



# Department of Justice

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**STATEMENT**

**OF**

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**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE, PEACE CORPS, AND  
GLOBAL NARCOTICS AFFAIRS  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**AT A HEARING ENTITLED**

**“NEXT STEPS ON THE CARIBBEAN SHARED SECURITY PARTNERSHIP”**

**PRESENTED**

**DECEMBER 15, 2011**

**Statement for the Record of  
Rodney G. Benson  
Assistant Administrator  
Chief of Intelligence  
Drug Enforcement Administration**

**Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Global Narcotics Affairs  
Committee on Foreign Relations  
United States Senate**

**“Next Steps on the Caribbean Shared Security Partnership”  
December 15, 2011**

**Introduction**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Rubio, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: On behalf of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Administrator Michele M. Leonhart, I want to thank you for your continued support of the men and women of DEA and the opportunity to testify about what our Administration is seeing with regard to the current drug trafficking situation in the Caribbean, counterdrug operations, and DEA’s regional engagement moving forward.

**DEA in the Caribbean**

The Drug Enforcement Administration has a unique and challenging problem set in the Caribbean with both foreign and domestic offices covering thousands of square miles with hundreds of islands that speak multiple languages. DEA’s Caribbean Field Division, headquartered in San Juan, has oversight of the island of Puerto Rico, the United States Virgin Islands (USVI), 27 island nations throughout the Caribbean, and the countries of Guyana and Suriname in South America. Seven DEA Caribbean Island Country Offices are located in Barbados, Curacao, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. DEA’s Miami Field Division has oversight of The Bahamas, with the country office located in Nassau, and a resident office located in Freeport, Bahamas.

**Background: The Scope of Drug Trafficking in the Caribbean**

Given their geographic locations, the Caribbean Islands are extremely vulnerable to drug trafficking. Historically, significant quantities of cocaine destined for the United States transited the Caribbean. Counterdrug successes in the region, coupled with a changing dynamic between Colombian and Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs), led traffickers to shift transit routes increasingly toward Mexico and Central America. While the vast majority of drugs destined for the United States still transit Mexico/Central America, enforcement action and rising violence in Mexico have begun to lure some traffickers back to the Caribbean. The illegal drug

trade remains a menace to the public welfare and represents a serious threat to the rule of law in many Caribbean island nations.

The principal drug threat in the Caribbean region today continues to be cocaine; however, the smuggling and abuse of heroin, marijuana, and methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA, otherwise known as Ecstasy) are also of concern. In addition, the diversion, unlawful sale, and abuse of prescription drugs are a growing threat in Puerto Rico and the USVI. The increasing levels of drug-related violence in Puerto Rico, the USVI, and many Caribbean nations is one of the most pressing issues currently facing regional law enforcement and public officials.

DTOs from Mexico (particularly the Sinaloa Cartel) and South America are attracted to the Caribbean region due to its proximity to South America, the southern coast of the U.S., and the U.S. Territories of Puerto Rico and the USVI. Additionally, traffickers take advantage of the vast Atlantic Ocean for unfettered movement to West Africa and Europe. Established ties with Caribbean DTOs provide South American and Mexican traffickers with transportation, security, stash sites, and other logistical support necessary to manage drug trafficking operations in the Caribbean.

### *Cocaine*

Cocaine is the primary drug threat in the Caribbean region. The Caribbean serves as a major transshipment and storage location for cocaine originating primarily in Colombia (frequently traversing Venezuela) and destined for the United States, Canada, and Europe. Cocaine departing South America through the Caribbean follows three distinct trafficking corridors: 1) the Central Caribbean Corridor, which includes the islands of Jamaica, The Bahamas, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuban territorial waters; 2) the Eastern Caribbean Corridor which starts in Trinidad and Tobago and moves north through the Leeward Islands; and 3) the ABC Corridor which includes the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao.

The Dominican Republic remains the main Caribbean transit point of South American cocaine, although at much lower levels than those witnessed in 2009 due to a significant disruption of air transportation activity into Hispaniola. Nonetheless, over half of the cocaine that currently transits the Caribbean is estimated to flow through the Dominican Republic.

While drug traffickers use every means at their disposal to move drugs through these corridors, maritime transportation is the most commonly used conveyance in the Caribbean basin. The use of go-fast boats, capable of carrying 500-2,000 kilograms per trip, is the primary method used to move loads quickly from South America through the Central Corridor and between the Caribbean islands. Containerized cargo -- with loads ranging from 50 kilograms up to multi-tons -- is another maritime trafficking conveyance, as DTOs are able to hide large quantities of drugs amid legitimate container traffic, making interdiction extremely difficult without specific intelligence. In addition, traffickers have recently begun to affix torpedo-shaped tubes or metal boxes carrying cocaine, heroin, marijuana, MDMA, and bulk cash to the underside of maritime cargo vessels. Once the vessels arrive at their destination, divers retrieve the parasitic devices and their contraband contents. Additional maritime conveyances include local and commercial fishing vessels, luxury vessels, ferries, and cruise ships. Finally, due to recent self-propelled

semi-submersible (SPSS) seizures that occurred in 2011 off the coast of Honduras, it is expected that traffickers will begin exploring this option to carry multi-ton loads of cocaine through the Eastern Caribbean.

Traffickers also use commercial and non-commercial aircraft to smuggle cocaine through the Caribbean. Most notably, departures via non-commercial aircraft -- in both twin and single engine planes -- from Apure, Venezuela, have increased in recent years. Loads are either airdropped, or traffickers land the planes on clandestine airstrips. This trend has led to a rise in subsequent cocaine transshipment through the neighboring Caribbean islands of Aruba and Curacao, the northern Leeward Islands, and Trinidad and Tobago. Couriers on commercial aircraft, air cargo, and parcel services are also used to smuggle cocaine.

Once in the Caribbean, cocaine is repackaged and sent to the United States or Europe by both air and maritime conveyances. In the Central Corridor, traffickers send loads through Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, and The Bahamas for entry into Puerto Rico and the USVI and the southeastern portion of the United States. In the Eastern Corridor, traffickers move loads into Puerto Rico via the USVI, British Virgin Islands (BVI) and St. Maarten, or directly to Europe. There is also a threat through the western coastal area of Puerto Rico where drug shipments are smuggled via maritime conveyances from the Dominican Republic. Puerto Rico's western and eastern coastal areas continue to be dominant sites for drug operations. Antigua, in the Leeward Island chain, has also emerged as a major command and control center for drug movement.

### *Marijuana*

A secondary threat in the Caribbean is the cultivation and smuggling of marijuana. Jamaica is the primary marijuana producer for the Caribbean, and large amounts of marijuana are smuggled out of Jamaica via go-fast vessels, cargo containers, couriers, and parasitic devices attached to the hulls of vessels. Marijuana is also smuggled through overnight and express mail delivery services, such as Federal Express, DHL, United Parcel Service, and the U.S. Postal Service. While it may seem counterintuitive, most of the marijuana consumed in Puerto Rico originates in Mexico. The Mexican marijuana is smuggled into the United States via the Southwest border and then transported to Puerto Rico by couriers on commercial airline flights or through commercial parcel services.

### *Heroin*

Traffickers primarily transport Colombian heroin (often transiting Venezuela) to Puerto Rico for onward shipment to U.S. cities such as Miami, New York, and Houston. There are two distinct heroin transportation routes through the Caribbean: 1) Colombia through the eastern Caribbean nations of St. Maarten and the Dutch Antilles to Puerto Rico where loads are broken down prior to being shipped to the U.S.; and 2) Venezuela to Aruba and Curacao, a route which has seen a marked increase in recent usage. Aruba has become an important transit point for heroin destined to the United States. Like cocaine, heroin is transported via both air-drop operations and maritime vessels, including go-fast boats and cruise ships. In some instances, heroin is comingled with cocaine shipments.

## MDMA

Most MDMA transported through the Caribbean is imported from Europe (particularly the Netherlands and France), Canada, and the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe via airports, seaports, and mail parcels. Aruba and Curacao are particularly significant MDMA and precursor chemical transshipment points in the Caribbean. In addition, MDMA trafficking through the Dominican Republic has increased during the past two years. MDMA is used for local consumption among tourists and wealthy Dominican families as well as for export to the United States.

### **Current Highlights in the Caribbean**

In addition to the general drug trafficking trends through the Caribbean, there are a few specific related factors that merit particular consideration:

- *Violence in the Caribbean.* While there are many factors contributing to the rate of violence in the Caribbean, drug trafficking is one factor of particular concern to DEA.

*Puerto Rico.* There have been over 1,050 homicides in Puerto Rico between January and early December 2011. Homicide rates in Puerto Rico, on average, rank among the highest in the nation. DTOs, money laundering organizations, and street gangs habitually use intimidation, violence, and murder to gain or retain control of the drug markets within the region. Furthermore, firearms transported into Puerto Rico and the USVI from the U.S., particularly from Florida, are a significant threat to stability in the region.

*Dominican Republic.* The Dominican Republic is a popular transshipment location in the Caribbean for South American and Mexican cartels. After the arrest of a Sinaloa Cartel member and his Dominican associates in August 2011, several execution-style murders took place, intensifying local concern over rising rates of drug-related violence. The overall homicide rate in the Dominican Republic has steadily increased, reaching 25 homicides per 100,000 people.

*U.S. Virgin Islands.* The USVI has also experienced an increase in violence. The USVI has a higher per capita homicide rate than most U.S. states, reaching more than ten times the national average. The increasing importance of the USVI to drug traffickers as entry points to the U.S., and as transshipment points to Europe, may facilitate this trend of drug-related violence.

*Trinidad and Tobago.* In August 2011, the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago declared a limited state of emergency following the murder of eleven people in four days. The Prime Minister attributed these murders to recent drug seizures. Trinidad and Tobago is a major transshipment point for South American cocaine destined for Europe and the U.S. and is also a significant hub for arms smuggling and money laundering. Trinidad and Tobago's close proximity to Venezuela and its well-developed banking and transportation infrastructure make it a convenient destination for all manner of illegal activity. The small Caribbean nation has experienced a dramatic rise in crime over the last few years – although violence this year has decreased from last year -- and is struggling to combat drug-related violence. A

lack of resources and effective laws continues to hamper counterdrug efforts. The rising crime rate has become a political issue, as the country's two major political parties focus on the government's commitment to crime reduction.

- *Presence of Mexican cartels in the Dominican Republic.* Mexican drug trafficking organizations, particularly members of the Sinaloa Cartel, have established a limited presence in the Dominican Republic. A recent operation in the Dominican Republic led to the arrests of Dominican Republic and Mexican nationals responsible for facilitating drug movement from Colombia through the Caribbean to Mexico on behalf of the Sinaloa Cartel. DEA believes the Mexican cartel's presence within the Caribbean indicates a desire to expand the Mexican DTOs' market, gain greater control over drug movements, and avoid the turf wars currently plaguing Mexico and Central America.
- *Bulk currency smuggling.* Bulk currency smuggling through the Caribbean is the primary method for returning illicit proceeds to the source zones. Traffickers conceal bulk cash in parcels, luggage, and via courier, using the same smuggling routes that are used to move drug loads, i.e. containers, maritime and non-commercial air shipments. Traffickers also launder illicit proceeds in order to avoid the risk of moving large amounts of bulk currency. Preferred money laundering methods in the Caribbean include purchasing real estate and other tangible goods like high end vehicles and jewelry, money remitters, structured bank deposits, and the black market peso exchange.

### **DEA Programs in the Caribbean**

As in other regions, the U.S. Government's strategy in the Caribbean is the Drug Flow Attack Strategy, an innovative strategy leveraging DEA, Department of Defense, other U.S. law enforcement, and host nation resources, to combat the illicit trafficking of drugs, money, and chemicals in the region. This strategy supports the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative's aims of strengthening maritime/aerial security, building law enforcement capacity, and strengthening border/port security. Under the umbrella of this overall strategy, DEA maintains many effective enforcement programs in the Caribbean, several of which are highlighted below:

- *Operation All-Inclusive* is a combination of sequential and simultaneous land, air, maritime, and financial attacks targeted by DEA intelligence. It involves synchronized interagency counterdrug operations designed to influence illicit trafficking patterns and increase disruptions of DTOs.
- The *Sensitive Investigative Unit (SIU) Program* is the foundation for building effective and trustworthy partner-nation units capable of conducting complex drug investigations. There is a DEA-sponsored SIU in the Dominican Republic, as well as five additional DEA-supported vetted units in the Dominican Republic dedicated to various facets of investigative and interdiction activities. In addition, there are also DEA supported vetted units in several other Caribbean nations. In lieu of an SIU, DEA is working with the U.S. State Department to reconfigure the Haitian National Police's antinarcotics unit as a vetted narcotics task force trained and equipped to function as a capable counterdrug partner.

- *Operation Bahamas, Turks and Caicos (OPBAT)* is a DEA-led, multi-agency, multi-lateral operation for disrupting the flow of illegal drugs through The Bahamas and Turks and Caicos to the United States. OPBAT operates under the Three Part (TRIPART) Agreement among the United States, The Bahamas, and the United Kingdom; this agreement authorizes OPBAT helicopters and personnel to conduct counter-drug operations in The Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands.
- *Operations Broken Bridge and Seawall.* Operation Broken Bridge, initiated in August 2007, successfully assisted the Dominican Republic Government in its interdiction efforts against drug-laden aircraft. This operation served as a response to the increased number of drug air shipments transported from Venezuela into Hispaniola. Although this operation curtailed the aviation threat in the Dominican Republic, maritime smuggling remains a threat. As a result, *Operation Seawall* was initiated in October 2011 as a Dominican Republic-led operation to target go-fast activity in the Dominican Republic and the secondary flow of cocaine smuggling from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico.
- *Judicial intercept programs.* Communication interception and exploitation abilities are another great asset that DEA employs in coordination with several host nation countries in the Caribbean.
- The *Caribbean Corridor OCDETF Strike Force (CCSF)* is a federal multi-agency strike force focused on the disruption of maritime drug trafficking in the Caribbean. The CCSF targets South American-based DTOs and is located in DEA's San Juan office.

### **Conclusion: DEA's Regional Engagement Moving Forward**

DEA recognizes that interagency and international collaboration and coordination are fundamental to our success. We remain committed to working with our U.S. law enforcement and intelligence partners as well as with our host nation counterparts in order to disrupt drug transportation routes through the Caribbean. Bringing to the criminal and civil justice systems of the United States, or any other competent jurisdiction, those organizations and principal members of organizations involved in the cultivation, manufacture, and distribution of controlled substances appearing in or destined for illicit trafficking in the United States remains the core of our focus.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss this important issue. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.