Police Link Crimes, Guns & Suspects Across National Borders

A violent transnational gang, operating between Spain and Portugal, has been stopped thanks to diligent police work, rigorous cross border protocols, and an innovative new-technology-based program called the INTERPOL Ballistic Information Network (IBIN). IBIN proved its value when it counted most, on the streets of Portugal and Spain, where police using IBIS® (Integrated Ballistics Identification System) technology were able to share and leverage their ballistic data through IBIN to develop two suspects in Spain who were responsible for a series of violent carjackings and a murder in Portugal. Discovering a link between these crimes would not have been possible just a year ago.

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Here is how the events unfolded:

In early 2004, a crime spree began in the Braga region of northern Portugal. What began with car thefts and property damage, the severity escalated over the next few months to armed robberies, carjackings, attempted murder, and murder.

Investigators suspected that a mobile, organized crime group was involved in many crimes that were taking place in the region, but they had no way of being certain. Detectives from Portugal's Policia Judiciaria began canvassing small towns and villages across the area, asking local police departments if they knew of recent firearm crimes. Some did, but thinking that the events were random and isolated, local police had not done much with the seemingly "insignificant" cartridge case evidence. Although collected at crime scenes, the evidence was never entered into IBIS. As the investigation progressed from Braga to Freamunde, investigators gathered dozens of cartridge cases as evidence.

Upon their return to Lisbon, the investigators used IBIS at the Laboratorio de Policia Cientifica (LPC) to image the cartridge cases and store their unique digital signatures into a database. Then, IBIS was used to compare the digital signatures against all other digital signatures in the database. IBIS is able to compare thousands upon thousands of digital signatures at speeds well beyond human capacity, and is able to link evidence to firearms, crimes to crimes, and cases to suspects. Using IBIS technology, what previously took firearm examiners months is now accomplished in minutes. By 2008, the story the evidence painted was crucial for investigators. The correlation results told investigators a shocking story.

"What originally appeared as isolated crimes became a correlation between 50 crimes, including homicide, attempted homicide and attempted murder against police officers," explains Fernando Dias, the LPC firearm examiner. In all, nine firearms were responsible for the 50 crimes that had occurred across northern Portugal.

"Once the investigation began, and it was working well, we lined up all the cases as being linked," said Dias. "A lot of elements come into play during an investigation. It's not always just ballistics. We work closely to develop intelligence with investigators and we have an intelligence section that puts all that information together."

In particular, forensic specialists identified a specific 9mm firearm as having been used in nine separate incidents in Portugal:

January 22, 2001: A Ford Transit was stolen and a firearm was discharged in Peso de Regua.

January 22, 2004: A carjacking and an assault with a deadly weapon were perpetrated by unknown assailants in the city of Porto.

February 22, 2004: In Braga, another stolen Ford Transit was recovered. Inside, two 9mm cartridge cases were found.

March 23, 2004: In the town of Freamunde, shots were fired into a home. No one was hurt, but 9mm cartridge cases were found at the scene.

June 26, 2004: In Delães, Vila Nova de Famalicao, a member of the Guarda Nacional Republicana stopped a Ford Orion and asked the driver for identification. The driver fired two shots at the policeman and sped away.

July 20, 2004: During a carjacking of a Ford Transit in Sao Martinho do Campo, a 9mm firearm was discharged by unknown assailants. Later that day, this same vehicle was used in a robbery.

July 21, 2004: In Braga, unknown assailants attempted to carjack the driver of a Mitsubishi Conti. While resisting, the driver sustained injuries to his head. A single 9mm cartridge case was found at the scene.

August 3, 2004: Assailants discharged a firearm during a carjacking near the city of Braga.

November 13, 2004: A carjacking was attempted near the city of Albergaria-a-Velha. Once again, the driver resisted. The unknown assailants shot and killed a local man, Joao Ferreira Leite, 63 years old. Three cartridge cases were recovered from the crime scene.

The investigation focused on a mobile, organized crime group, but the suspects eluded police. These groups are common in both Portugal and Spain. They are family-based transnational organizations with members in the 20–40-year-old range. By their nature, they are difficult to investigate given their nomadic tendencies and their habit to live on the fringe of society.

Although police in Portugal could link all the cases, they did not have any suspects. The trail had gone cold—as had the cases.

In almost 70 nations, IBIS technology helps countries link cases across cities, provinces, and countries, through networked access to a centralized database. Both Spain and Portugal adopted this technology early and has made excellent use of it within their country. But now, through the use of the newly configured INTERPOL Ballistic Information Network (IBIN), INTERPOL member countries can now search the digital signatures of evidence in the database of another member country.

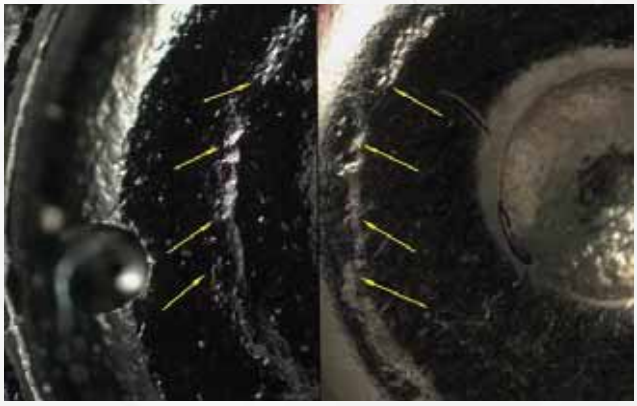
Both Spain and Portugal recognized the benefits of joining IBIN and sought membership early in the life of the program. Spain's Cuerpo Nacional de Policia (CNP) joined immediately in 2009, and Portugal's Policia Judiciaria followed in late 2011. Sharing a 1200 km border with its neighbor, each country knew that the evidence in one country might help an investigation in the other. Also, Spain established crime gun protocols that require all seized firearms and ballistics evidence to be entered into its national IBIS database.

What happened next is a testament to dedicated processes, innovative technology, and exceptional police work. In 2008, in the Madrid, Spain suburb of Fuenlabrada, a Ford Scorpio refused to stop at a police checkpoint. When police eventually halted the vehicle, they found drugs and a single cartridge case. The car's two suspects were arrested for possession of narcotics and were subsequently photographed and fingerprinted.

Following protocol, police for the CNP submitted the found cartridge case to the ballistics lab in Madrid. Using IBIS, the evidence was imaged and stored in the database.

When both Spain and Portugal joined IBIN, this cartridge case was among the first to be correlated.

"I was notified of the hit when I arrived in the morning and was told it was a potential hit with the National Police in Spain," recalls Dias. "I received a call from the CNP in Madrid, and they offered to bring a cast of the cartridge case here to Lisbon. Once they did, we confirmed that it was indeed a hit: the gun that fired that cartridge in Spain was the same involved in all the cases we had linked in Portugal, including the murder of Mr. Ferreira Leite."



Side-by-side view of matching cartridge cases. Marked regions of interest denote that both casings were fired from the same firearm.

Through IBIN, the cartridge case in the Ford Scorpio and the cartridge cases at the murder scene were linked not only to each other, but to a total of 10 crimes. These IBIN hits were integral in allowing the two bordering countries to generate significant investigative leads that resulted in the dismantling of the mobile, organized gang. Armed with the identification of the suspects obtained by the Spanish police in Fuenlabrada, the Policia Judiciaria of Portugal finally had the information that had been eluding them for years.

This connection would have never happened had not people like chief Inspector Jose Dominguez of the CNP played a vital role. "This case demonstrates that in a territory with no frontiers (such as the EU), criminals move without borders, thus a crime in Spain links with many crimes in Portugal," explains Dominguez, "Criminals are crossing from one to the other without any restrictions. And that's what we are going to do as well."

The detectives and forensic personnel of the CNP recognized that seemingly insignificant evidence can hold the key to solving a case. Many police agencies would have been satisfied with the drugs in the Scorpio and would have discounted the ballistic evidence—especially since no firearm was found with the two suspects. The CNP protocol that treats each piece of evidence as though it were involved in a crime was the key to breaking this case open.

"Previously work like this would have taken years. With IBIN, this could be solved in a week," beams Dominguez, "Now they are going to think twice. In prisons, word will spread that the police are everywhere."

The suspects identified in Spain are currently serving sentences in Portugal for other gang-related activity. As of September, 2012, Portuguese judges are reviewing the additional crimes to determine how the suspects' sentences will be affected. The disclosure laws surrounding the adjudication process prohibit the release of suspects' names and further details.

Fernando Dias is a satisfied man. The transnational, organized gang that terrorized regions of northern Portugal no longer exists and more than half of the members are in prison. "The link with Spain was the final piece in the puzzle that allowed us to put an end to this gang," he boasts, "They are gone. Finished."

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Chief Inspector
Jose Dominguez of the CNP

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