

**Statement of Michael Shifter
President, Inter-American Dialogue**

**Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere**

“Regional Security Cooperation: An Examination of the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI)”

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Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sires, and members of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, I very much appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to share some thoughts on US security cooperation through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI).

The dire security situation in the countries of Central America and the Caribbean should be of utmost concern to the United States. With over three million Central Americans living in the United States and over \$40 billion of trade in both directions, US ties to the countries of Central America are historic, profound, and will surely deepen in coming years. The United States is similarly bound to the Caribbean by strong demographic and commercial linkages.

As the United States’ “third border” and the transshipment point for over 15 million containers destined for our shores each year, the security capacity of the Caribbean nations is intimately connected to the US’s own wellbeing. The substantial presence of transnational criminal organizations, gangs, and other illicit actors in both of these regions poses severe challenges to the rule of law and democracy, and in so doing, to the United States’ own strategic interests.

It is easy to be skeptical that the United States has a constructive role to play in assisting its neighbors to reverse these worrisome tendencies of spreading criminality. Similar skepticism was expressed by members of the US Congress and many opinion makers in the country some 13 years ago, when Plan Colombia was being considered. I recall the question was asked: “Is there any precedent for the US providing sustained support to another country, which helped it assert the authority and strengthen the capacity of the state?”

Back then, there were no ready answers to that good question. But today we can point to Plan Colombia itself as an example that security cooperation over a sustained period can actually make a difference. The security situation in Colombia, though still challenging in many respects, has vastly improved from a decade ago. Plan Colombia could not have worked without the commitment of the Colombians, but there is little question that some \$8 billion of US support contributed to a positive outcome in Colombia, and helped advance US strategic interests in Latin America.

Today we are in a different environment. The fiscal outlook of the US is not what it was when Plan Colombia was being reviewed. Central America and the Caribbean present substantially different conditions than Colombia, which was, and still is, involved in an internal armed conflict.

But the fundamental problem of governance and rampant lawlessness apply to both situations. The good news today is that most of the Central American and Caribbean leaders are interested in pursuing stronger cooperation with the United States to deal with criminal violence and insecurity. That disposition was clearly displayed during President Obama's recent visit to Costa Rica with Central American presidents and Vice President Biden's trip to Trinidad and Tobago. At both stops the President and Vice President met with leaders of regional organizations—SICA in the case of Central America, CARICOM in the Caribbean—that will need to play a critical role in marshaling resources and coordinating efforts to bring violence under control. Indeed, the governments and societies in both sub-regions deserve credit for having taken steps to more effectively tackle the enormous challenges they confront.

Assessing CARSI and CBSI

US security cooperation, chiefly through CARSI and CBSI, has been useful and important in assisting our troubled Central American and Caribbean neighbors. That is why every country is seeking continued US support. But these programs are clearly not enough. The data show that crime and violence in a number of the countries are worsening. In Honduras, for example, murder rates increased by some 50 percent between 2008 and 2012.¹ True, conditions would likely be even more severe absent US cooperation. Even where violence has dropped, US assistance has been too modest and could be more effectively targeted. But the overall sobering situation and outlook should prompt serious questions about the focus and scale of US assistance and Washington's overall approach to Central America and the Caribbean.

The Obama administration emphasizes that CARSI and CBSI are wide-ranging and comprehensive efforts to security challenges in both regions. Both combine traditional counter-narcotics operations with institution-building and crime prevention measures. While the administration deserves credit for shifting more resources to institution-building and crime prevention measures than in the past, figures for both CARSI and CBSI reveal that support for international narcotics control and law enforcement (INCLE) and foreign military financing (FMF) continue to account for a disproportionate share of the budget. According to the GAO, INCLE and FMF assistance represented over two-thirds of the money committed or disbursed through CARSI between 2008 and 2011², and over three-quarters of the money committed or disbursed through CBSI between 2010 and 2012.³

There is little question that drug trafficking is a key element and driver for spreading criminal violence in both regions. Transnational criminal organizations have a corrosive effect on state institutions and threaten to displace government authority in many zones, particularly in Central America's "Northern Triangle." But evidence shows that after decades of spending on interdiction and defense cooperation, levels of cocaine seizures—the main metric used to measure success when it comes to US security aid—are not directly correlated with homicide

¹ See a compilation of homicide statistics for Central America's "Northern Triangle" countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras from 2000 to 2012 at, Mike Allison, "Homicide Statistics in Central America," *Central American Politics Blog*, January 6, 2013, available at <http://centralamericanpolitics.blogspot.com/2013/01/homicide-statistics-in-central-america.html>.

² United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Status of Funding for the Central American Regional Security Initiative," January 30, 2013, p. 3, available at <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/651675.pdf>.

³ United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Status of Funding, Equipment, and Training for the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative," March 20, 2013, p. 3, available at <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/653173.pdf>

rates. In the Caribbean, for example, even though the share of cocaine being trafficked has been reduced to just five percent⁴, murder rates have more than doubled over the past decade.⁵

However important US counter-narcotics assistance may be—and it is more important in some countries, for example, Honduras, than in others—the overriding goal of US security cooperation should be to reduce levels of violence and protect Central American and Caribbean citizens. It is crucial to have that fundamental focus in mind. To accomplish this aim, it is further essential to strengthen national institutions, particularly the judiciary and police forces. This echoes a call by Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto to concentrate on reducing violence within the Merida Initiative. The main lesson of Plan Colombia is that US cooperation was most effective not when it was used to eradicate coca production or interdict drug shipments, but when it emphasized the building of state capacities to protect Colombians.

It is further essential that US resources directed to both Central America and the Caribbean be delivered in an efficient, timely fashion, and that they be commensurate with the challenge, and what is at stake for the region, and for the United States. More needs to be done to expedite the delivery of already apportioned funds. According to the GAO, for example, as of January 2013, only 28 percent of total CARSII funds from 2008 to 2011 had been committed or disbursed, while an additional 58 percent had been obligated.⁶ A similar report on the CBSII from March 2013 found that just over 13 percent of funds allocated between 2010 and 2012 had been disbursed.⁷ Without a more agile and well-coordinated release of funds, efforts will remain stalled.

The Obama administration has noted that, in a very difficult fiscal environment with declining budgets, resources for CARSII will increase in 2014. This is good news. But the question is whether even the increased level is adequate, given the depth of the problems. It is true that the region's institutions have limited absorptive capacity and that more money is not necessarily the answer. Still, resources do matter, and the US should be prepared to regard this region as an urgent priority and increase funding even more, if necessary.

It is important to recognize that, however important the CARSII and CBSII programs may be, they do not and should not constitute the overall US policy towards the region. To be effective, the cooperation needs to be reinforced by other political and diplomatic instruments of US policy. It is especially critical for Washington to use its leverage and position to encourage greater coordination between Central America and the Caribbean and other hemispheric countries, especially Mexico and Colombia. Much of this is already taking place, but it can be further enhanced and should be sustained over time.

⁴ United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, *Preventing a Security Crisis in the Caribbean*, September 2012, p. 9, available at http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve/?File_id=90bb66bc-3371-4898-8415-fbfc31c0ed24.

⁵ On the whole, the homicide rate in the Caribbean jumped from 14 to 25 murders per 100,000 inhabitants between 2000 and 2009. See, Sheridon Hill, "Gang Homicide in the Caribbean," *Symposium on Gangs and Gang Violence in the Caribbean at American University*, February 17, 2012, available at <http://cvpcs.asu.edu/sites/default/files/content/events/Hill%20presentation.pdf>.

⁶ United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Status of Funding for the Central American Regional Security Initiative," *op. cit.*

⁷ United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Status of Funding, Equipment, and Training for the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative," *op. cit.*

US Policy Issues

The countries of Central America and the Caribbean are sensitive to a number of US domestic issues that policymakers should take into account in crafting an approach to security cooperation in both regions. While the CARSI and CBSI assistance packages and their programs on institution-building, crime prevention, and counter-narcotics are important, their positive effects could be neutralized if the US does not address a number of challenges within our own borders.

First, in the spirit of shared responsibility, it is important for the US to be even more actively engaged in a serious debate and review of drug policy. The recent study conducted by the Organization of American States⁸ offers some useful ideas on a variety of related questions such as the criminal justice system and victims of drug abuse. The Obama administration has pursued a more balanced approach but more needs to be done to reduce demand and consumption in the United States. It is also worth exploring how to scale up relatively low-cost treatment programs in the US, such as Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE), which has been successful in rehabilitating heavy drug users. And the experiments in Colorado and Washington State should be carefully monitored and studied.

The second question on the domestic agenda that has far-reaching consequences for Central America and the Caribbean nations is deportations. Under the Obama administration, the number of deportations of individuals in the United States illegally have well-exceeded one million, placing a particular strain on the already fragile governance structures of Central America and the Caribbean. To reduce the negative effects of criminal deportations, ICE and FBI officials need to do far more on information sharing with regional governments to provide details about who is being returned and their criminal backgrounds. Officials in both Central America and the Caribbean cite the lack of exchange of information as a major factor in expanding levels of criminal violence.

Finally, any US approach to combating criminal violence in Central America and the Caribbean must take into account the impact of dangerous arms flowing from the United States into the region. While much attention has focused on this issue regarding the Mexican case, recent research shows that it also affects Central America and the Caribbean, where controls are even weaker.⁹ According to a 2009 AP report, for example, 80 percent of traceable illegal arms recovered in Jamaica originated in the United States.¹⁰ To be sure, the arms used come from variety of sources and are hard to control. But more serious US efforts to stop illegal arms from entering the region, and further complicating an already volatile mix, would be widely welcomed and send a powerful, positive signal to our neighbors.

Concluding Thoughts

⁸ The OAS Report on the Drug Problem in the Americas can be accessed at http://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-194/13.

⁹ See, Colby Goodman, *U.S. Firearms Trafficking to Guatemala and Mexico: A Working Paper*. Woodrow Wilson Center, April 2013, available at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/US%20Firearms%20to%20Guatemala%20and%20Mexico_0.pdf.

¹⁰ "U.S. guns fuel Jamaica's gang wars," *NBC News*, June 21, 2009, available at http://www.nbcnews.com/id/31474297/ns/world_news-americas/t/us-guns-fuel-jamaicas-gang-wars/#.UbjbNuf2ZQg.

Escalating criminal violence in neighboring Central America and the Caribbean today has deleterious effects on the social, political, and economic systems of the countries directly affected. It also puts at risk key US strategic interests in the Western Hemisphere. Fragile institutions and governance structures with inadequate human and material resources in both regions should be of deep concern to this Congress.

But alongside the daunting challenges, there are also encouraging opportunities for US collaboration. Central American and Caribbean governments are eager for greater cooperation with the United States, as illustrated during the recent meetings between President Obama with the Central American and Dominican heads of state in Costa Rica and Vice President Biden with CARICOM leaders in Trinidad. As Colombia showed, success, though not easy, is indeed possible. The key is having regional governments open to external collaboration, and the United States being prepared to be proactive and sustain resources and attention to institutional construction and renewal.