



Honduras and US: Heightened Partners in War on Drugs

US Ups Support with Naval and Air Blockade on Honduran Coastline

By Marcela Estrada

March 18, 2014

Español “The party is over for drug traffickers,” according to Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández.

Since his inauguration in January, Hernández has concentrated all his efforts into fighting drug trafficking in his country. Honduras is one of several Central American countries that have become drug-trafficking logistics and transit hubs, facilitating the flow of drugs from South America into Mexico and the United States. For this reason, Hernández has agreed to work closely with the Obama administration through a naval and air blockade operation along the Honduran coastline.

Samuel Reyes, Honduran minister of defense, announced last week that the Southern Command of the United States Coast Guard would reactivate its activities in international waters close to Honduras, with the aim of strengthening the Honduran naval shield. Starting this week, the US government will send four armed vessels, two cutters, and two frigates.

These ships will operate as shields in international waters off the coast of Honduras, and will work in coordination with the Honduran Navy. One frigate would be located in the Atlantic Ocean, and another one in the Pacific. They will collaborate in monitoring, intelligence, and interdiction functions, helping to identify ships suspected of carrying drugs. They will share information with Honduran military authorities to proceed with the “interdiction” — military jargon for disrupting a suspect’s communication and provisioning lines.

Naval operations will be supported by US aircraft patrolling the area, flying through domestic and international airspace with the permission of Honduran authorities. Arrested suspects will be tried in Honduras or the United States, depending on which maritime space they are captured in.

President Hernández has shown great confidence in the success of this operation. Last Friday, he reiterated that the problem of drug trafficking in Honduras “is a matter of life or death,” for which the naval shield “will be of great help.” At the same time, the president blamed US consumers for fueling the drug trade that afflicts both nations.

“Support must be comprehensive, because this is not an exclusively Honduran issue, we suffer the consequences of the behavior of [drug] addicts there, in the United States,” said Hernández.

Besides US cooperation, the National Congress of Honduras approved the Law on the Protection of Airspace, which empowers the Honduran Air Force to shoot down any airplane suspected of smuggling drugs through the Caribbean that illegally enters its airspace. The law, which was passed in January, took effect in early March; however, Minister Reyes admitted that despite legislation being in place, drug operations have continued.



Faced with the threat of being shot down, drug cartels have changed their routes, transporting drugs by maritime means through containers arriving at Puerto Cortés, Honduras’s largest port. They are also using short flights with stops in Panama and Nicaragua, and then entering the Honduran Mosquitia — a rainforest between Honduras and Nicaragua — in crop dusters, thus avoiding detection by radar. According to a State Department report, 79 percent of flights carrying drugs from South America pass through La Mosquitia.

The air exclusion law has caused concern among US government officials. In January, William Brownfield, US assistant secretary of state for narcotics, and John F. Kelly, chief of the Southern Command, visited Hernández to express concern with the legislation, arguing that in some of these “narco-planes” could be undercover US intelligence agents.

This, however, did not stop the agreement between Honduran and US government officials to strengthen surveillance in maritime drug trafficking routes. According to intelligence sources

from the Southern Command, 80 percent of drugs coming from South America to the United States travel by sea, and only 20 percent by air.

The Failed War on Drugs

Drug traffickers have penetrated Honduran public institutions, finding the necessary support in the judiciary and the police to continue their operations in the country. This is one of the main causes for the widespread violence that plagues Honduran society.

In an interview with *La Tribuna* newspaper, Ángel Edmundo Orellana, former head of the Honduran attorney general's office, believes that "trafficking has grown to the point where today we are a country virtually kidnapped by the drug trade." This situation, according to Orellana, "is a direct consequence of the abandonment that the United States has particularly subjected Honduras to."

However, there are those who differ on the impact that US drug consumption may have on trafficking in Honduras. Juan Carlos Hidalgo, public policy analyst for Latin America at the Cato Institute, argues:

"While the US market is the most important, it is not the only one that counts. Drug use has been increasing in other regions such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia, even in the Middle East. This indicates that even if the United States managed to control the consumption of illicit substances in their territory (which has failed over 40 years of fighting against drugs), other regions may compensate any gap in demand. There will be demand for a long while, and therefore, there will be supply."

In this sense, it would seem that there is no solution to the drug problem; but Hidalgo believes that there is one: legalization. The analyst explained that "by legalizing drugs, governments would have more control over the drug market, and could regulate and tax its production and sales, as they do with tobacco and alcohol."

Honduras remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world, and President Hernández blames drug trafficking for the country's violence epidemic. In this regard, Hidalgo says that "the biggest advantage of legalization is that it would largely drive criminal elements away from the drug business, which would reduce, if not eradicate, the violence and corruption associated with prohibition. No legalization advocate says that this is a panacea. However, it would be substantially better than the patently failed Drug War."