

Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi (Puerto Rico)
Testimony Before the Committee on Appropriations,
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
March 22, 2012

Chairman Wolf, Ranking Member Fattah, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify about the 2013 CJS Appropriations bill.

Department of Commerce; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; Operations, Research and Facilities

I have submitted a number of language and programmatic requests to the Subcommittee. For example, under NOAA's ORF account, I am asking the Subcommittee to fund the National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program at the Fiscal Year 2012 enacted level. I want to thank the Subcommittee, and especially Chairman Wolf, for including language in the Fiscal Year 2012 "minibus" that requires NOAA to prepare a report—due this month—that details its current capacity to predict tsunamis in the Caribbean and requires the agency to accelerate its "Tsunami Ready program" in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Tsunamis pose a major threat to my constituents, and I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure that they are adequately protected.

I am also asking the Subcommittee to provide an additional \$3 million, above the President's request, to enable the Coral Reef Conservation Program to continue its support for competitive applied research necessary to protect our coral reefs. If the Subcommittee is unable to "plus up" the Coral Reef Conservation Program for this purpose, then I respectfully ask that, as an alternative, the Subcommittee provide enough funding for the Cooperative Institutes budget line under the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research to enable NOAA to establish a cooperative institute dedicated to coral reef research.

Department of Justice; Federal Bureau of Investigation/Drug Enforcement Administration/Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives/Office of Justice Programs/Community Oriented Policing Services

Notwithstanding the importance of these requests, Mr. Chairman, I want to focus my testimony today on the public safety crisis in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and on the important role this Subcommittee can play in relieving that crisis.

Violent crime in Puerto Rico and the USVI has been on the rise since the year 2000, even as violent crime nationwide has decreased substantially. The homicide rate in each territory is approximately six times the national average and nearly three times higher than any state. To put this in stark terms, Puerto Rico has nearly the same number of annual murders that Texas does, even though Texas is home to 25 million people and Puerto Rico is home to fewer than four million.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to this spike in violence, but perhaps the most important is geopolitics. As the U.S. government has increased resources along the Southwest Border and provided substantial funding to Mexico and Central American nations with the Mérida Initiative, drug trafficking organizations have returned to well-established routes through the Caribbean to get their products to market. According to some estimates, three-quarters of the murders in Puerto Rico and the USVI are linked to the drug trade. And most are carried out with illegal firearms.

This is a problem of national, not simply regional, scope. According to briefings provided to my office, 70 to 80 percent of the cocaine that enters Puerto Rico is then transported to the U.S. mainland. Because Puerto Rico is an American jurisdiction, once drugs enter the Island, they are easily delivered to the states, through commercial airlines and container ships, without having to clear customs or otherwise undergo heightened scrutiny. Once in the states, those drugs destroy lives and communities, especially along our nation's eastern seaboard. Indeed, at a 2011 Judiciary Committee hearing, Attorney General Holder called drug-related violence in Puerto Rico and the USVI a "national security issue" that "we must confront." And Senator Rubio, at a December 15th hearing, stated that if Jacksonville, Florida were experiencing the same level of violent crime as Puerto Rico, "people would be screaming about it right now." Senator Rubio went on to tell the Administration witness: "I just want to make sure from not just the Administration but from the Congressional perspective that we are paying just as much attention to it because Puerto Rico is a domestic responsibility of ours. It is not another country. And so I want to make sure that we are giving it the attention it deserves both resource-wise and publicly."

Mr. Chairman, I believe that the federal government, working closely with its local partners, must do far more to reduce the amount of drugs that enter American jurisdictions in the Caribbean and to lower the violence that accompanies those drugs. That is why Puerto Rico Governor Luis Fortuño (a Republican) and I (a Democrat) have jointly proposed that the Administration establish a Caribbean Border Initiative, modeled on the successful Southwest Border Initiative. This would be a well-coordinated, well-funded, well-executed, government-wide strategy encompassing all federal agencies—including DOJ, DHS, and DOD—that have a role in combating drug trafficking and related violence.

The three primary law enforcement agencies within DOJ—the FBI, DEA, and ATF—are on the front lines of this fight. Thus, as the Subcommittee makes its decisions regarding the proper funding levels for these agencies, I urge you—in the most respectful, but also in the strongest possible, terms—to ensure that those funding levels are sufficient to enable the agencies to devote the necessary resources and personnel to Puerto Rico and the USVI. And I urge the Subcommittee to emphasize that reducing drug-related violence in our Caribbean territories is both a national responsibility and a national priority.

I want to thank the Subcommittee for the steps it has already taken on this matter. In last year's bill, based on my request, the Subcommittee required the DEA to prepare a report—due this month—on their efforts to boost the recruitment and retention of agents in the U.S. territories in the Caribbean. I believe the message the Subcommittee sent with this provision has been received. At a recent meeting with DEA Administrator Leonhart, I was advised that DEA has

increased the number of agents assigned to Puerto Rico by 30 percent in the last few years. On the other hand, the number of ATF agents in Puerto Rico has gone down, despite the fact that gun-related violence on the Island is on the rise.

In light of the foregoing, my specific requests are as follows:

- First, I ask the Subcommittee to fund the Salaries and Expenses accounts for the FBI, DEA and ATF at levels that will enable them to increase their resources and personnel in the U.S. jurisdictions in the Caribbean—at least on a temporary basis but preferably on an enduring basis.
- Second, I ask that the Subcommittee, in its report to accompany the 2013 bill, direct these agencies to make reduction of violent crime in Puerto Rico and the USVI a national priority, just as we have rightly made reduction of violent crime along our Southwest Border a national priority. It is my firm belief that these component agencies require additional direction and resources from Congress to spur them into action.
- Third and finally, I ask the Committee to enact the amount requested by the President for the critical COPS and Byrne JAG grant programs, which have done so much to prevent and fight crime in Puerto Rico and other U.S. jurisdictions.

That concludes my testimony. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak, Mr. Chairman.