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Study Guide



**United Nations Office
on Drugs and Crime**

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**“Discussing the Threat Posed by
Transnational Organised Crime with Special
Emphasis on Gang Violence, Arms
Smuggling, and Criminal Governance “**

Committee Overview

Established in 1997, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) serves as the primary United Nations body responsible for addressing issues related to drugs, crime, corruption, and terrorism. Operating as an executive entity within the wider UN system, UNODC plays a critical role in advancing international criminal justice objectives and assisting Member States in translating international commitments into practical action.

UNODC's work focuses on strengthening criminal justice systems, combating organised crime and illicit drug networks, preventing corruption, supporting terrorism prevention initiatives, and producing research that informs international policy responses. Through technical assistance programmes, capacity-building initiatives, policy guidance, and research, the organisation seeks to strengthen the ability of Member States to respond effectively to evolving criminal threats.



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To maximise the impact of its work, UNODC collaborates extensively with governments, civil society organisations, academic and research institutions, the private sector, regional organisations, international organisations, and other United Nations bodies.

Several intergovernmental mechanisms operate under the broader UNODC framework and facilitate international cooperation on matters relating to crime and drugs. These include the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ), the United Nations Congresses on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, and the Conference of the States Parties to the United Nations Convention against Corruption.

Mandate and Limitations of UNODC

Mandate

While UNODC serves as one of the most significant international actors in combating organised crime, delegates must recognise the limitations of its mandate when proposing solutions.

Limitation

Unlike the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), UNODC is not binding in nature. It provides technical assistance, policy guidance, and facilitates international cooperation, but its recommendations rely on the voluntary cooperation and implementation of Member States.



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Introduction the the Agenda

“Discussing the Threat Posed by Transnational Organised Crime with Special Emphasis on Gang Violence, Arms Smuggling, and Criminal Governance“

Transnational organised crime (TOC) has emerged as one of the most significant non-traditional security challenges of the twenty-first century. Advances in globalisation, technological development, international trade, and cross-border mobility have enabled criminal organisations to expand their operations beyond national boundaries and establish increasingly sophisticated networks.

Today, organised criminal groups engage in a diverse range of illicit activities, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, firearms trafficking, money laundering, migrant smuggling, cybercrime, environmental crime, and illicit resource extraction. These activities generate enormous profits while simultaneously undermining governance, destabilising economies, fuelling violence, and weakening public trust in institutions.

The impact of transnational organised crime extends beyond conventional criminal activity. In many regions, organised criminal groups have developed the capacity to challenge state authority, influence political systems, control territory, and provide services traditionally associated with government institutions. Such developments have blurred the distinction between criminal activity and governance itself.



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This agenda will examine transnational organised crime through three interconnected dimensions: gang violence, arms smuggling, and criminal governance. While each issue presents unique challenges, all three are closely interconnected and often reinforce one another. Understanding these linkages will be essential for delegates seeking comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

Understanding Transnational Organised Crime

The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) provides the primary international framework for understanding transnational organised crime.

An offence is considered transnational when it is committed in more than one State, when it is committed in one State but planned, directed, or controlled from another State, when it involves an organised criminal group operating across multiple States, or when substantial effects of the offence are experienced in another State.

An organised criminal group is defined as a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time, acting together to commit serious crimes, and seeking financial or material benefit.

Contrary to common assumptions, organised criminal groups do not always operate through rigid hierarchical structures. While some organisations maintain traditional command systems, many modern criminal networks function through decentralised arrangements that make them more adaptable and resilient.



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These structures may be hierarchical, network-based, cell-based, or family-based. Increasingly, criminal organisations are adopting decentralised network models that allow them to expand operations while reducing vulnerability to law enforcement intervention.

To sustain their operations, organised criminal groups employ a variety of methods. These include corruption, bribery, violence, intimidation, threats, money laundering, and the infiltration of legitimate businesses. Such methods allow criminal organisations to conceal profits, evade prosecution, secure political protection, and expand their influence within society.

The objectives of organised criminal groups extend beyond immediate financial gain. While profit remains a primary motivation, many groups also seek market control, territorial influence, political influence, and access to lucrative illicit markets. As a result, organised crime frequently becomes deeply embedded within political, economic, and social structures.

A wide range of criminal markets are associated with transnational organised crime. These include drug trafficking, human trafficking, migrant smuggling, firearms trafficking, money laundering, counterfeit goods, wildlife trafficking, cultural property trafficking, cyber-enabled crime, environmental crime, and illicit resource extraction.



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Several structural factors enable the growth and persistence of organised criminal networks. Corruption remains one of the most significant facilitators of organised crime. Criminal groups frequently rely on the bribery of customs officials, police officers, politicians, and members of judicial systems to avoid detection and prosecution.

Weak institutions further contribute to the expansion of organised crime. Limited law enforcement capacity, weak judicial systems, and inadequate border management create opportunities for criminal organisations to operate with relative impunity. Similarly, fragile states characterised by political instability, armed conflict, or state collapse often provide fertile environments for organised criminal activity.

Poverty and inequality also play an important role in facilitating organised crime. Vulnerable populations may become susceptible to recruitment, while the absence of economic opportunities can contribute to the expansion of illicit economies.

The consequences of transnational organised crime are extensive and multidimensional. From a security perspective, organised crime contributes to increased violence, rising homicide rates, the strengthening of armed criminal groups, and the expansion of illicit weapons markets. In governance terms, it undermines state authority, weakens the rule of law, corrupts public institutions, and increases impunity.



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Economically, organised crime distorts legitimate markets, reduces government revenue, increases illicit financial flows, and discourages investment. Socially, it contributes to population displacement, the exploitation of vulnerable communities, heightened insecurity, and declining public trust in institutions.

The scale of the challenge is reflected in several notable statistics. Organised crime is estimated to generate approximately US\$870 billion annually. Money laundering accounts for between 2 and 5 percent of global GDP. Human trafficking has been identified in more than 140 countries and involves victims from over 160 nationalities. Global cocaine production currently exceeds 3,700 tonnes annually, while more than 80 percent of global trade by volume moves through maritime routes, creating significant opportunities for criminal exploitation.

The transnational nature of these activities demonstrates why international cooperation remains essential. No single state possesses the capacity to effectively address organised crime in isolation, making multilateral approaches central to any meaningful response.



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International Legal Framework

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>

The international response to transnational organised crime is primarily guided by a series of conventions and protocols developed under the United Nations system. These instruments provide the legal foundation for international cooperation, criminalisation of organised criminal activities, information sharing, extradition arrangements, mutual legal assistance, and capacity-building efforts.

Given the inherently transnational nature of organised crime, domestic measures alone are often insufficient. Criminal networks routinely exploit differences in national legislation, weak enforcement mechanisms, and jurisdictional limitations. Consequently, international legal frameworks play a critical role in enabling coordinated responses among Member States.

The most significant legal instrument relevant to this agenda is the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), commonly known as the Palermo Convention. Adopted in 2000, UNTOC serves as the primary international treaty aimed at preventing and combating organised crime across national borders. The Convention establishes common definitions, promotes international cooperation, and encourages Member States to strengthen domestic legal frameworks against organised criminal activity.



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Complementing the Palermo Convention is the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, commonly referred to as the Firearms Protocol. Adopted in 2001, the Protocol seeks to prevent and combat the illicit manufacturing and trafficking of firearms through improved regulation, tracing mechanisms, and international cooperation.

Another significant instrument is the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), adopted in 2003. Since corruption serves as one of the primary enablers of organised crime, UNCAC provides an important framework for strengthening transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption measures within states.

Delegates should recognise that while these instruments provide legal frameworks and policy guidance, their effectiveness depends heavily upon state implementation, enforcement capacity, and political commitment.

Below are the important conventions and protocols listed in order of occurrence

Year	Development
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1988	United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances
2001	Palermo Convention (UNTOC) adopted
2003	Firearms Protocol adopted
2003	United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) adopted UNTOC entered into force



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1. *Gang Violence*

Gang violence represents one of the most visible and socially disruptive manifestations of transnational organised crime. Criminal gangs often employ violence as a means of maintaining territorial control, protecting illicit markets, intimidating rivals, and enforcing internal discipline. In many regions, gang violence has evolved from a localised criminal issue into a transnational security concern due to the growing integration of gangs into wider organised criminal networks.

Gang violence generally refers to violent activities carried out by criminal gangs in pursuit of territorial dominance, economic gain, or control over criminal operations. While gang structures vary significantly across regions, many are actively involved in organised criminal activities including drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, armed robbery, and illegal weapons trade.

The relationship between gang violence and transnational organised crime is particularly significant. Modern gangs frequently participate in cross-border drug trafficking networks, firearms trafficking operations, money laundering schemes, and recruitment efforts extending across multiple jurisdictions. As a result, gang violence often serves as both a symptom and a facilitator of broader organised criminal activity.



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Several factors contribute to the growth of gang violence. Poverty and unemployment frequently create environments in which criminal organisations can recruit vulnerable individuals. Social exclusion may further contribute to the appeal of gangs by providing individuals with a sense of belonging, economic opportunity, or protection. Weak law enforcement institutions, easy access to firearms, and political instability also create conditions that allow gangs to expand their influence.

The consequences of gang violence extend beyond immediate criminal activity. From a security perspective, gang violence contributes to increased homicide rates, armed confrontations, and the expansion of criminal networks. The resulting insecurity can overwhelm local law enforcement institutions and undermine public safety.

Governance is also significantly affected. In areas where gangs exercise substantial influence, public confidence in government institutions may decline, corruption can increase, and state authority may become weakened. Criminal groups may establish informal systems of control that challenge the state's monopoly on the use of force.

The economic consequences are equally significant. Persistent violence discourages investment, damages local businesses, and increases security-related expenditures for both governments and private actors.



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Communities affected by gang violence frequently experience reduced economic development and declining living standards.

Socially, gang violence creates widespread fear among local populations, contributes to displacement, and often targets vulnerable groups for recruitment. Young people, in particular, may become susceptible to gang involvement when legitimate opportunities are limited.

2. Arms Smuggling

Arms smuggling constitutes a critical component of transnational organised crime and serves as a force multiplier for numerous criminal and extremist activities. The illegal movement of firearms across borders enables criminal organisations to expand territorial control, protect illicit markets, challenge state authority, and conduct violent operations.

Arms smuggling refers to the illegal manufacture, transfer, transport, sale, or possession of firearms, ammunition, and related materials across national boundaries. The illicit circulation of weapons significantly contributes to insecurity by increasing the lethality and operational capabilities of criminal groups.

Organised criminal groups rely on illegal firearms for a variety of purposes. Weapons are used to protect trafficking routes, intimidate rival organisations, enforce territorial claims, facilitate extortion schemes, and resist law enforcement operations.



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Consequently, arms trafficking frequently intersects with other forms of organised crime including drug trafficking, human trafficking, and criminal governance.

Illicit firearms originate from a variety of sources. These include conflict zones where weapons remain in circulation following armed conflicts, theft from government stockpiles, illegal manufacturing operations, and diversion from legal markets into criminal networks.

Criminal organisations employ a wide range of methods to transport illicit weapons. Firearms may be concealed within cargo shipments, smuggled across land borders, transported through maritime trafficking routes, or moved through established criminal networks that specialise in cross-border smuggling operations.

Several factors facilitate the growth of arms smuggling. Corruption remains a major enabler, particularly when customs officials or border authorities accept bribes in exchange for allowing weapons to cross borders undetected. Weak border management systems, limited inspection capacities, and inadequate monitoring technologies further increase vulnerabilities. Political instability and armed conflict also contribute to the proliferation of illicit weapons by weakening state institutions and increasing demand for firearms.



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The impact of arms smuggling is far-reaching. Increased access to firearms contributes directly to gang violence, armed crime, and the escalation of conflicts. The proliferation of weapons strengthens organised criminal groups and undermines public security.

From a governance perspective, widespread arms trafficking weakens state authority by empowering non-state actors capable of challenging government control. Criminal groups armed with sophisticated weaponry may become increasingly difficult for law enforcement agencies to counter effectively.

The social consequences include increased civilian casualties, heightened insecurity, and reduced public confidence in state institutions responsible for maintaining law and order.



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Criminal Governance

One of the most significant developments in contemporary transnational organised crime is the emergence of criminal governance. While organised criminal groups have traditionally been understood as actors operating outside state structures, many modern criminal organisations have expanded beyond purely criminal activity and begun performing functions typically associated with government institutions. In certain regions, these groups exercise sufficient influence to shape social, political, and economic life within communities under their control.

Criminal governance refers to situations in which organised criminal groups perform functions normally carried out by the state. Rather than simply engaging in illicit activities, criminal organisations may impose rules on local populations, collect illegal taxes or fees, regulate access to resources, resolve disputes, and provide forms of security or protection. Through these activities, criminal groups establish systems of authority that compete with or replace formal state institutions.

The emergence of criminal governance is often associated with areas characterised by weak state presence, limited law enforcement capacity, political instability, and ongoing conflict. Where governments are unable or unwilling to provide basic services, security, or effective governance, organised criminal groups may exploit these gaps to strengthen their influence and legitimacy within local communities.



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Criminal groups employ a variety of methods to establish and maintain governance structures. Intimidation and violence are frequently used to suppress opposition and ensure compliance. Corruption enables criminal organisations to secure protection from public officials and avoid accountability. Control over local economies allows these groups to generate revenue while simultaneously increasing community dependence upon criminal networks.

The objectives of criminal governance extend beyond financial profit alone. Organised criminal groups frequently seek territorial control, political influence, economic gain, and social control. By establishing authority over communities, criminal organisations can secure operational freedom, strengthen recruitment efforts, and create environments in which illegal activities can continue with minimal interference.

A common misconception is that criminal governance may provide benefits to local populations by offering dispute resolution mechanisms or protection services. While these functions may appear beneficial on the surface, they ultimately undermine state authority and weaken the rule of law.

For example, disputes within a society are generally expected to be resolved through formal institutions such as courts, legal systems, and law enforcement agencies.



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When criminal organisations begin resolving disputes, communities increasingly rely upon criminal actors rather than legitimate institutions. Over time, this reduces the authority and legitimacy of the state while strengthening the influence of criminal groups.

Similarly, criminal organisations may offer protection services to local populations. However, such protection is frequently linked to extortion or coercion. Individuals may be required to pay fees in exchange for security, creating dependence on criminal groups rather than public institutions. As a result, organised criminal groups become entrenched as alternative centres of authority.

The consequences of criminal governance are extensive and often long-lasting. From a governance perspective, criminal governance weakens state legitimacy, erodes the rule of law, and contributes to increased corruption. Public institutions may become incapable of operating effectively in areas controlled by criminal organisations, further reinforcing criminal influence.

The security implications are equally significant. Criminal governance often enables organised criminal groups to expand their operations, strengthen recruitment networks, and consolidate territorial control. Violence may increase as rival organisations compete for influence or as criminal groups seek to suppress challenges to their authority.



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Economic consequences are also substantial. Criminal governance frequently contributes to the growth of illicit economies, reduces government revenue, and distorts legitimate markets. Businesses may face extortion demands, while investment and economic development are often discouraged by insecurity and corruption.

Social impacts include declining public trust in institutions, exploitation of vulnerable communities, and increased dependence upon criminal organisations. Over time, entire communities may become integrated into systems controlled by criminal actors, making restoration of state authority increasingly difficult.

The study of criminal governance is particularly important because it demonstrates how organised crime can evolve beyond conventional criminal activity and become a direct challenge to state sovereignty, legitimacy, and governance itself.



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Case Studies

The following case studies demonstrate how transnational organised crime manifests across different political, social, and geographic contexts. Delegates are encouraged to analyse these examples not only as isolated incidents but also as illustrations of broader trends relating to gang violence, arms smuggling, criminal governance, corruption, and institutional weakness.

1. *Case Study 1: Haiti*

Background

Haiti represents one of the most severe contemporary examples of criminal governance and gang-driven instability. The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021 created a significant political vacuum that weakened state institutions and accelerated the expansion of organised criminal groups. In the years that followed, gang coalitions rapidly increased their territorial influence, culminating in major escalations of violence and criminal control between 2024 and 2026.

Key Groups

- The Viv Ansanm coalition is one of the principal criminal alliances operating in Haiti.
- The G9 alliance has exercised considerable influence over organised criminal activities.
- 400 Mawozo is a major gang known for kidnappings and violent crime.



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- 5 Segond is another significant organised criminal group operating within the country.

Indicators of Criminal Governance

- Armed gangs control major transportation routes connecting different parts of Port-au-Prince.
- Criminal groups have disrupted access to hospitals, schools, ports, and fuel terminals.
- Many residents rely on gang-imposed rules rather than state authority.
- Armed gangs are estimated to influence or control nearly 90% of Port-au-Prince.

Impact

- Nearly 5,000 people were killed between October 2024 and June 2025.
- More than one million people were internally displaced by 2025–26.
- Kidnapping became one of the primary sources of revenue for organised criminal groups.
- Government officials increasingly became targets of organised criminal violence.



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Case Study 2: Sicilian Mafia (Italy)

Background

The Sicilian Mafia, commonly known as Cosa Nostra, is one of the world's oldest and most influential organised criminal organisations. It remains an important example of criminal governance and long-term organised crime.

Main Organisation

Cosa Nostra is the principal organised criminal organisation operating in Sicily.

Historical Development

- The organisation emerged during the nineteenth century.
- It expanded through extortion, protection rackets, political influence, and organised criminal activity.
- It became deeply embedded within local economic and political structures.

Activities

- The organisation operates protection rackets to generate illicit income.
 - It engages extensively in money laundering.
 - It has historically influenced political institutions through corruption.
 - It participates in numerous illegal business activities.
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Governance Characteristics

- The organisation established parallel systems for dispute resolution.
- It imposed informal taxation through extortion.
- It exercised significant influence over local political structures.
- It created systems that competed with state institutions and generated long-term dependence among local communities.

Significance

- The Sicilian Mafia represents one of the earliest examples of criminal governance.
- It demonstrates that organised crime can survive across multiple generations.
- It highlights the long-term challenges involved in dismantling entrenched criminal networks.

Case Study 3: Central America's Northern Triangle

Background

The Northern Triangle refers collectively to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The region has long experienced gang violence, organised crime, trafficking networks, and weak governance.

Countries Included

- El Salvador forms part of the Northern Triangle.
- Guatemala forms part of the Northern Triangle.
- Honduras forms part of the Northern Triangle.



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Characteristics

- Gang networks operate across national borders.
- Criminal organisations utilise shared trafficking routes.
- Criminal groups facilitate the cross-border movement of offenders.
- Organised crime relies heavily on extortion and territorial control.
- Regional cooperation remains essential for addressing these interconnected criminal threats.

Case Study 4: Myanmar

Background

Myanmar has experienced a significant expansion of transnational organised crime following the military takeover in 2021. Political instability and weakened governance have enabled criminal organisations to expand their activities.

Key Groups

- Border Guard Forces (BGFs) have been linked to illicit economic activities.
- Karen National Army (KNA)-linked criminal networks operate in border regions.
- Certain ethnic armed organisations have engaged in illicit trafficking.
- Transnational organised crime syndicates operate large-scale cyber scam compounds.



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Indicators of Criminal Governance

- Criminal organisations operate cyber scam compounds and trafficking centres.
- Organised crime controls important cross-border smuggling routes for arms, narcotics, and human trafficking.
- Criminal syndicates cooperate with local armed groups in several border regions.
- Weak state authority has enabled parallel systems of governance to emerge.

Impact

- Thousands of victims have been trafficked into cyber scam operations.
- Illicit arms trafficking has fuelled domestic and regional conflicts.
- Myanmar remains one of the world's largest producers of synthetic drugs.
- Organised crime has created significant security challenges for neighbouring countries.

Case Study 5: Somalia

Background

Somalia has long experienced weak governance, prolonged conflict, and limited state authority. These conditions have enabled organised criminal groups to expand their influence.



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Key Groups

- Al-Shabaab's criminal financing networks play a major role in organised crime.
- Somali piracy networks continue to threaten maritime security.
- Arms smuggling syndicates facilitate the illicit movement of weapons.
- Cross-border trafficking organisations operate throughout the Horn of Africa.

Indicators of Criminal Governance

- Criminal and armed groups exercise authority in areas with limited government control.
- Organised criminal groups impose illicit taxation and extortion on local communities.
- Informal ports and maritime routes are widely used for smuggling weapons and other illicit goods.
- Weak law enforcement institutions have enabled organised crime to flourish.
-

Impact

- Organised crime has contributed to persistent insecurity and violence.
- Illicit arms trafficking continues despite international embargoes.
- Piracy and maritime crime threaten international trade and shipping.
- Organised criminal activities have weakened economic development and public confidence in state institutions.



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Suggest Moderated Caucus Topics

1. Strengthening international cooperation and intelligence-sharing to combat transnational organised crime while respecting state sovereignty.
2. Addressing the root causes of gang violence through socio-economic development, youth engagement, and community-based crime prevention strategies.
3. Preventing the illicit manufacturing, trafficking, and diversion of firearms through improved border management, tracing mechanisms, and international cooperation.
4. Combating corruption, money laundering, and illicit financial flows that enable organised criminal networks to expand and operate with impunity.
5. Strengthening criminal justice systems, law enforcement capacity, and judicial cooperation in accordance with the mandate of UNODC.
6. Addressing criminal governance in fragile and conflict-affected states by reinforcing the rule of law, state institutions, and public service delivery.
7. Enhancing regional and international implementation of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocols to address emerging forms of organised crime.



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Reference Links

Europe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OagsSY1G0-g> – Part 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVZFMtuKXgQ> – Part 2

Balkan (Serbia)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol94TlE6pmk>

Asia

- Asia's Illegal Drug Trade

https://youtu.be/hiKUBw8OnrU?si=dfCcetIVQ26-4E_5

- Organized Crime Shifting Routes In Southeast Asia

<https://youtu.be/nsXW9Gf2yEs?si=tduFzhXRPIYbWTaS>

- Inside Story America

<https://youtu.be/u0mxbzAdTUE?si=3Gh8iSdKUYFNY7mJ>

Related to the agenda in general

<https://www.youtube.com/c/GlobalInitiativeAgainstTransnationalOrganizedCrime>

Global Heat Map

<https://ocindex.net/> - showing criminality scores across the globe.



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Concluding Remarks

Transnational organised crime remains one of the most complex challenges facing the international community. Through gang violence, arms smuggling, and criminal governance, organised criminal groups have demonstrated an ability to undermine security, weaken governance, distort economies, and erode public trust in institutions.

As criminal organisations become increasingly sophisticated and interconnected, effective responses will require cooperation across borders, stronger institutions, improved legal frameworks, and sustained political commitment. The challenge before this committee is not only to address the immediate manifestations of organised crime, but also to confront the structural conditions that allow such networks to thrive.

Delegates should approach this agenda with an understanding that organised crime is not merely a law enforcement issue. It is a governance challenge, a development challenge, and increasingly, an international security challenge. Meaningful solutions will therefore require comprehensive, collaborative, and sustainable approaches that reflect the global nature of the threat.