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Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime
Transportation, Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure, House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at
10:00 a.m., EDT,
Tuesday,
August 1, 1995

DRUG WAR

Observations on U.S.
International Drug Control
Efforts

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064236/154850

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to provide some preliminary observations based on our ongoing review of the strategies and efforts of U.S. agencies to stop the production and trafficking of cocaine and heroin destined for the United States. This review is being conducted at the request of the Chairman of the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight.

As part of our review, we observed counternarcotics programs in Colombia, Mexico, and several countries in the Far East and discussed these programs with U.S. officials at headquarters and field locations. We also reviewed the results of an October 1994 counternarcotics conference sponsored by the Office of National Drug Control Policy and the U.S. Southern Command. This conference was attended by over 100 senior and mid-level officials from most of the agencies involved in the drug war overseas.

On the basis of this work, coupled with our past work,¹ we have five general observations to offer.

SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS

First, the executive branch has changed the focus of its international strategy for cocaine from law enforcement and drug seizures in the transit zone to stopping drugs in the source countries before they reach the transit zone.

¹Drug War: Observations on Counternarcotics Aid to Colombia (GAO/NSIAD-91-296, Sept. 30, 1991); The Drug War: U.S. Programs in Peru Face Serious Obstacles (GAO/NSIAD-92-36, Oct. 21, 1991); Drug Control: Revised Drug Interdiction Approach Is Needed in Mexico (GAO/NSIAD-93-152, May 10, 1993); The Drug War: Colombia Is Undertaking Antidrug Programs, but Impact Is Uncertain (GAO/NSIAD-93-158, Aug. 10, 1993); Drug Control: Heavy Investment in Military Surveillance Is Not Paying Off (GAO/NSIAD-93-220, Sept. 1, 1993); Drug Control: Expanded Military Surveillance Not Justified by Measurable Goals or Results (GAO/T-NSIAD-94-14, Oct. 5, 1993); Drug Control: Interdiction Efforts in Central America Have Had Little Impact on the Flow of Drugs (GAO/NSIAD-94-233, Aug. 2, 1994); and Drug Control: U.S. Counterdrug Activities in Central America (GAO/T-NSIAD-94-251, Aug. 2, 1994).

However, the executive branch has had difficulties implementing a key part of its strategy--shifting resources from the transit zone to the source countries. Also, a proposed heroin strategy was submitted to the President in mid-June 1995 and is awaiting his approval.

Second, in addition to combatting drugs, the United States has other important foreign policy objectives that compete for U.S. attention and resources. As a result, the United States must make tough choices as to which objectives to pursue most vigorously.

Third, the many U.S. agencies involved in counternarcotics efforts overseas do not always coordinate their efforts. U.S. officials have agreed that more coordination and leadership is needed.

Fourth, U.S. funds are not always well managed. In the past, we have recommended improvements in how U.S. counternarcotics assistance funds are managed. We found that the extent to which U.S. agencies monitor the end use of assistance provided to foreign governments varies. Furthermore, specific measures of how programs are contributing to overall counternarcotics goals have yet to be established.

Finally, the effectiveness of U.S. international drug control programs depends in large measure on the willingness and ability of foreign governments to combat the drug trade in their country. The extent and direction of host-country actions often vary over time. Recent actions by the government of Colombia, such as the incarceration of several senior members of the Cali Cartel, are positive steps, but continued commitment is needed. For a variety of reasons, foreign governments are not always willing to fully participate in counternarcotics efforts. Even when they are willing, they often lack the necessary resources. Extensive corruption in some countries further weakens host country actions to combat the drug trade.

Let me now elaborate on each of these five observations.

THE COCAINE AND HEROIN STRATEGIES

In November 1993, the U.S. Policy on International Counternarcotics in the Western Hemisphere established a strategy for combatting the production and trafficking of cocaine. Among other things, the policy called for a gradual shift of resources from the transit zone of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean to the source countries of cocaine--primarily Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia.

According to the Department of Defense, the amount of resources applied to the transit zone has been significantly reduced. However, to date, we have not seen a shift in resources to the source countries. For example, the Drug Enforcement Administration is reducing its presence in Colombia, the U.S. Southern Command is now flying fewer sorties per month in support of source-country interdiction than it did in 1993, and counternarcotics assistance to each of the three primary source countries is expected to be less in 1995 than in 1991 or 1992.

Some agencies' programs and assets are better suited to interdiction in the transit zone than to the current source country strategy. However, shifting resources between and within agencies has been problematic.

In several instances, officials of U.S. agencies expressed concerns about shifting resources from the transit zone. In mid-1994, the Drug Enforcement Administration's Attache in Mexico cautioned that the primary drug interdiction initiative in Mexico--known as the Northern Border Response Force--had been jeopardized by the loss of detection and monitoring coverage in the transit zone. In addition, a senior officer at the U.S. Atlantic Command, which has primary responsibility for detection and monitoring activities in the transit zone, told us that he sees a need to continue detection, monitoring, and interdiction efforts in the transit zone and believes that shifting resources to the source countries would adversely affect this coverage. The Interdiction Coordinator supports the shift in emphasis to source countries but has also cautioned against reducing funding and programs for transit zone interdiction before the United States has an active implementation plan for the source countries.

It should also be noted that the Office of National Drug Control Policy has designated Mexico as the second most important country in the international narcotics program--behind Colombia--even though Mexico is listed as a transit-zone country. Moreover, the Drug Enforcement Administration Attache in Mexico recommended that Mexico be reclassified as a source country so it can be considered for more resources under the strategy.

The production and trafficking of heroin is becoming a more serious problem as usage in the United States is reportedly increasing. In November 1993, the executive branch announced that within 4 months it would develop a strategy to combat the heroin trade. As of July 27, 1995, about 20 months later, there still was no heroin strategy. However, we understand that a recommended strategy was presented to the President in mid-June 1995 and is awaiting his approval. Delays in developing this strategy were due in part to difficulties in balancing U.S. objectives in Burma--the primary source of heroin.

BALANCING U.S. FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES

The United States has a variety of foreign policy objectives that compete for U.S. attention and resources. Deciding which objectives are most important is difficult. These decisions may result in counternarcotics objectives receiving less U.S. attention than other objectives. Our recent work showed difficulties faced in balancing counternarcotics and other foreign policy objectives.

Mexico is an example of competing U.S. priorities. For that country, countering the drug trade is the fourth highest priority in the U.S. Mission Action Plan. During our recent fieldwork, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico told us that he had focused his attention during the past year and a half on the higher priority issues of trade and commerce. He explained that because of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the U.S. financial support program for the Mexican peso, he had had insufficient time to focus on counternarcotics issues.

Conflicts in U.S. policy towards Burma have also affected counternarcotics efforts. Burma is the primary source of heroin entering the United States. Yet the U.S. government has limited counternarcotics activities in Burma.

Because the current Burmese government is considered to be brutal and repressive, the U.S. government has chosen to limit its contacts with Burmese officials. Combatting the heroin trade in Burma will probably require cooperation with the Burmese government, but such cooperation could send a signal that the United States is de-emphasizing its concerns over human rights and democracy issues. U.S. Embassy officials told us that they have proposed some counternarcotics initiatives to the State Department. They said that some have been rejected as representing too much engagement with the Burmese government, and others have been approved when the level of involvement was deemed acceptably low.

In another case, \$45 million originally intended for counternarcotics assistance to the cocaine source countries was reprogrammed to assist Haiti's democratic transition. These funds were needed in Haiti to support activities such as paying the cost of non-U.S. personnel assigned to the multinational force, training of a police force, and developing a job creation and a feeding program.

Efforts to reduce federal spending have brought about other tradeoffs in U.S. policies. For example, the Department of State has decided to close the U.S. Consulate in Barranquilla, Colombia, to reduce its costs, even though U.S. officials told us that retaining a consulate in Barranquilla is important to their counternarcotics operations. According to a State Department official, agreement has recently been reached between State and the Drug Enforcement Administration to retain a small office in Barranquilla for counternarcotics purposes.

INTERAGENCY LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION

During our review, we discussed with agency officials the need for strong leadership and better coordination. These officials generally agreed that no single organization was in charge of antidrug activities in the cocaine source countries or the transit zone. They also recognized that better leadership was needed to integrate all U.S. programs in the region to develop a coherent plan. An official of the Office of National Drug Control Policy indicated that the office had made some progress towards developing a plan that will bring more leadership to the drug war but acknowledged that staffing constraints had limited the progress.

Our recent work in Colombia provides some indications of problems with the integration and coordination of U.S. programs. The lack of coordination and clear statements of responsibilities has led to confusion over the role of the offices responsible for intelligence analysis and related operational plans for interdiction. U.S. officials in Colombia told us they were unsure who had operational control over their activities and questioned which agency could best provide that control.

The position of U.S. Interdiction Coordinator, currently held by the U.S. Coast Guard Commandant, is one coordinating mechanism. The position was established in 1993 to enhance coordination among U.S. agencies involved in interdiction, but specific roles and authorities of the coordinator were not established. Although the Coordinator advises the Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy on interdiction issues, Coordinator officials told us that their ability to coordinate activities was limited because of the lack of funds, expertise, and authority over agencies involved.

An interagency working group on international counternarcotics policy, also established in 1993 and chaired by a representative of the Department of State, is responsible for developing and ensuring implementation of an international counternarcotics policy. The group is to report its activities and differences of view among agencies to the Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy for review, mediation, and resolution. At this point in our work, we have not completed our review of the group's activities or assessed its effectiveness as a coordinating mechanism.

NEED FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Good financial and program management dictates accountability for U.S. funds, including funds for the drug war. Because of concerns that U.S. assistance intended for the drug war might be used for other purposes, end-use monitoring requirements have been established. However, in Mexico, the Narcotics Affairs Section of the Embassy and other agencies support assistance that requires little end-use monitoring because the government of Mexico has been reluctant to accept assistance that includes U.S. oversight. In Colombia, the Narcotics Affairs Section conducts reviews of how the National Police uses counternarcotics assistance. The U.S. Military Group relies primarily on host-nation reports. We noted that the U.S. military

personnel lacked reports from the Colombian Air Force on how U.S.-provided equipment is being used.

In 1993, we reported on control weaknesses at the Colombian warehouse used to store U.S.-funded spare parts for rotary and fixed-wing aircraft used by Colombian counternarcotics police. Subsequently, the Embassy conducted an inventory and found that over \$200,000 worth of equipment could not be accounted for. U.S. Embassy officials stated that they are in the process of installing a system to account for commodities being purchased with U.S. funds.

Furthermore, in 1993, we recommended that U.S. officials establish a quantitative baseline to evaluate the progress that U.S. antidrug programs in Colombia are having in meeting U.S. objectives and goals. The Office of National Drug Control Policy is now developing a system for measuring the contribution of U.S. agencies' efforts to achieve U.S. counternarcotics objectives.

HOST COUNTRY WILLINGNESS AND CAPABILITY TO COMBAT THE DRUG TRADE

The success of efforts to stop the international flow of drugs is dependent, in large measure, on the willingness and ability of foreign governments to combat the drug trade within their countries. While the United States can provide these countries with support and assistance, in the end, the producing and transit countries must make the drug seizures, arrests, and prosecutions that are necessary to stop the production and movement of drugs.

The U.S. Ambassador to Mexico recently reemphasized the importance of political will. In June 1995, he told us that an army of 10,000 Americans could not win the war against drugs in Mexico; the key lies with the Mexicans, who must be committed and involved. The importance of political will has also been widely recognized by many organizations. U.S. agencies agree that more needs to be done to encourage countries to take stronger action against the drug trade.

Combatting drugs is not necessarily a high priority for foreign governments. Some countries perceive drug production and trafficking as a U.S. problem, and the perception that the United States lacks political will to combat drugs within its borders has been widely reported in the foreign media.

In February 1995, President Clinton determined that all three primary source countries for cocaine--Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia--were not cooperating fully in the drug war. The political will of the Colombian government to act forcefully against the drug cartels was of particular concern. The State Department told the government of Colombia of six actions that needed to be taken by June 1995 to demonstrate its willingness to cooperate more fully. These included arresting at least one high-level member of the Cali Cartel, passing money laundering legislation, enacting tougher sentencing guidelines for convicted drug offenders, and meeting specific eradication targets. Colombia recently arrested two major members of the Cartel and three other members of the cartel have surrendered. Based on recent actions, it appears that Colombia is making progress on the other five actions. For example, according to U.S. Embassy reports, Colombia has enacted money laundering legislation and has exceeded goals for eradicating coca and opium poppy.

Many drug-producing and transit countries lack the resources necessary to effectively combat drugs. Necessary resources include pilots, mechanics, other properly trained personnel, and equipment such as fixed and rotary wing aircraft that are properly maintained. In many instances, the massive profits generated by drug trafficking have resulted in traffickers having more sophisticated equipment than the police units that have been tasked with curbing such activities. In Colombia, U.S. officials told us that the intelligence activities of the Cali Cartel are more sophisticated than those of the government of Colombia.

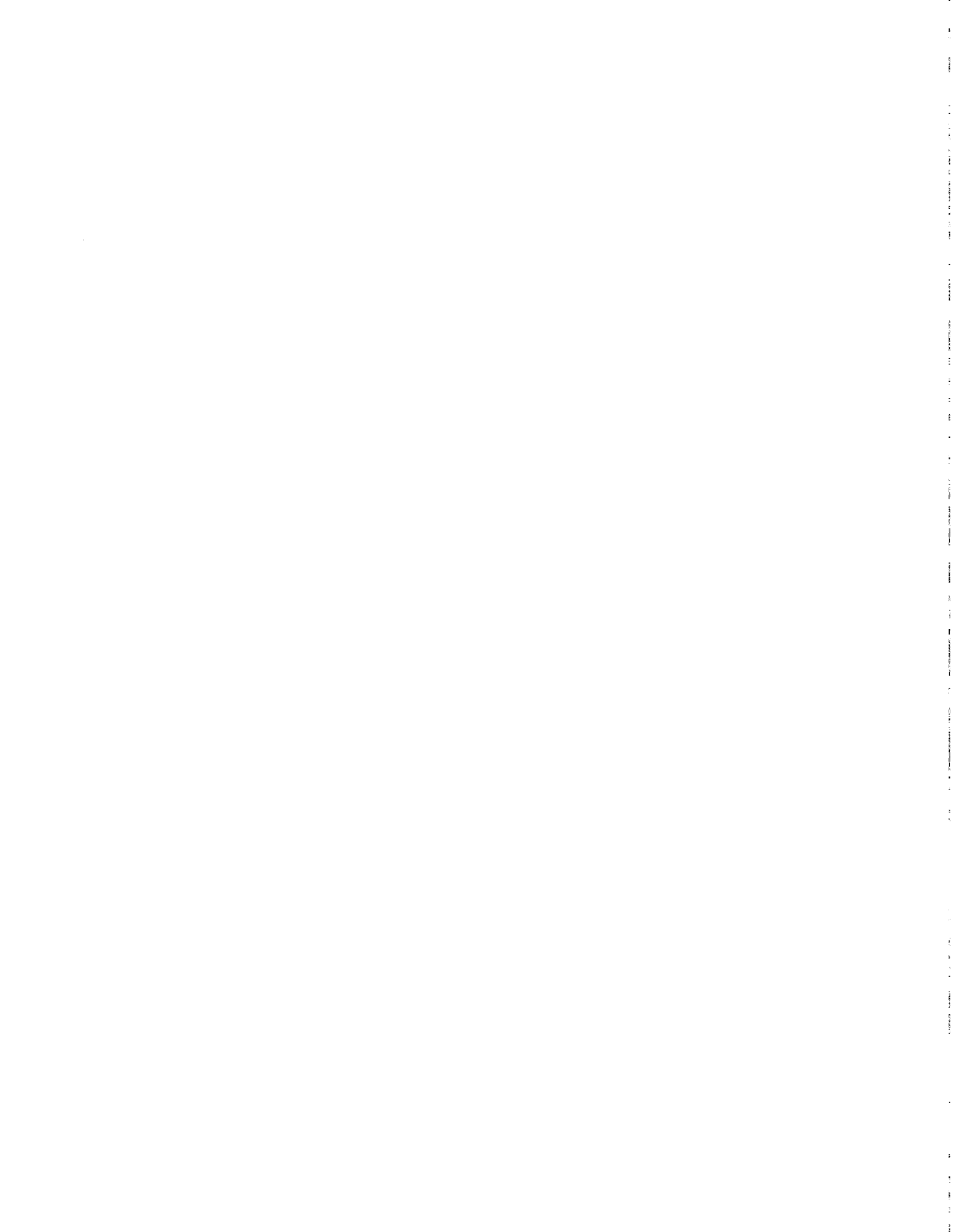
In many instances, the counternarcotics forces lack the most basic forms of equipment, training, and transportation. For example, the director of the counternarcotics police in Colombia said that the police have 10 helicopters available at any one time for counterdrug interdiction and eradication efforts throughout Colombia. Mexican and Colombian law enforcement officials are, by U.S. standards, poorly trained for investigation and interdiction.

Corruption continues to undercut the willingness and ability of host nations to combat the drug trade. The U.S. Ambassador to Colombia said that corruption in Colombia is the greatest single impediment to a successful counternarcotics effort. Although the Colombian government has taken some steps to eliminate corruption, U.S. officials in Colombia told us that the United States still refuses to share certain information with the government for fear that the information will be compromised, ongoing investigations will be undermined, and informants will be injured or killed. U.S. Embassy officials in Mexico said that corruption is pervasive there as well. These officials explained that the salary level for police officers--the equivalent of about \$3 per day--made them susceptible to accepting bribes.

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This concludes my prepared remarks. I would be happy to respond to any questions.

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