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## Venezuela's Efforts Against Drug Trafficking

Based on its proximity to Colombia, the source of almost 90 percent of cocaine entering the United States<sup>1</sup>, Venezuela has been used by smugglers as a transit point for drugs originating in Colombia and destined for Europe and the United States. This geographic position alone behooves the government of Venezuela to be pro-active in the fight against drug trafficking, an initiative that wasn't taken seriously under past administrations. Unfortunately, Washington continues to diminish Venezuela's efforts at combatting narco-trafficking and has even put up roadblocks to its advancement.

### 2007 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)

On March 1, 2007, the U.S. Department of State released its 24th International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) that presumes to rate the efforts of countries in the areas of international drug trade, chemical control, money laundering and financial crimes.<sup>2</sup> This report makes a number of misleading accusations against Venezuela and omits a significant number of achievements including high level international cooperation that Venezuela has embarked upon in recent years.

The report comes almost two years after Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez announced that Venezuela would suspend its cooperation with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). On August 8, 2005 he stated, "The DEA was using the fight against drug trafficking as a mask, to support drug trafficking and to carry out intelligence in Venezuela against the government... We have detected intelligence infiltration that threatened national security and defense. Under those circumstances we decided to make a clean break with those accords."<sup>3</sup>

### Venezuela's International Cooperation

Within this context, the State Department issued its 2007 INCSR in early March condemning Venezuela for a "lack of international counternarcotics cooperation".<sup>4</sup> A quick review of the facts however, clearly shows that the Venezuelan government has a long history of cooperating with foreign governments and international organizations to combat narco-trafficking and terrorism.

In November 2001, Venezuela's drug czar was elected to a one-year term as president of the Organization of American States' Commission for Drug Abuse Control (CICAD) and participated in hemispheric efforts to develop its Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism (MEM) to improve

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State's 2007 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2007/vol1/html/80855.htm>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State's 2007 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2007/>

<sup>3</sup> "Venezuela Leader Accuses DEA of Espionage", AP, August 07, 2005

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State's 2007 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2007/vol1/html/80855.htm>

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counternarcotics cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Later, in November of 2005, Venezuela hosted the First International Assembly of Observatories of Drugs with the participation of over forty countries. During this three-day conference, experts shared their methodology and technical expertise in combatting narco-trafficking.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, according to the State Department's own 2003 report<sup>7</sup>, Venezuela has signed or is a party to the following international agreements:

- 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs
- 1971 UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances
- 1972 Protocol Amending the Single Convention
- 1988 UN Drug Convention
- UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
- Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons
- Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants
- Inter-American Convention Against Corruption

Venezuela has also signed a number of important bilateral agreements with the U.S., including a ship-boarding agreement from 1991 (updated with a new protocol in 1997), a Memorandum of Understanding concerning cooperation in narcotics, and a customs mutual assistance agreement.<sup>8</sup> Venezuela is a party to numerous bilateral and multilateral narcotics control agreements, including bilateral agreements with 15 other Latin American and Caribbean nations, as well as one Asian and three European countries.

### **Cooperation between Colombia and Venezuela**

Counter to the State Department's assertion that Venezuelan "arrests are limited to low-level actors" in September of 2006 the Venezuelan government captured Colombia's second most wanted narco-trafficker, Farid Feris Domínguez, and immediately handed him over to Colombian officials.<sup>9</sup> In part this was due to the increase in cooperation between Venezuela and Colombia in the areas of counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism. In 2005 Colombia and Venezuela signed a pact pledging to create greater cooperation between the two countries' authorities and to develop more effective enforcement mechanisms to combat drug trafficking. Since then Venezuela has caught and turned over many suspects to Colombian authorities, including the well known FARC rebel leader Gentil Alvis Patino.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, both countries have developed a joint operation of manual eradication of coca, poppy, and marijuana crops in the Perija Mountains along the Colombian-Venezuelan border. This plan, known as Operation Sierra, which the United Nations and the Organization of American States also contributed to, resulted in the eradication of 110 hectares of poppy, 80 hectares of coca plants and 15 hectares of marijuana. 18 laboratories of coca based paste and 11 rural camps in which the supplies for the primary processing of the coca leaves were stored have been completely destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 2002 International Narcotic Control Strategy Country Report, <http://caracas.usembassy.gov/www1695.html>

<sup>6</sup> "Comienzo I Encuentro Internacional de Observadores de Droga"

<http://www.rnv.gov.ve/noticias/index.php?act=ST&f=2&t=26650&hl=operacion+sierra&s=b96df712e38b8c09b6fc2d1dd3a6d23f>

<sup>7</sup> 2003 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, <http://caracas.usembassy.gov/www2135.html>

<sup>8</sup> 2002 International Narcotic Control Strategy Country Report, <http://caracas.usembassy.gov/www1695.html>

<sup>9</sup> "En 24 horas, Farid Domínguez fue atrapado y deportado", El Universal, September 24, 2006

<sup>10</sup> "En 24 horas, Farid Domínguez fue atrapado y deportado", El Universal, September 24, 2006

<sup>11</sup> Plan Sierra 2005 Erradica 215 hectarias de Drogas, [http://www.ona.gob.ve/Noticias/09112005\\_1.htm](http://www.ona.gob.ve/Noticias/09112005_1.htm)

More recently in December 2006, Venezuela acquired new radar systems, enabling an increase in patrols and the beefing up of its monitoring along the 1400-mile Venezuelan-Colombian border. These new radar systems also fill the gap in coastal surveillance that resulted when the United States discontinued renting its radar equipment to Venezuela in 2004.<sup>12</sup>

## **Cooperation between the European Union and Venezuela**

The European Union has entered into two agreements with Venezuela<sup>13</sup>. The scope of these agreements range from suppression of trafficking and demand reduction to specific controls on money laundering and precursor chemicals.<sup>14</sup> In fact, in May 2006 Venezuela's main opposition newspaper, *El Universal*, highlighted the cooperation between Venezuela and European authorities when detaining a Venezuelan ship containing drugs:

*"A joint operation between the Venezuelan National Guard and the Spanish and French militaries led to the May 23 interdiction of a Venezuelan ship carrying more than two tons of cocaine. The operation took place in international waters off the African coast...According to information provided, the ship departed from Sucre state and was interdicted at sea after Venezuelan authorities communicated intelligence on the cargo to French and Spanish authorities, which allowed the operation to proceed. The ship was intercepted 300 nautical miles from the coast of Cape Verde on the African continent. ... Venezuelan authorities have detained 624 people for drug trafficking in 2006. Additionally, they have confiscated more than 18 tons of a variety of illegal drugs, a number that represents an increase of 34 percent from 2005."*<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Venezuela has signed an accord with France and Spain to process satellite images that detect illegal airstrips and airplanes carrying drugs<sup>16</sup> and Venezuelan drug enforcement officials are currently being trained by the French government in airport drug interception methods.<sup>17</sup> An anti-drug agreement with Germany is also in the works.<sup>18</sup>

## **U.S. Arms Embargo on Venezuela**

On May 15, 2006 the U.S. State Department decided to restrict the sale of weapons to Venezuela while continuing to accuse Venezuela of "backsliding in the global war on drugs".<sup>19</sup> By imposing an arms embargo which blocks the acquisition of military equipment and parts, the United States has refused to recognize the right of Venezuela to obtain necessary systems of defense and internal patrol, many of which are crucial in the fights against drug-trafficking.

Moreover, the U.S. has actively interfered with Venezuela's right to purchase military equipment from other countries by blocking the sale of Spanish patrol boats as well as Brazilian aircraft to

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<sup>12</sup> "New radars in anti-drug efforts", *El Universal*, December 15, 2006

<sup>13</sup> "Agreement between the European Community and the Republic of Venezuela on precursors and chemical substances frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances"

[http://europa.eu.int/smartapi/cgi/sga\\_doc?smartapi!celexapi!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=EN&numdoc=21995A1230\(14\)&model=guichett](http://europa.eu.int/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexapi!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=EN&numdoc=21995A1230(14)&model=guichett)

<sup>14</sup> 2003 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, <http://caracas.usembassy.gov/www2135.html>

<sup>15</sup> "Venezuelan Ship Detained With Drugs in Cape Verde." *El Universal*, May 26, 2006

<sup>16</sup> Website of Venezuela's National Office of Anti-Drugs, [http://www.ona.gob.ve/Noticias\\_2006.htm](http://www.ona.gob.ve/Noticias_2006.htm)

<sup>17</sup> Embajada de Francia y ONA dictan seminario en trafico aereo de drogas [http://www.ona.gob.ve/Noticias/05032007\\_1.htm](http://www.ona.gob.ve/Noticias/05032007_1.htm)

<sup>18</sup> "Venezuela Says US Accord Not needed." *Reuters* <http://www.reuters.com/article/politicsNews/idUSN0316329620070303>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-0703020106mar02,1,217239.story?coll=chi-newsnationworld-hed>

Venezuela in recent years. In the case of the Brazilian aircraft, the president of the Brazilian Aeronautics Company (Embraer), Mauricio Botelho, stated that “The plane we are talking about is not an attack plane. Its purpose is law enforcement in missions directed against drug and arms trafficking.”<sup>20</sup> The Brazilian Minister of Foreign Relations, Celso Amorim, also remarked that Brazil was not in agreement with the US position.<sup>21</sup> Along those same lines, the President of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, even defended the sale of planes and boats to Venezuela and characterized them as helpful to the war on drugs, “The sale of aircraft and ships has the objective of patrolling the coasts..., controlling the sea borders,... against narco-trafficking... and in no way does it have any offensive nature.”<sup>22</sup> The arms embargo does not allow any company utilizing U.S. parts to sell equipment to Venezuela. Currently, of all the nations with whom the U.S. has imposed an arms ban, Venezuela is the only one that has not been designated by the U.S. Department of State as a state sponsor of terrorism.

## **Venezuela’s Advances in Counter-Narcotics Operations**

Despite these roadblocks, Venezuela is beefing up its efforts to combat drugs domestically and has recently passed new legislation that sends a clear message to those involved in the illegal narcotics trade. In 2005, the Organic Law Against Illicit Traffic and Consumption of drugs and Psychotropic Substances was passed as well as the Organic Law Against Organized Crime. These laws stipulate that those who perform human and/or drug trafficking and harbor drugs and illegal chemical substances will be subject to six to eight years in prison. The punishment will be increased if the offender is a government official, a member of the National Guard, a judicial authority, or anyone who impersonates such individuals.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in January 2006, Venezuela made a very significant advancement by transforming the National Commission Against Illegal Drug Use (CONACUID) into the National Office of Anti-Drugs (ONA), handing over the financial, administrative, and functional autonomy to the institution that would now implement public policies and strategies of the State against the production, trafficking, money laundering and consumption of illicit drugs.<sup>24</sup>

Some of Venezuela’s most recent achievements are highlighted below:

- According to ONA, 43.2 tons of drugs were seized in Venezuela in 2004, the last full year of cooperation with the DEA. In 2005, 77 tons of drugs were seized by Venezuelan authorities; moreover, 2005 witnessed an increase in the seizures of “ecstasy” at the Simon Bolivar International Airport of Maiquetia in the State of Vargas and the Santiago Marino International Airport of the State of Nueva Esparta, totaling 79,260 pills. In 2006 60.3 tons of drugs were captured.<sup>25</sup>
- In March 2006 Venezuelan authorities used GPS systems to discover two clandestine runways that were used for narco-trafficking in the states of Bolivar and Sucre. Both runways operated between Venezuela, Colombia and the Caribbean Sea and were used to store drugs<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> “Embraer comments on impasse blocking sale of airplanes to Venezuela” [Agencia Brasil](#) 23 January, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Agence France Press, <http://www.rnv.gov.ve/noticias/index.php?act=ST&f=2&t=15423>, March 29, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> “Official Gazette No. 38.287”, Caracas, October 5, 2005 & “Official Gazette No. 38.281”, Caracas, September 27, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Website of Venezuela’s National Office of Anti-Drugs, <http://www.ona.gob.ve/ONA/Antecedentes.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Website of Venezuela’s National Office of Anti-Drugs, <http://www.ona.gob.ve/Estadisticas.htm>

<sup>26</sup> Venezuelan Ministry of Interior and Justice, [http://www.mij.gov.ve/article.php3?id\\_article=510](http://www.mij.gov.ve/article.php3?id_article=510).

- Currently (March 2007), Venezuela's Integrated National Service for Customs and Tax Administration (SENIAT), is installing unobtrusive X-ray machines at ports, making it possible to examine an entire container for drugs. This was already being done with imports, but now enforcement agents can apply the practice to exports as well. Right now, the ONA is doing a feasibility study for the creation of a Special Anti-Drug Task Force that would operate in the states bordering Colombia.<sup>27</sup>

Statistics on confiscations in Venezuela are public and are available at the website of the National Office on Anti-Drugs [www.ona.gob.ve](http://www.ona.gob.ve)

### **Findings of the Report: Politics over Evidence**

The 2007 INCSR finds particular fault with the narco-trafficking enforcement of Venezuela and Bolivia, two countries whose political and economic agendas are at odds with the Bush Administration's goals in the region, while praising the efforts of close U.S. allies Mexico and Colombia. The praise for Colombia's drug enforcement seems especially questionable given that Colombia is the world's primary producer of cocaine and South America's top producer of heroin<sup>28</sup> in spite of the \$4.7 billion that the U.S. has spent in anti-drug efforts in Colombia since 2000.<sup>29</sup> In fact, cocaine production in Colombia is on the rise.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, a recent political scandal in Colombia has linked high-level government officials to paramilitary groups known for their involvement in drug trafficking.<sup>31</sup> This raises serious questions about the credibility of the U.S. State Department's report and whether its findings are political rather than objective and informational.

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<sup>27</sup> "No es necesario firmar un acuerdo antidrogas con EEUU", El Universal, March 3, 2007

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of State's 2007 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2007/vol1/html/80855.htm>

<sup>29</sup> "Rethinking Plan Colombia: some ways to fix it", Christian Science Monitor, September 29, 2006

<sup>30</sup> "Coca Production Up besides Record Eradication." AP. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13445739/>

<sup>31</sup> "Colombia political scandal imperiling US ties", Boston Globe, February 25, 2007