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“Adapting U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts in Colombia”

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Chairman Grassley, Co-Chairman Feinstein, distinguished Members of the Caucus; thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss counternarcotics efforts in Colombia. Implementation of an effective counternarcotics plan for Colombia is more important now than ever. We have a limited window of opportunity to roll back the recent troubling narcotics trends that threaten the safety and health of citizens here in the United States as well as in Colombia and throughout the rest of the Western Hemisphere.

The Government of Colombia has been our partner in the fight against crime and narcotics for more than two decades. Since 2000, the United States has invested more than \$10 billion to improve citizen security, disrupt the drug trade, and combat criminal networks to advance peace and prosperity, while the Colombian government has invested many times more. Working with our Colombian partners, our joint efforts have produced positive results. Since 2002, homicides in Colombia have fallen by more than 50 percent and kidnappings have dropped by 90 percent; in 2016, Colombia had its lowest reported homicide rate in 40 years.

However, after years of progress in combatting coca cultivation and cocaine production, Colombia is once again the world's largest producer of cocaine and is the origin of approximately 92 percent of the cocaine seized in the United States, according to U.S. government estimates. Between 2013 and 2016, coca cultivation in Colombia increased by more than 130 percent, from 80,500 hectares in 2013 to 188,000 hectares in 2016. Perhaps more troubling, pure potential cocaine production surged by more than 200 percent in the same time period, from 235 metric tons in 2013 to 710 metric tons in 2016. Cocaine use and overdose deaths in the United States are on the rise. Following a dramatic decline in cocaine-involved deaths in the United States since 2006, this figure has steadily increased since 2012, reaching 6,784 cocaine-involved deaths in 2015, the highest on record since 2006.

This surge is due to multiple factors. These include Colombia's decision in 2015 to end the U.S.-supported aerial coca eradication program as well as counter-eradication techniques implemented by coca growers. Widespread reporting indicates FARC leaders urged coca growers to plant more coca, purportedly motivated by the belief that the Colombian government's investment in the wake of its agreement with the FARC and subsidies would focus on regions with the greatest quantities of illicit crops. The Colombian government also reduced forced manual eradication operations in areas controlled by the FARC, the principal

enabler of the current narcotics situation in Colombia, to lower the risk of armed conflict.

In the lead up to the official cessation of the aerial eradication program in September 2015, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos announced a counternarcotics strategy laying out three priority areas: rural development programs to reduce drug cultivation, including voluntary eradication and crop substitution for coca growers; enhanced law enforcement efforts to dismantle organized crime groups; and public health approaches to address domestic drug consumption. These priorities conform to the counternarcotics-related aspects of the agreement with the FARC.

The voluntary eradication and crop substitution plan includes the creation of a coordination and communication mechanism for crop substitution; hiring technicians to help implement this plan; granting of land titles to program participants; and cash payments for food subsidies, medium-term employment contracts for infrastructure projects, and other payments for long-term crop substitution such as cacao. The United States is not currently supporting the Colombian government's voluntary eradication and crop substitution program because the FARC is involved in some aspects of the program and remains designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization under several U.S. laws and sanctions regimes. Early indications suggest the crop substitution plan has had little to no impact on the current cultivation trend.

The Colombian government is operationalizing its counternarcotics strategy through the Ministry of Defense (MOD)-led *Centros Estratégicos Operacionales*/Strategic Operational Centers, or "CEOs," concept, an integrated, whole-of-government approach to counternarcotics and rural development. In early January, the Colombian government began implementing the CEO concept in the municipality of Tumaco – a critical area for coca cultivation and cocaine production and other illicit activity. The government plans to expand this effort to a total of four CEOs servicing the 11 departments where 93 percent of the coca is cultivated. Embassy Bogota continues to support the Colombian government in this effort.

To date, the results of Colombia's counternarcotics strategy have been mixed. Colombia continues to make interdiction its primary tool against narco trafficking. Colombian security forces are on pace to exceed 2016's record seizures of cocaine and cocaine base, approximately 261 metric tons (MT) through July 2017, compared to 207 MT for through July 2016. This represents a 10

percent increase. Based on historical patterns of cocaine trafficking leaving Colombia, seizures are likely to increase in the Fall. Destruction of laboratories and seizures of precursor chemicals are also exceeding last year's pace. A surge in interdiction operations, including Operation Agamemnon II against the Gulf Clan, the largest drug trafficking organization in the region, are not only driving these seizures and arrests; they are resulting in improvements in interoperability among Colombian security services that have long been lacking. On August 31, after months of effort, Colombian forces were able to take out Gulf Clan number two, Roberto Vargas, alias "Gavilán." This operation was executed with the skill and competence that we have come to expect of the Colombian security forces. The Colombian government announced September 5 that as a result of the Gavilán operation, the leader of the Gulf Clan – Dairo Antonio Usuga, alias "Otoniel" – is now discussing the terms of a possible surrender to Colombian law enforcement authorities.

While these efforts are impressive, significant challenges remain. Chief among them is that drug seizures are simply not keeping pace with the explosion in coca cultivation, which must be addressed with the same vigor as the interdiction mission.

President Santos and Minister of Defense Villegas must find a way to implement a robust forced eradication campaign for 2018 to reverse the current trend. Though the Colombian security forces have reported the forcible eradication of over 28,000 hectares, surpassing the 2016 total of 18,009 hectares, they continue to encounter violent public protests that disrupt forced eradication operations. In 2016, 675 attempted eradication operations were cancelled in the field due to restrictive rules of engagement that prevented security forces from engaging protestors. These protests continue in 2017. On March 28, the Ministry of Defense-led CEO in Tumaco launched a successful eradication operation along the border with Ecuador. Although approximately 6,500 hectares have been eradicated to date, the operation has been marred by protests and violence, resulting in the injury of two police officers and the death of a third. The security forces must be empowered to effectively deal with protests by creating standard operating procedures and proper political cover for implementation. A permanent solution to this issue is a requirement for forced eradication efforts to have a significant effect on coca cultivation levels in 2017 and future years.

To be successful, the Colombian government's voluntary eradication and crop substitution program needs adequate financial and human resources as well as a clear implementation plan to succeed. Currently these are lacking. We strongly

encourage the Colombian government to limit the number of voluntary eradication agreements they negotiate and sign to make implementation feasible. Voluntary eradication agreements must also have expiration dates so the security forces can forcibly eradicate in areas where coca growing communities fail to meet their obligations. The military and civilian agencies must also continue to enhance their cooperation and coordination for successful implementation of the counternarcotics strategy and CEO concept.

In addition to eradication and crop substitution efforts, we have called on the Colombians to preserve the use of extradition as a law enforcement tool. Although Colombia continues to extradite more criminals to the United States than any other country, we are strongly urging the Colombians to ensure narcotraffickers do not fraudulently use the peace accord's transitional justice measures to avoid extradition.

I visited Colombia twice in the past several months, once in March and again in June, to discuss these challenges and outline a plan for moving forward together. The U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, Kevin Whitaker, and I led a U.S. government delegation for a Binational Technical Working Group (BTWG) on counternarcotics in March. The delegation met with senior Government of Colombia officials and conveyed our government's strong concerns regarding the worsening narcotics situation in Colombia. We stressed the urgent need to operationalize a whole-of-government strategy to counternarcotics and rural development in strategic areas of concern. Subsequent to the BTWG, we met with President Santos and then incoming-Vice President Oscar Naranjo to reinforce these messages. Counternarcotics was also a key topic of discussion during President Santos' May 18 meeting and more recent telephone call with President Trump, who on both occasions underscored our deep and growing concern and urged immediate action. Vice President Pence reiterated the message during his visit to Colombia in August.

An encouraging development this year was Colombian Vice President (VP) Naranjo's appointment as Colombia's counternarcotics coordinator. Under Naranjo's leadership, we have seen an acceleration of whole-of-government counternarcotics operations, with a priority focus on the main coca-growing regions, principally Tumaco and most recently Bajo Cauca, Antioquia. In June, Vice President Naranjo convened a strategic drug policy workshop bringing together a dozen Colombian agencies for a comprehensive assessment of their collective counternarcotics efforts and to lay the groundwork for a "unified vision" to address illicit crops. During the event, which was notable for its participation,

structure, and candid conversation, VP Naranjo said disparate counternarcotics strategies had failed because they focused solely on interdiction and eradication programs, and never addressed structural problems causing families to replant coca. He repeatedly stressed Colombia needed a paradigm shift to promote an integrated, whole-of-government approach. We could not agree more. We understand a follow-up strategic drug policy workshop will occur in September. This underscores VP Naranjo's commitment to enhance the government's counternarcotics strategy.

My June visit to Colombia with my colleagues on The Interdiction Committee further revealed improvements in the direction of Colombia's counternarcotics efforts, and this can almost certainly be attributed to the positive effects of Vice President Naranjo's leadership. The most encouraging development during our visit was the clear signal that Colombia is readying its various ministries to launch a second CEO in Antioquia later this month.

The Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) continues to assist the Government of Colombia with its interdiction and coca eradication operations; strengthening the country's rule of law capacity to counter money laundering, and prosecute and convict organized criminals; and supporting the expansion of government presence to rural areas to prevent organized criminal groups from gaining a foothold where state presence is weak. Anti-corruption is a guiding principal for INL efforts worldwide. In Colombia, INL supports the work of the independent audit agency to identify the misappropriation of public funds in priority areas of high coca cultivation with weak or no state presence. However, it will ultimately be up to Colombia to drive this effort. As was the case with Plan Colombia, U.S. assistance to support implementation of Colombia's counternarcotics strategy is a fraction of Colombia's overall investment.

The stakes could not be higher. Not only will failure to counter drugs jeopardize the hard won gains under Plan Colombia, but emboldened organized criminal groups and huge inflows of illicit earnings will erode citizen security, increase corruption in the upcoming 2018 and 2019 elections, foment increased illegal immigration, and destabilize neighboring states and Colombia itself. The Colombian government has been our partner in the fight against crime and narcotics since before the start of Plan Colombia in 1999. Reversing the current trend will not be easy, nor quick, but we are confident that it can be implemented with a robust strategy and sufficient resources.