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Capabilities for Interdicting Airborne
Drug Smugglers Are Limited and Costly

Statement of
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Administration of Justice Issues

Before the
Senate Permanent Subcommittee on
Investigations
United States Senate



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**CAPABILITIES FOR INTERDICTING AIRBORNE DRUG
SMUGGLERS ARE LIMITED AND COSTLY**

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT BY
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JUSTICE ISSUES

Federal spending for anti-drug efforts cost about \$1.1 billion in 1981 and is expected to reach \$5.5 billion in 1990. Despite increased spending, anti-drug efforts are not working: the amount of drugs entering the country is growing; the prices of illegal drugs are going down; and drugs such as cocaine are still easily available to consumers in big cities, small towns, and rural areas throughout the United States. Crime and violence associated with drug trafficking and use are severely straining criminal justice systems and eroding the public order.

Efforts to control airborne drug smuggling (air interdiction programs) are aimed at smugglers using private aircraft to primarily transport cocaine and marijuana from Latin America and the Caribbean into the United States. Federal spending on air interdiction programs increased from \$18 million in 1982 to about \$200 million in fiscal year 1989. These amounts do not include approximately \$330 million authorized in fiscal year 1987 for DOD assistance to civilian air interdiction agencies.

Drug seizures by air and other interdiction efforts have not reduced the supply of illegal drugs available to consumers. Planned deployments of additional radar systems and improvements in command, control, communications, and intelligence systems (C3I) may increase the effectiveness of air interdiction efforts, but will be very expensive--including at least \$124 million for radar acquisitions and over \$50 million for Customs' C3I system. These costs do not include any of the \$300 million authorized in fiscal year 1989 for DOD aid to air and marine interdiction efforts.

Decisions about providing funds for additional air interdiction efforts should not be made without considering whether these funds could be put to more effective use on some other aspect of the Nation's war on drugs. GAO is not convinced that spending more on air interdiction is the best use for additional funds. There are insufficient data, however, to draw a definitive conclusion as to how funds can best be spent fighting the war on drugs. Accordingly, Congress may want to pursue the issue further with key administration officials before deciding on specific authorization and appropriation levels for all aspects of the war on drugs.

Chairman Nunn and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be a part of your hearings examining federal capabilities for controlling airborne drug smuggling, including the potential role of the military in supporting civilian drug interdiction efforts.

As you will recall, Mr. Chairman, the Comptroller General testified before you on June 8, 1988, in your capacity as Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, on federal drug abuse control policy and the role of the military in anti-drug efforts. My remarks today are intended to build on that testimony, by focusing on the results of our review of federal efforts to control airborne drug smuggling.

The General Accounting Office has just released a report on air interdiction, entitled "Drug Smuggling: Capabilities for Interdicting Private Aircraft are Limited and Costly." This is the third and last in a series of reports responding to the requirements of section 1241 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989 (Public Law 100-180), and printed copies of the report will be available for distribution in the near future. My statement highlights the contents of that report.

Over the past year, we interviewed headquarters and field officials from Customs, Coast Guard and DOD units (including the Air Force, Army, and Navy) at 24 locations involved in air interdiction efforts. At these offices, we analyzed documents such as interdiction case files, operations manuals, maintenance records and radar logs.

Mr. Chairman, the bottom line of my testimony and of our report is simple: air interdiction programs are very costly and have limited capabilities. While air and other interdiction programs have resulted in the seizure of substantial amounts of drugs, these seizures are small compared to the amounts successfully smuggled into the United States. We are not convinced that spending additional millions of dollars to expand air interdiction programs is the best use of the limited resources available for federal anti-drug efforts. However, we do not have sufficient evidence to draw a conclusion about the most effective programs on which scarce federal funds can best be spent to fight the war on drugs.

Background

Federal efforts to control airborne drug smuggling have increased dramatically during the 1980s. These efforts, known as air interdiction programs, are aimed at smugglers using private aircraft to transport illegal drugs from foreign countries

(primarily cocaine and marijuana from Latin America and the Caribbean) into the United States. Federal spending on air interdiction programs increased from about \$18 million in 1982, to an estimated \$200 million in fiscal year 1989. These amounts do not include approximately \$330 million authorized in fiscal year 1987 for DOD assistance to civilian air interdiction agencies.

Air Interdiction Results

Air interdiction programs have resulted in the seizure of substantial amounts of drugs. For example, about 28 tons of cocaine were seized through these programs in 1987. However, these seizures and those from other interdiction programs are small compared to the amounts successfully smuggled into the United States.

Customs Service averaged about 5 interdictions of drug smuggling aircraft a month over the fiscal year period 1983-1987. In 1987, about 55,000 pounds of cocaine and 175,000 pounds of marijuana were seized from private aircraft. Many of these seizures, however, were by-products of "controlled deliveries"-- undercover law enforcement operations in which federal agents allowed drug smuggling operations to take place in order to arrest key drug traffickers and disrupt the operations of drug trafficking networks.

After controlled deliveries are accounted for, the impact of air interdiction may be less than reported. The Miami Air Branch currently is Customs' most successful air interdiction unit. In fiscal year 1988, it was involved in seizing 70 percent of all the cocaine seized by Customs air interdiction programs. During that period, controlled deliveries accounted for more than half of Miami's cocaine seizures.

Despite substantial seizures, air and other interdiction programs have not reduced the overall availability of illegal drugs to U.S. consumers. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimates that the price of cocaine has decreased over the last 5 years, while the purity of cocaine being sold to consumers has remained high. According to DEA, these trends indicate an overall increase in the availability of cocaine.

Air Interdiction System Vulnerabilities

Gaps exist in the radar coverage that the present air interdiction detection network provides. In addition, all radar detection systems have inherent technical constraints that limit their ability to detect the small aircraft typically used to smuggle drugs. According to agency interdiction officials, drug smugglers are able to exploit these vulnerabilities, although the extent to which they do so is unclear. Customs and Coast Guard

have been able to respond to most radar detections of suspected air smugglers, but most aircraft they have pursued turned out not to be engaged in smuggling. Our analysis of Customs data shows that only about 10 percent of air interdiction missions in fiscal years 1987 and 1988 resulted in seizures.

The current federal air interdiction strategy includes plans to expand the existing aerostat detection network from 5 to 16 aerostats, providing radar coverage for most of the U.S. southern border. However, aerostats must be taken down for maintenance and cannot operate in severe weather. Consequently, current aerostats are operational only about half of the time. The strategy also includes plans to acquire two more long-range radar aircraft (Customs and Coast Guard currently operate nine radar aircraft dedicated to drug interdiction including two long-range radar aircraft recently acquired by Customs.) The estimated cost of acquiring the six aerostats not already funded and two long-range radar aircraft is at least \$124 million.

Customs and Coast Guard have plans for coordinating air interdiction detection activities with their interdiction response assets. Customs is developing a command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) system to coordinate radar detections and intelligence on drug smuggling activities with air interdiction response aircraft. The system, which is still evolving, will cost over \$50 million, and its impact cannot yet

be determined. As of June 1989, DOD was beginning to carry out new responsibilities for detecting air and marine drug smugglers and integrating drug interdiction C3I assets authorized by the Fiscal Year 1989 National Defense Authorization Act. The Act authorizes \$300 million for DOD anti-drug programs in support of civilian anti-drug agencies. The impact of DOD's new responsibilities on drug smuggling detection and C3I asset integration is not yet known.

Matters for Congressional Consideration

Our reports have noted the need to address the Nation's drug abuse problem through a centralized and comprehensive approach. Such an approach should address both the supply of illegal drugs and the demand for them. To date, neither the administration nor Congress have been able to commit sufficient funds to adequately deal with both aspects of the drug problem. Decisions about providing funds for additional air interdiction efforts should not be made without considering whether these funds could be put to more effective use on some other aspect of the Nation's war on drugs. We are not convinced that spending more on air interdiction is the best use for additional funds. There are insufficient data, however, to draw a definitive conclusion as to how funds can best be spent fighting the war on drugs. Accordingly, Congress may want to pursue the issue further with key administration officials before deciding on specific

authorization and appropriation levels for all aspects of the war on drugs.