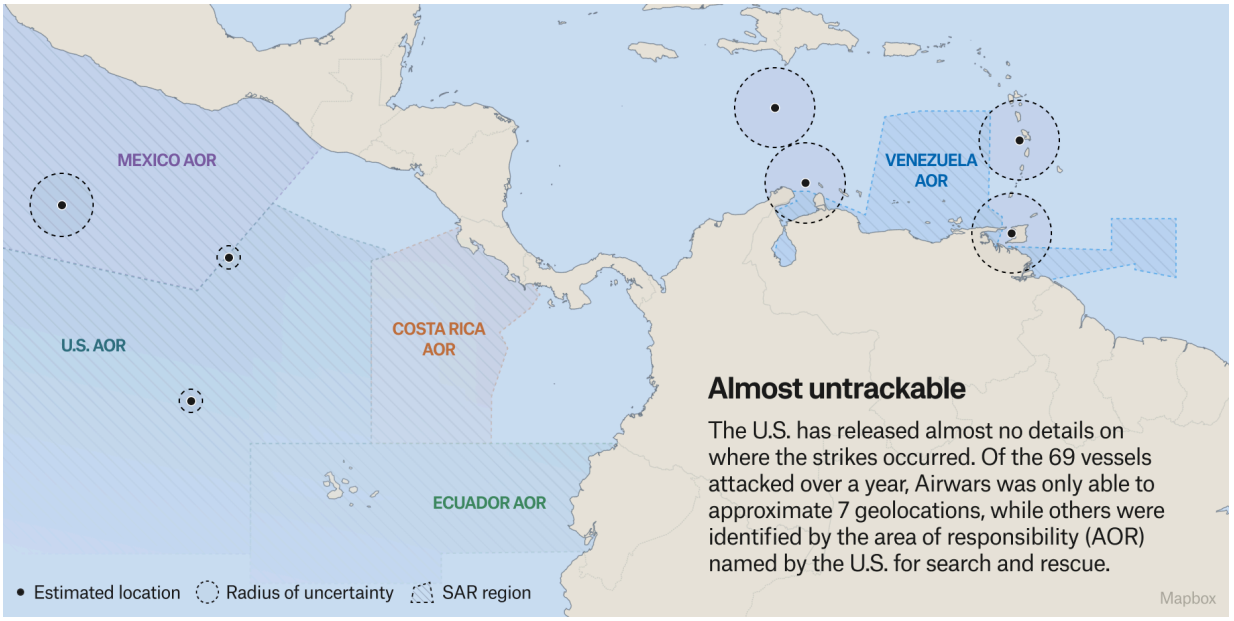
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Where the killings happened

As in all conflicts we track, Airwars tries to narrow down the location of an incident as precisely as possible. This is particularly challenging in maritime environments, as the U.S. provides limited disclosure and the open ocean leaves few clues. To overcome this, we draw upon vessel and flight tracking, media reports, alongside information from governments and search-and-rescue authorities.

Over the last year Airwars has experimented with a variety of tracking tools, combining images of fires at sea captured by FIRMS and optical imagery from Copernicus Browser, triangulated tracking data from MarineTraffic, GlobalFishingWatch, and FlightRadar24.

To date, we have broadly geolocated seven incidents, based on a combination of inferences from media reporting, comments about boat trajectories from witnesses shared with journalists, and statements by officials including the Mexican and United States Coast Guard.



For seven other incidents, we narrowed the location to a specific search-and-rescue area of responsibility. In these cases, SOUTHCOM tasked the U.S. Coast Guard with coordinating survivor searches, all of which were unfortunately unsuccessful. In other cases, even this level of accuracy was impossible.

The seven incidents with the most detailed geolocations are below with notes below explaining how researchers narrowed down the locations.

INCIDENT DATE	INCIDENT CODE
2 September 2025	USMAR250902a

LOCATION
Caribbean Sea

SUMMARY

Estimated fatalities	11

View incident →

> Multiple media accounts reported that the vessel departed from San Juan de Unare Venezuela and was bound for Trinidad when struck.

INCIDENT DATE	INCIDENT CODE
6 November 2025	USMAR251106a

LOCATION
off the coast of Puerto López in Guajira Peninsula

SUMMARY

Estimated fatalities	3

View incident →

> A smoke column visible from video taken from shore at Puerto López on the Guajira Peninsula in Colombia points to a location in the Caribbean sea.

INCIDENT DATE
19 September 2025

INCIDENT CODE
USMAR250919a

LOCATION
80 nautical miles south of Beata Island

SUMMARY

Estimated fatalities	**3**

View incident →

> Dominican authorities reported seizing packages of cocaine after a U.S. strike 80 nautical miles south of Isla Beate, Dominican Republic.

INCIDENT DATE
27 October 2025

INCIDENT CODE
USMAR251027a

LOCATION
more than 400 miles southwest of Acapulco

SUMMARY

Estimated fatalities	**14 – 15**

View incident →

> Mexican Coast Guard announced a search and rescue operation 400 miles south east of Acapulco.

INCIDENT DATE
30 December 2025

INCIDENT CODE
USMAR251230a

LOCATION
about 400 NM southwest of the Mexico-Guatemala border

SUMMARY

Estimated fatalities	**3 – 11**

View incident →

> Location derived from the Colombian president's social media post, flight tracking data of the rescue plane and vessel tracking data, compiled and analysed by Airwars and the Intercept.

INCIDENT DATE
13 February 2026

INCIDENT CODE
USMAR260213a

LOCATION
Caribbean Sea

SUMMARY

Estimated fatalities	**3**

View incident →

> A Coast Guard Commander from Saint Vincent reports a site approximately 5 miles off Bequia, and 45 miles southeast of Saint Vincent, in the country's exclusive economic zone.

INCIDENT DATE
16 June 2026

INCIDENT CODE
USMAR260616a

LOCATION
Eastern Pacific

SUMMARY

Estimated fatalities	**1 – 3**

View incident →

> Location inferred based on a quote from US Coast Guard given to the Intercept and shared with Airwars.

Numbers killed per boat

Almost every boat the U.S. struck carried a handful of people. From the announcements, 58 of the 69 vessels held between two and four people, and 33 of those held exactly three. That is close to what a smuggling run would typically look like. Jeremy McDermott of InSight Crime, which studies organised crime in the Americas, put the typical complement of a long-distance go-fast at "a crew of two/three people, maybe four if there is a fear of piracy."

Six boats did not fit this trend. The first strike of the campaign, on 2 September 2025, carried 11 people - more than any boat that followed. Three carried six, and two carried eight.

Current and former U.S. officials told The Intercept that the voyage of that first boat was not likely solely a drug run. "No one would smuggle cocaine with 11 people on board their drug-running boat," one of them said. "It just is not done. Full stop."

Asked at a classified briefing whether any of the 11 people killed on 2 September 2025 could have been victims of human trafficking, Rear Adm. Brian H. Bennett of the Joint Staff answered: "They could be." In later briefings the Pentagon described one of the 11 as a member of a designated terrorist organisation and the other ten as "affiliates". Senator Tim Kaine's office said in August 2026 that serious concerns had been raised about whether those 11 included victims of human trafficking.

The victims and survivors

The U.S. has declared killing 227 people in Operation Southern Spear, including 25 people who survived but are now presumed dead. It hasn't named a single one. This contrasts with other military campaigns on land, where the U.S. often names the key targets of strikes.

Per strike, Airwars has also recorded a fraction of local sources sharing information about the boat strikes compared to even the most prohibitive contexts otherwise monitored. Even in the U.S. campaign in Yemen last year, for example, Airwars was able to identify more than double the number of sources on average per strike compared to this campaign, and name more than half of those killed. In the strikes in the Pacific and Caribbean, just 11 per cent of victims have been publicly identified.

With a limited open source environment, Airwars teamed up with a collaborative partnership of predominantly Latin American journalists - Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP) - with extensive experience reporting on the ground across the region.

Ten journalistic organisations shared information; Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP), Casa Macondo, Verdad Abierta, 360 grados (all Colombia), Runrunes, Tal Cual, El Pitazo of Alianza Rebelde Investiga (Venezuela), The Guardian (Trinidad and Tobago), with support from Airwars and El Veinte (Colombia). Airwars was the only organisation not based in Latin America or the Caribbean, with its team primarily providing open source documentation and evidence where possible to corroborate the work of the regional teams.

The investigations publish in May remain the most authoritative source on the identities of those killed in the strikes, and the first comprehensive picture of the communities in which many of those on the boats were originating from.

The Victims

Names have been circulated through a variety of channels, though not all have been verified by journalists within the CLIP coalition. Airwars has found partial or nicknames through sporadic social media accounts for eight individuals, while local journalists have been able to identify 26 full names and two nicknames through on the ground interviews and review of documentation.

Among the first victims to be identified by journalists was Chad “Charpo” Joseph, reported killed by the Trinidad and Tobago Guardian on 17 October 2025, three days after a strike.

In February 2026 Mexican outlet La Jornada reported eight Mexicans killed, seven of them identified by neighbours by first name only.

Three months later the CLIP coalition published a series of articles across the region, with the full names of 16 of the dead. In July 2026 the Los Angeles Times named those eight Mexicans in full, and two more.

All appear to be male and, for those whose ages were known, aged between 24 and 46. These details are outlined below.

The 26 named dead

Name	Age	Home	Country	Strike	Named by	Airwars Asssessment
Luis Alí Martínez "Che María"		Güiria	Venezuela	9/2/2025	El CLIP alliance	USMAR250902
Alejandro Andrés Carranza Medina		La Guajira	Colombia	9/15/2025	El CLIP alliance	USMAR250915
Luis Ramón Amundarain	36	Güiria	Venezuela	10/3/2025	El CLIP alliance	USMAR251003a
Jesús Carreño		Güiria	Venezuela	10/3/2025	El CLIP alliance	USMAR251003a

Juan Carlos Fuentes	43	Güiria	Venezuela	10/3/2025	El CLIP alliance	USMAR251003a
Robert Sánchez		Güiria	Venezuela	10/3/2025	El CLIP alliance	USMAR251003a
Chad Joseph "Charpo"	26	Matelot	Trinidad and Tobago	10/14/2025	T&T Guardian / El CLIP	USMAR251014a
Rishi Samaroo		Las Cuevas	Trinidad and Tobago	10/14/2025	T&T Guardian / El CLIP	USMAR251014a
Eduardo Jaime "Pichirilo"		Güiria	Venezuela	10/14/2025	El CLIP alliance	USMAR251014a
Dushak Milovcic	24	Güiria	Venezuela	10/14/2025	Associated Press / ARI	USMAR251014a
Ricky Joseph		Savannes Bay	Saint Lucia	2/13/2026	El CLIP alliance	USMAR260213a
Edgar Valerio Ramos		La Cruz de Huanacaxtle	Mexico	2/16/2026	Los Angeles Times	USMAR260216a
Pedro Torres Falcón		La Cruz de Huanacaxtle	Mexico	2/16/2026	Los Angeles Times	USMAR260216a
Luis Torres Jiménez		La Cruz de Huanacaxtle	Mexico	2/16/2026	Los Angeles Times	USMAR260216a
Carlos Torres Zamora		La Cruz de Huanacaxtle	Mexico	2/16/2026	Los Angeles Times	USMAR260216a
José Reyes García		La Cruz de Huanacaxtle	Mexico	2/16/2026	Los Angeles Times	USMAR260216a
Diego Ocampo González		La Cruz de Huanacaxtle	Mexico	2/16/2026	Los Angeles Times	USMAR260216a
Abel Ramos Jiménez		La Cruz de Huanacaxtle	Mexico	2/16/2026	Los Angeles Times	USMAR260216a
Braulio Cruz Joya		Corrales	Mexico	2/16/2026	Los Angeles Times	USMAR260216a
Eduard Hidalgo	46	Güiria	Venezuela	2/23/2026	El CLIP alliance	USMAR260223a
Enrique Meza		Puerto San Carlos	Mexico	3/8/2026	Los Angeles Times	USMAR260308a
Pedro Ramón Holguín Holguín	40	Manta	Ecuador	3/19/2026	Costa Rican authorities	USMAR260319a

Carlos Manuel Rodríguez Solórzano	34		Ecuador	3/19/2026	Costa Rican authorities	USMAR260319a
Adrián Lubo		Riohacha	Colombia	5/4/2026	Colombian authorities	USMAR260504a
Ronald Arregocés		Riohacha	Colombia	5/4/2026	Colombian authorities	USMAR260504a
Jesús Rangel Romero	28	Puerto San Carlos	Mexico	26-30 May 2026	Los Angeles Times	Possible range: USMAR260530a USMAR260529a USMAR260527a USMAR260526a

Sources: *El CLIP alliance: Los Bombardeados: sin derecho a la defensa; Airwars write-up of CLIP investigation; Los Angeles Times: U.S. airstrikes at sea are killing Mexican citizens; Trinidad and Tobago Guardian: No justice yet for Chad Joseph after US strike; La Jornada: Afirman que 8 mexicanos murieron en ataques de EU a lanchas en el Pacífico*

While not all victims have been identified by name, Airwars has tracked reported nationalities for at least 41 victims: 18 from Venezuela, 13 from Mexico, three from Colombia, three from Ecuador, two from Trinidad and Tobago, and two from Saint Lucia.

Among those identified by CLIP were a bus driver, a mototaxi driver who also fished, a tuna and marlin fisherman, a futsal player well known in his town, a registered fish and seafood trader, and a 46-year-old deported from the United States in December 2025 who went back to fishing. They are predominantly from poor communities and when connected or members of drug groups are recorded to be amongst the lowest ranked members.

After months of reporting, CLIP also secured a rare interview with a smuggler. He described those on the boats effectively as drug mules - with those in control never at risk. "Most of the people [involved in the boats] don't own anything. The owners of the product are always from outside. They buy the product in Colombia, and then they wait [to receive it] at the destination."

Reporters working in La Guajira and Sucre were told repeatedly that the boats which carry cocaine out often bring passengers back, so the people aboard one are not necessarily its crew.

Juan Carlos Fuentes, 43, drove a bus in Güiria, in a port town on Venezuela's Caribbean coast. The bus broke down, he could not afford to repair it, and he went across to Trinidad to try his luck. There he was offered a place on a trip. "Voy a tener que hacer lo malo para ver qué puedo resolver," he told his wife: I am going to have to do the bad thing and see what I can sort out." He was killed on 3 October 2025, on a boat the U.S. struck off the Venezuelan coast. He left behind three children and a grandson.

Before dawn on 16 February 2026, two boats carrying eight fishermen left Mexico's Pacific coast. Seven of them lived in La Cruz de Huanacaxtle, a village north of Puerto Vallarta. Their families reported their names to The Los Angeles Times as Edgar Valerio Ramos, Pedro Torres Falcón, Luis Torres Jiménez, Carlos Torres Zamora, José Reyes García, Diego Ocampo González, Abel Ramos Jiménez and Braulio Cruz Joya. In the village it was common knowledge that the men earned extra money running gasoline out to the high seas to refuel the speedboats bringing cocaine north.

The U.S. announced two strikes in the Pacific that night and said eight narco-terrorists had been killed. Asked about the men, a SOUTHCOM spokesman said every person killed in the operation was "an affiliated member of a Designated Terrorist Organization actively transporting illicit material along known trafficking routes in international waters". He would not say whether gasoline was considered illicit material. Asked what it knew about Mexican citizens killed in the strikes, Mexico's foreign ministry said: "We have no information."

Jesús Rangel Romero, 28, took a smuggling job out of Puerto San Carlos in Baja California Sur after the town's sardine cannery closed. "He accepted it out of desperation," his wife said. He last contacted his family on 26 May 2026. Nearly two months later she was still waiting for her own government to confirm his death. "They didn't have guns, they didn't have drugs, they carried gasoline," a fisherman in La Cruz de Huanacaxtle said. "What they did was illegal, yes. But it doesn't make them terrorists."

Being named carries a cost. Alejandro Andrés Carranza Medina, the tuna and marlin fisherman, was the main provider for his partner, his children and his parents; his lawyer says the family has been threatened since it spoke to the media.

Trinidad and Tobago has reportedly refused to investigate the deaths of Chad Joseph and Rishi Samaroo. CLIP's investigation found that a body that several sources say came from Pedernales in the Dominican Republic has lain in a Colombian prosecutor's morgue since November 2025, with Dominican authorities making no move to identify or repatriate it.

In January 2026 the mother of Chad Joseph and the sister of Rishi Samaroo sued the United States in federal court in Massachusetts - the first case any family has brought over these strikes. A second, brought by the same organisations, asks a New York court to order the release of the legal justification of the strike campaign. The case was argued on 24 June 2026 and has not been decided.

The Survivors

In almost every month of the campaign, somebody was left alive in the sea after an initial strike.

In the 11 posts announcing survivors, little else is shared by the U.S., recording only that a search and rescue operation has been initiated. Of the 28 individuals who survived the initial strike but were left freezing in the sea, only three were successfully rescued. The identities of the 23 individuals now presumed dead remains unknown, while two were identified after their bodies were recovered.

In nine survivor announcements the U.S. Coast Guard is named as the primary responder. On five occasions the U.S. Coast Guard notified another country's search-and-rescue authorities that there were survivors in their area of responsibility: Mexico in October 2025, Ecuador in February 2026, Mexico on 8 May and 26 May Venezuela in June. Only Mexico, at the end of October 2025, ever said publicly that it conducted a search and rescue operation - which was suspended without rescue or recovery after 96 hours. Nobody was declared found in any of these strikes.

Rare rescues

A total of three people have been rescued in two incidents.

On 16 October 2025, the U.S. Navy pulled two men from a sinking semi-submersible, later returning them to Ecuador and Colombia. One, Andrés Fernando Tufiño Chila of Ecuador, had a 2021 conviction for cocaine distribution, though his sister told El Pais he was working as a fisherman prior to the U.S. attack. The second survivor, Jonathan Obando, was a fisherman from Colombia's Pacific coast. An investigation by El Pais found no criminal history or proven cartel links for Obando. Though President Trump vowed they would face prosecution, both men were ultimately released from their respective countries without any formal charges.

In the second incident, on 19 March 2026, the Bertholf, one of the Coast Guard's

'cutter' ships, rescued a survivor. The survivor, a 21-year-old Colombian with burns across half his body, was transferred along with the bodies of two deceased individuals to Costa Rican search and rescue authorities.

As of 5 June 2026, according to La Nación, the survivor remains hospitalised in San José, Costa Rica. The two deceased were later identified from fingerprints and tattoos as Pedro Ramón Holguín Holguín, a 40-year-old fish and seafood trader, and Carlos Manuel Rodríguez Solórzano, 34, both Ecuadorean. These two men are the only people killed in this campaign whose deaths and identities were verified by a government agency.

Failed attempts

In multiple other cases, the efforts to rescue people appeared limited. As outlined below, Airwars found that rescue operations often took so long to start there was no meaningful chance of survival.

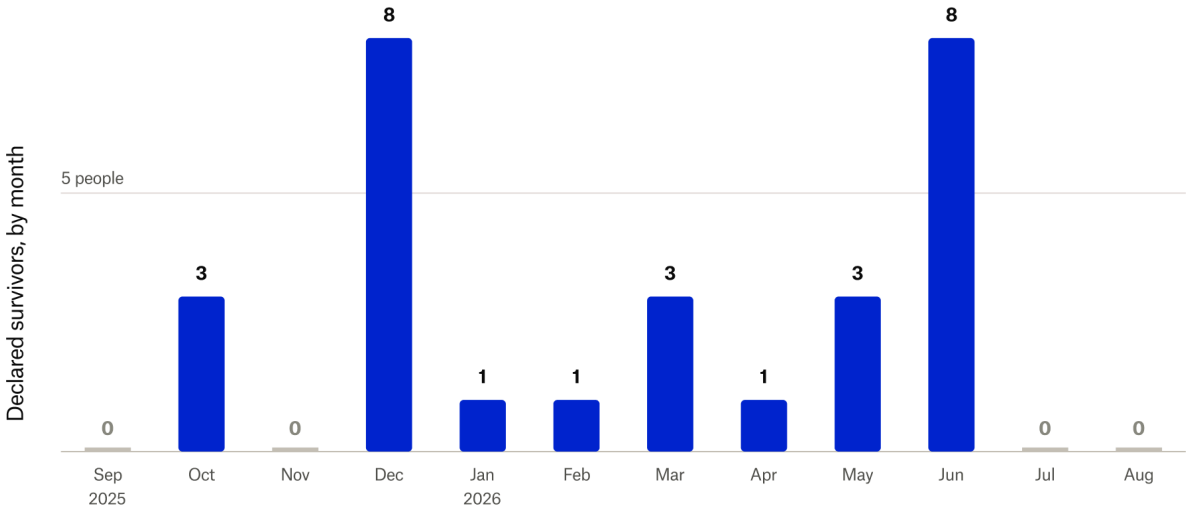
The first strike of the campaign on 2 September 2025 killed nine people. Two others survived, clinging to the wreckage for 45 minutes before a second strike was ordered - killing them. This 'double tap' strike was initially denied - with the U.S. saying only that "the strike resulted in 11 terrorists killed in action."

The Intercept's Nick Turse broke the story within days of the 'double' tap strike. Following weeks of investigative journalism by The Washington Post and others, the U.S. was forced to admit they were killed while drifting aimlessly - in what many condemned as a clear breach of international law. U.S. Senators and Representatives were ultimately allowed to view classified footage of the strike that killed the men.

The largest group of survivors were left in the water on 30 December 2025. Southern Command struck three vessels travelling as a convoy, killed three men aboard the first, and said the crews of the other two "abandoned their vessels, jumping overboard and distancing themselves before follow-on engagements sank their respective vessels" – eight men, four from each boat. Southern Command said it "immediately notified" the Coast Guard, and ended its account of what happened next in one sentence: "The active search was suspended without recovery."

Twenty-eight people the U.S. said survived

Survivors declared in U.S. strike announcements, by month of the strike. Eleven of the 56 announcements declared one.



Three of the 28 were taken from the water alive and two were recovered dead by another government. The other 23 have never been found. November 2025 declared 21 deaths across six announcements and not one survivor, and neither August 2026 strike declared a survivor.

Source: Airwars analysis of 56 U.S. maritime strike announcements, 2 September 2025 to 25 August 2026. The 30 December 2025 announcement gave no number; its eight come from a SOUTHCOM press release revised in place on 8 January 2026.

Airwars

How Airwars used flight tracking analysis to expose lackluster U.S. search and rescue

Airwars looked closely at the strike on 30 December 2025 because the announcement was unlike any other in the campaign. It was the only one to describe boats moving together – "three narco-trafficking vessels traveling as a convoy" – and the only one to report survivors without saying how many. Three men were reported killed on the first vessel, with eight survivors diving into the sea.

The post declaring the attack said the U.S. military had "immediately notified" the Coast Guard "to activate the Search and Rescue system".

By analysing flight tracking data and the Coast Guard's own press release, Airwars established that the single aircraft did not arrive in the search area until 45 hours after Southern Command reported people in the water. Airwars followed the path of the plane from Sacramento, California to Costa Rica, where it stopped for fuel and for the crew to rest. By the time it arrived at the strike site, the men would have long frozen to death.

Airwars took the finding to The Intercept, whose reporting drew the Coast Guard's own timeline out of the service and confirmed it. The eight men had gone into 9-foot seas and 40-knot winds. Experts told The Intercept they likely died within minutes. The Coast Guard suspended its search on 2 January, reporting "no sightings of survivors or debris".

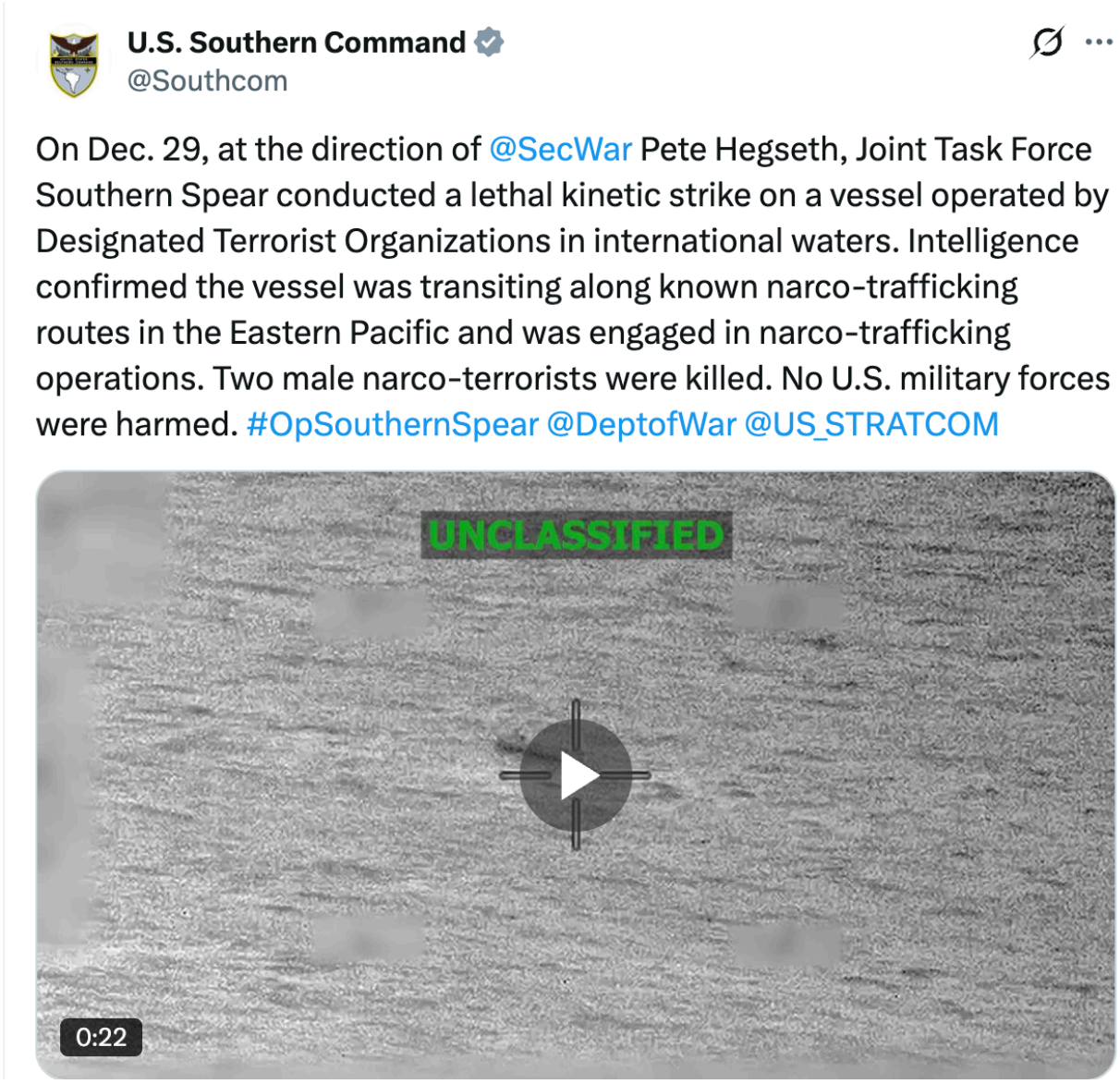
The U.S. narrative

This U.S. campaign is perhaps the first publicised almost exclusively on social media - with nearly all information about the conflict released by the military actor on either President Trump's personal Truth Social account, or U.S. officials on X.

From the President to the command

A constant throughout has been the format of each strike announcement: a single post on social media - typically either Twitter/X or Truth Social - with a short statement about the strike.

A typical strike statement includes: who the strike was directed by, reference to a "Designated Terrorist Organization," the number of vessels struck, the number of victims, the claim that those killed were involved in "narco-terrorism," and a statement that no U.S. forces were harmed. Most posts include a typically black and white video showing the strike, seemingly filmed from a surveillance drone.



A typical strike declaration post

These posts were usually shortly after the strike - of the 56 maritime disclosures, 45 were published on the day of the strike.

Who has posted the statements changed over time. Trump announced the first five strikes himself on Truth Social. Then Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced the next 11. Then on 14 November 2025 U.S. Southern Command, the part of the U.S. military responsible for Latin America, appeared to take over - issuing the remaining 39 announcements.

The authority which directed the strike also changed over time. For the first 16 strikes, President Donald Trump was stated to have directed the mission. Between November 14 and February 5, Hegseth was named as directing them. And from February 5 onwards, the authority came from Gen. Francis L. Donovan, the commander of Southern Command.

Over time the phrase "international waters" appears to have been dropped from strike announcements. The phrase appears in 24 of the first 25 announcements, from the first strike on 2 September 2025 to 31 December. "International waters" would place a strike outside another country's jurisdiction - generally, 12 nautical miles from their shore. The last announcement to use the phrase went out on the afternoon of 31 December 2025, and none of the announcements that followed brought the phrase back.

Comparisons to al-Qaeda appear in six posts, all between 19 October and 1 November 2025, and never again - though this has been a refrain shared by Hegseth in official statements and interviews. "The Department will treat them EXACTLY how we treated Al-Qaeda," Hegseth wrote on 1 November. "We will continue to track them, map them, hunt them, and kill them."

The list that kept growing

The justification for the strikes has mostly been given by U.S. officials under pressure in Congressional hearings, with the legal basis for the campaign still classified. Southern Command has said that the attacks are intended to be both on “narco-terrorists” and their “enablers”, though exactly which Designated Terrorist Organisations (DTOs) are on the target list is unclear.

In October 2025, President Trump asserted that the strikes were taking aim at cartels smuggling fentanyl, "The boats get hit, and you see that fentanyl all over the ocean... It's like floating in bags. It's all over the place." But most experts argue that cartels running drugs in South America are more likely to be trafficking cocaine.

The number of Latin American groups designated as DTOs has increased fivefold under the Trump administration. Between Trump's inauguration and the boat campaign beginning in September 2025, 10 cartels were added to an official public

list, beginning with Tren de Aragua. Since September 2025, another 10 have been added, spanning cartels across Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Haiti, Mexico Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela and Ecuador. Though as Senator Kaine noted in a letter to the President on 3 August 2026, given that the target list the President selected for the strikes is classified, meaning that it may include organisations not publicly identified. Kaine emphasised that those chosen for targeting "are entirely unaware that they are marked for execution".

Members of Congress have also raised questions as to the rationale for the underlying targeting criteria, confirming that according to classified briefings, the administration does not need to positively identify individuals on the boats.

Forty-four of the 54 disclosures on social media by U.S. officials describe the dead as male. The U.S. has never explained how it knew the gender of people it says it had no need to identify.

Undisclosed strikes

Aside from the declared strikes outlined above, there remain a number of outliers.

At Naval Station Norfolk on 5 October 2025, celebrating the Navy's 250th birthday, President Trump told the crowd there were "no boats in the water anymore" and that "we did another one last night". No post by the President, the Secretary of War or Southern Command announced a strike that night, no video was released, and no wreckage, casualty or local report has surfaced since. He may have been describing the strike of 3 October, which the U.S. had already announced. Airwars could not establish that a separate attack took place, though has kept this possible incident within our archive.

On December 18, a possible land strike left physical evidence but has not appeared to be part of the Southern Spear disclosures. Local sources reported an explosion on the Alta Guajira coast of Venezuela that destroyed a storage hut, a boat and fishing nets, and temporarily deafened members of the local Wayuu community. From photographs of munition fragments of the site Trevor Ball, a weapons researcher and former U.S. army explosive ordnance disposal technician, identified the remnants of the rocket motor of a Hellfire or a JAGM, both American-made missiles.

In recent weeks a number of media outlets including DropSite, Washington Post and the New York Times have reported that the CIA might be behind a series of attacks in the Eastern Pacific between January and March 2026.

Eight crew of fishing vessel the *Fiorella* have been missing since 20 January, and in April the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances issued an urgent action in each of their names. Crews of *La Negra Francisca Duarte II* and the *Don Maca* say armed drones struck their boats and that men in uniform with U.S. flags on their sleeves then detained them at sea. Human Rights Watch and Ecuador's Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos have each documented the three cases. The United States denies any involvement. Airwars assesses the incidents as disputed and continues to monitor them.

From international criticism to coalition building

Almost two months into the campaign, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, said the strikes "violate international human rights law" and called for independent, transparent investigations. The Washington Office on Latin America, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Just Security and Ecuador's Comisión Ecuménica de Derechos Humanos have all published on the campaign, and several have also concluded that the strikes are unlawful.

In the autumn of 2025, Britain stopped passing drug-trafficking intelligence from its Caribbean territories to the Pentagon, on the view that the strikes were unlawful and that British information might be used to choose targets. France's foreign minister, Jean-Noël Barrot, said at a G7 meeting that the operations "violate international law". Canada placed conditions on the intelligence it passed to the U.S. Caribbean task force. The region is divided. Trinidad and Tobago's prime minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, said the day after the first strike that she had "no sympathy for traffickers; the US military should kill them all violently". Caricom heads of government reaffirmed the Caribbean as a zone of peace. Colombia's president Gustavo Petro suspended intelligence sharing with Washington for as long as the strikes continued. After the four boats struck on 27 October 2025, Mexico summoned the U.S. ambassador; President Claudia Sheinbaum said her government did not agree "with these attacks, with how they are carried out"

Nine weeks after the raid that captured Venezuela's president Nicolas Maduro, President Trump signed a proclamation at his resort in Doral, Florida, launching the Shield of the Americas, a counter-cartel coalition of 17 nations. Colombia joined as the 19th member on 12 August, days after a new president took office, and had already asked U.S. forces in, Hegseth told the members in Panama, "authorizing joint military operations to destroy terrorists and terror networks". Ecuador, Honduras and Guatemala have invited U.S. forces onto their own soil, and Jamaica signed a status of forces agreement on 20 August.

An uncertain future

Initially framed by President Trump as a campaign to stop the flow of the drug fentanyl to the United States, the underlying legal justification remains classified. Experts at the Washington Office for Latin America (WOLA) have pointed out that the boats are unlikely to carry fentanyl, and instead are more likely to be smuggling cocaine to either larger vessels or to third countries indirectly to the United States. Data shared by WOLA indicates that the attacks have had little impact on the supply of cocaine to the United States. What might constitute mission 'success' is therefore unclear, with no end in sight a year into the campaign.

On 4 August 2026 the mission was given a permanent home, with the launch of the new Joint Task Force Western Hemisphere, a standing headquarters labelled "SOUTHCOM's action arm for confronting threats across the hemisphere". Two strikes have been declared since the Joint Task Force has been stood up, with two people killed in the eastern Pacific and another four in the Caribbean.

In Southern Command's social media post about the Caribbean strike, Commander General Donovan is quoted: "We will hunt, disrupt, and defeat these narco-terrorist networks".

Pete Hegseth described the organisations in an announcement about the new task force as "the ISIS and al Qaeda of the Western Hemisphere, no different and they should be treated as such". Donovan's task force exists, in his own words, to "increase total systemic friction".

A year on, the United States has not said who it killed. It has published no names, and families in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Mexico still do not know whether the men they are missing were aboard one of the boats. It has not accounted for the 25 people it declared alive in the water and never mentioned again.