Context Paper:
Venezuela’s Fight against Drug Trafficking

Venezuela is active in the fight against the production, consumption, and trafficking of illegal drugs. In addition to a consistent strategy of interdicting drug shipments, Venezuelan authorities have undertaken a set of aggressive steps to curtail drug trafficking.

The report issued by the State Department on February 27th revealed the inertia of U.S. bureaucracy. Discrediting of Venezuela in the fight against drugs is a political maneuver initiated by the Bush administration.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK
The principal institution charged with fighting the use and trafficking of illegal drugs in Venezuela is the National Anti-Drug Office (ONA in Spanish), which is led by National Guard Col. Nestor Reverol and is part of the Ministry of Interior and Justice.1

ONA’s actions and strategies are outlined in five-year national plans, the most recent being the 2008-2013 National Anti-Drug Plan. The plan is divided into four main sections: demand reduction, supply reduction, international cooperation, and money laundering. The budget for anti-drug programs and operations was $1.2 million in 2004; $1.8 million in 2005; $4.5 million in 2006; $6.3 million in 2007; and $9.8 million in 2008—an increase of 717 percent over five years.

DRUG INTERDICTION
Venezuela seized 50 tons of illegal drugs in 2008; 57 tons in 2007; 60 tons in 2006; 77 tons in 2005; and 43 tons in 2004. In each of these years, the majority of the drugs seized were cocaine.2 Furthermore, between January 1, 2008 and July 8, 2008, Venezuela seized nearly 200 tons of the chemical precursors used to make drugs. According to the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Venezuela ranks fourth in the world in total seizures of cocaine, behind the U.S., Colombia and Spain.3

Contrary to claims made by U.S. officials, cocaine seizures by Venezuelan authorities increased following the Drug Enforcement Agency’s (DEA) departure. In 2005, the year in which full cooperation between Venezuela and the United States was suspended, Venezuela seized 58.9 tons of cocaine; this was, however, a unique year which featured major multinational operations. In 2006, Venezuela seized 39 tons of cocaine, and 31.8 tons were seized in 2007. This average to 43.2 tons of cocaine seized per year tons of cocaine seized per year, significantly higher than the average of 27.1 tons seized during 2002-2004, when the two countries had the cooperation agreement. Another 29.2 tons of cocaine were seized between January and December 5th, 2008, higher than the average seized when the agreement was in full effect.

Furthermore, the politicization of the fight against drugs, characteristic of the Bush administration, led to Venezuela being criticized for not seizing more of the cocaine being trafficked through its territory. However, it is well known that interdictions of this sort are rarely able to stop a majority of the drugs moving through a country. According to the Drug Policy Alliance, U.S. authorities successfully interdict only 10 to 15% of all heroin and 30% of all cocaine being trafficked into the U.S.4

The 2008 U.N. World Drug Report states that 78% of the 610 tons of cocaine produced in Colombia were transported by sea in 2006.5 This leaves only 22%, or 134.2 tons, that could have been transported by land or air.6 It is unlikely that all 134.2 tons could have been trafficked through Venezuela, because this assumes that cocaine is not trafficked by land or air through any other country. Therefore, Venezuelan authorities, who seized 39 tons of cocaine in 2006, interdicted at least 20% of the cocaine flowing through the country at the time. This figure, calculated using official U.N. data, is in line with the percentage of cocaine seized by the United States.

PROSECUTION AND INCARCERATION
In an interview with The Washington Post, Attorney General Isaías Rodríguez noted: “In my tenure here, and this has never been done before, we’ve leveled 10,147 accusations against people for illicit drugs. . . . With these actions, we’ve gotten 4,274 sentences, and 86 percent of them have been favorable. . . . We’re talking about 3,670 convictions.” On March 8, 2008 Venezuelan authorities arrested a suspected drug lord and arms smuggler with paramilitary links wanted in the U.S.8 There are currently over 4,000 people in jail for drug trafficking, and so far this year there have been

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over 4,600 people charged with this crime. \(^9\)

**Venezuela also has a record of extraditing known drug traffickers.** Colonel Reverol noted that two drug kingpins have been extradited to the United States over the past two years. \(^10\)

### DESTRUCTION OF LANDING STRIPS

One of the main elements of Venezuela’s fight against drug trafficking in 2008 was the destruction of illicit landing strips in isolated areas used by small planes carrying illegal drugs. **Over 223 of these landing strips were destroyed as of September 2008.** \(^11\)

### RADAR INSTALLATION

By November 2008, Venezuela installed ten Chinese-made radar stations to track and intercept planes carrying illegal drugs. The purchase and installation of these stations, **costing $260 million**, have allowed the Venezuelan government to improve its monitoring of airspace. **The National Assembly is likely to endorse a law that will allow the Venezuelan Air Force to shoot down planes trafficking illegal drugs, similar to programs used in Colombia and Brazil.**

U.S. officials have claimed that drug flights through Venezuela increased in the past few years, and they released surveillance data about suspected flights which have landed in Mexico and the Dominican Republic, among other countries. \(^12\) These claims raise two questions: Why is it that Venezuela is singled out and criticized for drug trafficking when it is clearly a global problem? Moreover, why are these planes not detained upon landing? \(^13\)

### POLITICAL AND GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Venezuela is in a difficult situation with regards to the fight against drug trafficking. **While it consistently battles drug traffickers and takes measures to limit trafficking through its territory, Venezuela also finds itself geographically situated between one of the world’s largest producers of cocaine, Colombia, and one of its biggest consumers, the U.S.** Moreover, Venezuela shares a 1,400-mile-long border with Colombia, much of which follows rugged and inhospitable terrain that has long been the scene of violence, crime, smuggling, and trafficking.

While Colombian authorities have sought to decrease the production of cocaine in their country with ample assistance from the U.S.-funded Plan Colombia, overall production has not markedly decreased in recent years. In fact, the 2008 UNODC report indicates that the total area under coca leaf cultivation increased by **27% in Colombia in 2007.** \(^14\) Furthermore, traffickers are using increasingly sophisticated methods and routes to get drugs into the U.S., the region’s biggest market.

In an interview with the *Washington Post* in late 2007, Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez spoke of the difficulties Venezuela faces in preventing the entrance of drugs from Colombia: “It’s one of the longest borders in the world. It’s more than 1,000 kilometers [2,050 kilometers], a frontier, with mountains, jungles, and rivers . . . 57 percent of the water that comes into Venezuela comes from Colombia. . . . So we’re not just talking about trafficking through the air, but we’re talking about trafficking that has several options.” \(^15\)

**Venezuela has long argued that the fight against drug trafficking must be focused on demand and not just supply.** Drug-consuming countries like the U.S. must take more responsibility in curbing internal demand. In a recent interview, Col. Reverol addressed this point: “We’re between the biggest producer of cocaine and the biggest consumer of cocaine, and we’re the problem?” \(^16\)

### INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Venezuela is a signatory to over 50 bilateral cooperation agreements with 37 countries, including Spain, France and Portugal. Venezuela has also signed and ratified the 1988 U.N. Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and the 1971 U.N. Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and it is a signatory to the 1961 U.N. Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs.

Venezuela actively participates in the Organization of American States’ (OAS) Inter-American Commission for the Control of Drug Abuse (CICAD in Spanish). **Venezuela voluntarily entered the CICAD's Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism, through which the OAS has worked with Venezuelan authorities to judge the country’s progress on fighting drugs. The most recent report was completed in 2005-2006, in which CICAD recognized Venezuela’s efforts in implementing the 2002-2007 National Anti-Drug Plan.** \(^17\)

Venezuela also engages in regional anti-drug cooperation with countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia. On August 20, 2008, Venezuela and Brazil held a joint aerial training exercise to improve response against furtive flights that use national airspace to transport drugs.
COOPERATION WITH THE UNITED STATES

Cooperation with the U.S. was difficult during the Bush administration. In 2005, Venezuela suspended cooperation with the DEA, after which drug seizures in Venezuela increased significantly. Venezuela took this measure over accusations that DEA agents were not working cooperatively with their Venezuelan counterparts and had engaged in espionage.

vilify Venezuela, evidence of the Bush administration’s unwillingness to engage in a true partnership with Venezuela in the fight against drugs.

Furthermore, the Bush administration limited the country’s ability to adequately fight drug trafficking. They blocked Venezuela’s attempt to purchase 24 Super Toucan planes from Brazil, the very planes that would be used to shoot down illegal drug trafficking flights and better monitor Venezuela’s territory. The DEA also refused to sell chemical reagents necessary for the detection of cocaine, heroin and amphetamines. This has forced Venezuela to produce its own chemical reagents.

In spite of U.S. allegations that Venezuela was not doing enough in the fight against drugs, President Chávez met with U.S. Ambassador Patrick Duddy on July 5, 2008. During this meeting the President said: “we have to [cooperate] again. . . . to fight against drug trafficking and international crime.”

Despite this gesture and the facts at hand, the Bush administration continued its campaign to portray Venezuela as unwilling to fight drugs. Once again, U.S. officials made inflammatory comments about Venezuela. On August 26th, 2008, drug czar John Walters claimed that he had been denied a visa to go to Venezuela. In reality, Mr. Walters officially asked for a meeting with the President on the 27th and 28th of August, days in which the President’s agenda was full and no meeting could be arranged. The Venezuelan Foreign Ministry proposed alternative dates, but the meeting had not yet been scheduled as of September 3rd.

Since then, Venezuela and the U.S. have only cooperated on technical matters. In an interview with a Colombian radio station in May 2007, Thomas Adler, the DEA Director for Venezuela, stated: “The collaboration and the information, the sharing of information between officials has improved since last year. It has improved since the day I arrived in November [2006]. Thankfully there is a new drug czar, Nestor Reverol, the new president of the ONA, with whom we have great collaboration.”

During President Bush’s tenure, further discussions on re-negotiating any bilateral cooperation agreement were complicated by statements made by U.S. officials. In January 2008, Rep. Bill Delahunt (D-Mass.) met with President Chávez to discuss moving forward on cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking. Three hours after the meeting, U.S. drug czar John Walters, who was on an official visit to Colombia, made inflammatory comments accusing Venezuela of working with drug traffickers. These false and misleading comments were clear attempts to

MOVING FORWARD

Venezuela will continue to fight drug trafficking, seeking to interdict drug shipments while taking other aggressive steps such as the destruction of illegal landing strips, the shooting down of illegal flights, and the prosecution of those who participate in trafficking activities.

Venezuela also looks for the fight against drug trafficking to be viewed as a product of demand more than of supply. While drugs may come from areas in South America and
may be smuggled through Venezuela, serious reductions in demand in consuming countries will have a positive effect on the fight against drugs.

Venezuela will continue to cooperate with the international community in fighting drug trafficking, and hopes for consistent engagement by U.S. officials in the fight against this scourge.

Further information on this issue, including drug seizure and arrest statistics, is available at: [http://www.embavenez-us.org/?pagina=drugs/drugs_intro.php&titulo=Drugs%20Fighting](http://www.embavenez-us.org/?pagina=drugs/drugs_intro.php&titulo=Drugs%20Fighting)

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2 The figure for 2008 does not include all seizures; it is based on data up to December 5, 2008.
10 Ibid.
19 2008 UNODC World Drug Report
27 Ian James, “US, Venezuela increasingly at odds on drugs”