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DRUG CONTROL

Observations on U.S. Counternarcotics Activities

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Mr. Chairmen and Members of the Subcommittee and Caucus:

I am pleased to be here today to present our observations on the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to combat the movement of drugs into the United States. My statement discusses the (1) challenges of addressing international counternarcotics issues and (2) obstacles to implementing U.S. and host-nation drug control efforts. My testimony is primarily based on our recent reports concerning U.S. counternarcotics efforts in the Caribbean, Colombia, and Mexico.¹

Summary

Our work over the past 10 years indicates that there is no panacea for resolving all of the problems associated with illegal drug trafficking. Despite long-standing efforts and expenditures of billions of dollars, illegal drugs still flood the United States. Although U.S. and host-nation counternarcotics efforts have resulted in the arrest of major drug traffickers and the seizure of large amounts of drugs, they have not materially reduced the availability of drugs in the United States. A key reason for the lack of success of U.S. counternarcotics programs is that international drug-trafficking organizations have become sophisticated, multibillion-dollar industries that quickly adapt to new U.S. drug control efforts. As success is achieved in one area, the drug-trafficking organizations quickly change tactics, thwarting U.S. efforts.

Other significant, long-standing obstacles also impede U.S. and source and -transit countries² drug control efforts. In the drug-producing and -transiting countries, counternarcotics efforts are constrained by corruption; limited law enforcement resources and institutional capabilities; and internal problems such as insurgencies and civil unrest. Moreover, drug traffickers are increasingly resourceful in corrupting the countries' institutions.

Some countries, with U.S. assistance, have taken steps to improve their capacity to reduce the flow of illegal drugs into the United States. Among other things, these countries have taken action to extradite criminals; enacted legislation to control organized crime, money laundering, and

¹Drug Control: U.S.-Mexican Counternarcotics Efforts Face Difficult Challenges (GAO/NSIAD-98-154, June 30, 1998); Drug Control: U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts in Colombia Face Continuing Challenges (GAO/NSIAD-98-60, Feb. 12, 1998); Drug Control: Update on U.S. Interdiction Efforts in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific (GAO/NSIAD-98-30, Oct. 15, 1997).

²The major source countries for cocaine are Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. The major source nations for heroin in the Western Hemisphere are Colombia and Mexico. The major drug transit areas include Mexico, the Caribbean, the eastern Pacific, and Central America.

chemicals used in the production of illicit drugs; and instituted reforms to reduce corruption. While these actions represent positive steps, it is too early to determine their impact, and challenges remain.

U.S. counternarcotics efforts have also faced obstacles that limit their effectiveness. These include (1) organizational and operational limitations, and (2) planning and management problems. Over the years, we have reported on problems related to competing foreign policy priorities, poor operational planning and coordination, and inadequate oversight over U.S. counternarcotics assistance. We have also criticized the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and U.S. agencies for not having good performance measures to evaluate results. Our work has identified ways to improve U.S. counternarcotics efforts through better planning, sharing of intelligence, and the development of measurable performance goals.

Background

Illegal drug use, particularly of cocaine and heroin, continues to be a serious health problem in the United States. According to ONDCP, drug-related illness, death, and crime cost the nation approximately \$67 billion annually. Over the past 10 years, the United States has spent over \$19 billion on international drug control and interdiction efforts to reduce the supply of illegal drugs. ONDCP has established goals of reducing the availability of illicit drugs in the United States by 25 percent by 2002 and by 50 percent by 2007.

ONDCP is responsible for producing an annual National Drug Control Strategy and coordinating its implementation with other federal agencies. The 1998 National Drug Control Strategy includes five goals: (1) educate and enable America's youth to reject illegal drugs as well as alcohol and tobacco; (2) increase the safety of U.S. citizens by substantially lowering drug-related crime and violence; (3) reduce health and social costs to the public of illegal drug use; (4) shield America's air, land, and sea frontiers from the drug threat; and (5) break foreign and domestic drug supply sources. The last two goals are the primary emphasis of U.S. interdiction and international drug control efforts. These are focused on assisting the source and transiting nations in their efforts to reduce drug cultivation and trafficking, improve their capabilities and coordination, promote the development of policies and laws, support research and technology, and conduct other related initiatives. For fiscal year 1998, ONDCP estimated that about 13 percent of the \$16 billion federal drug control budget would be devoted to interdiction and international drug control activities—in 1988,

these activities represented about 24 percent of the \$4.7 billion federal drug control budget.

ONDCP also has authority to review various agencies' funding levels to ensure they are sufficient to meet the goals of the national strategy, but it has no direct control over how these resources are used. The Departments of State and Defense and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) are the principal agencies involved in implementing the international portion of the drug control strategy. Other U.S. agencies involved in counternarcotics activities overseas include the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Customs Service, various U.S. intelligence organizations, and other U.S. agencies.

Challenges in Stemming the Flow of Illegal Drugs Into the United States

Over the past 10 years, the U.S. agencies involved in counternarcotics efforts have attempted to reduce the supply and availability of illegal drugs in the United States through the implementation of successive drug control strategies. Despite some successes, cocaine, heroin, and other illegal drugs continue to be readily available in the United States.

According to ONDCP, the cocaine source countries had the potential of producing about 650 metric tons of cocaine in 1997. Of this amount, U.S. officials estimate that about 430 metric tons were destined for U.S. markets, with the remainder going to Europe and elsewhere. According to current estimates, about 57 percent of the cocaine entering the United States flows through Mexico and the Eastern Pacific, 33 percent flows through the Caribbean, and the remainder is moved directly into the United States from the source countries. According to ONDCP estimates, the U.S. demand for cocaine is approximately 300 metric tons per year.

According to DEA, Colombia was also the source of 52 percent of all heroin seized in the United States during 1996. The current U.S. demand for heroin is estimated to be approximately 10 metric tons per year.

Drug-Trafficking Organizations Have Substantial Resources, Capabilities, and Operational Flexibility

A primary challenge that U.S. and foreign governments' counternarcotics efforts face is the power, influence, adaptability, and capabilities of drug-trafficking organizations. Because of their enormous financial resources, power to corrupt counternarcotics personnel, and operational flexibility, drug-trafficking organizations are a formidable threat. Despite some short-term achievements by U.S. and foreign government law enforcement agencies in disrupting the flow of illegal drugs, drug-trafficking organizations have found ways to continue to meet the demand of U.S. drug consumers.

According to U.S. law enforcement agencies, drug-traffickers' organizations use their vast wealth to acquire and make use of expensive modern technology such as global positioning systems, cellular communications equipment and communications encryption devices. Through this technology, they can communicate and coordinate transportation as well as monitor and report on the activities of government organizations involved in counterdrug efforts. In some countries, the complexity and sophistication of drug traffickers' equipment exceed the capabilities of the foreign governments trying to stop them.

When confronted with threats to their activities, drug-trafficking organizations use a variety of techniques to quickly change their modes of operation, thus avoiding capture of their personnel and seizure of their illegal drugs. For example, when air interdiction efforts have proven successful, traffickers have increased their use of maritime and overland transportation routes.³ According to recent U.S. government reports, even after the capture or killing of several drug cartel leaders in Colombia and Mexico, other leaders or organizations soon filled the void and adjusted their areas of operations. For example, we reported in February 1998 that, although the Colombian government had disrupted the activities of two major drug-trafficking organizations, the disruption had not reduced drug-trafficking activities, and a new generation of relatively young traffickers was emerging.⁴

³Drug Control: Revised Drug Interdiction Approach Is Needed in Mexico (GAO/NSIAD-93-152, May 10, 1993).

⁴Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-60, Feb. 12, 1998).

Obstacles in Foreign Countries Impede Counternarcotics Efforts

The United States is largely dependent on the countries that are the source of drug production and drug transiting points to reduce the amount of coca and opium poppy being cultivated and to make the drug seizures, arrests, and prosecutions necessary to stop the production and movement of illegal drugs. While the United States can provide assistance and support for drug control efforts in these countries, the success of those efforts depends on the countries' willingness and ability to combat the drug trade within their borders. Some countries, with U.S. assistance, have taken steps to improve their capacity to reduce the flow of drugs into the United States.

Drug source and transiting countries face long-standing obstacles that limit the effectiveness of their drug control efforts. These obstacles, many of which are interrelated, include corruption; limited law enforcement resources and institutional capabilities; and insurgencies and internal unrest.

Corruption Permeates Institutions in Countries Involved in Drug Production and Movement

Narcotics-related corruption is a long-standing problem affecting U.S. and foreign governments' efforts to reduce drug-trafficking activities. Over the years, U.S. officials have identified widespread corruption problems in Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and the countries of Central America and the Caribbean—among the countries most significantly involved in the cultivation, production, and transit of illicit narcotics.

Our more recent reports have discussed corruption problems in the Caribbean, Colombia and Mexico.⁵ For example, in October 1997, we reported that the State Department had identified narcotics-related corruption in various transit zone countries in the Caribbean, including Antigua, Aruba, Belize, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, St. Kitts, St. Vincent, and others.⁶ We also reported that once the influence of drug trafficking becomes entrenched, corruption inevitably follows and democratic governments may be placed in jeopardy. In March 1998, the State Department reported that narcotics-related corruption problems continue in many Caribbean countries.

⁵Drug War: Observations on the U.S. International Drug Control Strategy ([GAO/T-NSIAD-95-182](#), June 27, 1995); Drug Control: Counternarcotics Efforts in Mexico ([GAO/NSIAD-96-163](#), June 12, 1996); Drug Control ([GAO/NSIAD-98-30](#), Oct. 15, 1997); Drug Control ([GAO/NSIAD-98-60](#), Feb. 12, 1998); and Drug Control ([GAO/NSIAD-98-154](#), June 30, 1998).

⁶Drug Control ([GAO/NSIAD-98-30](#), Oct. 15, 1997).

In June 1998, we reported that persistent corruption within Mexico continued to undermine both police and law enforcement operations.⁷ Charged with corruption, many law enforcement officers had been arrested and dismissed. One of the most noteworthy arrests involved General José Gutierrez Rebollo—former head of the Mexican equivalent of DEA. In February 1997, he was charged with drug trafficking, organized crime and bribery, illicit enrichment, and association with one of the leading drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico.

Despite attempts by Mexico’s Attorney General to combat corruption, it continues to impede counternarcotics efforts. For example, in February 1998, the U.S. embassy in Mexico City reported that three Mexican law enforcement officials who had successfully passed screening procedures were arrested for stealing seized cocaine—illustrating that corruption continues despite measures designed to root it out.

Inadequate Resources and Institutional Capabilities Limit Arrests and Convictions of Drug Traffickers

Effective law enforcement operations and adequate judicial and legislative tools are key to the success of efforts to stop the flow of drugs from the source and transiting countries. Although the United States can provide assistance, these countries must seize the illegal drugs and arrest, prosecute, and extradite the traffickers, when possible, in order to stop the production and movement of drugs internationally. However, as we have reported on several occasions, these countries lack the resources and capabilities necessary to stop drug-trafficking activities within their borders.

In 1994, we reported that Central American countries did not have the resources or institutional capability to combat drug trafficking and depended heavily on U.S. counternarcotics assistance.⁸ Two years later, we said that equipment shortcomings and inadequately trained personnel limited the government of Mexico’s ability to detect and interdict drugs and drug traffickers.⁹ These problems still exist. For example, we reported in June 1998 that the Bilateral Border Task Forces, which were established to investigate and dismantle the most significant drug-trafficking organizations along the U.S.-Mexico border, face operational and support problems, including inadequate Mexican government funding for

⁷Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-154, June 30, 1998).

⁸Drug Control: U.S. Counterdrug Activities in Central America (GAO/T-NSIAD-94-251, Aug. 2, 1994).

⁹Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-96-163, June 12, 1996).

equipment, fuel, and salary supplements for personnel assigned to the units.¹⁰

Countries in the Caribbean also have limited drug interdiction capabilities. For example, we reported in October 1997 that many Caribbean countries continue to be hampered by inadequate counternarcotics capabilities and have insufficient resources for conducting law enforcement activities in their coastal waters.¹¹ We reported that St. Martin had the most assets for antidrug activities, with three cutters, eight patrol boats, and two fixed-wing aircraft, whereas other Caribbean countries had much less.

Insurgency and Civil Unrest Limit Counternarcotics Efforts

Over the years, our reports have indicated that internal strife in Peru and Colombia have limited counternarcotics efforts in these countries. In 1991, we reported that counternarcotics efforts in Peru were significantly hampered because of the threat posed by two insurgent groups.¹² Currently, Colombia's counternarcotics efforts are also hindered by insurgent and paramilitary activities. In 1998, we reported that several guerrilla groups made it difficult to conduct effective antidrug operations in many areas of Colombia.¹³ Since our report, the situation has worsened. For example, during this past summer the insurgents overran a major police base that was used as a staging area for aerial eradication efforts.

Efforts to Improve Counternarcotics Capabilities

Some countries, with U.S. assistance, have taken steps to improve their capacity to reduce the flow of illegal drugs into the United States. For example, in June 1998, we reported that Mexico had taken efforts to (1) increase the eradication and seizure of illegal drugs, (2) enhance counternarcotics cooperation with the United States, (3) initiate efforts to extradite Mexican criminals to the United States, (4) pass new laws on organized crime, money laundering, and chemical control, (5) institute reforms in law enforcement agencies, and (6) expand the role of the military in counternarcotics activities to reduce corruption.¹⁴ Many of these initiatives are new, and some have not been fully implemented.

¹⁰Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-154, June 30, 1998).

¹¹Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-30, Oct. 15, 1997).

¹²The Drug War: U.S. Programs in Peru Face Serious Obstacles (GAO/NSIAD-92-36, Oct. 21, 1991).

¹³Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-60, Feb. 12, 1998).

¹⁴Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-154, June 30, 1998).

Colombia has also made progress in making efforts to improve its counternarcotics capabilities. In February 1998, we reported that Colombia had passed various laws to assist counternarcotics activities, including money laundering and asset forfeiture laws, reinstated extradition of Colombian nationals to the United States in November 1997, and signed a maritime agreement.¹⁵

Obstacles Inhibit Success in Fulfilling U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts

Our work over the past 10 years has identified obstacles to implementing U.S. counternarcotics efforts, including (1) organizational and operational limitations, and (2) planning and management problems. Over the years, we have criticized ONDCP and U.S. agencies involved in counternarcotics activities for not having good performance measures to help evaluate program results. Efforts to develop such measures are currently underway.

Organizational and Operational Limitations

The United States faces several organizational and operational challenges that limit its ability to implement effective antidrug efforts. Many of these challenges are long-standing. Several of our reports have identified problems involving competing priorities, interagency rivalries, lack of operational coordination, inadequate staffing of joint interagency task forces, lack of oversight, and lack of knowledge about past counternarcotics operations and activities.

For example, our 1995 work in Colombia indicated that there was confusion among U.S. embassy officials about the role of the offices involved in intelligence analysis and related operational plans for interdiction.¹⁶ In 1996 and 1997, we reported that several agencies, including the U.S. Customs Service, DEA, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, had not provided personnel, as they had agreed, to the Joint Interagency Task Force in Key West because of budgetary constraints.¹⁷

In October 1997, we reported that according to U.S. officials, the small amount of aircraft and maritime assets hindered U.S. interdiction efforts in the Eastern Pacific and that their ability to interdict commercial and

¹⁵Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-60, Feb. 12, 1998).

¹⁶Drug War (GAO/T-NSIAD-95-182, June 27, 1995).

¹⁷Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-30, Oct. 15, 1997) and Drug Control: U.S. Interdiction Efforts in the Caribbean Decline (GAO/NSIAD-96-119, Apr. 17, 1996).

noncommercial fishing vessels was limited.¹⁸ We also reported in 1993 and 1997 that reduced radar capability was limiting operational successes in this region.¹⁹

We also reported on instances where lessons learned from past counternarcotics efforts were not known to current planners and operators, both internally in an agency and within the U.S. antidrug community.²⁰ For example, in the early 1990's the United States initiated an operation to support Colombia and Peru in their efforts to curtail the air movement of coca products between the two countries. However, U.S. Southern Command personnel stated in 1996 that while they were generally aware of the previous operation, they were neither aware of the problems that had been encountered nor of the solutions developed in the early 1990s. U.S. Southern Command officials attributed this problem to the continual turnover of personnel and the requirement to destroy most classified documents and reports after 5 years. These officials stated that an after-action reporting system for counternarcotics activities is now in place at the U.S. Southern Command.

We have also reported that a key component of the U.S. operational strategy is having reliable and adequate intelligence to help plan interdiction operations. Having timely intelligence on trafficking activities is important because traffickers frequently change their operational patterns and increasingly use more sophisticated communications, making it more difficult to detect their modes of operations.²¹ ONDCP is in the process of reviewing U.S. counternarcotics intelligence efforts.

Planning and Management Limitations

Over the years, our reviews of U.S. counternarcotics efforts have indicated planning and management limitations to U.S. counternarcotics efforts. Our recent reports on Colombia and Mexico have shown that the delivery of U.S. counternarcotics assistance was poorly planned and coordinated.

In February 1998, we reported that the State Department did not take adequate steps to ensure that equipment included in a 1996 \$40-million Department of Defense assistance package could be integrated into the

¹⁸Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-30, Oct. 15, 1997).

¹⁹Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-93-152, May 10, 1993) and Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-30, Oct. 15, 1997).

²⁰Drug Control: Long-Standing Problems Hinder U.S. International Efforts GAO/NSIAD-97-75, Feb. 27, 1997).

²¹Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-97-75, Feb. 27, 1997).

U.S. embassy's plans and strategies to support the Colombian police and military forces.²² As a result, the assistance package contained items that had limited immediate usefulness to the Colombian police and military and will require substantial additional funding before the equipment can become operational.

We reported a similar situation in Mexico. In June 1998, we noted that key elements of the Defense Department's counternarcotics assistance package were of limited usefulness or could have been better planned and coordinated by U.S. and Mexican officials.²³ For example, we reported that the Mexican military was not using the four C-26 aircraft provided by the United States because there was no clearly identified requirement for the aircraft and the Mexican military lacked the funds needed to operate and maintain the aircraft. In addition, inadequate coordination between the U.S. Navy and other Defense Department agencies resulted in the transfer of two Knox-class frigates to the Mexican Navy that were not properly outfitted and are currently inoperable. Further, Mexican Navy personnel were trained in the frigates' operation, but these personnel may not be fully utilized until the two frigates are activated.

Our work has also shown that, in some cases, the United States did not adequately control the use of U.S. counternarcotics assistance and was unable to ensure that it was used as intended. Despite legislative requirements mandating controls over U.S.-provided assistance, we found instances of inadequate oversight of counternarcotics funds. For example, between 1991 and 1994, we issued four reports in which we concluded that U.S. officials lacked sufficient oversight of aid to ensure that it was being used effectively and as intended in Peru and Colombia.²⁴ We also reported that the government of Mexico had misused U.S.-provided counternarcotics helicopters to transport Mexican military personnel during the 1994 uprising in the Mexican state of Chiapas.²⁵

Our recent work in Mexico indicated that oversight and accountability of counternarcotics assistance continues to be a problem. We found that

²²Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-60, Feb. 12, 1998).

²³Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-98-154, June 30, 1998).

²⁴The Drug War: Colombia Is Undertaking Antidrug Programs, but Impact Is Uncertain (GAO/NSIAD-93-158, Aug. 10, 1993); The Drug War: Observations on Counternarcotics Programs in Colombia and Peru (GAO/T-NSIAD-92-2, Oct. 23, 1991); Drug War (GAO/NSIAD-92-36, Oct. 21, 1991); and Drug War: Observations on Counternarcotics Aid to Colombia (GAO/NSIAD-91-296, Sept. 30, 1991).

²⁵Drug Control (GAO/NSIAD-96-163, June 12, 1996).

embassy records on UH-1H helicopter usage for the civilian law enforcement agencies were incomplete. Additionally, we found that the U.S. military's ability to provide adequate oversight is limited by the end-use monitoring agreement signed by the governments of the United States and Mexico.

Importance of Measuring Performance

We have been reporting since 1988 that judging U.S. agencies' performance in reducing the supply of and interdicting illegal drugs is difficult because the agencies have not established meaningful measures to evaluate their contribution to achieving the goals contained in the National Drug Control Strategy.

In February 1998, ONDCP issued its annual National Drug Control Strategy, establishing a 10-year goal of reducing illicit drug availability and use by 50 percent by 2007. In March 1998, ONDCP established specific performance effectiveness measures to evaluate progress in meeting the strategy's goals and objectives. While we have not reviewed the performance measures in detail, we believe they represent a positive step to help gauge the progress in attaining the goals and objectives.

Ways to Improve the Effectiveness of U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts

We recognize that there is no easy remedy for overcoming all of the obstacles posed by drug-trafficking activities. International drug control efforts aimed at stopping the production of illegal drugs and drug-related activities in the source and transit countries are only one element of an overall national drug control strategy. Alone, these efforts will not likely solve the U.S. drug problem. Overcoming many of the long-standing obstacles to reducing the supply of illegal drugs requires a long-term commitment. Over the years, we have recommended ways in which the United States could improve the effectiveness of the planning and implementation of its current counternarcotics efforts. These recommendations include (1) developing measurable goals, (2) making better use of intelligence and technologies and increasing intelligence efforts, (3) developing a centralized system for recording and disseminating lessons learned by various agencies while conducting law enforcement operations, and (4) better planning of counternarcotics assistance.

Mr. Chairmen, this concludes my prepared testimony. I would be happy to respond to any questions.

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