



# Committee on Foreign Affairs

CHAIRMAN ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN



## **OPENING STATEMENT**

**Chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen**

**Full Committee Hearing:**

**“Emerging Threats and Security in the Western Hemisphere:**

**Next Steps for U.S. Policy”**

**Thursday, October 13, 2011, 10:00 a.m.**

In light of this week’s foiled Iranian terrorist plot to be executed on American soil, this hearing could not be more timely. I want to commend the work of the DEA and the FBI and all of our outstanding agencies for their incredible work in uncovering this plot, and I applaud the efforts of all the law enforcement personnel and intelligence officers that continue to protect our homeland and keep us safe. Kudos also to the Mexican agencies who collaborated with us in making this a successful operation.

The issues to be covered by this hearing have been a priority for many of us on this Committee for some time as we sought to develop legislative policy and the responses to counter Iran’s increasing activities in the Western Hemisphere, the threat of Islamic extremists in the region, and the threat posed by the narco-trafficking networks and related violence, in themselves, but also, as ready-made networks to facilitate and support other terrorist activities throughout the Hemisphere, including right here in the United States as we saw in that plot.

We must stop looking at the drug cartels today solely from a law enforcement perspective and consider designating these narco-trafficking networks as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, and their leaders as Specially Designated Nationals, if they are providing material support and assistance to other Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Nationals, and their state-sponsors.

The foiled Iranian plot also underscores the need to assess current U.S. strategy and examine what actions the United States must now undertake, looking beyond existing initiatives, to confront the evolving and emerging threats and security challenges in the Western Hemisphere.

The U.S. provided nearly \$2 billion in security-related assistance to the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean in the last fiscal year. Is this assistance advancing U.S. security objectives, and what have been the tangible returns on our investment?

While violent crime in Central America continues to increase, our counter-narcotics support for these countries remains limited. As Central America is ripped apart by drug violence, the State Department continues to dole out counter-narcotics funding to regimes elsewhere in Latin America that are actively working against U.S. interests. In Bolivia, for example, State is providing \$15 million for Fiscal Year 2011 to fight drug trafficking and yet Bolivia is actively working against U.S. interests, has withdrawn from the Single Convention on

Narcotic Drugs at the UN. And the former Bolivian drug chief, General Rene Sanabria, was sentenced last month to 15 years in prison for drug smuggling charges.

In Peru, State has spent over \$70 million in the past two fiscal years on counter-narcotics programs, but according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, overall coca cultivation increased in 2010 by 33%, which led to a 13-year all time high. Further, the new Peruvian administration temporarily suspended U.S.-funded coca eradication programs earlier this year.

There is no question that equipment and technology are necessary for protecting the integrity of this region from drug cartels, from extremist groups, and from rogue regimes. And I am pleased to see many countries in the region, such as Colombia, assuming a more active role in taking on these threats. However, Venezuela's and Brazil's increasing purchase of advanced lethal military equipment from Russia and China is very troubling and may lead to an arms race in the region.

As we formulate and implement our security policy in the Hemisphere, it is crucial that we understand the transnational nature of the illicit individuals and groups we are targeting. Rogue regimes and extremist groups leverage the resources of their sympathizers to strengthen their capabilities in the region and advance their hate-filled agendas. For years, the State Department has reported on the fundraising activities of Hezbollah and Hamas in the region.

This week's foiled plot contributes to the growing evidence of the potential links between these groups and the drug cartels. As we know, such a linkage was not made because those were our guys posing as members of the drug cartel. But it seems that our sworn enemy Iran sees a potential kindred spirit in the drug cartels in Mexico. We see reports on the expansion of the FARC into West Africa, and its potential links with Hezbollah and al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb. In June, Iran and the rest of the Venezuela-aligned ALBA countries in Latin America inaugurated a military academy in Bolivia to educate and train their forces. And we know that Cuban intelligence officers are embedded throughout the Venezuelan government as well as spread across the Hemisphere working against U.S. national security interests.

This week, we also learned that the Venezuelan and Cuban foreign ministers led a delegation, which included representatives of Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Bolivia, to Syria to meet with al-Assad to show their support of his brutal attacks against his own people.

Finally, a Department of Defense report from last year stated that the Iran's Qods Force has "an increased presence in Latin America, particularly Venezuela."

Our national security interests, the stability of our Hemisphere as a whole, and this week's failed plot has reminded us that our homeland security is at stake. We must take immediate action to counter these threats and not waste valuable resources on misplaced diplomacy with those who seek to do us harm.