

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-5401

March 31, 2011

The Honorable Eric Holder
Attorney General
Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Mr. Attorney General:

On July 27, 2010, I wrote to you regarding Puerto Rico's high murder rate and to express my concern over the amount of resources that the Department of Justice and other federal agencies are devoting to fight drug-related violence in Puerto Rico. On September 28, 2010, you and I met to discuss how the Department could strengthen its presence in Puerto Rico and more effectively combat violence on the Island. Since our meeting, the level of violence in Puerto Rico—particularly the Island's murder rate—has remained stubbornly high. There is no question that Department of Justice employees in Puerto Rico are doing superb work in a difficult environment. And the Department is to be credited for discrete actions it has taken, including the arrests in October 2010 of nearly 100 allegedly corrupt police officers on the Island. However, it remains my firm belief that, overall, the federal government has yet to commit sufficient resources to address drug-related violence in Puerto Rico. I write to reiterate my request that the level of federal resources allocated to Puerto Rico be made commensurate with the Island's needs in this area. I would like to receive a detailed briefing on the specific steps the Department has taken since our meeting—or that it plans to take in the near future—to combat this scourge.

In my July 2010 letter, I described an alarming set of circumstances that has resulted in Puerto Rico having one of the highest murder rates in the United States. Because of its location in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico is a key transit point for drugs produced in South America and Central America and destined for consumption in the 50 states. Largely due to the trade in illicit drugs, Puerto Rico has experienced an extraordinarily high number of murders in recent years—a trend that appears likely to continue in 2011. Through the first three months of this year, almost 300 murders have been committed in Puerto Rico.

The Island's high murder rate was recently recognized by the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status as cause for significant concern. The Task Force's March 2011 report recommended that a working group of federal security and law enforcement agencies be convened to determine how federal programs could be better leveraged to create a safer Puerto Rico. I commend the Task Force for highlighting the costs of violent crime, which can be measured both in the number of lives that have already been lost and the number of my constituents who fear they or someone they love might be the next victim. Greater coordination between federal agencies would be welcome, to be sure, but it is only one of many steps that the federal government must take to reduce drug-related violence on the Island. As the federal government (rightly) proclaims its intention to curtail the flow of drugs across the Southwest border, it also needs to demonstrate a comparable commitment to ensuring that drug traffickers do not use Puerto Rico and the Caribbean region as an alternative smuggling route.

Despite Puerto Rico's exceptionally high murder rate, the level of federal resources that has been devoted to the Island lags behind other jurisdictions. As I observed in my letter and during our meeting, 1,192 federal law enforcement officers are assigned to Puerto Rico. This translates to 31 federal officers per 100,000 residents, which is well below the national average of 36. Clearly, the number of personnel assigned to Puerto Rico is insufficient in light of the central role that the Island unfortunately plays in the transnational drug trade.

In my letter, I described several specific steps that the Department of Justice could—and should—take to confront the unacceptably high level of drug-related violence in Puerto Rico. The Department should increase the number of authorized positions among its component agencies in Puerto Rico and undertake intensive efforts to promptly fill those positions. For example, less than half of the total number of agent positions that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is authorized to employ in Puerto Rico are filled. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is having difficulties recruiting agents to work in Puerto Rico and even greater trouble retaining agents beyond their standard three-year commitment. Both ATF and DEA should use whatever means are needed to expeditiously fill those positions.

The difficulties these two agencies face with recruiting and retaining agents suggest that the Department of Justice should establish a program designed to recruit agents to fill authorized positions in high-need areas. Just as the federal government devotes a disproportionate level of resources to our nation's poorest schools (as measured by family income level), so too should federal law enforcement agencies focus their recruitment efforts on jurisdictions with the highest levels of violence. Adequate staffing is critical to improving public safety in jurisdictions that are struggling to confront violent crime. The Department must make special efforts to ensure a sufficient number of agents are stationed in Puerto Rico.

I am committed to working with you to ensure that Puerto Rico receives the resources it needs. The government of Puerto Rico is doing everything within their power to combat drug-related violence. They need the full backing of the federal government in this fight. Words of sympathy and support from Washington must be followed by concrete action. I look forward to hearing from you in the very near future on the specific steps the Department of Justice has taken—and will take—to fight drug-related violence in Puerto Rico.

Sincerely,



Pedro R. Pierluisi
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Luis G. Fortuño, Governor of Puerto Rico
Cecilia Muñoz, Co-chair, President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status
Tom Perrelli, Co-chair, President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status
Robert S. Mueller, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation
Kenneth E. Melson, Acting Director, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and
Explosives
Michelle M. Leonhart, Acting Administrator, Drug Enforcement Agency