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Dominican Republic Under DEA Scrutiny

by Crosby Girón

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Michele Leonhart, head of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), visited the Dominican Republic in early August. During Leonhart's trip, outgoing President Leonel Fernández bestowed her with a special distinction as a token of thanks for her government's support for the country's efforts to eradicate drug trafficking.

However, even though Leonhart spoke of the Dominican government's efforts in fighting drug trafficking, many analysts said that statements made only two weeks earlier by Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano betray deeper concerns about this issue.

During her official visit, Napolitano was accompanied by Deputy Commissioner of US Customs and Border Protection David V. Aguilar, Assistant Secretary of International Affairs Alan Bersin, and US Ambassador to the Dominican Republic Raúl Yzaguirre.

These visits have been regarded as a clear sign that the administration of President Barack Obama wishes to coordinate efforts and technology from the DEA, FBI, and Border Patrol to dismantle the organizations operating in the Dominican Republic and shipping drugs to the US and Europe.

Although the drugs problem is nothing new, in its annual report, the US made it clear the Dominican Republic is becoming a "bridge" or transit point for drugs shipped from South America. One of the US government's main concerns is that drug trafficking has permeated power structures, especially the armed forces, as was published by a US newspaper in 2011.

A highly controversial report

In May this year, the US published its annual report on drug trafficking and consumption in several countries, which did not bring entirely good news for the Dominican Republic. The reactions were swift; whereas some considered that it reflected the government's efforts to fight drug trafficking, others said that, before criticizing other countries, the US ought to invest more in efforts to eradicate drug trafficking.

One critic was Interior Minister José Ramón Fadul, who said, "Drug trafficking has been caused by excessive consumption in the US," adding that the resources spent on fighting drugs have not been increased. "The US has focused more on Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, when more needs to be done in Latin America."

It is hardly surprising that the report was not well-received in official circles as it stated that one of the factors that has favored the drug trade between South America and the North American and European markets is the "endemic corruption" within the state apparatus.

No one denies that corruption exists, not even Minister of the Presidency César Pina Toribio or the executive's top drug advisor Marino Vinicio Castillo. However, they have been eager to highlight the efforts made by their government to fight this problem. "A growing number of public officials have been sanctioned in cases when it has been established that they contributed to the proliferation of drug trafficking by not fulfilling their duties," said Pina Toribio.

Another staunch defender of the Dominican government's efforts is Rolando Rosado Mateo, president of the Dirección Nacional de Control de Drogas (DNCD), who issued a press release stating that, under his administration, hundreds of officials and agents from every level were expelled from the DNCD as a result of corruption allegations as well as members of the police and the armed forces. He added that the DNCD is regarded as one of the US's main allies in the war on drugs.

Meanwhile, Hotoniel Bonilla, director of the Departamento de Prevención de la Corrupción Administrativa (DPCA), has chosen to remain silent on the issue, according to the local media, even though corruption affects the institution that he represents. However, Foreign Relations Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso said that the report was "an act of justice" that acknowledged the efforts made by the Dominican government to fight the drug trade. "The war on drugs in this country has taken a turn, and, as the report says, coordination among our various government agencies and between these agencies and their US partners has been crucial in increasing drug raids," said Troncoso.

Corruption and pressure to secure extraditions

Napolitano's and Leonhart's visits occurred in the space of only two weeks and a few days before the Dominican Republic's new president was due to take office. Although newly elected President Danilo Medina hardly touched the subject during his State of the Nation address in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), five days later the DNCD, the Dominican Navy, and other government organizations working with the DEA intercepted a speedboat from South America carrying 1,000 kg of cocaine.

With four Colombians on board, the boat was intercepted 18 nautical miles from the Dominican coast.

As part of its efforts to fight drug trafficking in the Dominican Republic, the US government gave the Dominican government a Predator spy plane, which will make it possible to search the depth of the seas and prevent the incursion of speedboats in the country's waters, Rosado explained.

A subject that Napolitano and Leonhart discussed with Dominican authorities was the extradition of people detained on drugs charges. The Dominican media reported that, with the detention in April of the driver of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, the Sinaloa cartel kingpin, the number of Mexican drug traffickers caught and expelled from the country during the past 14 months has risen to ten. All were purportedly linked to Guzmán, and seven have already been extradited to the US.

Napolitano and Leonhart held private meetings with outgoing President Fernández, and later Foreign Minister Morales Troncoso travelled to Washington to sign cooperation agreements with the US government.

Security analysts say the US government is requesting the extradition of 70 Dominican citizens, including high-ranking members of the armed forces and the police, retired army officers as well as bankers and former government officials from the Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (PLD), the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), and the Partido Reformista Social Cristiano (PRSC), along with several businesspeople. Napolitano and Leonhart gave the list of individuals the US wants extradited to President Fernández; now it will be President Medina's responsibility to enforce this.

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