

Chairman Gimenez and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to share the Florida National Guard story and our contributions to ongoing efforts to reduce illegal migration and illicit drug flow into our great state and nation and to protect Floridians from the dangerous impacts of the Border Crisis. In addition to witnessing a drop in the number of people entering the state through the Florida Keys as a result of coordinated state efforts to deter and prevent illegal migration, almost 11,000 migrants have been returned to their country of origin after attempting to enter Florida illegally since August 2022, as Governor Ron DeSantis announced earlier this month.

In recent months, the number of unauthorized alien interdictions in and around Florida has risen to alarming levels not seen for decades, which has put an undue burden on local resources and threatened public safety. On January 6th of 2023, after a peak of over 800 migrant apprehensions during the first week of January, and inadequate federal action, Governor DeSantis took action to provide the resources necessary to respond to the mass migration event and protect Florida's communities; signing an executive order declaring a state of emergency and directing the Adjutant General of Florida to activate the Florida National Guard, as needed, to support the State's efforts to interdict illegal migrants attempting to gain entry to the United States through Florida. Governor DeSantis's executive order was timely and based on steady increases in illegal migrations through the Florida Straits, a mass migration landing in the Dry Tortugas, and an increase to Phase 1b of Operation Vigilant Sentry, which is the federal government's plan to interdict illegal migration throughout the southeast United States and Caribbean nations, primarily Haiti and Cuba.

The Florida National Guard was activated in a supporting role to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, under the overall command and control of the Florida Division of Emergency Management within the Executive Office of the Governor, and in coordination with the United States Coast Guard, other federal agencies and local law enforcement. Our role is to provide aerial observation to cue potential migrant activity to maritime assets to conduct the actual interdiction. With federal support, we have been able to conduct our flight operations safely and in coordination with all state agencies. Initially we activated two LUH-72 Lakota rotary wing aircraft within 24 hours of the executive order. In the following weeks, we grew our forces operating out of Marathon Key, FL to a total of twelve aircraft, an aviation battalion tactical operations center with all primary staff, and associated maintenance and logistics personnel for support.

Since January 10th, 2023 the Florida National Guard has averaged 10-12 sorties per day along four air corridors in South Florida to provide ariel observation in support of maritime assets. We have assisted in interdictions of 349 migrants and identification of over 100 abandoned vessels, but perhaps more importantly, our presence in the air seems to have resulted in a notable deterrence. According to data compiled by the Florida Division of Emergency Management, from October 2022 through January 2023, there was an average of 1,210 illegal migrants apprehended, per month. This number decreased to 276 for the month of February due to the buildup of State law enforcement agencies, Florida National Guard air assets acting as a deterrent and federal partner during the month of January.

The total cost of the state activation across all responding agencies is currently in excess of \$50 million, and that number will continue to rise. To date, the State of Florida has paid over \$7 million for the use of our aviation rotary wing aircraft. To help mitigate the cost, but sustain our presence and reconnaissance capability, Florida recently requested to use our unmanned aircraft system, the RQ-7B Shadow tactical unmanned aircraft system. Currently we are working with the FAA for approval to fly this system in civilian airspace, as well as working in coordination with Navy Region Southeast to launch and recover from Key West Naval Air Station.

Since the beginning of the Florida National Guard's involvement, the Florida National Guard has posted a liaison officer in the United States Coast Guard District 7 operations center in Brickell, FL. Additionally, the FLNG has a full-time liaison officer in the State of Florida Emergency Operation Center, and there are daily touchpoints to ensure continuity of communication. At the tactical level the FLNG's communications directorate installed upgrades to our rotary wing assets to ensure the FLNG can communicate with the maritime assets across all state and federal agencies.

Lastly, the FLNG is conducting these operations predominantly with the highly dedicated part-time force of traditional National Guard Soldiers and Airmen, all of whom have been volunteers who are proud to support both our state agencies and the federal partners charged with the protection of our borders. The Florida National Guard is proud to be part of this operation to protect Florida's citizens and looks forward to the continued support and partnership.