

GAO

Report to the Ranking Member,
Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S.
Senate

July 2009

DRUG CONTROL

U.S. Counternarcotics Cooperation with Venezuela Has Declined



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Highlights of [GAO-09-806](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Hundreds of metric tons of cocaine flow annually from South America toward the United States, threatening the security and well-being of U.S. citizens. Since 2000, the United States has provided about \$8 billion to countries in the region to disrupt drug trafficking. Most of this assistance went to Colombia to reduce illicit drug production and improve security. In March 2009, the Department of State reported that Venezuela had become a major transit route for cocaine out of Colombia, with a more than fourfold increase in cocaine flow between 2004 and 2007. We determined (1) what is known about cocaine trafficking through Venezuela, (2) what is known about Venezuelan support for Colombian illegal armed groups, and (3) the status of U.S. and Venezuelan counternarcotics cooperation since 2002.

To address these objectives, we reviewed U.S. counternarcotics reports, assessments, and other documents regarding illicit drugs transiting Venezuela. We also traveled to Venezuela and Colombia to discuss these matters with U.S. and foreign government officials.

Because this report is primarily descriptive, we do not make any recommendations.

[View GAO-09-806 or key components.](#)
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DRUG CONTROL

U.S. Counternarcotics Cooperation with Venezuela Has Declined

What GAO Found

Every year since 1996, the President has determined that Venezuela was one of the major drug transit countries in the Western Hemisphere. Venezuela's extensive border with Colombia, covering large swaths of jungle and mountainous terrain, enables the flow of cocaine from Colombia over land and river routes and by air. After entering Venezuela, the cocaine usually leaves aboard maritime vessels that depart from Venezuela's long coastline or aboard suspicious aircraft that take off and land from hundreds of clandestine airstrips. While a majority of the cocaine transiting Venezuela is headed toward the United States, more has begun flowing toward Europe.

According to U.S. and Colombian officials, Venezuela has extended a lifeline to Colombian illegal armed groups by providing significant support and safe haven along the border. As a result, these groups, which traffic in illicit drugs, remain viable threats to Colombian security. A high level of corruption within the Venezuelan government, military, and other law enforcement and security forces contributes to the permissive environment, according to U.S. officials.

The United States and Venezuela cooperated closely on counternarcotics between 2002 and 2005, but this cooperation has since declined. The United States has attempted to resume cooperation through a variety of measures, but Venezuela—while initially supporting some of these efforts—has not reciprocated. In 2007, Venezuela began denying visas for U.S. officials to serve in Venezuela, which complicated efforts to cooperate. In 2008, President Chávez expelled the U.S. Ambassador and recalled his Ambassador from Washington, D.C. But in June 2009, the United States and Venezuela agreed to return their respective ambassadors. Nevertheless, the Venezuelan government claims cooperation with the United States on counternarcotics is not necessary because Venezuela has its own programs. Yet, at the time of our visit to Caracas, Venezuelan officials expressed willingness for greater technical cooperation with the United States if the government of Venezuela were to allow it.

U.S.-Supported Counternarcotics Activities in Venezuela, 2002 through 2009

Activity	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Prosecutor's Drug Task Force	●	●	●	●				
Wire intercept	●	●	●	●				
Cooperating Nation Information Exchange System	●	●	●					
JIATF-South intelligence liaison	●	●	●	●	●			
Port security programs	●	●	●	●	●			
Operation Seis Fronteras	●	●	●	●				
Canine drug detection program	●	●	●	●	●			
Law enforcement training	●	●	●		●	●	●	
Demand reduction programs	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Municipal programs					●	●	●	●

● Indicates ongoing activity during a given year

Source: GAO analysis of State and DEA data.

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Abbreviations

CIF	Container Inspection Facility
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DOD	Department of Defense
DOJ	Department of Justice
ELN	National Liberation Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
IACM	Interagency Assessment of Cocaine Movement
INCSR	International Narcotics Control Strategy Report
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
JIATF-South	Joint Interagency Task Force-South
NAS	Narcotics Affairs Sections
OFAC	Office of Foreign Assets Control
ONA	National Anti-Drug Office
ONDCP	Office of National Drug Control Policy
State	Department of State
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

July 20, 2009

The Honorable Richard G. Lugar
Ranking Member
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Lugar:

Hundreds of metric tons of cocaine flow annually from South America toward the United States, threatening the security and well-being of U.S. citizens and undermining U.S. efforts to promote democracy and stability in the region.¹ Since 2000, the United States has provided about \$8 billion in assistance to countries in the region to reduce the supply of illicit drugs and disrupt drug trafficking. Most of this assistance went to Colombia to help it reduce the production of illicit drugs, primarily cocaine, and improve security by reclaiming control of areas held by illegal armed groups that traffic in illicit drugs. However, in March 2009, the Department of State (State) reported that Venezuela had become a major route for trafficking cocaine out of Colombia, with a more than fourfold increase in cocaine flow between 2004 and 2007.² Given the reported rise in cocaine transiting Venezuela, the United States has sought the cooperation of the Venezuelan government to help address the growing problem.

At your request, we examined the issue of illicit drugs, primarily cocaine, transiting Venezuela. Specifically, we determined (1) what is known about the nature and extent of cocaine trafficking through Venezuela, (2) what is

¹GAO has published several reports addressing this issue, including *Drug Control: Cooperation with Many Major Drug Transit Countries Has Improved, but Better Performance Reporting and Sustainability Plans Are Needed*, [GAO-08-784](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 15, 2008); *Drug Control: U.S. Assistance Has Helped Mexican Counternarcotics Efforts, but Tons of Illicit Drugs Continue to Flow into the United States*, [GAO-07-1018](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 17, 2007); and *Drug Control: Agencies Need to Plan for Likely Declines in Drug Interdiction Assets, and Develop Better Performance Measures for Transit Zone Operations*, [GAO-06-200](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2005).

²State prepares the annual *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (INCSR) in accordance with Section 489 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, and must provide it to Congress by March 1 each year. The report describes the efforts of countries, including those that received U.S. assistance in the fight against drugs, and on presidential narcotics certification determinations on drug producing and transit countries. Information contained in the annual report covers the previous calendar year.

known about the nature and extent of Venezuelan support for Colombian illegal armed groups and the effect such support has had on the security gains made in Colombia, and (3) the status of U.S.-Venezuelan counternarcotics cooperation since 2002.

In addressing these objectives, we reviewed various U.S. government counternarcotics assessments, reports, strategies, and other documents regarding Venezuela. We obtained information on drug trafficking routes and methods from the U.S. Southern Command's Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South) in Key West, Florida.³ We discussed drug trafficking organizations and counternarcotics cooperation with officials at the Departments of Defense, Justice, State, and the Treasury; the Central Intelligence Agency; and the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) in Washington, D.C. To obtain Venezuela's perspective, we met with officials from the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington, D.C., and traveled to Caracas to meet with Venezuelan government officials, including the former Ambassador to the United States, the Attorney General, and the current and a former head of Venezuela's National Anti-Drug Office (ONA). However, despite Venezuelan assurances to provide us documentation we requested during our visit, we have not received it and, therefore, we were not able to fully document Venezuelan officials' statements about their counternarcotics efforts. In Caracas, we also discussed U.S. and Venezuelan counternarcotics cooperation with officials at the U.S. Embassy. We traveled to Bogotá, Colombia, to gain an understanding of Venezuelan and Colombian border issues from U.S. Embassy-Bogotá and Colombian government officials. We also met with representatives in the regional office of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (For a more complete description of our scope and methodology, see app. I.)

We conducted our work from August 2008 to July 2009 in accordance with all sections of GAO's Quality Assurance Framework that are relevant to our objectives. The framework requires that we plan and perform the engagement to obtain sufficient and appropriate evidence to meet our stated objectives and to discuss any limitations in our work. We believe

³JIATF-South includes representatives from the Departments of Defense, Justice, and Homeland Security; other U.S. agencies; and other nations, including France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and several Latin American countries. JIATF-South conducts interagency operations against illicit drug trafficking through detection and monitoring of illicit air and maritime targets, intelligence and information sharing, and cooperation with partner nations.

that the information and data obtained, and the analysis conducted, provide a reasonable basis for any findings and conclusions in this product.

The Departments of Defense, Justice, State, and the Treasury; and ONDCP provided no formal comments on a draft of this report. All except Treasury provided technical comments, which we have incorporated where appropriate.

Background

The *U.S. National Drug Control Strategy's* overall goal is to reduce illicit drug use in the United States. One of the strategy's three priorities calls for disrupting the market for illegal drugs, including interdicting illicit drugs en route to the United States and attacking drug trafficking organizations.⁴ The goal of providing U.S. counternarcotics assistance to other countries is to help their governments become full and self-sustaining partners in the fight against drugs.

State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) develops, funds, and manages counternarcotics and law enforcement assistance programs to help reduce the entry of illicit drugs into the United States and minimize the impact of international crime on the United States. INL's Narcotics Affairs Sections (NAS) oversees daily program operations in U.S. embassies overseas. State also administers security assistance programs generally implemented by the Department of Defense (DOD) intended to strengthen the overall capacity of foreign forces to address security threats, including those associated with drug trafficking. DOD also provides funds for certain security and counternarcotics activities. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), under the Department of Justice (DOJ), operates around the world to disrupt drug trafficking operations, dismantle criminal organizations, enforce the drug-related laws of the United States, and bring to justice those organizations and individuals involved in the growing, manufacture, or distribution of illicit drugs destined for the United States. As shown in table 1, in fiscal years 2003 through 2008 the United States expended over \$35 million for Venezuela counternarcotics-related activities, with more than half of that in fiscal years 2003 and 2004.

⁴ONDCP prepares the *U.S. National Drug Control Strategy*; the other two priorities are (1) stopping initiation and (2) reducing drug abuse and addiction.

Table 1: U.S. Assistance Expended for Counternarcotics-Related Activities in Venezuela, Fiscal Years 2003 through 2008

Dollars in millions

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total ^d
State/INL ^a	2.1	5.0	3.0	2.2	1.0	0	13.3
DEA ^b	2.5	2.4	2.2	2.3	2.0	1.2	12.6
DOD ^c	6.2	1.0	.8	.5	.5	.5	9.6
Total	10.8	8.4	6.0	5.0	3.5	1.7	35.5

Source: GAO analysis of State, DEA, and DOD data.

^aState/INL data reflect expenditures.

^bDEA data reflect expenditures for country and resident offices, less payroll expenses.

^cDOD data reflect estimates of counternarcotics-related support in Venezuela because DOD budgets by program, not by country.

U.S. Assistance Provided to Improve Colombian Security

Although State and ONDCP report that an increasing amount of cocaine is transiting Venezuela en route to the United States, Colombia remains the source for about 90 percent of the estimated cocaine flowing toward the United States.⁵ We reported in 2008 that between fiscal years 2000 and 2008, the United States provided over \$6 billion in military and nonmilitary assistance to Colombia in support of Plan Colombia. The Colombian government announced this strategy in September 1999 to reduce the production of illicit drugs, primarily cocaine, and improve security in the country by reclaiming control of areas held by illegal armed groups. Although the plan's drug reduction goals were not met, Colombian security has improved.⁶

Illegal armed groups operating in Colombia have been designated foreign terrorist organizations by the United States. As we previously reported, since 2000, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, FARC) has been Colombia's principal illegal armed group and it accounts for about 60 percent of the cocaine exported from Colombia to the United States. Although ONDCP reports that FARC membership has declined from about 17,000 members in 2001 to roughly

⁵ONDCP estimated cocaine production decreased by almost 25 percent from a high of 700 metric tons in 2001 to 535 metric tons in 2007.

⁶GAO, *Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, [GAO-09-71](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 6, 2008).

8,000 in 2008, FARC remains a national security threat to the Colombian government, and defeating FARC remains a focus of U.S. assistance.

Although other illegal armed groups in Colombia, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) have also been weakened, they still pose a threat to Colombian security and engage in drug trafficking. In addition, although approximately 32,000 members of the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia demobilized during 2003 to 2006, thousands of former members have formed criminal gangs, such as the Black Eagles, which traffic drugs in northeastern Colombia, along the border with Venezuela.

Venezuela Is a Major Drug Transit Country

Every year since 1996, the President has determined that Venezuela was one of the major drug transit countries in the Western Hemisphere.⁷ Venezuela's extensive and porous border with Colombia, covering large swaths of jungle and mountainous terrain, enables the flow of cocaine from Colombia primarily over land and river routes, but also by air. After entering Venezuela, the cocaine usually exits the country aboard maritime vessels that depart from Venezuela's long coastline or aboard suspicious aircraft⁸ that take off and land from hundreds of clandestine airstrips. While a majority of the cocaine transiting Venezuela is headed towards the United States through the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico, more has begun flowing toward Europe.

Flow of Cocaine through Venezuela Has Significantly Increased

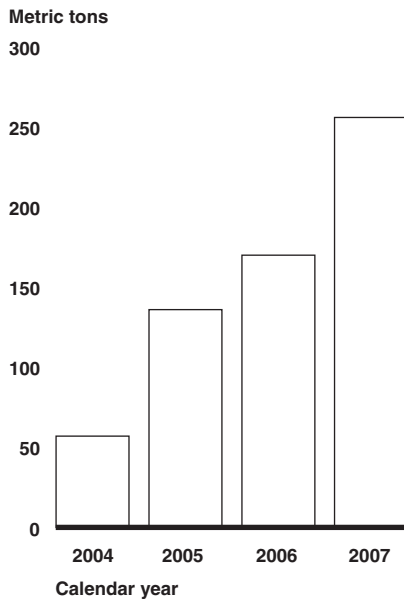
In 2008, ONDCP reported that the estimated flow of cocaine transiting Venezuela toward the United States, West Africa, and Europe increased more than fourfold from about 60 metric tons in 2004 to about 260 metric tons in 2007, as shown in figure 1. According to ONDCP's October 2008 *Interagency Assessment of Cocaine Movement* (IACM), this represented about 17 percent of the cocaine estimated to have been produced in 2007

⁷Section 489 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (codified at 22 U.S.C. 2291h) requires the President to issue an international narcotics control strategy report that, among other things, identifies illicit drug producing and drug transit countries.

⁸Suspicious aircraft include those that fly along recognized drug routes without adhering to a flight plan and demonstrate odd behaviors such as flying at night without lights and with no identification or markings.

(primarily in Colombia) and flowing from Venezuela toward the United States and Europe.⁹

Figure 1: Estimated Cocaine Flow Transiting Venezuela (2004 through 2007).



Source: ONDCP.

⁹ONDCP's IACM is the principal source of information about cocaine flowing toward the United States. It is prepared annually by an interagency group representing departments and agencies involved in U.S. counternarcotics efforts. The IACM is released in the year following the data period on which it reports. The IACM released in October 2008 covers data from calendar year 2007. The methodology for estimating cocaine flow toward the United States has limitations as the data comes from a variety of sources with varying levels of certainty. (For more complete information on IACM data, see app. I.)

Cocaine Flow into Venezuela from Colombia

Venezuelan government officials stated that it is difficult to prevent the entry of drugs from Colombia given the countries' 2,050-kilometer land border, much of which is inhospitable and rugged terrain that has long been the scene of crime, smuggling, and trafficking. Colombian officials told us that, in addition, the rough terrain provides cover for drug trafficking activities and that limited resources make patrolling the border difficult. While most Colombian cocaine enters Venezuela along land or river routes, traffickers also transport some cocaine across the border using small aircraft operating from clandestine dirt airstrips. According to JIATF-South officials, detecting such aircraft is difficult because they often fly at night and remain airborne for only a few minutes. Figure 2 illustrates possible entry routes for cocaine entering Venezuela from Colombia.

Figure 2: Possible Routes for Cocaine Entering Venezuela



Sources: GAO based on data from DEA, JIATF-South, State Department, and the Venezuelan government; Map Resources (map).

In 2008, UNODC reported that since 2006, traffickers have increasingly used overland routes to transport cocaine from Colombia through

Venezuela.¹⁰ Land crossings can occur almost anywhere along the border, from the Venezuelan states of Zulia and Tachira in the north to Amazonas in the south. A network of roads, including the Pan American Highway, connects Colombia with Venezuela. DEA reports a recent increase in the use of trucks transporting cocaine from Colombia along the Pan American Highway to Caracas. According to U.S. officials, the high volume of commercial traffic transiting both countries—largely through Cúcuta—makes it difficult to distinguish between legal and illicit transportation of goods as Venezuela and Colombia conducted more than \$6 billion a year in trade for 2008.

The Venezuelan government reports that drug traffickers also use the Rio Orinoco basin, which covers over 1 million square kilometers as it flows through Venezuela and empties into the Atlantic Ocean, to move cocaine toward eastern Venezuela. Navigable rivers, including the Rio Meta, Rio Vichada, and Rio Guaviare, all originate in Colombia and flow into the Rio Orinoco. U.S. Embassy-Bogotá officials described anecdotal reports of boats carrying cocaine along these rivers that looked like strings of pearls given their extensive numbers. These officials added that the rivers are difficult to patrol due to their length and the large number of smaller tributaries. In addition, the Rio Orinoco is wide and deep enough to accommodate oceangoing vessels.

Cocaine Flow from Venezuela

Cocaine usually exits Venezuela aboard maritime vessels and suspicious aircraft. However, JIATF-South officials stated that detecting suspicious maritime movements is difficult and, therefore, comparisons to the volume of cocaine moved via air are problematic. Nevertheless, these and other U.S. officials reported that while a majority of the cocaine transiting Venezuela is headed toward the United States, more has begun flowing toward Europe.

Venezuela has 4,000 kilometers of coastline along the Caribbean Sea and about 185 kilometers along the Atlantic Ocean with many inlets and commercial ports, including Maracaibo, La Guairá, and Puerto Cabello, through which cocaine can exit. According to JIATF-South, between January and July 2008, several types of maritime vessels, most of them Venezuelan-flagged, were seized carrying more than 11 metric tons of

¹⁰UNODC, *The Threat of Narco-Trafficking in the Americas* (Vienna, October 2008).

cocaine. DEA reports that go-fast boats,¹¹ fishing vessels, and commercial shipping containers are the primary means for smuggling cocaine out of Venezuela. Go-fast boats and fishing vessels have long been used to smuggle cocaine out of Venezuela to the eastern Caribbean and Europe. Drug traffickers can use go-fast boats to transport cocaine from Venezuela to some Caribbean island destinations within a short period of time. The October 2008 IACM indicates that the use of commercial maritime containers to ship cocaine from Venezuela to global destinations may be increasing.

U.S. government officials have observed an increase in suspicious air traffic originating in Venezuela. According to JIATF-South, 109 suspect air tracks originated in Venezuela in 2004 compared with 178 in 2007, with almost none originating in Colombia. A Colombian Air Force official credited the shift to Colombia's Air Bridge Denial program,¹² which has helped Colombia regain control of its airspace and forced illicit drug traffickers to find alternative routes.

JIATF-South officials told us that the majority of suspicious flights leaving Venezuela fly towards Hispaniola with others flying towards Central American transshipment points. In the first 9 months of 2008, JIATF-South reported 22 suspicious flights to Haiti and nearly 70 flights to the Dominican Republic. Such aircraft do not always land, according to U.S. officials, because the aircraft can drop loads of cocaine offshore or on land for others to retrieve and still return to Venezuela. In comparison, for the same period, JIATF-South reported 31 suspicious flights departing Venezuela on longer routes to Mexico and Central America.

In departing Venezuela, suspicious aircraft often take off from one of hundreds of clandestine dirt airstrips in Apure, although some depart from airstrips closer to the coast. During 2008, according to the head of ONA, the Venezuelan government destroyed nearly 325 clandestine airstrips. He told us that traffickers can readily rebuild the dirt airstrips and that the

¹¹Go-fast boats are capable of traveling at speeds over 40 knots, are difficult to detect in open water, and are often used at night. Even when detected, go-fast boats can often outrun conventional ships.

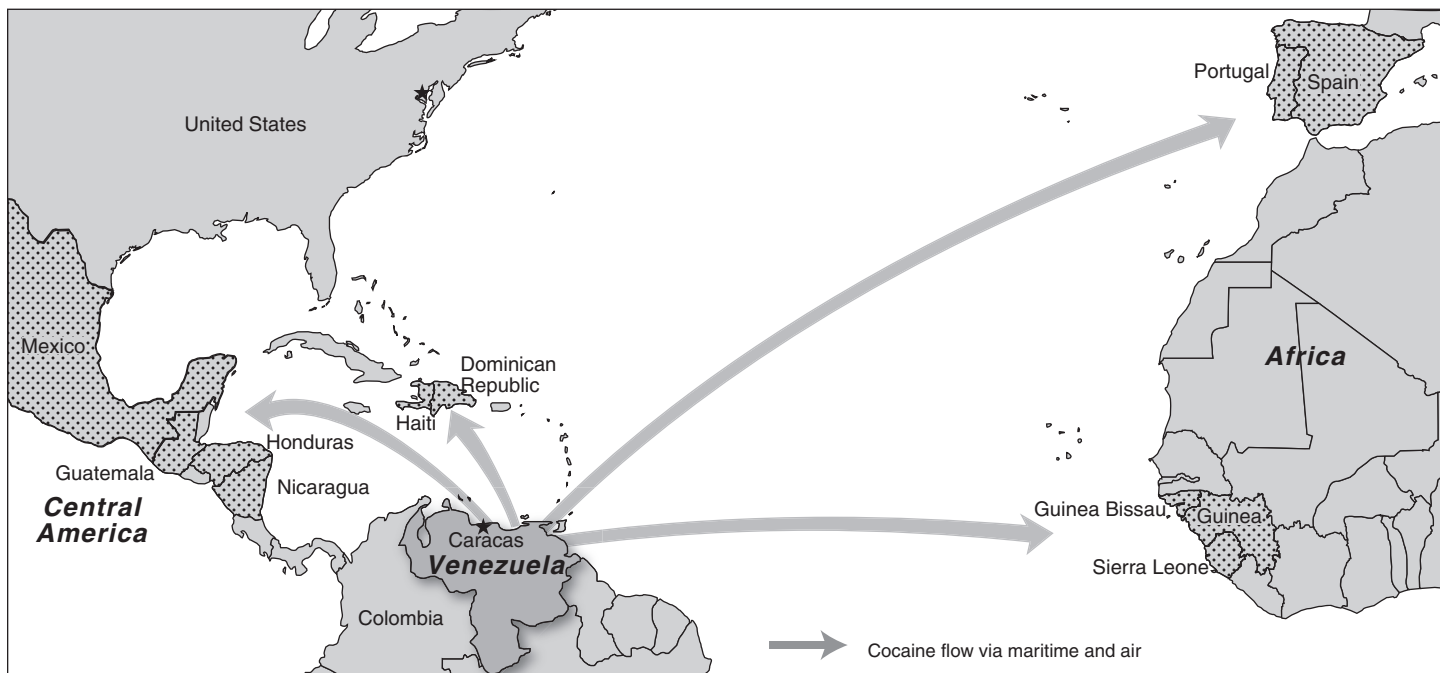
¹²Since fiscal year 2003, State has provided over \$62 million in assistance to enable the Colombian Air Force to improve its capacity to stop drug trafficking in Colombian airspace by identifying, tracking, and forcing suspicious aircraft to land so that law enforcement authorities can take control of the aircraft, arrest suspects, and seize drugs. The program was expanded in 2007 to include surveillance of Colombia's coastal waters.

entire state of Apure, a long and flat plain, could be used as an airstrip. He added that the Venezuelan government has invested over \$250 million to purchase 10 Chinese-made radars to detect and track the suspicious aircraft. He noted that, as of March 2009, three of the radars were operating in Apure and northern Venezuela. In addition, the Venezuelan National Assembly is considering a law to allow the Venezuelan Air Force to shoot down suspicious aircraft carrying illicit drugs.

Increasing Cocaine Flow to Europe

While the final destination of the cocaine transiting Venezuela is primarily the United States, U.S. and foreign government officials confirmed an increase in cocaine flowing directly toward Europe and to West Africa en route to Europe. Cocaine destined for the United States from Venezuela transits through Central America, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and other Caribbean islands.¹³ See figure 3 for a depiction of the primary routes drug traffickers take when departing Venezuela.

Figure 3: Cocaine Flow from Venezuela



Sources: GAO based on data from DEA, IACM, JIATF-South, and the State Department; Map Resources (map).

¹³2009 INCSR.

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction reports that the Iberian Peninsula, primarily Spain, is considered the main entry point for cocaine entering Europe. In 2006, Spanish authorities seized about 50 metric tons of cocaine, much of it at sea, representing about 41 percent of the total quantity seized in Europe.¹⁴ According to UNODC, for 2006 and 2007, much of the cocaine interdicted in Europe could be traced back to Venezuela.¹⁵ Spanish officials confirmed that the amount of cocaine flowing to Europe from Venezuela has increased. They cited a recent seizure of five metric tons of cocaine aboard a Venezuelan-flagged fishing vessel off the coast of Spain. U.S. and European government officials also reported an increase over the past few years of cocaine flowing to West Africa en route to Europe. Prior to 2005, the total amount of cocaine seized in Africa was about one metric ton. According to the United Nations International Narcotics Control Board, between 2005 and 2007, at least 33 metric tons of cocaine was seized in West Africa.¹⁶

Venezuelan Lifeline to Illegal Armed Groups Threatens Colombian Security

According to U.S. and Colombian officials, Venezuela has extended a lifeline to Colombian illegal armed groups by providing them with significant support and safe haven along the border. As a result, these groups remain viable threats to Colombian security and U.S.-Colombian counternarcotics efforts. According to U.S. officials, a high level of corruption within the Venezuelan government, military, and other law enforcement and security forces contributes to the permissive environment.

Support for Colombian Illegal Armed Groups

According to U.S. officials, Venezuelan government officials have provided material support, primarily to FARC, which has helped to sustain the Colombian insurgency and threaten security gains achieved in Colombia. One of the primary sources of evidence for high-level Venezuelan support of FARC appeared on computers captured by the Colombian National Army in a March 2008 raid on a FARC camp in Ecuador. During the raid,

¹⁴European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addition Technical Data Sheets, *Monitoring the Supply of Cocaine to Europe*, 2008.

¹⁵In 2006, about 36 percent of the cocaine intercepted in Europe transited Venezuela. For 2007, the percentage increased to 44 percent. See UNODC, *The Threat of Narcotrafficking in the Americas*, October 2008.

¹⁶United Nations, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2008* (New York, February 2009).

Luis Edgar Devia Silva (alias Raul Reyes), a member of FARC's Secretariat,¹⁷ was killed. Since then, data from the computers (commonly referred to as the Reyes files) has been analyzed by the Colombian government and shared with the United States.¹⁸

Although U.S. officials suspected high levels of Venezuelan government support for FARC, they told us that evidence in the Reyes files not only confirmed their suspicions but indicated that FARC relationships with Venezuelan government officials were well established and had been in place longer than suspected. Based on Colombian government analyses of the Reyes files, Venezuelan government officials may have provided FARC with as much as \$300 million and other support such as medical care and weapons. State reports that some weapons and ammunition found with illegal armed groups in Colombia came from official Venezuelan stocks and facilities.¹⁹ Information from the Reyes files released by the Colombian government indicates that Venezuelan officials also facilitated arms sales for FARC including the purchase of Russian and Chinese rifles, grenade launchers, machine guns, and missiles. Furthermore, according to Colombian government officials, information obtained from the Reyes files detailed FARC and ELN officials cooperating and conducting meetings with Venezuelan officials to discuss assistance. U.S. officials told us that Venezuelan documents such as passports and identification cards have also been provided to illegal armed groups. For instance, a senior FARC member captured in 2004 had Venezuelan citizenship and identification papers.²⁰

Based on evidence obtained from the Reyes files and other corroborating information, in September 2008, the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated three high ranking Venezuelan government officials as drug kingpins for providing material support to

¹⁷FARC Secretariat represents the top leadership of the group.

¹⁸To ensure that the computers had not been tampered with, the General Secretariat of the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) conducted a forensic examination of the computer hardware. INTERPOL found no evidence that the files had been modified. See *INTERPOL's Forensic Report on FARC Computers and Hardware Seized by Colombia*, issued in May 2008.

¹⁹2009 INCSR.

²⁰State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005* (Washington, D.C., 2005).

FARC.²¹ Those designated were the Director of Venezuela's Military Intelligence Directorate, Hugo Armando Carvajal Barrios; the Director of Venezuela's Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services, Henry de Jesus Rangel Silva; and the former Venezuelan Minister of Interior and Justice, Ramon Emilio Rodriguez Chacin. According to OFAC, these officials protected drug shipments, provided weapons and funding, and conducted meetings with senior FARC members. In spite of OFAC's designations, Venezuelan President Chávez publicly defended these officials in a speech, and Carvajal and Rangel remain in office.

Safe Haven for Colombian Illegal Armed Groups

U.S. government officials told us that Venezuela has condoned a permissive environment or safe haven along the Colombian border for FARC, ELN, and Colombian criminal gangs. State reports that members of these groups regularly cross into Venezuela to traffic drugs, rest and regroup, and evade Colombian security forces.²² Statements of former FARC members, obtained through interviews with Colombian officials, indicate that Venezuelan military and law enforcement officials, including those in the National Guard, provide support and weapons and do little to prevent illegal armed groups from crossing the border. By allowing illegal armed groups to elude capture and by providing material support, Venezuela has extended a lifeline to Colombian illegal armed groups, and their continued existence endangers Colombian security gains achieved with U.S. assistance, according to U.S. and Colombian government officials. Colombian officials cautioned that FARC remains a national security threat because it exercises control over large areas of Colombia, including along the border with Venezuela. Reducing FARC's membership, finances, and operating capabilities so that it no longer poses a national security threat remains a goal of the Colombian government.²³

²¹Significant foreign narcotics traffickers and foreign persons named by OFAC are referred to as Specially Designated Narcotics Traffickers and appear on OFAC's listing of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons. Placement on this list freezes any assets the designated entities and individuals may have under U.S. jurisdiction and prohibits U.S. persons from conducting financial or commercial transactions involving those assets. OFAC designations are authorized by the 1999 Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (the Kingpin Act).

²²2005 and 2008 *Country Reports on Terrorism* and 2009 INCSR.

²³[GAO-09-71](#).

Corruption in Venezuela

As early as 1996, State reported that corruption among some members of the Venezuelan National Guard was a problem that had hindered counternarcotics efforts.²⁴ Later, in 2004, State reported that public corruption continued to plague Venezuela and cited evidence of midlevel National Guard officers smuggling drugs through the international airport in Caracas.²⁵ By 2007, State reported that corruption was rampant within the Venezuelan government and military and had fueled a permissive operating environment for drug traffickers.²⁶ The September 2008 OFAC drug kingpin designations illustrated that corruption had reached the ministerial level of the Venezuelan government.²⁷

According to former FARC members interviewed by Colombian government officials, Venezuelan officials, including those in the National Guard, have been bribed to facilitate cocaine shipments across the border with Colombia. State also reports that members of the special counternarcotics units of the National Guard and the Federal Investigative Police often facilitate or are themselves involved in drug trafficking. In addition, although the Venezuelan government reports that it seizes cocaine and incinerates it, some may be taken by Venezuelan officials or returned to drug traffickers.²⁸ According to U.S. officials, corruption within the Venezuelan National Guard poses the most significant threat because the Guard reports directly to President Chávez and controls Venezuela's airports, borders, and ports.

Finally, the Corruption Perceptions Index compiled annually by Transparency International ranks countries from 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (highly clean) based on a series of indicators. For 2008, Venezuela had a score of 1.9, ranking it 158 out of 180 countries worldwide, and 31 of 32 countries within the Americas. Comparatively, Colombia ranked 70 out of 180 countries worldwide, and 13 of 32 countries in the region.²⁹

²⁴1996 INCSR.

²⁵2004 INCSR.

²⁶2007 *Country Reports on Terrorism*.

²⁷2009 INCSR.

²⁸2009 INCSR.

²⁹Transparency International, 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index, <http://www.transparency.org>.

Counternarcotics Cooperation with Venezuela Has Declined

The United States and Venezuela cooperated closely on counternarcotics between 2002 and 2005, but this cooperation has greatly declined since. The United States has attempted to resume cooperation through a variety of measures, including negotiations, designations, and technical cooperation, but Venezuela—while initially supporting some of these efforts—has not reciprocated. In 2007, the government of Venezuela began denying visas for U.S. officials to serve in Venezuela, which has further complicated efforts to cooperate. For its part, the Venezuelan government claims cooperation with the United States on counternarcotics is not necessary because of its own counternarcotics programs. At the time of our visit to Caracas, however, Venezuelan officials expressed willingness for greater technical cooperation with the United States if the government of Venezuela were to allow it.

U.S.-Venezuelan Counternarcotics Cooperation

The United States and Venezuela have had a Memorandum of Understanding on counternarcotics cooperation since 1978. Under this agreement, the two countries have cooperated on a variety of counternarcotics activities, even after the overall bilateral relationship began to deteriorate. Although U.S. officials have for several years expressed concern over Venezuelan human rights issues, military arms purchases, and ties to Cuba and Iran, tensions escalated after the failed coup d'état in April 2002 that briefly ousted President Chávez from power.³⁰ In May 2004, for example, President Chávez expelled the U.S. military group from its offices, which had been co-located with the Venezuelan military for nearly 50 years, thus all but ending military-to-military cooperation. Nevertheless, the United States and Venezuela continued some counternarcotics cooperation. Figure 4 illustrates the years various U.S.-Venezuelan counternarcotics activities were active.

³⁰On April 11, 2002, amid massive opposition protests, Venezuelan military leaders removed President Chávez from office, although the military itself reinstated President Chávez three days later on April 14. The Venezuelan government alleges the U.S. government was behind the coup d'état, although U.S. officials have repeatedly denied the allegations.

Figure 4: U.S.-Supported Counternarcotics Activities in Venezuela, 2002 through 2009

Activity	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Prosecutor's Drug Task Force	●	●	●	●				
Wire intercept	●	●	●	●				
Cooperating Nation Information Exchange System	●	●	●					
JIATF-South intelligence liaison	●	●	●	●	●			
Port security programs	●	●	●	●	●			
Operation Seis Fronteras	●	●	●	●				
Canine drug detection program	●	●	●	●	●			
Law enforcement training	●	●	●		●	●	●	
Demand reduction programs	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Municipal programs ^a					●	●	●	●

● Indicates ongoing activity during a given year

Source: GAO analysis of State and DEA data.

^aMunicipal programs include support NAS has given local law enforcement personnel.

Despite the strain in the U.S.-Venezuelan bilateral relationship, State's annual INCSRs described the counternarcotics cooperation in very favorable terms until 2005. Between 2002 and 2005, the United States and Venezuela cooperated on a number of counternarcotics projects. For example,

- DEA and NAS provided logistical support and advice to the Venezuelan Prosecutors' Drug Task Force, consisting of three dozen vetted prosecutors and investigators from three Venezuelan agencies—the Public Ministry, the Federal Judicial Police, and the National Guard. Begun in 2001, the Prosecutors' Drug Task Force engaged in intelligence gathering and interdiction operations, targeting narcotics trafficking organizations, prosecuting dozens of traffickers, and seizing tons of cocaine as well as traffickers' assets.
- The United States supported other intelligence gathering initiatives such as a wire intercept program and the Cooperating Nation Information Exchange System—a computer network through which participating countries share information in real time regarding aircraft and vessels

suspected of transporting drugs. In addition, Venezuela had an intelligence liaison officer stationed at JIATF-South to facilitate the exchange of information between the United States and other nations on illicit drug trafficking in South and Central America and the Caribbean.

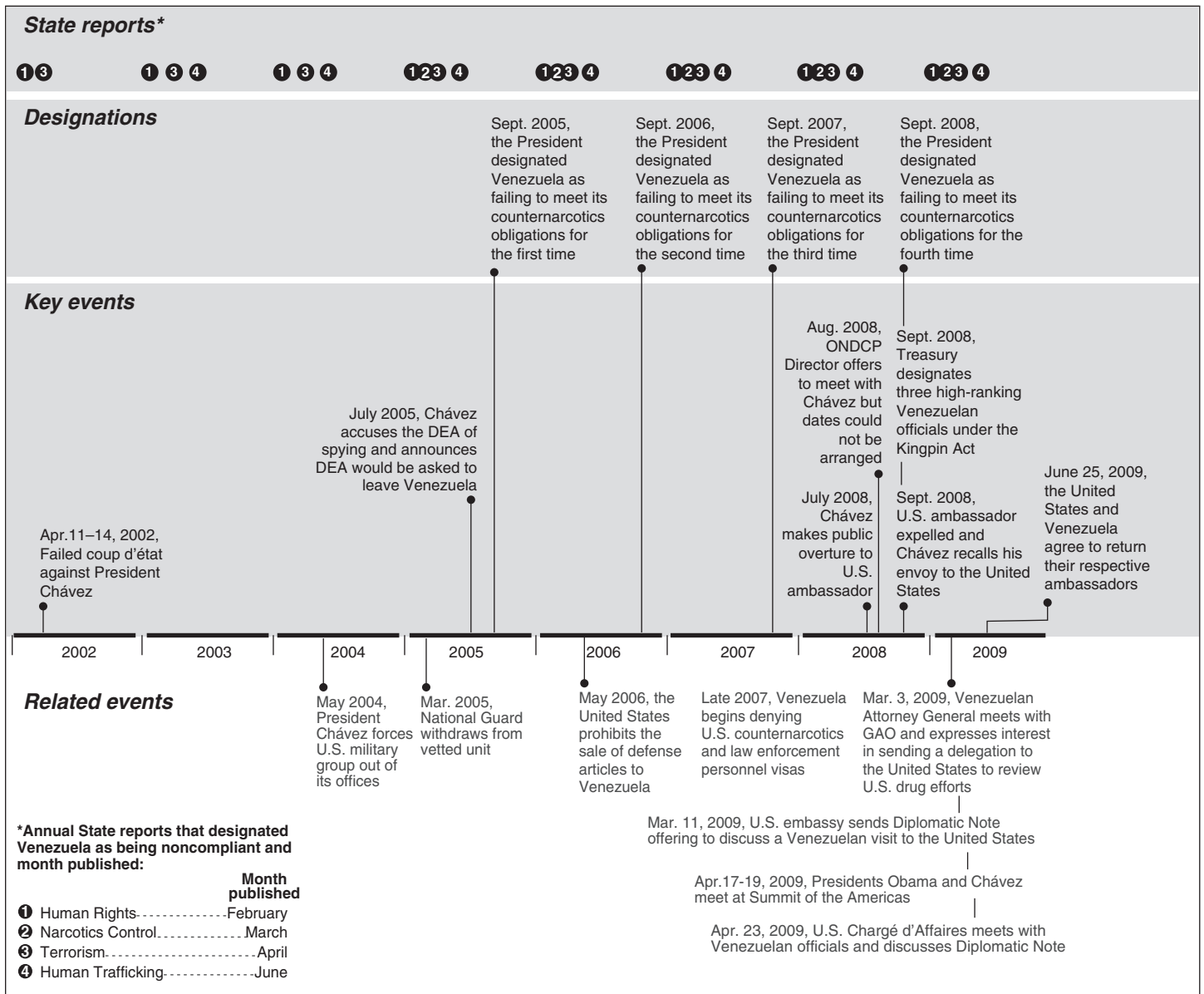
- The United States supported Venezuelan port security through the provision of X-ray machines and ion scanners to detect and interdict drugs at seaport, airport, and land border points of entry and exit. As part of the seaport security program, INL funded a modern Container Inspection Facility (CIF) at Puerto Cabello, Venezuela's largest commercial seaport and a known embarkation point for multi-ton cocaine shipments to the United States. The CIF included a high-tech X-ray system, forklifts, tools, and safety equipment that would allow Venezuelan authorities to examine high-threat shipping containers and their contents in a secure environment.
- Venezuela participated in the DEA-sponsored chemical control initiative for the region, Operation *Seis Fronteras* (Six Borders). Venezuelan authorities assisted with auditing dozens of companies for possible diversion of precursor chemicals utilized in the production of cocaine and heroin, as well as in staffing interdiction checkpoints.

Beginning in 2005, the government of Venezuela took a number of actions that have weakened U.S.-Venezuelan counternarcotics cooperation. In January 2005, Venezuela refused to renew its participation in the Cooperating Nation Information Exchange System and, in March 2005, the Venezuelan National Guard withdrew from the Prosecutor's Drug Task Force. In July 2005, President Chávez accused DEA of spying and said he would ask DEA agents to leave the country. U.S. officials denied the allegation, yet the Venezuelan government suspended official relations with DEA and made it clear it would not resume counternarcotics cooperation with the United States until both countries negotiated and signed an addendum to the 1978 Memorandum of Understanding. These actions led President Bush in September 2005 to designate Venezuela as having "failed demonstrably" during the previous 12 months to make substantial efforts to adhere to their obligations under international counternarcotics agreements and the counternarcotics measures specified

in U.S. law.³¹ Figure 5 illustrates a timeline of significant events affecting U.S.-Venezuelan relations since 2002.

³¹Under Section 706(1) of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2003, the President must submit, by September 15 each year, a report identifying all major illicit drug producing and drug-transit countries, referred to as the Majors List, designating those countries that have “failed demonstrably” during the previous 12 months to make substantial efforts to adhere to their obligations under international counternarcotics agreements and the counternarcotics measures specified in U.S. law, and certifying those who have cooperated. If a country is not certified, most U.S. assistance is cut off unless the President issues a waiver.

Figure 5: Significant Events in U.S.-Venezuelan Counternarcotics Cooperation, 2002 through 2009



Counternarcotics cooperation continued to deteriorate after 2005 as the overall bilateral relationship worsened. For example, although the CIF was nearly completed in 2006, it was never operational.³² In 2006, Venezuela also withdrew its representative from JIATF-South and ended its participation in Operation *Seis Fronteras*. Furthermore, ONA broke off contact with the U.S. Embassy-Caracas/NAS in early 2007.

Despite U.S. efforts to resume negotiations, apply designations, and provide low-level technical assistance, counternarcotics cooperation has continued to decline.

Negotiations

Although the United States did not agree that an addendum to the 1978 Memorandum of Understanding was necessary for continuing counternarcotics cooperation, it nevertheless entered into negotiations with Venezuela. The two governments negotiated an addendum that elaborated on the Venezuelan-United States Commission for Cooperation in the Narcotics Field called for in the memorandum. In particular, the addendum specified the composition and duties of commission members, meeting guidelines, and types of counternarcotics measures the commission may take. The United States has been prepared to sign the addendum since December 2005, but the Venezuelan government has cancelled the signing date twice. Furthermore, the Venezuelan officials who negotiated the addendum have since left their positions, and their successors stated Venezuela will neither sign an agreement nor cooperate with the United States on counternarcotics.

Designations

As required by law, the U.S. government annually publishes several reports in which it designates, or identifies, countries failing to comply with certain international standards governing narcotics trafficking, support for terrorism, and regard for human rights. Designations can be a tool for persuading countries to change their policies and practices, as sanctions often accompany designations. For example, in 2006, State designated Venezuela as a country that had “virtually ceased its cooperation in the

³²According to State, one of their officials attempted to visit the CIF in June 2009 but was denied access by Venezuelan Port Authority officials. They also informed the State official that unknown persons had broken into the CIF and stolen some of the U.S.-owned equipment, including batteries for the forklifts, computers, air conditioners, and some office furniture. Furthermore, they asked that U.S. Embassy officials secure permission from the central government in Caracas before seeking access to the CIF in the future.

global war on terror.”³³ As a result, the U.S. government imposed—as required by law—a military equipment embargo against Venezuela, prohibiting the sale or license of defense articles and services.³⁴ The United States has renewed both the designation and the embargo every year since 2006.

As figure 4 shows, in addition to the annual designation for not cooperating with the United States on antiterrorism efforts, State has also annually designated Venezuela as failing to comply with minimum human trafficking standards since 2003³⁵ and with human rights standards, since at least 2002. Furthermore, every year since 2005, the President has designated Venezuela as a major drug transit country that has “failed demonstrably” to meet its international counternarcotics obligations and responsibilities by taking sufficient action against the rising drug trafficking problem both within and along its borders.

Venezuelan officials have questioned the accuracy of these various reports. In particular, they maintain the narcotics designation is not a technical assessment and that the United States has politicized drug trafficking in Venezuela. In addition, Venezuelan officials said these multiple annual designations hinder not only an improved bilateral relationship with the United States, but also the resumption of counternarcotics cooperation.

Both U.S. and Venezuelan officials pointed out that the sanctions from designations, particularly the embargo on defense articles and services,

³³Section 2656f(a) of Title 22 of the United States Code requires the Secretary of State to provide Congress, by April 30 of each year, a full and complete report on terrorism during the preceding year with regard to those countries and groups meeting criteria set forth in the legislation. Therefore, the *Country Reports on Terrorism* published in April 2006, covered calendar year 2005.

³⁴Section 40A of the Arms Export Control Act requires the President ensure that defense articles and services are not subject to diversion or other misuse of sensitive technology. To that end, no defense article or service may be sold or licensed for export to a foreign country the President determines is not fully cooperating with U.S. antiterrorism efforts.

³⁵State first designated Venezuela as a country with a human trafficking problem in its 2003 *Trafficking in Persons Report*. In its 2004 report, State said the situation had worsened and not only was the Venezuelan government not meeting the minimal standards for the elimination of trafficking, but it was not making any efforts to do so. It remained in this worst category (tier 3) every year until 2008, when State determined Venezuela had shown greater resolve to address trafficking, although no evidence yet existed that it had done so (tier 2 watch list).

hinders Venezuela from cooperating on counternarcotics even if it desired to do so.³⁶ This embargo not only prohibits Venezuela from procuring defense articles and services directly from the United States, but it also prevents Venezuela from buying defense articles from a third country if they have U.S.-origin content. For example, the head of ONA told us Venezuela wanted to buy Super Tucano airplanes from Brazil to intercept suspicious drug trafficking aircraft, but it was unable to do so because the planes contain U.S.-origin parts. Instead, Venezuela is in the process of buying 18 Chinese-made K8 planes.

Dialogue

U.S. officials have unsuccessfully tried to engage the Venezuelan government in dialogue on numerous occasions, even after President Chávez publicly announced to the U.S. ambassador at Venezuela's Independence Day parade in July 2008 that he was willing to discuss renewed cooperation with the United States. According to U.S. embassy officials,

- The first business day after the parade, they contacted the Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to inquire how to proceed. The ministry told them to send a formal request letter, which they did. According to U.S. officials, however, the Venezuelans never responded.
- In mid-July, the U.S. Special Coordinator for Venezuela³⁷ traveled to Venezuela to meet with Venezuelan officials in an attempt to re-start dialogue. The day prior to his trip, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs stated in congressional testimony that Venezuela had “for the first time in many years, expressed a willingness to explore improved relations with the United States...[and] we have told Venezuela that we would like to explore this diplomatic opening.” When the Special Coordinator arrived in Caracas, however, he was told that

³⁶Each year that the President has designated Venezuela as failing to meet its counternarcotics obligations he has waived economic sanctions so that Venezuela may continue to receive U.S. democracy assistance. However, while Venezuela was on the Tier 3 list for trafficking in persons from 2004 to 2007, Venezuela was subject to sanctions withholding certain funding assistance. The President waived some of the sanctions in 2004 for democracy assistance. In 2005, the list of exceptions was expanded to include programs that were for public diplomacy, assisted victims of trafficking, and combated trafficking. The exception list also included regional programs, efforts to improve the legal system, and existing United States obligations to multilateral development banks' initiative to provide basic human needs.

³⁷From 2006 to 2008, the Special Coordinator for Venezuela was a position within State that worked on common areas of interest between the United States and Venezuela.

Venezuelan officials had cancelled all of his appointments. In the end, he was only able to meet with one Venezuelan legislator.

- In August, the Director of ONDCP proposed a trip to discuss resumption of counternarcotics cooperation with President Chávez. Venezuelan officials alerted ONDCP that the proposed dates conflicted with the President's schedule, but that they were evaluating possible alternatives. U.S. officials told us they then contacted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to inquire about the alternative dates but never received a response.
- In September, the U.S.-Venezuela bilateral relationship worsened when President Chávez expelled the U.S. ambassador and recalled the Venezuelan ambassador from Washington, D.C. The U.S. government reciprocated by expelling the Venezuelan ambassador.

Despite the expulsion of the U.S. ambassador, U.S. officials continued to try to engage the Venezuelan government. For example, in a March 2009 meeting with us, the Venezuelan Attorney General expressed interest in sending a Venezuelan delegation to the United States to address U.S. counternarcotics efforts. In response, the U.S. Embassy-Caracas sent a Diplomatic Note³⁸ to the Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs requesting a meeting with the head of ONA to discuss counternarcotics cooperation as well as Venezuelan's interest in sending a delegation to the United States. As of the end of June 2009, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not responded. But, as a possibly positive sign, on June 25, 2009, Venezuela and the United States agreed to return their respective ambassadors to Washington, D.C., and Caracas.

Technical Cooperation

Despite the strained relations, some low-level technical counternarcotics cooperation continues to occur, although this has steadily declined since 2005. According to U.S. officials,

- DEA agents continued to develop leads and gather counternarcotics intelligence that helped Venezuelan officials carry out drug interdiction operations even after formal cooperation with the DEA had ended. DEA officials, however, told us that their ability to assist has deteriorated. They said that they continue to meet informally with the head of ONA, but these meetings are generally to maintain communication rather than discuss substantive cooperation.

³⁸Diplomatic Notes are used as correspondence between the U.S. government and foreign governments to conduct official State business.

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- Venezuela has recently expelled two Colombian drug traffickers directly to the United States, although U.S. officials had not made formal extradition requests. Venezuela has also extradited Colombian drug traffickers to Colombia, knowing that Colombia will, in turn, extradite some of them to the United States.
 - Over the past 5 years, Venezuela has granted the U.S. Coast Guard permission to board eight Venezuelan-flagged ships to search for drugs.³⁹ However, U.S. Coast Guard officials told us Venezuela will take several hours or longer to reply to a U.S. request to board. According to these officials, typically with other countries with similar agreements, if they do not get a response within 2 hours of requesting to board, they will assume the vessel is stateless and board. Nonetheless, Venezuela has not denied any U.S. request to board. Furthermore, U.S. officials told us that with Venezuelan-flagged vessels, the United States returns the ship, drugs, and crew back to Venezuelan authorities. In contrast, U.S. agreements with some other countries allow U.S. officials to provide drug samples or even to bring the seized drugs and individuals to the United States.

The United States has continued to provide some technical assistance through partner nations and UNODC. According to law enforcement officials we met with from three European countries, they, like the United States, continue to share counternarcotics intelligence on suspected drug movements and trafficking. In addition, the United States belongs to an international law enforcement working group on drugs that meets monthly in Caracas. However, the European officials expressed some frustration that the United States does not always attend the meetings. U.S. officials, for their part, told us the meetings were not always productive.

Moreover, the United States supported UNODC training programs for the Venezuelan judiciary. In 2006, for example, NAS funded three UNODC programs—two on money laundering and a third on counternarcotics law enforcement. The Venezuelan government indicated in 2007, however, that it would no longer participate in any programs receiving U.S. funds, although the government held one judicial sector training exercise in 2008 with U.S.-funded UNODC technical support.

³⁹Ship-boarding provisions establish an expedited process for U.S. law enforcement agencies to obtain authorization from the competent authority of a designated country to board and search a vessel flying its flag and suspected of being engaged in illicit traffic outside the territorial waters of any nation.

In addition, the U.S. Embassy-Caracas/NAS⁴⁰ continues to assist a few Venezuelan nongovernmental organizations on demand reduction programs, although ONA suspended the certification of one such U.S.-supported organization in 2008 after the U.S. Ambassador attended the workshop's graduation ceremony, covered by the Venezuelan press. According to U.S. Embassy-Caracas officials, a law pending before the Venezuelan National Assembly could make U.S. support of local nongovernmental organizations more difficult by requiring such assistance to go through the Venezuelan government.

The United States has also provided some limited assistance to municipal authorities. For example, NAS currently supports a police bicycle program in one of Caracas' municipalities. NAS provided 12 bicycles, along with training, which have allowed the police to have increased visibility in their community, resulting in a decreased crime rate, including drug-related violence. Another NAS program provided a municipal police K-9 unit with dogs and drug kits to train the dogs.

Visa Issues Further Complicate Cooperation

As shown in table 2, the number of U.S. embassy personnel in Caracas has declined since 2002 and, according to U.S. officials, counternarcotics cooperation has become more difficult as a result. In late 2007, the Venezuelan government began denying visas for U.S. government officials, particularly for law enforcement personnel. DEA, for example, had its personnel in Caracas reduced from 10 in 2007 to 3 in January 2008, because the Venezuelan government would not approve visas for incoming replacement agents. Two of the current personnel are scheduled to leave in late 2009, and DEA does not know whether any of its agents will be able to stay past January 2010. In addition, at the present time, NAS has no officers in Caracas, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation has only one agent, who is scheduled to leave in August 2009 and he indicated he is unlikely to be replaced.

⁴⁰Although NAS has had no U.S. personnel in Venezuela since mid-2008, two political officers have been serving as acting NAS staff, in addition to carrying out their normal duties.

Table 2: U.S. Counternarcotics, Law Enforcement, and Military Personnel in Caracas

Agency/group	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
DEA	8	8	8	8	10	10	3	3
Federal Bureau of Investigation	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1
NAS ^a	3	3	4	6	4	2	1	0
U.S. Military Group ^b	27	25	22	17	15	13	10	8
Department of Homeland Security	3	5	5	5	7	2	2	1
Totals	43	43	41	38	38	28	17	13

Source: GAO analysis of information from the Departments of State, Justice, Defense, and Homeland Security.

^aNAS personnel numbers from 2004 to 2006 include two Department of Homeland Security officials who worked on NAS programs.

^bU.S. Military Group numbers include personnel from the Defense Attaché Office.

Venezuelan Counternarcotics Efforts

Venezuelan officials said Venezuela does not need U.S. counternarcotics assistance because it conducts its own counternarcotics initiatives. They told us that under the framework of the draft 2008-2013 National Anti-Drug Plan,⁴¹ ONA and other Venezuelan law enforcement agencies have carried out various activities such as cocaine seizures, destruction of clandestine airstrips, and bilateral counternarcotics efforts with non-U.S. partner nations. For example:

- Venezuelan authorities reported that since January 2009, they have destroyed 18 drug labs and seized over 23 metric tons of drugs. U.S. officials, however, question the reliability of such reports. For example, U.S. sources stated and ONA officials confirmed, that Venezuela counts seizures made by third countries among its own seizure data, which artificially inflates Venezuela's seizure statistics. Furthermore, as U.S. officials are not permitted to observe drug destruction in Venezuela, officials we spoke with believe some of the drugs seized may re-enter the drug flow.

⁴¹ONA develops 5-year national plans designed to address demand reduction, supply reduction, international cooperation, and money laundering. President Chávez did not approve Venezuela's national counternarcotics strategy for 2008-2013 until late June 2009, but ONA officials told us in March 2009 that they had already begun to implement it.

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- Venezuela's armed forces have conducted operations to destroy clandestine airstrips used by suspicious aircraft to carry illicit drugs. The government reports destroying 323 of these airstrips in 2008. However, these airstrips are usually dirt, which can be repaired within hours. The head of ONA agreed that some airstrips had been rebuilt.
 - Various Venezuelan sources highlighted the fact that Venezuela has signed bilateral counternarcotics agreements with 37 countries. The European law enforcement officials we spoke with said that their countries cooperate with Venezuela to varying degrees on counternarcotics—sharing intelligence and conducting interdiction operations. Nevertheless, the European officials also expressed some frustration with the level of cooperation they receive from Venezuela. They told us the frequent turnover of Venezuelan government officials, for example, makes establishing working relationships difficult.

Although Venezuelan officials said Venezuela remains active in the global fight against drugs without U.S. assistance, some officials indicated a willingness to pursue greater technical cooperation.

- When we met with the Venezuelan Attorney General, she told us that the United States has not provided reciprocal assistance on a number of counternarcotics cases. While a U.S. Justice official acknowledged that little cooperation exists between the two offices, he told us that the Venezuelan requests to share evidence are often voluminous and difficult to respond to. Nevertheless, the Attorney General expressed her desire for greater exchange of information and cooperation on counternarcotics prosecutions, including meeting with her counterpart in the United States.
- In addition, the head of ONA told us that he would be willing to pursue greater technical cooperation with the United States if President Chávez were to allow it. He said such cooperation could include establishing working groups to address projects that were left pending in 2005 as well as making the U.S.-funded CIF in Puerto Cabello operational. He told us that he had sent a memo to President Chávez at the beginning of 2009 requesting permission to use the CIF.⁴² At the time of our meeting with him in March, he had not received a response.

⁴²We asked for a copy of the memo provided to President Chávez. Although the head of ONA agreed to provide it, we have not received it.

Additionally, at the Summit of the Americas in April 2009, Presidents Obama and Chávez shook hands and greeted each other. Later, during the 3-day summit, President Chávez announced he was considering sending an ambassador to the United States. Furthermore, a few days after the summit, the U.S. Chargé d’Affaires in Caracas met with the Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he brought up the Diplomatic Note sent in March in which he offered to meet with ONA to discuss counternarcotics cooperation and the possibility of a Venezuelan visit to the United States. To date, Venezuelan officials have not arranged for such a meeting. However, as we previously noted, on June 25, 2009, the U.S. and Venezuelan governments agreed to reinstate the expelled ambassadors and resume full diplomatic representation.

Finally, various U.S. sources have stated that the U.S. government is prepared to act on any of several counternarcotics initiatives the Venezuelans may be interested in pursuing, including signing the addendum to the 1978 Memorandum of Understanding, meeting with Venezuelan officials to discuss areas for greater cooperation, and working to make the CIF operational.

Concluding Observations

While Venezuela has its own counternarcotics initiatives and says it does not need U.S. assistance, available data indicate that drug trafficking through Venezuela is increasing. At a minimum, the lack of Venezuelan counternarcotics cooperation with the United States is a significant impediment to the U.S. capacity to interdict drugs en route to the United States. Moreover, if illegal armed groups continue to find safe haven in Venezuela and receive support from Venezuela, the permissive atmosphere and lack of cooperation will likely adversely affect the security gains made in Colombia since 2000. However, as Venezuelan officials have repeatedly stated, Venezuela is caught between the world’s largest producer of cocaine—Colombia—and largest consumer of cocaine—the United States. Nevertheless, absent greater initiative by the Venezuelan government to resume counternarcotics cooperation with the United States, U.S. efforts to address the increasing flow of cocaine through Venezuela will continue to be problematic.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Departments of Defense, Justice, State, and the Treasury; and ONDCP for their comments. None provided formal comments on the draft. However, DOD, Justice, State, and ONDCP provided technical comments, which we have incorporated where appropriate.

We will provide copies of this report to other interested congressional committees; the Secretaries of Defense, State, and the Treasury; the Attorney General; and the Director of ONDCP. In addition, this report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (202) 512-4268 or fordj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess T. Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J" and a distinct "T" and "F".

Jess T. Ford, Director
International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

To address the nature and extent of cocaine trafficking through Venezuela, we obtained information on drug trafficking routes and methods from officials at the U.S. Southern Command's Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South) in Key West, Florida. We obtained information from the Department of State's (State) Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), the Department of Justice's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency's Crime and Narcotics Center, and the Department of the Treasury. We also reviewed the *National Drug Control Strategy* reports for 2008 and 2009 and met with officials from the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and reviewed various U.S. government counternarcotics assessments, briefings, reports, and other documents regarding cocaine flow through Venezuela. To identify trends in cocaine flowing from Venezuela, we reviewed *Interagency Assessment on Cocaine Movement* (IACM) reports from 2002 through mid-year 2008. The IACM draws upon other studies to estimate how much cocaine is produced and available for export to the United States (supply), and how much cocaine is used in the United States and elsewhere (demand). Some IACM data is derived from an interagency consolidated counterdrug database. The IACM uses a range of cocaine amounts—from highly certain to less certain—to estimate the cocaine flow to the United States. For 2007, the IACM reported a range of 71 metric tons to 250 metric tons cocaine transiting Venezuela. While the IACM reported 250 metric tons as the most likely estimate of cocaine transiting Venezuela, the estimate included about 80 metric tons of cocaine that were not documented. While the IACM data have limitations, due in part to the illegal nature of the drug trade and the time lag inherent in collecting meaningful data, we determined that these data were sufficiently reliable to provide an overall indication of the nature and extent of cocaine transiting Venezuela.

To determine what is known about Venezuelan support for Colombian illegal armed groups and the effect of such support on security gains made in Colombia, we reviewed prior GAO reports and State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports* (INCSR) for 1996 through 2009. To update this information, we traveled to Bogotá, Colombia, to discuss Venezuelan border issues, including security and drugs and arms trafficking. We met with Colombian government officials within the Ministry of Defense, Air Force, and National Police. At the U.S. Embassy-Bogotá, we obtained information from U.S. officials in the Narcotics Affairs Section, the Economic Section, the Military Group, and DEA. We also met with the U.S. Ambassador to Colombia who had previously served as U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela. In addition, we met with representatives in the regional office of the United Nations Office on

Drugs and Crime. To help gain a measure of corruption in Venezuela, we used Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, which is based on the results of surveys of business people and citizens, and analysis by country experts.¹ In prior GAO reports, we determined that Transparency International's data were sufficiently reliable to provide a broad gauge of corruption within a country.²

To determine the status of U.S.-Venezuelan counternarcotics cooperation since 2002, we reviewed State's INCSRs and end use monitoring reports and its *Country Reports on Terrorism, Trafficking in Persons* reports, and *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* covering calendar years 2002 through 2008. We also reviewed final reports and work plans from DEA. We met with U.S. and Venezuelan officials in Washington, D.C., and Caracas, Venezuela. In Washington, D.C., we met with U.S. officials from ONDCP, State, and DEA; and Venezuelan Embassy officials. In Caracas, Venezuela, we met with U.S. officials from State, DEA, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Military Group. We also met with Venezuelan government officials, including the former Ambassador to the United States, the Attorney General, and the current and a former head of Venezuela's National Anti-Drug Office. In addition, we met with law enforcement representatives from three European countries to discuss the types of counternarcotics efforts they have with Venezuela, and several Venezuelan nongovernmental organization representatives. For our analysis of U.S.-supported counternarcotics activities in Venezuela and U.S. Embassy-Caracas staffing, we relied on U.S. Embassy-provided information.

- For U.S. counternarcotics activities, we did not include an activity in any given year if the United States supported the activity for less than 3 months of that year.
- For embassy staffing for U.S. counternarcotics, law enforcement, and military personnel, we included U.S. direct hires, excluding any administrative support personnel. We followed up with each agency to ensure that the data were complete, consistent, and accurate. We did not

¹The index ranks countries by the degree of corruption perceived to exist in countries around the world rather than by actual corruption which is difficult to measure.

²GAO, *Drug Control: Cooperation with Many Major Drug Transit Countries Has Improved, but Better Performance Reporting and Sustainability Plans Are Needed*, [GAO-08-784](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 15, 2008).

include any staff who had not been at post for at least 3 months of that year.

Finally, despite Venezuelan officials' assurances to provide us documentation requested during our visit, we did not receive a listing of ongoing legal cases between Venezuela and the United States, data on Venezuela's drug seizures over the last 5 years, and information regarding the Venezuelan government's plans to use the U.S.-funded container inspection facility at Puerto Cabello.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Jess T. Ford, (202) 512-4268 or fordj@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual named above, Albert H. Huntington, III, Assistant Director; Beth Hoffman León; and Judith Williams made key contributions to this report. Joseph Carney, Martin De Alteriis, Mark Dowling, and Etana Finkler also provided technical assistance.

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