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The GAO Report on U.S.-Venezuela Drug Cooperation: Revisiting the Bush Policy of Politicization

On Monday, July 21, 2009 the U.S. Office of the Comptroller General Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report commissioned by the ranking minority member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Republican Senator Richard Lugar.

Specifically, the report was “to determine 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. counternarcotics cooperation since 2002.”

The GAO is considered an independent office that works for the United States Congress. This report however, is quite the opposite, and resembles something out of the political playbook of the hostile George W. Bush administration.

Some of the most egregious inaccuracies are below along with some facts.

Myth: This report shows that the amount of drugs transiting through Venezuela has increased in the last few years and is largely a result of Venezuela’s inability to fight drugs and cooperate with other nations.

Fact: It is true that drugs passing through Venezuela have increased. Venezuelan officials have repeatedly acknowledged this and explained that their location between the region’s number one producer (Colombia) and the world’s number one consumer (the United States) of cocaine makes for a dangerous situation in terms of narco-trafficking. It is not true however, that Venezuela has lacked the ability to carry out counter-narcotics operations or to cooperate with other nations on this important issue.

In fact, Venezuela has demonstrated its clear intention to dismantle drug operations and work together with all interested parties, as long as they respect Venezuelan sovereignty. This is demonstrated most obviously by the 20 extradition orders, this year alone, that Venezuela has honored with Colombia, the United States and other countries.ⁱ

Venezuela has also had successful counter-narcotic partnerships with 37 countries, among them members of the European Union, and has increased its own activities in the fight against drugs. United Nations figures show that Venezuela has the second highest cocaine seizure rates in South America.ⁱⁱ Moreover, as the GAO itself points out, Venezuela has shown an increase in the destruction of drug laboratories, drug seizures, and the destruction of clandestine airstrips.

On many occasions, Venezuela has also tried to work with the U.S., as was the case last year when the two nations were on the verge of reestablishing cooperation, thanks in large part to the initiative of U.S.

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congressmen. Unfortunately, at the very moment that these talks were taking place, the U.S. Drug Czar publicly attacked Venezuela, halting any possible rapprochement on the issue.

Myth: Venezuelan interdiction efforts have drastically fallen since U.S. drug officials (DEA) were asked to leave the country for spying in 2005, and the bulk of Venezuela-U.S. drug cooperation came to a close.

Fact: False. The GAO report, based on a flawed methodology, relies on no new research and primarily on sources from the Executive branch previously released under the openly hostile administration of George W. Bush. The few times that alternative sources are mentioned such as the United Nations, their statistics and findings are not actually included as part of the data in the report.

According to the United Nations, Venezuela holds the world's 4th highest interdiction rateⁱⁱⁱ and the GAO itself notes that Venezuela intercepts about 29% of the drugs (mostly cocaine) passing through its territory.^{iv} According to US government statistics, the United States intercepts roughly the same amount of cocaine in its own territory.

Moreover, in UNODC's 2008 World Report on Drug Seizures, it notes that during the last two years of Venezuela's cooperative agreement with the US on drugs, between 2003 and 2004, a total of 63,498.32 kg of cocaine were seized in Venezuela. In the two year period directly following that, beginning in 2005 when Venezuela asked the DEA to leave the country and chose not to renew a variety of joint cooperation programs, statistics show that Venezuelan cocaine seizures actually increased by 35%.^v

Myth: The Venezuelan government has extended a "lifeline" to Colombian illegal armed groups and provided them with support and safe haven along the Colombian border.

Fact: The statements cited to back these incendiary claims up come from U.S. officials under the Bush administration and Colombian officials that both have a political interest in linking the government of Venezuela with the FARC. Moreover, the "primary sources" of evidence for these claims, as defined by the GAO, come from the infamous computer laptops "captured" by the Colombian National Army in March of 2008. The problem of course, is that the GAO regurgitates the highly politicized statements made by the Colombian government as if they are fact, when in all actuality the contents of the laptops were never authenticated by any independent party.

Interpol said as much during their investigation of the events when they stated that they had never analyzed "the content of documents, folders or other material on the eight seized FARC computer exhibits. The accuracy and source of the user files contained in the eight seized FARC computer exhibits are and always have been outside the scope of Interpol's computer forensic examination."^{vi} Therefore, the claims made as to what exists on these files are left solely up to the Colombian government to decide.

Myth: Corruption linked to drug-trafficking is rampant at the highest levels of the Venezuelan government, including the ministerial level.

Fact: Corruption is still a problem in Venezuela, as in many developing nations throughout the world. However, using outdated and politicized US government reports to reiterate this claim provides no real sense of the situation and is just poor investigation. Moreover, the only other sources referred to are entities that are openly hostile to the government of Venezuela such as Transparency International who ranks Colombia, where more than 60 legislators have been labeled official suspects in that country's para-politics scandal, as less corrupt than Venezuela. Finally, given the Colombian government's relationship with the FARC, whom

they consider a domestic terrorist group, the alleged testimony extracted from FARC prisoners during closed interrogation sessions should at a minimum be looked upon with some measure of doubt.

Conclusion

This report was leaked to the press before its formal publication, in an obvious attempt by certain right wing sectors of the previous administration, to set the parameters of the debate before Venezuela had the opportunity to review it. According to the Venezuelan embassy, the GAO was made aware of the situation but still refused Venezuela the right to access the report before its official release date set for Monday, July 20th.

Although the GAO did not make any official recommendations, after receiving the report, Republican Senator Lugar stated that the findings reflect "corruption in that country's government" and "require at a minimum a comprehensive review of U.S. policy towards Venezuela."^{vii}

The government of George W. Bush politicized all possible areas of cooperation between Venezuela and the United States. As the Financial Times points out, while paraphrasing Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez, "the main sources for the study – which describes corruption at the highest levels of government as well as being widespread in the national guard – were from within the former US administration, which enjoyed notoriously poor relations with Mr. Chávez and even backed a failed coup against him in 2002."^{viii}

By using a mediocre methodology that relies solely on old information and lacks a variety of credible sources, the GAO has does nothing but replicate this politicized modus operandi. It is unfortunate that during a time when many saw improved relations between the Chavez and Obama administrations within reach, the GAO has allowed itself to be used to put forward a poor report that will only serve to sow more seeds of mistrust.

ⁱ Jones, Rachel. "Venezuela to Deport Top Italian Mafia Suspect." Associated Press, June 23, 2009.

ⁱⁱ "Venezuela Has Second Highest Number of Cocaine Seizures in South America." Embassy of Venezuela in the United States, July 16, 2009. <http://www.embavenez-us.org/news.php?nid=5116>

ⁱⁱⁱ 2008 World Drug Report, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2008/SEIZURE_Tables.pdf

^{iv} US GAO Report "Drug Control: U.S. Counternarcotics Cooperation with Venezuela Has Declined," Government Accountability Office (GAO), July 20, 2009. <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-806>

^v 2008 World Drug Report, p.25, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2008/SEIZURE_Tables.pdf

^{vi} "INTERPOL's Forensic Report on FARC computers and hardware seized by Colombia," Press Statement by Ronald K. Noble, Interpol Secretary General, May 15, 2008. <http://www.interpol.int/Public/ICPO/speeches/2008/SGbogota20080516.asp>

^{vii} Chris Kraul, "Venezuela's anti-drug efforts fall short, U.S. says" Los Angeles Times, July 21, 2009. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-venez-drugs21-2009jul21.0.3075773.story>

^{viii} MANDER, BENEDICT. "VENEZUELA SLAMS US REPORT ON DRUGS", LOS ANGELES TIMES, JULY 23, 2009. [HTTP://WWW.FT.COM/CMS/S/0/6C69BF84-77CF-11DE-9713-00144FEABDC0.HTML](http://www.ft.com/cms/S/0/6C69BF84-77CF-11DE-9713-00144FEABDC0.HTML)