

**Statement of
The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings, Chairman
Subcommittee on the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
Hearing on
Coast Guard Drug and Migrant Interdiction
March 11, 2009**

Today, the Subcommittee convenes to examine the Coast Guard's drug and migrant interdiction operations and policies.

Many people in the United States who do not live near the water or work in the maritime industry may have little interaction with the Coast Guard and may simply not be aware of the critical importance of the service's work. However, the Coast Guard's work touches every community in this nation – and that is particularly true of the service's interdiction missions.

I live in Baltimore's inner, inner city. And I have seen first-hand how addiction can blind young people to their hopes and dreams and possibilities. I have seen young men lured into prison instead of college by traffickers, and I have seen young women selling their bodies on our streets to feed their habits. It is almost impossible for me to express how deeply I am troubled by this waste of human lives.

However, I am heartened by the successes that the Coast Guard is achieving in interdicting illegal drugs. Put simply, every ounce of an illegal drug interdicted at sea is an ounce that is kept off our streets. Every ounce interdicted is an ounce that cannot destroy a life, a family, or a community. And every ounce interdicted is money kept out of the hands of illegal drug cartels and even, potentially, terrorist organizations.

In 2007, the Coast Guard removed just under 356,000 pounds of cocaine with an estimated street value of more than \$4.7 billion. The Coast Guard surpassed this outstanding record in 2008, removing nearly 368,000 pounds of cocaine. The Coast Guard, working with its federal and international partners, has achieved these record results at a time when the service is increasingly constrained by the limits imposed by its ageing assets and while managing an ever expanding workload arising from its other critical missions.

It is important for us to understand from today's hearing the factors that may be limiting the service's ability to seize additional amounts of illegal drugs. I am particularly concerned to know whether our intelligence capabilities, which are centered on facilities -- like the Joint Interagency Task Force-South, ably represented today by Admiral Joseph Nimmich – are gathering intelligence faster than we can act on it.

We will also examine the emerging threats we face. In recent years, smugglers have begun using semi-submersible vessels – some self-propelled and some towed behind other boats. These vessels, known as SPSS vessels, can carry large quantities of drugs. In January of this year alone, the Coast Guard removed four such SPSS vessels carrying an estimated combined total of more than 50,000 pounds of cocaine.

The emergence of SPSS vessels, and the shifts now observed in maritime smuggling routes, testify to the increasing ability of the Coast Guard and our partner agencies to interdict drugs carried in more conventional ways. However, they also testify to the willingness and ability of smugglers to innovate, and that is why we must always be a step ahead of the smugglers if we are to continue increasing interdiction rates.

Congress responded to the SPSS threat by passing legislation last year making the operation of a stateless SPSS vessel with intent to avoid detection a federal felony. This legislation gives the Coast Guard and the Department of Justice a new weapon in the fight against drugs. We hope to examine today whether other legislative changes may be needed to respond to new threats.

Another critical interdiction mission performed by the Coast Guard involves the interception of undocumented migrants at sea. According to the Coast Guard, in the first quarter of fiscal year 2009, more than 2,700 undocumented migrants tried to come to the U.S. by sea – a figure that is more than 14 percent higher than the rate seen in the first quarter of fiscal year 2008.

Most of the migrants interdicted by the Coast Guard originate from Cuba, Haiti, or the Dominican Republic. Many of those seeking to enter the U.S. put to sea in rickety vessels or even home-made rafts in an attempt to flee the desperation of their circumstances. Others are smuggled in go-fasts operated by organized smuggling rings.

The Coast Guard's work interdicting migrants is critical to preventing unauthorized entry into the U.S. In many instances, the service is also rescuing individuals who may be at great risk in unsafe boats in open water. As with drug interdiction operations, we hope to examine in more detail today the trends that the Coast Guard is observing in migration, particularly as national economies experience a deepening world recession, as well as what measures may be needed to respond to them.

In addition to Admiral Nimmich, we are also joined by Admiral Wayne Justice, the Coast Guard's Assistant Commandant for Capability. Admiral Justice is a familiar face to the Subcommittee, and we welcome him back.

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