

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

March 31, 2011

The Honorable Janet Napolitano
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
Nebraska Ave. Center, NW
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Napolitano:

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 Homeland Security and other federal agencies are devoting to fight drug-related violence in Puerto Rico. On September 13, 2010, I met with Under Secretary Rafael Borrás, Assistant Secretary Juliette Kayyem and other senior DHS officials to discuss how the Department could strengthen its presence in Puerto Rico and more effectively combat violence on the Island. Since that 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 Homeland Security 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 recent establishment of a Border Enforcement Security Task Force (BEST) 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 Homeland Security 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 ensure that these agencies have the equipment they need to effectively combat violent crime. Currently, 25% of Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) authorized positions in Puerto Rico are unfilled. ICE should use all available means to expeditiously fill those positions. 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.

In addition, the Coast Guard lacks sufficient aircraft in Puerto Rico. While the Coast Guard maintains helicopters on the Island, it currently does not have any coastal patrol airplanes in Puerto Rico, and is not scheduled to have any until 2018. The Coast Guard should take the necessary steps to deploy a dedicated helicopter to 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 meeting with you in the very near future to discuss specific steps the Department of Homeland Security 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 (DOJ)
Rafael Borrás, Under Secretary for Management, DHS
Juliette Kayyem, Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental Affairs, DHS
Admiral Robert J. Papp, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard
John T. Morton, Assistant Secretary, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
Alan Bersin, Commissioner, U.S. Customs and Border Protection
John S. Pistole, Administrator, Transportation Security Administration