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Bodies Bearing Burn Marks Wash Ashore in Trinidad as U.S. Expands “Narco-Terror” Strikes Across the Caribbean

President Trump affirmed that U.S. strikes against Caribbean narcotics networks will continue without a formal war declaration, citing the southern Caribbean campaign’s use of existing legal authorities and warning the campaign may soon expand onto land.

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Janeke Simon **October 24, 2025**

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Two corpses, one with burn marks on its face and both missing limbs, have washed ashore on Trinidadian beaches in recent weeks, deepening concern that the dead may be victims of U.S. airstrikes on vessels accused of drug trafficking.

Villagers near the sites where the bodies were discovered believe they were among those killed in one of the first U.S. maritime strikes launched in early September. Despite mounting unease, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar has issued no public comment, even as her government remains supportive of Washington's widening military campaign in the region.

The discoveries coincide with escalating U.S. operations targeting alleged "narco-terrorists." Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth confirmed another airstrike this week against a seafaring vessel, marking the tenth since the campaign began. The Pentagon says the strikes form part of the administration's counter-narcotics initiative, which President Donald Trump has vowed to continue without Congressional approval.

The USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group—the largest in U.S. service—was formally reassigned Friday to U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) to expand American military presence in the Southern Caribbean. Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said the move would "bolster U.S. capacity to detect, monitor, and disrupt illicit actors and activities that compromise the safety and prosperity of the United States homeland and our security in the Western Hemisphere." He added that the additional forces would "enhance and augment existing capabilities to disrupt narcotics trafficking and degrade and dismantle TCOs."

In his latest statement, Secretary Hegseth said U.S. forces struck and destroyed a vessel believed to be operated by members of Venezuela's Tren de Aragua gang, killing six people. "If you are a narco-terrorist smuggling drugs in our hemisphere, we will treat you like we treat al-Qaeda," Hegseth declared on social media. It was the third U.S.-announced strike in a single week, bringing the death toll to at least 43.

The operation has also drawn scrutiny after one of the two survivors from an October 16 attack on a submersible was released by Ecuadorian authorities without charge. Ecuador's government said it found "no evidence of a crime" to prosecute, a decision at odds with the Trump administration's depiction of the men as cartel operatives.

Nevertheless, President Trump has made clear that the airstrikes will continue. "I think we're just going to kill people that are bringing drugs into our country, OK? We're going to kill them, like, dead," he told reporters at the White House on Thursday. The president reiterated his earlier threat to extend the campaign beyond sea targets. "The land is going to be next," he said, emphasizing that seeking Congressional approval "is not on the table." "I don't think we're going to necessarily ask for a declaration of war," Trump added.

Presidents routinely avoid asking Congress for a formal declaration of war because U.S. leaders have long relied on other legal authorities and practices to justify military action — most commonly the president's constitutional role as commander-in-chief, prior Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMFs), and the War Powers framework that requires prompt notice to Congress but does not always force a formal declaration.

While Washington expands its military footprint, Venezuelan forces have reportedly begun massing along coastal regions. In Trinidad and Tobago, where two nationals were previously killed in U.S. strikes, families of the deceased have rejected accusations that their relatives were involved in narcotics trafficking. Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar, whose administration has maintained unwavering support for the U.S. operation, has remained silent on the latest deaths and on the unidentified bodies that have washed ashore.

The Pentagon insists its actions are part of a defensive strategy to counter what it calls "narco-terrorism" threatening the United States and its neighbors. But as U.S. warships and bombers

patrol the Caribbean, and civilian casualties mount, regional unease is growing over the scope and legality of a campaign now extending to the hemisphere's southern shores.

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