



**TESTIMONY OF
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**ON
“DRUG INTERDICTION OPERATIONS”**

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION
SUBCOMMITTEE**

JUNE 16, 2015

Introduction

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss the Coast Guard’s Drug Interdiction mission.

The primary mission of the United States Coast Guard is to ensure the safety, security, and stewardship of the Nation’s waters. The Coast Guard protects those on the sea, protects the nation from threats delivered by the sea, and protects the sea itself. The Coast Guard is recognized for its ability to be agile and perform a broad range of maritime missions across a large area of responsibility. For counterdrug operations, the Coast Guard is the lead federal agency for maritime law enforcement, including drug interdiction on the high seas, and shares the lead for drug interdiction in U.S. territorial seas with Customs and Border Protection (CBP). The Coast Guard is able to leverage a broad array of authorities, capabilities, competencies, and partnerships which are vital to successful mission execution.

Additionally, the Coast Guard Commandant, Admiral Paul Zukunft, is designated by the Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) as the Chairman of The Interdiction Committee (TIC). TIC is a senior interagency forum, with drug control representatives from twenty-six different departments and agencies, which meets to discuss and resolve issues related to the coordination, oversight, and integration of international, border, and domestic drug interdiction efforts countering networks in support of the President's National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS). TIC supports the NDCS by developing interagency recommendations to promote information sharing and integrating detection, monitoring, and law enforcement activities with interdiction efforts to more effectively disrupt and dismantle drug trafficker transportation and distribution systems.

The Department of Defense (DoD) has the statutory responsibility for the detection and monitoring of illicit drugs in the air and maritime domains bound for the U.S., in support of law enforcement agencies such as the Coast Guard. This activity is conducted by DoD primarily through Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) South. The Coast Guard contributes aircraft, cutters, and personnel to JIATF South for the detection and monitoring mission, leads the critical phase of maritime interdiction and apprehension of suspect vessels and their crews, and delivers suspects, contraband, and evidence to investigators and prosecutors to deliver effective consequences for the illicit activities.

With broad authorities and an extensive array of bilateral agreements and arrangements with nearly every coastal state in the Western Hemisphere, the Coast Guard leads maritime interdiction efforts and plays an important role in the broader, regionally coordinated fight against transnational organized crime (TOC) networks that are largely fueled by the illicit drug trade. Our major cutters, Airborne Use of Force (AUF)-equipped helicopters, and maritime patrol aircraft possess the offshore capabilities necessary to operate on the high seas where TOC networks are largely unchallenged by regional partners, and where those networks are most vulnerable to enforcement action by the United States. Over the last five years, Coast Guard cutters and aircraft have removed from the high seas more than 450 metric tons of pure, uncut cocaine, with a wholesale value of nearly \$15 billion. Our annual seizures at sea amounts to more than three times the quantity of cocaine seized at our borders and within the United States combined. From 2002 to 2011, intelligence gained from Coast Guard interdictions contributed to the arrest and extradition of nearly 75 percent of all Colombian Consolidated Priority Organizational Targets (CPOTs), or drug kingpins.

Emerging Threats: Transnational Organized Crime, Violence, and Instability

One of the goals of the Coast Guard's drug interdiction program is to interdict illicit traffic as close to the source zone¹ as possible. This helps to keep the drugs from reaching the shores of Central America where it is transported over land into Mexico, and then to the United States, where the proceeds from the sale of drugs fuel TOC networks. These nefarious organizations operate with impunity throughout Central America while vying for power through drug-fueled violence and corruption of government officials; in fact, eight out of the ten most violent nations in the world are along these trafficking routes in the Western Hemisphere. Traffickers have also increasingly moved product through the Central and Eastern Caribbean vector. Corresponding with this movement, the homicide rate in Puerto Rico is five times that of the rest of the United States. Drug trafficking has destabilized regional states, undermined the rule of law, terrorized citizens, and driven both families and unaccompanied children to migrate to the United States. To be clear, the flow of illicit drugs funds TOC networks which pose a significant and growing threat to national and international security².

¹ Source Zone: The area of primary growing and/or processing of illicit drugs; where international distribution begins. The geographic area that is the original source of the illicit drug; i.e., where it is produced. This area normally encompasses the growth of required agricultural components and much or all of the processing required, either from synthetic or agricultural components, to create the consumable product. (National Interdiction Command and Control Plan (NICCP) of 2010).

² 2011 National Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime.

These TOC networks are constantly evolving to move their illicit cargoes. Today we face a sophisticated adversary that leverages high-tech conveyances such as semi- and fully-submersibles, employs multiple go-fast vessels to move drug shipments, and deploys beacons if forced to jettison bales of contraband to allow later relocation; all are advanced and coordinated means to avoid detection and evade apprehension.

In September 2014, the Coast Guard released its Western Hemisphere Strategy that identifies three priorities for the maritime domain in the Western Hemisphere: Combating Networks, Securing Borders, and Safeguarding Commerce. To meet these priorities, the strategy emphasizes the importance of a robust offshore AUF-enabled cutter capability, which is supported by fixed winged maritime patrol aircraft and sophisticated intelligence capabilities.

Combating TOC Networks – A Layered Approach to Drug Interdiction

The Coast Guard uses a maritime trident of cutters, boats and aircraft in a layered approach to combat TOC networks as they transport illicit goods from the source zone, through Central America and Caribbean islands, into the United States. This approach increases our border security by confronting the threat beyond our land borders, beyond Mexico, and beyond Central America on the high seas where traffickers are most exposed and vulnerable to interdiction by the United States. This layered approach begins overseas, spans the offshore regions, and continues into our territorial seas and our ports of entry.

As briefly mentioned earlier, the Coast Guard is the major maritime asset provider to JIATF South and deploys an effective package of offshore assets to combat drug organizations in the transit zone³. They include flight deck-equipped major cutters, fixed-wing maritime patrol aircraft, AUF-capable helicopters, deployable small boats and Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachments embarked on U.S. and allied ships. This suite of assets are the most capable and effective drug interdiction package in the maritime counterdrug inventory; when they are able to target cases, they have been 80-90 percent effective in disrupting the shipment.

With the implementation of the Western Hemisphere Strategy, the Coast Guard is dedicating additional focus and assets to Transit Zone interdiction operations and investing in the people and platforms necessary to carry out an offensive focus that targets TOC networks. As an example of these efforts' effectiveness, this April I welcomed home the Coast Guard Cutter BOUTWELL on her return to Naval Base San Diego after completing a 79-day counter-drug patrol in the Eastern Pacific. On deck, she carried over 29,700 pounds of uncut, pure cocaine with a street value of more than half a billion dollars. It was the result of 18 different interdictions by U.S. forces.

³ Transit Zone: A six million square mile area, including the Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico, and Eastern Pacific Ocean. The path(s) used by drug traffickers to transport illicit drugs to their market. Geographically, these paths normally connect, but do not include, the source and arrival zones. (National Interdiction Command and Control Plan (NICCP) of 2010).

That amount, combined with the 28,000 pounds of cocaine BOUTWELL had on deck upon completion of a patrol last October, is the equivalent of over a billion dollars-worth of cocaine that never reached U.S. streets. Our Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON) of AUF-capable helicopters set a record in 2014, with 46 at-sea interdictions, netting over 31 metric tons of cocaine and 27 tons of marijuana. In total for fiscal year 2014, the Coast Guard removed 91 metric tons of cocaine and 108,000 pounds of marijuana from the transit zone, worth an estimated wholesale value of three billion dollars.

Additionally, through the first two quarters of this fiscal year, awareness of drug events is up 15 percent.⁴ More importantly, our interdiction success has also increased. Notably, the number of detainees interdicted and subject to prosecution, by either the U.S. or partner nations, has more than doubled from 168 through the end of May in fiscal year 2014, to 311 this year. The importance of interdictions transcends the direct removal of drugs taken off the high seas—when the U.S. Coast Guard apprehends suspects from drug smuggling cases, they divulge information during prosecution and sentencing that is used to help indict, extradite, and convict drug kingpins in the effort to dismantle TOC networks. They also contribute to actionable intelligence on future events, producing follow-on seizures and intelligence. The intelligence gained during interdictions and the subsequent prosecution directly feeds additional interdictions. More than 90 percent of our 2014 interdictions were cued by intelligence, but our operational capacity limits us to targeting one third of the actionable intelligence.

To sustain and improve on these operational successes, the Coast Guard needs to replace its Medium Endurance Cutter (MEC) fleet with an affordable and capable Offshore Patrol Cutter (OPC). The OPC will be the backbone of Coast Guard offshore presence and the manifestation of Coast Guard authorities. It is essential to interdicting drug smugglers at sea, as well as for interdicting undocumented migrants, rescuing mariners, enforcing fisheries laws, responding to disasters, and protecting our ports. As the Coast Guard completes acquisition of the National Security Cutter, the OPC is now the Coast Guard's number one acquisition priority.

Combating TOC Networks – *International Cooperation*

In coordination with JIATF South, the Coast Guard is also working closely with partner nations in Central and South America, leveraging their capabilities and local knowledge to improve maritime governance in the littoral regions that are being exploited by TOC networks. To foster international cooperation and build partner capacity, Coast Guard personnel are posted as attachés, liaisons and drug interdiction specialists at several of our embassies in the Western Hemisphere. These personnel develop strategic relationships with partner nations that facilitate real-time operations coordination, confirmation of vessel registry, waivers of jurisdiction, and disposition of seized vessels, contraband, and detained crews.

Working in conjunction with the Departments of State and Justice, the Coast Guard has negotiated, concluded, and maintains forty-five counterdrug bilateral agreements and operational procedures with partner nations throughout the world, the majority of which

⁴ Joint Interagency Task Force South

are in the Western Hemisphere. These agreements enable the Coast Guard to rapidly gain authority to board suspect vessels, prevent suspect vessels from using under-patrolled territorial waters as a safe haven, and coordinate interdiction and apprehension operations in the transit zone.

As an example, on May 8, 2014, Honduran drug kingpin Carlos Arnoldo Lobo was extradited to the U.S. to face charges in the Southern District of Florida involving conspiracy to distribute cocaine. The investigation and subsequent indictment of Lobo was significantly aided by evidence and information obtained through four Coast Guard interdictions from 2010 through 2012, resulting in the indictment and conviction of numerous drug traffickers who worked for Lobo as he oversaw smuggling of cocaine onto vessels for shipment from Panama to Honduras, through Guatemala and Mexico, and ultimately into the United States. This was the first successful extradition of a Honduran national from Honduras to the United States since Honduras amended its Constitution in 2012. In December 2014, Lobo was sentenced to serve 20 years in prison, to be followed by five years of supervised release, for his involvement in a conspiracy to distribute cocaine into the United States.

Another success with international partners was the extradition of Juan Alberto Ortiz-Lopez. On May 22, 2014, Ortiz-Lopez was extradited to the Middle District of Florida to face federal drug trafficking charges. He had been indicted on February 1, 2011, and provisionally arrested in Guatemala on March 30, 2011, by Guatemalan authorities. Ortiz-Lopez's indictment was obtained following a long-term investigation led by agents assigned to the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces' (OCDETF) Operation Panama Express Strike Force (PANEX), including an agent from the Coast Guard Investigative Service (CGIS). Ortiz-Lopez was linked to the crew members and associates of two drug smuggling vessels interdicted in November 2007, by the Coast Guard Cutter CHASE, and in July 2009, by Coast Guard Cutter BERTHOLF. Based on intelligence and information from these two interdictions, a grand jury indicted Ortiz-Lopez, who was considered by the Drug Enforcement Administration at the time to be the highest ranking drug trafficker operating in Guatemala. In January 2015, Ortiz-Lopez pled guilty to a charge of conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine and is pending sentencing.

Since 2007, the Coast Guard has sponsored regional semi-annual multilateral maritime counterdrug summits. The most recent summit was last month in Guatemala City. These events draw national operational and legal experts from more than twenty nations to discuss changes in threats, resolve operational coordination difficulties, and develop ways to improve the likelihood interdiction cases will result in successful prosecution.

Finally, the Coast Guard provides international training and education through a variety of courses at Coast Guard training centers, through hands-on experience at U.S. Coast Guard operating units, and through Mobile Training Teams deployed to partner nations. Largely funded by the Department of State, exportable training is one of the Coast Guard's most versatile and cost effective international training tools, serving an average of 2,000 international students in approximately 40 countries each year. The end goal is to build and sustain capable partners who can respond to threats and conduct maritime operations vital to their own and regional security.

Combating TOC Networks – *A Whole of Government Approach*

Using an interagency approach to combat drug trafficking, the Coast Guard coordinates and conducts interdiction operations in concert with the Departments of State, Justice, and Defense and other components of the Department of Homeland Security. Last year, in order to improve departmental unity of effort, Secretary Johnson developed the Southern Border and Approaches Campaign Plan and creation of three Joint Task Forces. The Coast Guard Atlantic Area Commander, Vice Admiral Dean Lee, serves as the Director of Joint Task Force East to achieve unity of effort among DHS components operating in maritime approaches in the Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico, and Eastern Pacific Ocean.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard endeavors to keep drugs from reaching the U.S. border by identifying the emergent threat, countering it with a layered approach, utilizing strong international relationships, and maximizing domestic partnerships to combat TOC networks. The Coast Guard will continue to answer the call and respond to the maritime threat posed by TOC networks.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and thank you for your continued support of the U.S. Coast Guard. I would be pleased to answer your questions.