



# Department of Justice

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**STATEMENT OF  
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**BEFORE THE  
SENATE CAUCUS ON INTERNATIONAL DRUG CONTROL  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**FOR A HEARING ENTITLED  
*“Adapting U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts in Colombia”***

**PRESENTED  
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**Before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control**  
**United States Senate**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, and Members of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control: on behalf of the approximately 9,000 employees of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), thank you for the opportunity to discuss the issue of drug trafficking across Colombia and United States (U.S.) counterdrug assistance to Colombia.

Since 1973, DEA has maintained a presence in Colombia, and currently has locations in Bogota and Cartagena. Our relationship with our Colombian law enforcement counterparts has developed significantly since its inception and has matured into one of DEA's strongest international partnerships. In Colombia, on a daily basis, DEA personnel coordinate and collaborate with our foreign host counterparts to combat Colombian Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) by participating in bilateral investigations and intelligence activities, sponsoring and conducting counter-narcotics training and engaging in other liaison activities.

Colombian TCOs remain a significant criminal drug threat to the United States, particularly with regard to illicit cocaine, and to a much lesser extent, heroin production. Colombian TCOs maintain control over production and supply of cocaine, heroin, and other illicit drugs destined for the United States. Nearly all of the cocaine smuggled to the U.S. is of Colombian origin and continues to pass through Central America and Mexico by land and sea. Smaller Colombian TCOs maintain direct cocaine and heroin pipelines into the United States through couriers and air cargo on commercial flights. Colombian TCOs also maintain a physical presence in the United States to assist in the laundering of illicit proceeds.

The return to record coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia after years of decline has and will continue to result in an increase in the illicit importation and use of cocaine here in the United States. In 2012, estimates of illicit coca cultivation were at an all-time low with an estimated 78,000 hectares (ha), which could yield approximately 210 metric tons of pure cocaine. In 2016, coca cultivation rose to 188,000 ha with a potential production of 710 metric tons of pure cocaine, a 238 % increase in potential cocaine production.<sup>1</sup>

The DEA continues to focus resources on the most significant, sophisticated, and violent TCOs. DEA's strategic priorities include targeting Colombian Consolidated Priority Organization Targets (CPOTs) and Priority Target Organizations (PTOs), which are the most significant international and domestic drug trafficking and money laundering organizations.

**CURRENT ASSESSMENT OF THE THREAT:**

**Drug Trafficking Organizations / Transnational Criminal Organizations**

*Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC):*

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<sup>1</sup> DEA Intelligence Brief, "Colombia Cocaine Production Expansion Contributes to Rise in Supply in the United States", August 2017, page 4.9.

After lengthy negotiations between the Government of Colombia (GOC) and the FARC, both parties reached an agreement, which was approved in December 2016 by the Colombian Congress. The agreement effectively disbanded the FARC. While implementation of this agreement continues, we remain concerned that former members of the FARC continue to be actively involved with illicit cocaine trafficking. DEA continues to work with GOC counterparts to investigate significant traffickers as they are identified.

#### *Colombian-based Transnational Organized Criminal Bands (BACRIM):*

There are multiple Colombian-based Transnational Organized Criminal Bands (BACRIMS), which are comprised primarily of former paramilitary units that are active in illicit drug trafficking. These BACRIMS include former members of the Auto-Defensas Unidas (AUC), which disbanded in 2006 and are involved with coca cultivation, production, and worldwide distribution of cocaine. These criminal organizations are distinguished from traditional trafficking groups by the fact that they are armed with military grade weaponry and have experience in guerrilla warfare. The most prominent BACRIM is the Clan del Golfo, which the GOC estimates to consist of an estimated 3,000 well-armed members<sup>2</sup>. While the Clan del Golfo is not the largest TCO in Colombia, it is Colombia's largest security threat and has been the most aggressive in direct attacks on the Colombian National Police (CNP). This was most evident in a rash of ambush-style assassination attacks on members of the CNP after the Clan del Golfo instituted a type of bounty system called Plan Pistola in May 2017. The criminal group offered approximately \$800 for each member of the CNP murdered, and publicly broadcast this bounty in all the communities under their control. During the following weeks, Plan Pistola resulted in the deaths of eight police officials and two civilians as well as an additional 35 wounded police officials. Clan del Golfo has issued similar bounties on law enforcement officers, typically following successful capture or kill operations that targeted high ranking Clan del Golfo members.

#### *Maritime Drug Trafficking Organizations:*

The vast majority of the cocaine departing from Colombia and arriving in Central America, and ultimately the United States, is being smuggled by maritime Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) based in the region surrounding Tumaco, Nariño. Coordinated investigations of these cases by DEA Colombia and their vetted CNP units show that hundreds of metric tons of cocaine are transported in panga style vessels from Tumaco to the shores of Guatemala and Mexico. While just one of these cocaine-laden panga vessels may only carry 500 kilograms of cocaine, the profit margin upon sale of the load in Central America can reap the owner(s) US\$5 million in profit after all associated expenses.

### **Major Drugs of Concern / Money Flow**

#### *Cocaine:*

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<sup>2</sup> DEA National Drug Threat Assessment page 11.

Colombian cocaine remains the most significant threat to the U.S. illicit cocaine market. Cocaine availability and use in the U.S. increased between 2014 and 2015 and could continue increasing in the near term. This increase is directly related to elevated levels of coca cultivation and potential pure cocaine production in Colombia. According to DEA's Cocaine Signature Program, a DEA intelligence gathering initiative that determines both the geographic origin of illicit cocaine and its processing origin, nearly 92 percent of cocaine samples seized and tested in the United States are Colombian origin<sup>3</sup>.

Coca cultivation occurs throughout Colombia, with the most significant areas of cultivation located in the eastern lowlands, southern and western rainforest, and northeast. It is estimated that Colombian coca cultivation showed an 18 percent increase between 2015 and 2016, rising from 159,000 ha to 188,000 ha. The area under cultivation in 2016 was capable of producing 710 metric tons (MT) of pure cocaine, a more than 35 percent increase from 520 MT in 2015.<sup>4</sup>

The unprecedented spike in coca cultivation has been driven by several factors, including the end of aerial eradication and the decrease in manual eradication of coca plants in Colombia. Coca eradication in 2016 reached its lowest level since at least 1996.<sup>5,6,7</sup> In 2016, 18,009 ha were manually eradicated, an 81 percent decrease from the 95,731 ha subject to eradication in 2008.<sup>8,9</sup> These reduced eradication levels coincided with a decline of two-thirds in Colombia's manual eradication budget between 2008 and 2015, resulting in a 90 percent reduction in the number of manual eradicators.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, coca growers have employed countermeasures including blockades of manual eradication teams and have shifted coca fields to more remote and inaccessible locations, including national parks and indigenous reserves.<sup>11</sup>

With the record levels of coca cultivation and cocaine production occurring in Colombia, the DEA is concerned that cocaine importation and subsequent abuse will continue to increase in the United States. Street level distributors may look to increase the number of drug sale points or find ways to increase their customer base. Another particularly alarming concern is the increased presence of the highly potent synthetic opioid fentanyl within cocaine being encountered on the illicit market.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> DEA National Drug Threat Assessment page 90.

<sup>4</sup> ONDCP Press Release "ONDCP Release Data on Cocaine Cultivation and Production in Colombia," March 14, 2017, "

<sup>5</sup> The Office of National Drug Control Policy, "National Drug Control Strategy Data Supplement 2016," January 2017, [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/ondcp/policy-and-research/2016\\_ndcs\\_data\\_supplement\\_20170110.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/ondcp/policy-and-research/2016_ndcs_data_supplement_20170110.pdf), retrieved March 29, 2017. Extracted information is classified (U). Overall document classification is (U).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "2016 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume 1, Drug and Chemical Control," March 2016, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/253655.pdf>, retrieved June 17, 2016. Extracted information is classified (U). Overall document classification is (U).

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "2017 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume 1, Drug and Chemical Control," March 2017, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268025.pdf>, retrieved April 13, 2017. Extracted information is classified (U). Overall document classification is (U).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The Office of National Drug Control Policy, "National Drug Control Strategy Data Supplement 2016," January 2017, [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/ondcp/policy-and-research/2016\\_ndcs\\_data\\_supplement\\_20170110.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/ondcp/policy-and-research/2016_ndcs_data_supplement_20170110.pdf), retrieved March 29, 2017. Extracted information is classified (U). Overall document classification is (U).

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "2017 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume 1, Drug and Chemical Control," March 2017, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268025.pdf>, retrieved April 13, 2017. Extracted information is classified (U). Overall document classification is (U).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> DEA Intelligence Brief, "Colombia Cocaine Production Expansion Contributes to Rise in Supply in the United States", August 2017, page 9.

### *Heroin:*

While the vast majority of the US supply of heroin is from Mexico, according to DEA's Heroin Signature Program (HSP), a program designed to provide scientific data for determining the processing methodologies employed to convert opium to heroin in defined geographic areas, Colombia is the second largest supplier, particularly east of the Mississippi River. Most of Colombia's opium poppy cultivation occurs at high altitudes along the slopes of the central Andean Mountains in southwestern Colombia, including the departments of Cauca, Huila, Nariño, and Tolima. In 2015, the U.S. Government estimated that 1,100 hectares of opium poppy were under cultivation in Colombia, sufficient to produce about three metric tons of pure heroin. While the overall poppy cultivation and heroin production in Colombia is low, it still arrives in the U.S. and adds to the overall opioid epidemic.<sup>13</sup>

### *Money Laundering:*

Money laundering continues to be a significant challenge with regards to the Colombian counternarcotic situation. Drug money is deposited in the U.S. and sold on the Colombian black market or sent to Colombian front companies via U.S. bank accounts. Sophisticated money laundering methods used to conceal billions of dollars in drug proceeds include bulk cash smuggling, contraband trade, black market peso exchange, wire transfers, and a barter system. A large portion, potentially billions of dollars, of drug proceeds return to Colombia via Mexico, Panama, and various Caribbean nations as bulk cash cargo shipments, via maritime vessels, general aviation or human couriers.

The U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Controls (OFAC) publishes the list of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN List) on its website and in the *Federal Register*. The SDN list includes individuals, groups, and entities such as drug traffickers designated pursuant to Executive Order 12978, which is specific to Colombia, and the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, which applies worldwide. Any assets the designated persons may have under U.S. jurisdiction are frozen. U.S. persons are prohibited from conducting financial or commercial transactions with these entities and individuals, essentially cutting off a designee's ability to conduct any further business in the United States. Since 1995, more than 3,800 individuals and entities have been named on the SDN list for their role in narcotics trafficking and related activity. Of the 3,800 names, approximately 2,200, or 58 percent, are individuals and entities in or related to Colombia. These designations include drug trafficking organizations such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and United Self-Defenders of Colombia (AUC).

## **DEA RESPONSE TO THE COLOMBIAN DRUG THREAT**

DEA and its partners face a challenging situation addressing the Colombian illicit drug threat both domestically and internationally. The record increase in export quality cocaine production and the uncertain role the former members of the FARC will have in drug trafficking are two of the primary challenges DEA faces in Colombia. DEA prioritizes its resources by targeting its efforts on CPOTs and PTOs, which are the most significant international and domestic drug trafficking and money laundering organizations. We partner with federal, state,

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<sup>13</sup> DEA Intelligence Report, "2015 Heroin Signature Program Report" August 2017

local, tribal, and international entities to target these identified threats utilizing a range of programs.

### *DEA Country Office*

Since 1973, DEA has maintained a permanent presence in Colombia, working alongside our Colombian partners. DEA has offices in Bogota and Cartagena, which include the Andean Regional Office responsible for DEA efforts in Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. The DEA's presence in Colombia represents our largest international footprint. The ability to have DEA Special Agents assigned to offices throughout Colombia is a reflection of the level of cooperation that we continue to enjoy with our Colombian law enforcement counterparts. For example, DEA has agents assigned to several units within the Colombia National Police and the Cuerpo Tecnico De Investigacion (CTI). Post peace process, DEA Colombia is proactively monitoring and targeting the developing criminal networks that will replace the role of the FARC in the international cocaine supply chain. Specifically, our offices combat methods of operations used by the various regional DTOs by participating in bilateral investigations and intelligence activities, sponsoring and conducting counternarcotics training as well as engaging in foreign liaison. Our excellent working relationship with our foreign host counterparts and interagency partners has led to an outstanding level of cooperation and support by Colombian security forces and has contributed to a high number of arrests and extraditions of significant DTO members over the past several years. In 2016 alone, Colombian security forces arrested 490 individuals under investigation by the DEA, including two CPOTs.

### *Judicial Wire Intercept Program (JWIP):*

The GOC hosts one of the largest JWIPs in the world. This program gathers strategic intelligence which assists local and international law enforcement efforts in investigating large scale drug trafficking organizations responsible for the distribution of ton quantities of illicit drugs. DEA funds and jointly supports several JWIP suites throughout Colombia. Thanks to the collaborative partnership between the United States and GOC, these JWIP suites have been instrumental in the investigation and subsequent arrest of high level cocaine traffickers in Colombia and the United States. This year alone, the JWIP program has led to the seizure of nearly 70 tons of cocaine from DTOs operating in the Tumaco, Cali, and Medellin regions.

### *International Enforcement: Sensitive Investigative Unit:*

A significant component of DEA's International Drug Enforcement Priorities is to support and expand a key element of DEA's international efforts: the Sensitive Investigative Unit (SIU) program. DEA's SIU program aims to build effective and vetted host nation units capable of conducting complex investigations targeting major TCOs. Colombia is DEA's largest SIU program with several hundred vetted and dedicated officers who often place their lives in grave jeopardy to investigate violent DTOs. The Colombian SIU program represents a true partnership between DEA and the GOC, working together to investigate and disrupt large scale DTOs. As a testament to this partnership, the DEA training academy displays a 'Wall of Honor' which is dedicated to SIU officers, including multiple Colombian officers, who have lost their lives in the line of duty. To highlight the success of these units, from 2007 to 2015, the Colombia SIU assisted in the arrest or extradition of 47 CPOTs, the dismantlement of the North Valle Cartel, and the first generation leadership of BACRIMS. On a broader scale, as a result of

complex bilateral investigations conducted by Colombia SIU enforcement groups, over 1,223 defendants have been extradited from Colombia to the United States over the past seven years.

*Special Operations Division:*

Established in 1994, the Special Operations Division (SOD) is a DEA-led multi-agency operations coordination center with participation from Federal law enforcement agencies, the Department of Defense, the Intelligence Community, and international law enforcement partners. SOD's mission is to coordinate established strategies and operations to dismantle national and international trafficking organizations by attacking their command and control communications. Special emphasis is placed on those major drug trafficking and narco-terrorism organizations that operate across jurisdictional boundaries on a regional, national, and international level. Within SOD there are Bilateral Investigation Units that utilize extraterritorial authorities to infiltrate, indict, arrest, and convict previously "untouchable" TCO leaders involved in drug trafficking. Additionally, there are SOD assigned Staff Coordinators whose primary focus is to coordinate investigative and enforcement efforts between law enforcement officers in the United States and Colombia.

*El Paso Intelligence Center:*

The El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC) is a national intelligence center focused on supporting law enforcement efforts in the Western Hemisphere. Through its 24-hour watch function, EPIC provides law enforcement officers, investigators, and analysts immediate access to participating agencies' databases. This function is critical in the dissemination of relevant information in support of tactical and investigative agencies, deconfliction, and officer safety. EPIC also provides significant tactical, operational, and strategic intelligence support to federal, state and local law enforcement agencies. As part of the shared commitment to counter Colombian TCOs, the GOC has an assigned Colombian National Police liaison at EPIC.

**CONCLUSION**

A return to record cocaine production in Colombia in just a few short years presents a significant challenge for U.S. law enforcement officials. Colombian TCOs will continue to dominate the production and supply of nearly all of the cocaine destined for the U.S. markets. Colombian TCOs will continue to rely on Mexican TCOs to purchase and distribute wholesale amounts of cocaine and heroin in the United States. The U.S. can expect to see increased cocaine seizures, new cocaine users, and cocaine-related deaths. By maximizing the benefit of a sustained partnership between Colombia and United States, DEA will continue to collect and disseminate intelligence to United States and foreign law enforcement agencies with the goal of indicting and arresting the leadership of criminal networks. By eliminating the command and control of these criminal networks, DEA can severely disrupt the networks' ability to operate.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before the Caucus today, and I look forward to answering your questions.