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Coast Guard prepared to respond to mass migration

BY THAD ALLEN

This Christmas Eve, America's Coast Guard is on watch -- in the Florida Straits, across the Bering Sea and in the Persian Gulf.

At each point of the compass, at all latitudes, the Coast Guard serves as a "useful sentinel of the law" just as it has for more than two centuries, when Alexander Hamilton first penned those words.

Today, South Florida is one of the most challenging operating areas in the Coast Guard. More cruise ships call at local ports than any other region in the world. Unique and fragile ecosystems are threatened. Illegal migration by sea and drug trafficking require a continuous presence and eternal vigilance. Each year, we conduct 5,550 search and rescue cases, saving 923 lives.

Our people, ships, aircraft and communications systems are tested to the limit each day.

Understanding these challenges, I recently made the difficult decision to suspend operations of eight, 123-foot converted patrol boats based in Key West. Mindful of the current situation in Cuba, I will not allow this setback to compromise the Coast Guard's ability to support U.S. policy of safe, lawful and orderly migration. We have taken steps to sustain operations in the Florida Straits as we continue to exercise and refine our plans to respond to a mass migration with a wide range of local, state and federal interagency partners. There should be no doubt -- the Coast Guard will do whatever is necessary to secure our maritime border and remain ready to respond to a mass migration.

As commandant, I am accountable for the decision to suspend operations of the converted patrol boats as well as the future readiness of our aging fleet. We will thoroughly review what led to this situation under congressional oversight and through resolution of contractual issues between the Coast Guard and our industry partners.

What concerns me most is the condition of our aging fleet of ships and aircraft. We must replace them with proven, more capable assets. Our cutter fleet, comprising more than 250 ships, is one of the oldest among the world's naval fleets. The average age of our large ships is more than 35 years. Next year we will decommission cutter *Storis* after 64 years of service, including World War II. Our crews should not have to expect to serve on ships older than their captains, let alone their commandant.

The Integrated Deepwater System (Deepwater) ensures our future readiness -- for all of our missions, wherever we operate.

We have to get this right, and here's why. In the mid-1990s, we determined that most of our ships and aircraft were approaching the end of their service lives. To attempt simultaneous, piecemeal replacement of each class of ship and aircraft didn't make

sense. We didn't have the capacity to manage that many projects in parallel, and initial funding was set at half of what our Deepwater funding level is today.

We determined it would be most cost effective and efficient to acquire a wholly integrated system of ships, aircraft, sensors and communications systems. The Deepwater acquisition strategy replaces obsolete assets while upgrading existing ships and aircraft until a new fleet can be acquired.

The concept remains sound, and we are beginning to see results.

Upgraded sensors, communications equipment and armed helicopters directly contributed to the seizure of 150 tons of cocaine last year. Upgraded helicopters with more powerful engines outperformed legacy aircraft over the roof tops of New Orleans as part of an effort that rescued nearly 34,000 people. New communications systems aboard our cutters facilitate seamless operations with the Navy around the world.

We also recently launched the first of eight National Security Cutters (NSC) and took delivery of our first new maritime patrol aircraft.

With any long-term acquisition as complex as Deepwater, problems will arise. Deepwater's challenges stem from efforts to prolong the life of our aging ships after years of tight budgets while still introducing new ships like the NSC. Our inspector general recently questioned cost growth for the NSC.

A closer look reveals increases can be attributed to (1) new requirements after the 9/11 attacks, (2) damage caused by Hurricane Katrina and (3) structural modifications common with the first of a new class of ship. A forthcoming report by our inspector general will focus on the construction and project management of the NSC. I am aware of these concerns, and we are addressing them head on with due diligence. I am also committed to working with our overseers to complete detailed analyses of program performance, including external reviews by those with expertise in ship construction, contracting and program management.

In short, we are righting the course. We have solicited an independent external review of contracting processes, instituted third-party review of new ship designs and implemented recommendations by the General Accounting Office and inspector general. More changes are forthcoming as we collaborate with DHS and the Congress to build the most effective Coast Guard for this country. We are just four years into a 25-year program, having spent a fraction of the

\$24 billion required. Now is the time to make changes as we fulfill our obligation to American taxpayers.

In the hands of our crews, more capable ships, aircraft and communication systems will make Coast Guard forces more ready and responsive in South Florida and everywhere we operate. This is not about buying ships and aircraft. It's about saving lives, securing our borders and protecting our environment. For the safety and security of all Americans, we can't afford not to invest in the Coast Guard's Deepwater program.