



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
The Proposed “Caribbean Border Initiative”
December 13, 2011

Mr. Speaker:

American citizens in the Caribbean are facing a security crisis. While the national murder rate has declined in recent decades, the number of homicides in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands remains unacceptably high. Since 2008, the murder rate in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands has been about five times the national average and about twice as high as that of any state.

Most of the murders committed in Puerto Rico and the USVI are linked to the drug trade. As Attorney General Holder and other officials have acknowledged, the federal government’s effort to prevent traffickers from transporting drugs across our nation’s Southwest border is causing traffickers to turn increasingly to the Caribbean to ship drugs into the United States. And, as the National Drug Intelligence Center recently observed, violence by traffickers in the two territories has “become indiscriminate, endangering the lives of . . . innocent bystanders.” In response to questions I posed, Attorney General Holder recently called drug-related violence in Puerto Rico and the USVI a “national security issue” that “we must confront.” At my urging, Congress has also taken notice of the problem, directing federal law enforcement agencies on three separate occasions to devote more attention to the Caribbean region.

According to briefings provided to my office, 70 to 80 percent of the cocaine that enters Puerto Rico is transported to the U.S. mainland. Because Puerto Rico is a U.S. jurisdiction, once drugs enter the Island, they are easily delivered to the states, through commercial airlines and container ships, without having to clear customs or otherwise undergo heightened scrutiny. Once in the states, those drugs destroy lives and communities in my colleagues' districts. Thus, this is a problem of national, not simply regional, scope.

That said, the primary reason why the federal government must do more to reduce drug trafficking in Puerto Rico and the VI is because U.S. citizens in these two territories are dying in unprecedented numbers. Our nation has devoted considerable resources to confront drug gangs operating along our Southwest border—and rightfully so. Yet, Puerto Rico's murder rate is four to five times higher than any Southwest border state. And, according to a recent piece in *The Washington Post*, since 2008 the Island has received less than one fifth of the funding that the federal government has provided to combat the drug trade and associated violence in Mexico and Central American nations. The number of authorized positions at key federal law enforcement agencies in Puerto Rico is too low, the number of vacancies is too high, and interdiction assets like planes and boats are in short supply.

Since taking office, I have urged the federal government to devote resources to Puerto Rico at a level commensurate with the severity of the problem it faces. Specifically, I have asked the White House drug czar to establish a Caribbean Border Initiative, modeled after the successful Southwest Border Initiative. The time for half measures and piecemeal efforts has passed. What is needed, instead, is a well-planned, well-funded, well-executed, government-wide strategy that will encompass all federal agencies charged with fighting drug trafficking and related violence. To protect the lives of U.S. citizens in the Caribbean, and to reduce the flow of drugs headed to

the states through that region, the federal government must make a commitment of resources to Puerto Rico and the USVI that is similar to the commitment it has made to the Southwest border.

The challenge we face today is similar to the one we faced in 1994. I was Puerto Rico's Attorney General at the time, and lobbied successfully for Puerto Rico and the USVI to be federally designated as a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, which contributed to a significant reduction in the Island's violent crime rate. The problem has evolved over time, and the federal response must evolve along with it. I will not rest until it does.