

**Opening Statement
Chairman Eliot L. Engel**

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Assessing U.S. Drug Policy in the Americas

Thursday, October 15, 2009

Report after report over the past year has come to the same conclusion: U.S. counternarcotics efforts are not giving us the results we want to see. Whether it be the Brookings Institution, the International Crisis Group or the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy chaired by three former Latin American presidents, the general conclusion is the same: it is time to reassess our counternarcotics efforts and construct a new strategy. Even Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said in March that, “Clearly, what we’ve been doing has not worked.”

While billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars have been spent over the years to fight the drug war in Latin America and the Caribbean, the positive results are unfortunately few and far between.

For far too long, our country has been overly focused on the supply side of the drug trade, while paying far too little attention to what happens here at home. I am shocked that while the United States accounts for approximately 5 percent of world population, in 2007, an estimated 17 percent of the world’s users of illegal drugs were from the United States.

I am pleased that President Obama and Secretary Clinton have quickly taken leadership in asserting that the United States must do more to reduce our demand for illegal drugs. On her first visit to Mexico as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton said that “our insatiable demand for illegal drugs fuels the drug trade.” Similarly, when Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske accepted President Obama’s nomination to be our drug czar, he noted that the “success of our efforts to reduce the flow of drugs is largely dependent on our ability to reduce demand for them.” These statements are a breath of fresh air. I look forward to working with the Obama Administration to build a more balanced strategy that increases our investment in domestic prevention and treatment programs.

But, let me be clear: a reassessment of U.S. drug policy certainly should not mean a rejection of our existing programs which seek to curtail the supply of illicit narcotics. On the contrary, we must continue to support our friends in the Americas as they combat drug cartels in their own countries. **But**, we must do so with clearer goals in mind and in a more holistic and better coordinated manner.

As you all know, there are several pieces to the U.S. counternarcotics strategy in the region: the Andean Counternarcotics Initiative (mostly focused on Colombia, but also in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador); the Merida Initiative (with its main focus in Mexico, but also in Central America); and the recently proposed Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI).

There are many excellent components to each of these programs, and I have been a strong supporter of these efforts. **But**, for far too long, we have overly focused our counternarcotics efforts on one specific country or subregion only to see the drug trade quickly move to the next place in the hemisphere. For example, as President Calderón bravely combats drug traffickers in Mexico, the drug trade has slammed Guatemala – a country with weaker institutions than its neighbor to the north and a lower capacity to combat violent drug cartels.

If we want to see real results on the counternarcotics front and greater security here in our own neighborhood, we must move away from the current piecemeal approach to counternarcotics and embrace a more holistic strategy. I urge the Obama Administration to work with our partners in the hemisphere to develop a counternarcotics strategy that can withstand the so-called “balloon effect” that results from pressure in one region causing the drug trade to move to another region. This can only be done through a better coordinated, more holistic counternarcotics strategy.

To this day, I cannot figure out who at the State Department is overseeing our counternarcotics efforts in the Western Hemisphere. Different people seem to be running the Andean programs and the Merida Initiative. And, I have no idea how the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative will fit in to these operations or who will manage its integration into existing efforts. I, therefore, call for an executive branch coordinator at the State Department to oversee and manage our counternarcotics programs in the Americas.

40 years ago, in July 1969, President Richard Nixon identified drug abuse as a “serious national threat.” Two years after that, President Nixon declared a “war on drugs,” identifying drug abuse as “public enemy number one.” Unfortunately, four decades later, rather than being able to recount our successes, we find ourselves asking what went wrong. We cannot hesitate in reassessing US drug supply and demand policies, so that our children are not having this same discussion 40 years from now.

Thank you. I am now pleased to call on Ranking Member Mack for his opening statement.