

Statement of Ambassador Todd D. Robinson
Assistant Secretary of State for
International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
Before the
Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
“The Nexus between the Illicit Narcotics Trade and Corruption”
November 17, 2021

Chairman Whitehouse, Co-Chairman Grassley, distinguished Members of the Caucus; thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. The topic of this hearing – the nexus between the illicit narcotics trade and corruption – could not be more timely or important to the work of the Bureau I have led since September, the Department of State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL).

President Biden has identified corruption as a critical threat to U.S. national security and to democracy. The illicit drug trade is probably the single greatest revenue stream behind corruption globally. No other criminal revenue stream approaches the scale of illicit drug profits, which reaches hundreds of billions of dollars annually. While corruption takes many forms and stems from many sources, wealth on this scale gives transnational criminal organizations an almost unlimited capacity to corrupt government institutions and guarantee themselves more secure operating environments. Conversely, no criminal organization can thrive in the long-term or grow into a threat to democracy or international stability without significant corruption. This interdependency between the two threats requires integrated countermeasures, and I will briefly summarize how INL approaches this challenge.

INL Support for Holistic Criminal Justice Reform

First, Congress must be credited with playing an important role in supporting INL’s evolution to confront corruption. INL’s original mandate when the Bureau was created over 40 years ago was more restricted to illicit drug crops and trafficking. The nexus between drug trafficking and corruption was never a secret, and our foreign assistance programs included support for vetted units that addressed corruption in cooperation with law enforcement partners. But INL did not acquire the authorities to address the institutional and environmental factors that enabled corruption until the mid-1990s, when Congress expanded our mandate, giving INL authority to coordinate U.S. diplomacy, foreign assistance,

and multilateral engagement targeting all forms of global crime on behalf of the Secretary of State.

INL's diplomacy and foreign assistance programs have since evolved beyond drug supply reduction and intervention to engage the entire spectrum of criminal justice institutions of our international partners. INL now works with law enforcement, judges, prosecutors, and correctional institutions. All links in this criminal justice chain need resiliency to prevent sophisticated trafficking organizations from exploiting the weakest link. INL works closely with the Department of Justice, including the Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training (OPDAT) and the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP), the U.S. Agency for International Development, and other interagency partners, as well as with international organizations, civil society, the private sector, and U.S. state and local experts to promote fair, transparent, and accountable criminal justice systems capable of investigating and sanctioning corruption. By helping our international partners become more effective and resilient, our work helps prevent and combat international drug trafficking and corruption in tandem.

Anticorruption is a core INL mission that is interwoven into our work in over 90 countries. Conceptually, our efforts fall under three pillars, all aimed at supporting prevention, enforcement, and accountability. The first is building shared standards and political will against corruption at the global level; the second is strengthening capacity in partners to prevent, detect, and hold accountable those that participate in corruption; and the third is employing targeted sanctions as well as deterrence tools to discourage corruption and isolate offenders.

Building the Global Anticorruption Framework

Over the past two decades, INL has led U.S. efforts to develop shared global standards against corruption and the architecture for anticorruption cooperation across borders. INL leadership was key to negotiating the world's only global, legally binding commitments against corruption, the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), completed in 2003. Based on U.S. domestic best practices, this treaty now requires 188 governments to implement the same anticorruption standards to which we hold ourselves. INL also leads U.S. participation in multilateral frameworks including the G20's Anticorruption Working Group, and anticorruption discussions in the G7, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and the Organization of American States. These shared standards and commitments provide us with diplomatic leverage that is bearing results.

For example, over the past two years, INL led efforts against foreign bribery through the G20 Anticorruption Working Group. We worked closely with like-minded partners to secure the first ever time-bound commitment from all G20 countries to criminalize foreign bribery and enforce foreign bribery legislation. This commitment puts pressure on countries like China and India to act against companies using bribes to secure business abroad, leveling the playing field for U.S. businesses. Leveraging this achievement in the G20, the United States was then able to secure a similar commitment from the 188 States Parties to the UNCAC in June 2021 at the UN General Assembly Special Session against Corruption. Progress in building these global standards helps shrink the enabling environment that allows drug trafficking and all other forms of transnational crime to thrive.

The development and promotion of these global commitments are critical to achieving sustainable buy-in from governments. Because other countries have participated in the negotiation of these instruments and agreed to these standards, the United States stands on more solid ground to urge governments to demonstrate the political will needed to live up to them.

Integrating Anticorruption into INL Capacity Building

Our foreign assistance programs similarly integrate anticorruption objectives into broader country and regional strategies to fight illicit drugs and promote broader criminal justice reform.

INL programming supports the capacity of governments and civil societies to build transparent and accountable institutions, promote public sector integrity, and strengthen compliance with international anticorruption standards. Our assistance also helps to strengthen criminal justice authorities' ability to detect, investigate, and prosecute corruption, including corruption related to drug trafficking.

For example, for the past several years, INL has worked closely with Albania in cooperation with OPDAT and ICITAP to advance anticorruption efforts by providing training, mentorship, and equipment. INL's engagement has successfully expanded the effectiveness of Albanian authorities to investigate and deter high-level corruption and organized crime. In October, Albania's INL-supported Specialized Anti-Corruption Body and Internal Affairs Service arrested 12 people, including five corrupt police officers, involved in cannabis cultivation and trafficking.

INL works closely with the Department of Justice, the U.S. Agency for International Development and other interagency partners to build foreign law enforcement and justice capacity to investigate and prosecute complex corruption and drug trafficking cases, including by providing funding to support the deployment of expert advisors. For example, INL works with the U.S. Department of Justice in Pakistan to train and support prosecutors handling complex financial crimes and money laundering linked to corruption. Prior to August 15, 2021, INL's Afghanistan program included support for a judicial unit based at the Counter Narcotics Justice Center, which served as the central facility for the investigation, prosecution, and trial of major drug and drug-related corruption cases.

INL's anticorruption efforts hit every facet of our programming in Mexico. Particularly at the state level, our partnership with Mexico has helped strengthen the capacity of security and justice institutions to reduce opportunities for corruption, prosecute offenders, and promote a culture of accountability. Our work complements robust interagency programs, including those of USAID. Our joint work in helping Mexico transition to a more open and transparent accusatorial judicial system is a centerpiece of these efforts. INL support helped Mexico to achieve international accreditation of Mexican security and justice institutions to increase transparency. Such efforts are essential for reducing crime rates, improving criminal justice processes, and protecting human rights. Going forward under the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities, the United States will expand its partnership with Mexico to counter corruption through the investigation, seizure, and forfeiture of corrupt officials' illicit assets. We will also work to expand local institutional capacity to increase the investigation and prosecution of organized criminal groups. The success of these measures limits opportunities for drug trafficking organizations to leverage corruption to advance and protect their operations.

Another way by which INL mainstreams anticorruption goals into our counterdrug programs is through our support for vetted units. Vetted units are investigative units of foreign law enforcement personnel that are put through a security screening or vetting process, to include background checks and polygraph examinations. To cite one example, in cooperation with the Department of Homeland Security's Homeland Security Investigations, INL has equipped and trained a vetted team of Colombian officers to build strong cases against criminal organizations and corrupt officials who enable money laundering. Since April 2020, that team has reported seizing 2,880 kilograms in illicit drugs and over \$9 million in counterfeit and contraband products.

Corruption and the illicit drug trade cannot be separated from what motivates both – the money. Illicit finance is the genuine nexus between the drug trade and corruption. The infrastructure used by drug traffickers and other transnational criminals to launder illicit proceeds is extensive and worldwide. In addition to movement through the traditional financial system, informal value transfer systems, and bulk cash smuggling, it is increasingly common for criminals to move illicit proceeds through trade-based money laundering and the exploitation of new technologies. Regardless of the methodology, transnational criminal organizations increasingly outsource the laundering of criminal proceeds to professional money laundering networks, whose specialized expertise enables them to evolve and adapt more quickly.

To strengthen international capacities to deter, detect, and disrupt these illicit financial flows, INL provides support to strengthen anti-money laundering capacities of international partners in line with international standards. Our assistance efforts seek to strengthen the capacity of financial intelligence units and other relevant authorities to collect and share financial intelligence, as well as to provide case-based mentoring on financial crime investigations. INL programs are also working to promote beneficial ownership transparency in partner jurisdictions to prevent criminals from hiding illicit proceeds – a critical challenge for progress against corruption writ large.

INL's partnerships with other federal agencies and international organizations is crucial to the success of our efforts. To cite one example, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime has a global platform for providing high-quality capacity assistance based on leading international standards, and INL is a proud supporter of its work, including its flagship CRIMJUST program, which provides training and support to criminal justice institutions across multiple countries along major drug trafficking routes. INL has contributed more than \$29 million over the past five years to CRIMJUST programs in eight countries, including in Mexico, Nigeria, and other West African countries to bolster cross-border cooperation against drug trafficking and other forms of transnational organized crime.

Deterrence Tools

To complement and reinforce our diplomacy and assistance, INL also works with interagency counterparts to employ targeted sanctions and deterrence tools to discourage high-level corruption and support the work of law enforcement. INL manages two rewards programs targeting high-level drug traffickers and other transnational criminal leaders, which have helped our law enforcement partners

bring over 75 international drug kingpins and crime bosses to justice. INL also manages two anticorruption visa restriction authorities, and, in close cooperation with the Department of the Treasury, supports implementation of the corruption prong of the Global Magnitsky sanctions program.

The public designation of corrupt actors under our visa denial authorities has significantly reinforced our broader anticorruption agenda, including through increased media attention. We have also seen these designations spur governments to remove designees from office or to open law enforcement investigations and to build momentum to adopt anticorruption reforms. INL has greatly expanded the use of these tools since 2019, completing 2.5 times more visa restrictions cases and seven times more reward cases than in the previous two years.

Expanding the Knowledge Base

Addressing the nexus among various forms of transnational organized crimes, including corruption and drug trafficking, requires evidence-based approaches. To expand our organization's understanding of this complex issue, INL partners with academia and civil society to expand our knowledge on what interventions work. For example, through its Justice Sector Training, Research, and Coordination *plus* (*JusTRAC+*) program, INL partners with the University of South Carolina's Rule of Law Collaborative and the American Bar Association. JusTRAC+ convenes academics, civil society, and U.S. government practitioners, to share evidence-based approaches to combating corruption-enabled transnational crime. This information is then promulgated through practitioner toolkits, trainings, symposia, and an online knowledge hub.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, my testimony has focused on the work of my Bureau but let me end with an important point that cannot be stressed often enough: political will on the part of our partners to confront corruption and the drug trade is absolutely critical. Even the best resourced and planned U.S. foreign policy intervention cannot succeed if our partners are not equally or more committed to the challenge. Governments must own their efforts to enact reforms and disrupt drug networks and the corruption they engender.

The international anticorruption standards we have developed and promoted help immensely, and our assistance programs can nudge countries in the right direction. But long-term progress to close pathways for corruption and push the

illicit drug trade to the margins must come from our partners. To mobilize political will for further reforms, the United States must continue to engage civil society and public audiences. Governments that are accountable to their publics and value contributions from civil society have much greater resiliency against corruption, drug trafficking, and other criminal threats. No country is immune to these challenges, and we share them ourselves. The United States must also achieve further success here at home to reduce our own vulnerabilities, such as reducing demand for illicit drugs. By holding ourselves and our partners accountable, and recognizing that these are shared challenges, we give greater strength to our public messaging and increase our appeal as a partner.