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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-784](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, criminal organizations transport hundreds of tons of illegal drugs from South America to the United States through a 6 million square mile “transit zone” including Central America, the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the eastern Pacific Ocean. Since fiscal year 2003, the United States has provided over \$950 million to support counternarcotics efforts in transit zone countries, which historically lacked the capacity to interdict drugs. GAO was asked to examine (1) how the United States has assisted transit zone countries in disrupting drug trafficking and (2) what factors have impeded these efforts. GAO analyzed relevant data, met with U.S. and foreign officials, and visited selected countries.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State (1) report more comprehensively and consistently on the results of U.S. initiatives and (2) develop plans for sustaining U.S.-provided assets. State partially disagreed. GAO modified the first recommendation to emphasize reporting results rather than developing performance measures; however, GAO believes that plans are needed for sustaining U.S.-provided assets. GAO also recommends that DHS determine the feasibility of expanding its Container Security Initiative (CSI) to target and scan containers for illicit drugs. DHS disagreed, indicating that drug interdiction is not in CSI’s mandate. GAO notes that CSI’s 2006-2011 Strategic Plan envisions potential expansion to detect drugs and examining the feasibility of doing so would be a logical first step.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-784](#). For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4268 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov).

## DRUG CONTROL

### Cooperation with Many Major Drug Transit Countries Has Improved, but Better Performance Reporting and Sustainability Plans Are Needed

#### What GAO Found

U.S. government assistance has improved international counternarcotics cooperation with the eight major drug transit countries GAO reviewed, except Venezuela. First, assistance programs have helped partner nations gather, process, and share information and intelligence leading to arrests and drug seizures. Second, they have enabled these nations to participate in counternarcotics operations—both at sea and on land—by providing assets (such as interceptor boats and vehicles), logistical support, and training for police units. Third, U.S. assistance has helped strengthen the capacity of prosecutors to work more effectively on drug-related cases. Assessing the impact of such a wide variety of programs is difficult because some are indirectly related to drug interdiction, and because results reporting has been limited and inconsistent.

Despite gains in international cooperation, several factors, including resource limitations and lack of political will, have impeded U.S. progress in helping governments become full and self-sustaining partners in the counternarcotics effort—a goal of U.S. assistance. These countries have limited resources to devote to this effort, and many initiatives are dependent on U.S. support. Programs to build maritime interdiction capacity have been particularly affected, as partner nations lack fuel and other resources needed to operate and maintain U.S.-provided boats. Limited political support, particularly in Venezuela, and corruption have also hindered U.S. counternarcotics efforts. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has implemented a Container Security Initiative (CSI) that targets and scans containers for weapons of mass destruction and terrorist contraband. But CSI has not routinely been used for illicit drug detection, despite its applicability for this purpose.

**Major Drug Transit Countries in the Transit Zone and Principal Cocaine Vectors to the United States**



Source: GAO based on a similar map in ONDCP’s 2007 Interagency Assessment of Cocaine Movement; Nova Development (map).