



Highlights of [GAO-09-806](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate

### Why GAO Did This Study

Hundreds of metric tons of cocaine flow annually from South America toward the United States, threatening the security and well-being of U.S. citizens. Since 2000, the United States has provided about \$8 billion to countries in the region to disrupt drug trafficking. Most of this assistance went to Colombia to reduce illicit drug production and improve security. In March 2009, the Department of State reported that Venezuela had become a major transit route for cocaine out of Colombia, with a more than fourfold increase in cocaine flow between 2004 and 2007. We determined (1) what is known about cocaine trafficking through Venezuela, (2) what is known about Venezuelan support for Colombian illegal armed groups, and (3) the status of U.S. and Venezuelan counternarcotics cooperation since 2002.

To address these objectives, we reviewed U.S. counternarcotics reports, assessments, and other documents regarding illicit drugs transiting Venezuela. We also traveled to Venezuela and Colombia to discuss these matters with U.S. and foreign government officials.

Because this report is primarily descriptive, we do not make any recommendations.

[View GAO-09-806](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4268 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov).

## DRUG CONTROL

### U.S. Counternarcotics Cooperation with Venezuela Has Declined

#### What GAO Found

Every year since 1996, the President has determined that Venezuela was one of the major drug transit countries in the Western Hemisphere. Venezuela's extensive border with Colombia, covering large swaths of jungle and mountainous terrain, enables the flow of cocaine from Colombia over land and river routes and by air. After entering Venezuela, the cocaine usually leaves aboard maritime vessels that depart from Venezuela's long coastline or aboard suspicious aircraft that take off and land from hundreds of clandestine airstrips. While a majority of the cocaine transiting Venezuela is headed toward the United States, more has begun flowing toward Europe.

According to U.S. and Colombian officials, Venezuela has extended a lifeline to Colombian illegal armed groups by providing significant support and safe haven along the border. As a result, these groups, which traffic in illicit drugs, remain viable threats to Colombian security. A high level of corruption within the Venezuelan government, military, and other law enforcement and security forces contributes to the permissive environment, according to U.S. officials.

The United States and Venezuela cooperated closely on counternarcotics between 2002 and 2005, but this cooperation has since declined. The United States has attempted to resume cooperation through a variety of measures, but Venezuela—while initially supporting some of these efforts—has not reciprocated. In 2007, Venezuela began denying visas for U.S. officials to serve in Venezuela, which complicated efforts to cooperate. In 2008, President Chávez expelled the U.S. Ambassador and recalled his Ambassador from Washington, D.C. But in June 2009, the United States and Venezuela agreed to return their respective ambassadors. Nevertheless, the Venezuelan government claims cooperation with the United States on counternarcotics is not necessary because Venezuela has its own programs. Yet, at the time of our visit to Caracas, Venezuelan officials expressed willingness for greater technical cooperation with the United States if the government of Venezuela were to allow it.

**U.S.-Supported Counternarcotics Activities in Venezuela, 2002 through 2009**

Activity	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Prosecutor's Drug Task Force	●	●	●	●				
Wire intercept	●	●	●	●				
Cooperating Nation Information Exchange System	●	●	●					
JIATF-South intelligence liaison	●	●	●	●	●			
Port security programs	●	●	●	●	●			
Operation Seis Fronteras	●	●	●	●				
Canine drug detection program	●	●	●	●	●			
Law enforcement training	●	●	●		●	●	●	
Demand reduction programs	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Municipal programs					●	●	●	●

● Indicates ongoing activity during a given year

Source: GAO analysis of State and DEA data.