

PEDRO R. PIERLUISI
PUERTO RICO

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
1213 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
(202) 225-2615 FAX: (202) 225-2154

SAN JUAN OFFICE:
157 AVENIDA DE LA CONSTITUCIÓN
ANTIGUO EDIFICIO DE MEDICINA TROPICAL
ALA DE ENFERMERÍA 2DO PISO
SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO 00901
(787) 723-6333 FAX: (787) 729-7738

COMMITTEES:
ETHICS

JUDICIARY
NATURAL RESOURCES

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

June 4, 2012

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On June 14, 2011, I was honored to accompany you on your visit to San Juan, which marked the first time in 50 years that a sitting president traveled to Puerto Rico to speak to, and hear directly from, the Island's 3.7 million U.S. citizens. Through your presence that day, you demonstrated that—although the people of Puerto Rico cannot vote for president—we are an integral part of the American family and our well-being is important to you and the administration you lead.

During your trip, I personally expressed to you my profound concern about the extraordinarily high level of drug-related violence in Puerto Rico and what I regarded as the inadequate federal response to this problem. I noted that violent crime in Puerto Rico (and the neighboring U.S. Virgin Islands) has been on the rise since 2000, even though violent crime nationwide has decreased substantially during that same time period. Although there are a number of reasons for this spike in violence, one of the most important factors is that the U.S. government has—to its credit—substantially increased resources along the Southwest border with Mexico in an effort to stem the flow of drugs into our nation through the Central American land corridor and to reduce violence in U.S. border states. As a result, drug trafficking organizations have adapted, increasingly utilizing air and maritime routes through the Caribbean in order to supply the U.S. market. In 2011, Puerto Rico (population 3.7 million) had nearly as many homicides as Texas (population 25 million) and, according to estimates, three-quarters of these homicides were linked to the international drug trade.

I am particularly troubled that the federal government does not yet have a clear and comprehensive strategy to address drug trafficking and related violence along our nation's maritime border in the Caribbean, and has thereby failed to adequately protect its citizens living in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Since 2007, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) has prepared and published a National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy, which is designed to “substantially reduce the flow of illicit drugs, drug proceeds, and associated instruments of violence across the Southwest border.” In addition,

since 2011, ONDCP has prepared and published a National Northern Border Counternarcotics Strategy, which is intended “to strengthen our efforts to secure the Northern border against drug trafficking and related threats.” In sharp contrast, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands merit only a single sentence in ONDCP’s 2012 National Drug Control Strategy—in a section that describes the counter-drug assistance the federal government is currently providing to sovereign nations in the Caribbean region.

In December 2011, with the strong backing of Puerto Rico Governor Luis Fortuño, I wrote to ONDCP Director Gil Kerlikowske to propose that ONDCP prepare and publish a “Caribbean Border Initiative,” which would outline the federal government’s plan of action to secure our Caribbean border against the threat posed by drug trafficking and related violence. In meeting after meeting since my letter, I have underscored the importance of a well-funded and well-coordinated Caribbean border strategy to senior federal law enforcement officials from the White House, the Department of Justice, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the counternarcotics bureau of the Department of Defense. Not one of these senior officials has questioned whether such a strategy is necessary or has expressed doubt about whether it would be beneficial to U.S. jurisdictions in the Caribbean or to broader U.S. national security interests.

In the meantime, the U.S. Congress has taken notice of the problem and made clear that the federal government needs to step up its efforts considerably. On February 3, 2012, the nearly 100 members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Congressional Black Caucus, and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus wrote to you to echo my call for the federal government to establish a Caribbean Border Initiative and “to express our deep concern about increased drug trafficking through Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the high level of violence that these two American jurisdictions have been experiencing as a direct result of this trafficking, and what we believe to be an insufficient response by the federal government to these problems.”

At a December 15, 2011 hearing, Senator Marco Rubio expressed a similar sentiment, noting that if Florida were experiencing the same level of drug-related violence as Puerto Rico, “people would be screaming about it right now.” Senator Rubio then admonished an Administration witness, stating: “I just want to make sure from not just the Administration but from the congressional perspective that we are paying just as much attention to it because Puerto Rico is a domestic responsibility of ours. It is not another country.”

Indeed, Congress has already approved—or will soon approve—legislation directing federal law enforcement agencies to prioritize counter-drug efforts in the U.S. Caribbean. For example, the report accompanying the House of Representatives’ *Fiscal Year 2013 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill* states:

The Committee is aware that efforts by Federal law enforcement to reduce drug trafficking and associated violence in the Southwest border region have affected trafficking routes and crime rates in the Caribbean. The Committee expects the Attorney General to address these trends by allocating necessary resources to areas substantially affected by drug-related violence, and reporting such actions to the Committee.

Likewise, the report accompanying the House's *Fiscal Year 2013 Homeland Security Appropriations Bill* states:

The Committee is deeply concerned about the level of violent crime in the two U.S. jurisdictions in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, which are home to over 3.8 million residents. In particular, the Committee notes that the homicide rate in each jurisdiction is about six times the national average and about three times higher than any other U.S. jurisdiction; some estimates indicate that most of these homicides are associated with illegal narcotics trafficking. The public safety and security issues of the U.S. territories in the Caribbean must be a priority. The Committee expects that the Secretary will allocate the resources, assets, and personnel to these jurisdictions in a manner and to a degree consistent with that principle.

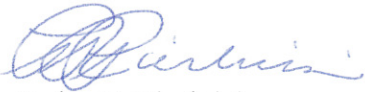
Finally, on May 30th, the House Homeland Security Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Management, under the leadership of Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, announced that it would hold a hearing on June 21st on this subject. In a statement accompanying the hearing announcement, Chairman McCaul said:

The disturbing increase in drug trafficking and drug-related violence in this region is . . . alarming and unacceptable. If this kind of violence were happening anywhere else where 4 million American citizens resided, it would make daily headlines. This problem is no less serious than drug cartels operating across the Mexican border. . . . Essentially, the U.S. Caribbean territories are functioning as an unlocked back door into the mainland United States. This situation is urgent, and must be addressed by the Department of Homeland Security.

I know that your personal commitment to the security of the people of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, like your commitment to the safety of their fellow citizens in the 50 states, is beyond question. Consistent with the unequivocal message that Congress has delivered, I respectfully ask that you direct ONDCP to establish a Caribbean Border Initiative and that you ensure that key federal agencies are allocating the resources, personnel and assets to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands at a level that is commensurate with the scope and severity of the drug-related violence problem these jurisdictions are experiencing.

Thank you for your attention to this critically-important matter.

Sincerely,



Pedro R. Pierluisi
Member of Congress

cc: Hon. R. Gil Kerlikowske, Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy, The White House
Hon. Cecilia Muñoz, Director, Domestic Policy Council, The White House
Hon. David Agnew, Co-Chair, The President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status
Hon. Tony West, Co-Chair, The President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status
Hon. Luis G. Fortuño, Governor of Puerto Rico
Hon. Donna M. Christensen, Member of Congress