DRUG CONTROL

Cooperation with Many Major Drug Transit Countries Has Improved, but Better Performance Reporting and Sustainability Plans Are Needed

What GAO Found

U.S. government assistance has improved international counternarcotics cooperation with the eight major drug transit countries GAO reviewed, except Venezuela. First, assistance programs have helped partner nations gather, process, and share information and intelligence leading to arrests and drug seizures. Second, they have enabled these nations to participate in counternarcotics operations—both at sea and on land—by providing assets (such as interceptor boats and vehicles), logistical support, and training for police units. Third, U.S. assistance has helped strengthen the capacity of prosecutors to work more effectively on drug-related cases. Assessing the impact of such a wide variety of programs is difficult because some are indirectly related to drug interdiction, and because results reporting has been limited and inconsistent.

Despite gains in international cooperation, several factors, including resource limitations and lack of political will, have impeded U.S. progress in helping governments become full and self-sustaining partners in the counternarcotics effort—a goal of U.S. assistance. These countries have limited resources to devote to this effort, and many initiatives are dependent on U.S. support. Programs to build maritime interdiction capacity have been particularly affected, as partner nations lack fuel and other resources needed to operate and maintain U.S.-provided boats. Limited political support, particularly in Venezuela, and corruption have also hindered U.S. counternarcotics efforts. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has implemented a Container Security Initiative (CSI) that targets and scans containers for weapons of mass destruction and terrorist contraband. But CSI has not routinely been used for illicit drug detection, despite its applicability for this purpose.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State (1) report more comprehensively and consistently on the results of U.S. initiatives and (2) develop plans for sustaining U.S.-provided assets. State partially disagreed. GAO modified the first recommendation to emphasize reporting results rather than developing performance measures; however, GAO believes that plans are needed for sustaining U.S.-provided assets. GAO also recommends that DHS determine the feasibility of expanding its Container Security Initiative (CSI) to target and scan containers for illicit drugs. DHS disagreed, indicating that drug interdiction is not in CSI’s mandate. GAO notes that CSI’s 2006-2011 Strategic Plan envisions potential expansion to detect drugs and examining the feasibility of doing so would be a logical first step.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-784. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4268 or fordj@gao.gov.