

**Outside Witness Testimony of Shari Bryan
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Before the House Committee on Appropriations | Subcommittee on National Security,
Department of State and Related Programs
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Introduction—Please support \$290 million for Conventional Weapons Destruction

Chairman Diaz-Balart, Ranking Member Frankel, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, as well as Committee staff, thank you for the opportunity to testify about our work to save lives and further American foreign policy objectives. My name is Shari Bryan and I serve as Executive Director of MAG U.S. MAG U.S. is a 501 (c)3 registered non-profit with a head office in Washington DC, working in more than 40 countries to help identify and clear explosive remnants of war in post conflict environments and effectively manage the weapons and ammunition held by security forces in partner countries. MAG U.S. is the leading implementing partner of these Conventional Weapons Destruction (CWD) programs and has been working in partnership with the U.S. Government for more than 20 years to further U.S. foreign policy goals.

These security assistance programs, managed by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, yield tangible results to advance U.S. foreign policy goals. Clearing explosive ordnance and limiting criminal access to illegal weapons contributes to stability, fosters economic prosperity, and reduces security threats that could otherwise escalate into expensive crises for the United States. They are an important tool in America's diplomatic toolkit, making America safer, stronger, and more prosperous, to borrow Secretary Rubio's phrase. MAG U.S. has critical programs with strategic partners around the world—including in Ukraine, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Lebanon, Syria, and Angola—but I'd like to focus on our work in Latin America and the Caribbean.

MAG U.S. Weapons Security Programs in Latin America and the Caribbean

While CWD programs are often thought of first and foremost as Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) programs—clearing mines and other explosive remnants of war to prevent casualties and return land to productive use—CWD also includes a growing portfolio of work known as Weapons and Ammunition Management (WAM) or Physical Security and Stockpile Management (PSSM). WAM/PSSM programs prevent weapons, ammunition, explosives, and other dangerous items in state-held armories from ending up in the hands of narco-trafficking groups and other violent and destabilizing non-state actors. These programs not only provide direct support and forge close ties with partner militaries and police forces, they also address a root cause of migration: violence and political instability.

This is accomplished by working with partner security forces to improve the physical security at armories and explosive storehouses and bolster the capacity to better manage stockpiles, routinely and safely dispose of excess and obsolete weapons and ammunition, and increase safety, security, and accountability levels. Together, this makes diversion of dangerous items into the hands of criminals much more difficult and also prevents deadly unplanned explosions that happen every year and require clearance of remaining explosive ordnance—prevention is the cheaper option.

MAG U.S. teams work closely with partner security forces, building the trust necessary to access sensitive weapons armories and jointly determining priorities, then working together with our embassies and PM-WRA on how best to provide training, equipment, and capacity building expertise to improve WAM/PSSM infrastructure, practice, and governance. Then, we move on to the next weakest link in the chain.

Over time, these programs prevent destabilizing violence while also strengthening America's strategic partnerships with national defense and police organizations.

The Caribbean

High levels of armed violence and crime negatively affect the safety and security of the Caribbean population and impede the region's sustainable development. This violence is largely fuelled by illegal firearms and ammunition trafficked through the region's porous borders or diverted from state-managed stockpiles.

In 2022, MAG began a partnership with CARICOM IMPACS to sustainably enhance the capacity of Caribbean states to manage state-held weapons and ammunition stockpiles and routinely and safely dispose of excess and obsolete weapons and ammunition. In 2023, MAG was formally welcomed as an implementing partner of The Caribbean Priority Actions on the Illicit Proliferation of Firearms and Ammunition across the Caribbean in a Sustainable Manner by 2030 (Caribbean Firearms Roadmap), and we partner with police, military, coastguard, immigration, and customs authorities across the region. CARICOM IMPACS also works closely on transnational crime with America's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); Homeland Security Investigations; and Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

Since 2023, MAG U.S. has upgraded physical security at armories in Barbados, Belize, and Trinidad & Tobago, training 284 people in WAM while helping with the destruction of over 3,100 weapons and 3,290,000 rounds of Small Arms Ammunition. MAG U.S. has also worked to facilitate greater collaboration between CARICOM national authorities on these issues. MAG U.S. has also engaged with security partners in the Bahamas, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Suriname, among others.

Just last week, in response to a question on combatting drug trafficking and police cooperation with Suriname, Sec. Rubio said: "we think we can help with technology, with personnel, with best practices...we are open to any programs we can do to build the capacity [of Suriname law enforcement]..this partnership is very close, we cooperate on all of this already, we just want to keep building on it, so that you can build the capacity where you can not only do it yourself but you're maybe helping other countries do it because you've gotten so good at it."

Ecuador

Between 2020 and 2024, Ecuador transitioned from being one of the safest countries in Latin America to one of the most insecure. The surge in drug-related activities, with Ecuador emerging as a primary departure point for trafficking drugs overseas, has fueled a significant escalation in criminal behavior. This period witnessed a staggering 577% increase in the homicide rate, with firearms involved in 85% of these cases. This significant escalation of armed violence has fueled a security crisis across the country, with devastating humanitarian and economic effects.

Addressing the ongoing security crisis in Ecuador is not only key to achieve civilian security, but also to prevent illegal migration flows, as it enables a safe environment where the population can build their livelihoods without having to leave their homes and seek security elsewhere. Given the nature of this armed violence crisis, and the existing threats related to weapons diversion from state-held armories, supporting the improvement of the Ecuadorian capacity to manage state-held weapons bring significant benefits in terms of mitigating the crisis and all its devastating social externalities, such as the migration phenomenon.

MAG U.S. has partnered with the Ecuadorian Military and Police to increase their WAM capacity, preventing potential weapons diversion that would fuel the ongoing security crisis. Over the last four years, more than 50 state-held armories and munition storehouses have had improvements made to their security standards and infrastructure, and more than 500 military and police personnel have received training in cutting-edge safe and secure inventory management practices. Furthermore, U.S. funding has enabled MAG to support the destruction of 14,903 firearms that could have been diverted to criminal hands.

This included the destruction of 91 man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADs); surface-to-air missiles that can be fired by an individual or a small team of people against aircraft. More than 40 civilian aircraft have been hit by MANPADS missiles since the 1970s, and as such, finding and destroying them is a top U.S. national security priority.

Perú

Armed violence remains a significant challenge in Perú, influenced by a combination of factors including organized crime, urban violence, and the historical legacy of past conflicts. Organized crime groups involved in drug cultivation and trafficking and illegal mining continue to perpetuate violence, particularly in rural and marginalized areas where state presence is limited. In urban centers like Lima, high levels of violence persist due to gang activities, drug-related crimes, and socio-economic disparities.

In Perú, MAG U.S. has been actively addressing critical issues related to arms and ammunition management, disposal of explosive remnants, and training personnel in safe handling practices since 2017. The program in Perú encompasses a comprehensive set of activities aimed at enhancing safety and security through PSSM tasks that ultimately feed into reducing armed violence and the risk of unplanned explosions. This includes partnerships with the Army, Navy, Air Force, police and civilian authorities.

The program has supported the destruction of over 8,041 weapons, 6,489,391 rounds of ammunition, 1,700 tons of explosive ordnance, 16,225 anti-personnel mines, 997 anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) 489 tons of pyrotechnics, 10 tons of ammonium nitrate. MAG U.S. was also able to destroy 23 MANPADs.

Paraguay

MAG U.S. has been active in Paraguay since late 2024, in partnership with the General Directorate of War Materials (DIGEMABEL) to support WAM practices. The country is affected by organized criminal networks engaged in the trade of narcotics and instability in neighboring countries.

Combined with its geographic location between two larger neighbors (Argentina and Brazil), Paraguay has porous borders and weak state institutions. This has led to Brazilian organized criminal networks, such as the Primeiro Comando da Capital, increasingly using Paraguay as a weapons supply pipeline, with arms imported legally and then diverted into illegal markets.

Since January 2024, MAG U.S. has trained 86 DIGEMABEL personnel in physical security and stockpile management standards and destroyed 74.52 tons of ammunition, nitrocellulose (a key ingredient in many explosives), 87,000 rounds of small arms, and 5,350 small arms and light weapons.

El Salvador

Since late 2024 MAG U.S. has commenced a project supporting the national police force in El Salvador with regard to its weapons marking and inventory management systems, this will help support greater faith in the work of the law enforcement agencies.

Mexico

As those representing states near the border are acutely aware, Mexico is a key gateway to North America for illegal weapons, drugs, and human trafficking. The country is a major large-scale producer of marijuana, methamphetamine, and fentanyl, and serves as a transit point for cocaine, as well as migrants from Central and South America heading north. Mexico is home to some of the hemisphere's largest, most sophisticated, and most violent organized criminal groups, whose networks stretch from Argentina to Canada and into Europe. Recent trends suggest expansions to China and India to circumnavigate regulations and procure less regulated pre-precursor chemicals to produce fentanyl and methamphetamine. These groups have become increasingly sophisticated in their armament, training, and tactics in response to intensified government crackdowns.

Between 2018-2019, MAG U.S. supported the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA) in improving its WAM/PSSM capacities through a small arms and light weapons intervention funded by the State Department (PM-WRA). This work played a role in restricting access to weapons by these cartels. Now more than ever, MAG U.S. hopes to be able to resume this program and is in dialogue with SEDENA to look to build a formal framework for future cooperation.

Conclusion

We have deep gratitude for the longstanding bipartisan support for Conventional Weapons Destruction programs by the Congress and this Subcommittee in particular. While America's foreign assistance is in the midst of a fundamental shift, these programs are very much in line with past, present, and future foreign policy priorities of the United States. This is because CWD provides tangible benefits: saving lives, fostering stability and self-sufficiency, and concretely advancing U.S. soft power. Both HMA and WAM/PSSM programs provide clear and sustainable outputs—they achieve results and don't create a permanent dependency on aid. We focus on partner capacity development and training specifically to ensure sustainability, so that the partners we work with are able to continue this work themselves, much as Sec. Rubio prefers.

MAG U.S. looks forward to continued strong partnership with the Congress, State Department, and the Department of Defense, to continue helping to make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous.