

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR CHARLES E. GRASSLEY
SENATE CAUCUS ON INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL
“US-Caribbean Security Cooperation”
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Madam Chairman, thank you for holding today's hearing. Although drug trafficking and related violence in the Caribbean have been eclipsed in recent years by events in Mexico and Central America, they still have a significant impact on our national security and on the lives of the people in the region. Today's hearing affords us the opportunity to learn more about current efforts in the Caribbean by the United States and our friends and allies in the region to resist an upswing in trafficking and violence there.

Our hearing today is a bit of a departure from our regular hearings where we usually call witnesses from the Executive Branch. Instead, we have a distinguished panel made up of Ambassadors from the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica. I welcome all of you here today and thank you for coming to discuss this important issue and how it is impacting each of your countries.

The Caribbean is made up of fifteen separate nations, but they all share concerns about drug crime and violence. Although the region is no longer the main transit point for the narcotics traffickers looking to move their product to the U.S., the high rates of crime in the region are still directly linked to drug trafficking.

Not long ago the Caribbean was the main corridor for moving illegal drugs from South America to the United States. The U.S. Government once estimated that forty percent of South American cocaine made its way to the United States through the Caribbean. That figure has now dropped to just

five percent. Today, most of the cocaine that flows into the United States comes through Central America and Mexico.

Nevertheless, we must still pay close attention to events in the Caribbean. Drug trafficking organizations are very adept at shifting their operations and trafficking routes to the paths of least resistance. When we cracked down on the drug traffickers in Mexico, they increased their presence farther south in the countries of Central America. Now, as we help Central America strengthen their counternarcotics efforts, we must ensure that we don't simply squeeze the balloon in Central American shifting drug trafficking operations back into the Caribbean.

Since the early 1980's, the United States has provided significant support for security and counternarcotics programs in the region. Operation Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, referred to as OPBAT [Op-Bat], provides air and maritime assets to help patrol the region's thousands of square miles of ocean. Operation Enduring Friendship provides assistance to improve port and airport security, and strengthen immigration controls.

Most recently, the Obama Administration established the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative as a way to maximize the limited resources available to get a handle on the security problems. Over the past two years, the United States has provided nearly \$140 million for the region through this initiative.

As part of this initiative, the participating Caribbean countries have agreed to work together to strengthen three areas of concern: narcotics trafficking; public security; and social justice. I am interested to hear about how these programs have affected the region from our witnesses.

Another area of significant concern to me is the roll Venezuela is playing in the drug trade. We continue to hear about how Venezuela has become a transshipment point for cocaine coming out of South America. Increasingly, traffickers use both go-fast boats and small planes to move the drugs from Venezuela to various points in Central America and the Caribbean. From there, the drugs make their way to both the United States and Europe.

The use of Venezuela as a transshipment point for illegal drugs is a very worrisome national security issue. It impacts all of our countries in the Western Hemisphere. We need to better understand this threat, determine whether the government of Venezuela is complicit with the drug traffickers, and what can be done to stop the drug shipments. I am very concerned about this development and would like to hear about any known links between drug traffickers in your countries and shipments from Venezuela.

This issue is particularly important because of the growing ties between Iran and Venezuela. Just yesterday, the Director of National Intelligence testified about Iran's desire to attack the United States on our own soil, as demonstrated by the recently uncovered plot to target the Saudi Ambassador to the United States in a bomb attack on a Georgetown restaurant, just a few miles from where we're now sitting. And we know that the Iranian-sponsored terrorist group Hezbollah is increasing its presence in South America.

Given the known drug transit routes from Venezuela to the Caribbean and Central America, we need to ensure that the growing ties between Venezuela and Iran do not lead to these routes being utilized to move

weapons or terrorists as well. More simply put, Venezuela's involvement in regional drug trafficking, and their ties to a state sponsor of terrorism, threaten to destabilize other nations in the region, including the Caribbean, and should be taken seriously.

Again, I thank the witnesses for being here today and I look forward to hearing their testimony. I want to ask them some questions about other changes in the region and ways we can continue our efforts to attack this multi-faceted problem. Thank you.