

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****U.S.-Caribbean Border: Open Road for Drug Traffickers and Terrorists***

June 21, 2012 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Oversight, Investigations, and Management subcommittee hearing entitled “U.S.-Caribbean Border: Open Road for Drug Traffickers and Terrorists”:

“Over the past decade, seemingly as a result of United States’ counternarcotics efforts in Mexico and Central America, the Caribbean region has become a key transshipment point for drugs flowing into the United States. Unfortunately, two U.S. territories – Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands – have become attractive targets for drug traffickers and placed the safety and security of U.S. citizens at risk.

The Department of Homeland Security, through the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, plays a vital role in the Caribbean by protecting our borders and securing the maritime environment.

However, by many accounts, recent budget cuts, aging equipment and a lack of a Caribbean Border Counternarcotics Strategy, similar to the existing Southwest Border and Northern Border Counternarcotics Strategy have resulted in inadequate DHS resources in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Furthermore, for years I have monitored vacancy rates at the Department and urged the Secretary to fill vacant positions that bear a direct role on security. I was disheartened to learn that 15% of ICE authorized positions in Puerto Rico are unfilled and a critical CBP Air and Marine Office in San Juan was closed due to budget shortfalls. These are federal resources that Puerto Rico needs and I urge the Secretary to fill these gaps.

In the meantime, however, Puerto Rico has the benefit of having the second largest police department in the United States. The Puerto Rico Police Department, or PRPD, has 17,000 police. The ratio of PRPD to residents is approximately 4.6 officers for every 1,000 residents, more than twice the U.S. national average.

Yet, according to the U.S. Department of Justice and a report that was just released by the ACLU on Tuesday the PRPD is plagued with police abuse, violence and corruption. Following its extensive investigation, DOJ found that the PRPD officers engage in a pattern and practice of excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment, unreasonable force and other misconduct designed to suppress the exercise of protected First Amendment rights, and unlawful searches and seizures in violation of the Fourth Amendment.

These findings are shocking. Moreover, the report released by the ACLU earlier this week corroborates these conclusions and further finds that in the face of the dire crime rate in Puerto Rico, rather than curbing the violence, the PRPD instead contributes to it.

This is important to note and relevant to this hearing because the PRPD is Puerto Rico’s primary law enforcement agency and in the absence of additional federal resources – which I admit is needed – the PRPD is large enough to fill the gap created by federal law enforcement shortages, if its house was in order.

While Members of this Committee and our Congressional colleagues work on improving DHS resources in Puerto Rico – and I lend my full support to this effort – I am interested in hearing from Gov. Fortuño on how he is upholding his obligation in Puerto Rico to revamp the PRPD.”

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