



Committee on
HOMELAND SECURITY
Chairman Peter T. King

Opening Statement

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**Statement of Chairman Michael McCaul (R-TX)
Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Management**

**“US Caribbean Border: An Open Road to Drug Traffickers and
Terrorists”**

**June 21, 2012
Remarks as Prepared**

Right now, somewhere on the streets of New York, Miami or maybe a few blocks away from where we sit in Washington, drug dealers are selling cocaine, heroin or marijuana. These drugs entered the United States through a wide open back door.

They didn't come across the US-Mexico or Northern border. Mr. Rodney Benson, Intelligence Chief for the Drug Enforcement Agency, said that larger and larger loads of both cocaine and heroin were transiting, and now staying, in Puerto Rico.

And once these drugs are in Puerto Rico, they have crossed our borders.

This Caribbean region is America's "Third Border;" an open door for drug traffickers and terrorists.

Because Puerto Rico is a US Territory, illegal contraband that makes it to the island is unlikely to be subjected to further US Customs inspections en route

to the continental United States, meaning it is easily mailed or placed on commercial aircraft without suspicion.

In FY 2011, 165,000 metric tons of illegal drugs were seized in the Caribbean, Bahamas and Gulf of Mexico, up 36% over four years. Up to 80% of cocaine trafficked through Puerto Rico is directed to US East Coast cities.

The maritime smuggling routes widely used by international drug trafficking organizations in the 1980's the "Miami Vice Era", are utilized more and more today.

These routes are a threat to America's national security. The Caribbean region is also susceptible to smuggling nuclear, radiological, chemical, and biological materials, and it could easily be used as staging areas for violence against the United States.

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan said, "Puerto Ricans have borne the responsibilities of US citizenship with honor and courage for more than 64 years. They have fought beside us for decades and have worked beside us for generations." President Reagan added that Puerto Rico's "strong tradition of democracy provides leadership and stability" for the Caribbean.

These statements also apply to the US Virgin Islands.

Today that stability and the millions of American citizens in the region are under siege.

Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands' close proximity to the continental United States and their lack of effective security infrastructures make them an appealing gateway for drug cartels.

The Caribbean region is also experiencing an escalation in trafficking of persons and firearms, as well as money laundering.

As these networks and drug routes evolve so do the potential links to terrorism and transnational crime.

On average one person is murdered on the islands every 7.5 hours, and at least half of those murders involve drug trafficking organizations.

Last year there were 30 homicides for every 100,000 Puerto Ricans. This rate is far higher than any state in the mainland.

Drug shipments from locations including Haiti, Colombia, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic are transported to the islands on board "fast boats" and submersibles. Cargo is then dropped at obscure port locations or just simply unloaded into the water and flagged for later pick up.

These locations are so remote that it can take federal law enforcement officers hours to reach them.

The Caribbean region Drug Trafficking Organizations have proven flexible, adaptable and can change routes quickly.

The US Postal Inspection Service seized hundreds of weapons hidden in packages postmarked for Puerto Rico including assault rifles, AK-47s, AR-15s, and armor-penetrating "cop-killer" bullets.

On June 6, 2012 the Drug Enforcement Agency arrested thirty-six people in a drug-trafficking ring that used Puerto Rico's International Airport in San Juan to smuggle large quantities of cocaine off the island aboard US-bound passenger flights.

From San Juan, drugs were flown to Miami, Orlando, and Newark. The drug ring had been operating for ten years inside the San Juan airport.

The Caribbean region also has an active black market selling fraudulent documents. According to the Department of State 40 percent of identity fraud in the United States involved birth certificates from Puerto Rico.

In January, fifty people were charged with conspiring to sell the identities of hundreds of Puerto Ricans to illegal immigrants on the American mainland. This was the largest single fraud case uncovered by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Hundreds of birth certificates, social security numbers, and driver's licenses were sold for up to \$2500 a set.

James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, recently testified, "terrorists and insurgents will increasingly turn to crime and criminal networks for funding and logistics... Criminal connections and activities of Hezbollah and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb illustrate this trend."

These criminal networks in the region could potentially be exploited by terrorists seeking to do us harm inside our borders. This type of exploitation was evidenced in the thwarted plot to kill the Saudi Ambassador in Washington. The Iranian Quds Force attempted to solicit a Mexican Drug Cartel member to carry out the assassination.

Iran and the Bolivarian states—(Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua)—which are major drug producers—bring a dangerous new set of threats to the Western Hemisphere as they work together with transnational organized crime enterprises and terrorist groups. This threat includes the potential for Weapons of Mass Destruction-related trafficking.

These activities are carried out with the participation of regional state actors who have publicly articulated a doctrine of asymmetrical warfare against the United States and its allies explicitly endorsing the use of weapons of mass destruction.

This is not a regional problem that won't reach our shores- these *are* our shores.

Earlier this month, the Attorney General was asked why the Office of National Drug Control Policy has a Southwest and Northern border counternarcotics strategy but does not have a Caribbean border counternarcotics strategy.

Attorney General Holder's response was, "when one looks at the Caribbean, Puerto Rico in particular, I think we need a strategy. We have a task force on Puerto Rico that the Associate Attorney General is co-chair of. I think to the extent it is not explicit, we should develop such a plan."

Without a comprehensive strategy to counter the cartels increasing presence in the Caribbean, the region could continue to spiral out of control.

The American flag has flown over Puerto Rico for more than a century. The people of the US Virgin Islands have been American citizens for almost as long. These islands are American soil, and our fellow American citizens need our support now.

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