



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement and Questions as Prepared for Delivery
Oversight Hearing on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security
House Committee on the Judiciary
May 29, 2014

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Johnson: welcome to the Committee. In your short time in office, you have already proven yourself to be a worthy successor to Secretary Napolitano. She traveled to Puerto Rico in 2012 and I hope you will visit the island as well.

I would like to outline a narrative for you, and then ask you to comment.

I took office in 2009. That year, there were about 900 homicides in Puerto Rico, home to less than four million American citizens. In 2010, there were nearly 1,000 homicides. And in 2011, there were 1,136 homicides, an average of over three a day, the most violent year in the territory's history. In each year, our homicide rate was four to six times the national average, and twice as high as any state.

Of every 10 murders in Puerto Rico, seven to eight are linked to the drug trade. Puerto Rico is within the U.S. customs zone and is used by organizations transporting narcotics from South America to the U.S. mainland.

Given this crisis, I examined the level of resources that DHS and DOJ were dedicating to combat drug-related violence in Puerto Rico, and it was clear that the federal law enforcement footprint on the island was inadequate.

Let me give two examples on the DHS side. First, in 2011, patrol aircraft from the Coast Guard—the lead agency for maritime drug interdiction—conducted a meager 150 flight hours of drug interdiction operations in Puerto Rico. If Puerto Rico were a state, that would never have been allowed to occur. Second, and also in 2011, CBP closed a boat unit in San Juan that had seized over 7,000 pounds of drugs the previous year. Clearly, there was a disconnect between the problem in Puerto Rico and the federal response.

Along with colleagues like Congressman Michael McCaul, who is now the chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, I did everything within my power to highlight the need for additional federal resources in Puerto Rico. My colleagues here can attest to this, having heard me raise the issue every time a DHS or DOJ official appears before this Committee. I have no alternative, because the stakes are so high.

Starting in 2012, our message finally began to sink in, particularly at DHS. Much of the credit owes to Secretary Napolitano, who—as noted—traveled to Puerto Rico and, upon her return, created a DHS task force charged with taking steps to reduce Puerto Rico’s murder rate. As a result of this initiative, ICE surged 30 agents to Puerto Rico last year, where they made hundreds of arrests and seized vast quantities of illegal drugs and firearms. Between 2009 and 2013, the Coast Guard tripled the number of days its ships spend conducting counter-drug operations in the waters off Puerto Rico. The number of Coast Guard flight hours increased from 150 in 2011 to approximately 1,000 in 2013. And CBP, having assumed control of the counter-drug tethered aerostat radar program this year, moved quickly to repair the radar in southern Puerto Rico that had been destroyed in bad weather in 2011. The result of this DHS effort, combined with the enhanced effort by DEA and other DOJ component agencies, has been remarkable. Puerto Rico still has the highest murder rate in the country, but the number of homicides this year is on pace to be 40 percent lower than in 2011.

The lesson is clear: when the federal government is committed to combating drug-related violence in Puerto Rico, hundreds of my constituents’ lives are saved each year.

I’d like to give you the chance to comment on the narrative I just laid out—and I hope you can assure me that Puerto Rico will continue to be a top priority for the agency you now lead.