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## FEATURED Q&A

# Are U.S.-Central America Anti-Drug Efforts Working?



U.S. President Donald Trump recently accused Central American countries of "pouring drugs" into the United States. // File Photo: White House.

**Q** **Guatemalan Army officials confirmed on May 8 that, in cooperation with the U.S. Coast Guard, they had seized three tons of cocaine in international waters, the largest cocaine drug bust in Guatemalan history, the Associated Press reported. The bust comes after nearly two decades of cooperative drug enforcement initiatives between the United States and Central American partners, though President Donald Trump in February accused Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador of "pouring drugs" into the United States and threatened to cut off aid. How well are the United States and Central American countries cooperating to stop the drug trade? Is the U.S. strategy on counter-narcotics significantly different under the Trump administration? What more should the U.S. and its neighbors be doing to curb drug trafficking?**

**A** **Barry McCaffrey, president of BR McCaffrey Associates, retired U.S. Army four-star general and former director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy:** "The Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras is swamped with corruption, governmental incompetence, skyrocketing violence and extreme poverty. People there are in survival mode. If they can, they flee. Millions are now living in the United States, and half are undocumented. There is no justice; the courts, prisons, and police are incapable of dealing with thousands of brutal drug gang members. There is massive impunity; probably 95 percent of crime goes unpunished. Homicide rates are the highest in the world. Kidnappings and extortion are a constant threat. Ninety percent of the cocaine flows through the region.

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## Inmates Revolt at Venezuelan Prison

Inmates claimed they took control of the detention facility of Venezuela's intelligence agency, Sebin. The facility holds prisoners including U.S. citizen Joshua Holt, who was arrested in 2016.

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### ECONOMIC

## Colombia's GDP Grows 2.2 Percent in First Quarter

The country's economy improved in the first quarter, following just 1.8 percent growth for all of 2017. Lower inflation and interest rates, along with higher consumer confidence, were among the reasons that Bancolombia cited for the improvement.

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### POLITICAL

## Former First Lady Quits Mexico Presidential Race

Former Mexican First Lady Margarita Zavala ended her campaign for Mexico's presidency, a move that analysts say could boost the candidacy of National Action Party candidate Ricardo Anaya.

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Zavala // File Photo: Notimex.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Inmates Revolt at Prison of Venezuelan Intelligence Agency

Inmates at a Venezuelan prison rioted Wednesday and took control of the facility, demanding that the country's government free them, CNN reported. The Helicoide prison in Caracas, which is run by Venezuelan intelligence agency Sebin, holds hundreds of inmates, including many opponents of President Nicolás Maduro's government. The prisoners said in a video

**Videos appear to show inmates moving about the facility and unlocking cells.**

posted to Twitter that they had taken over the facility during the revolt, and videos appear to show inmates moving about the facility and unlocking cells. Venezuelan Prosecutor General Tarek William Saab said late Wednesday that authorities had sent a representative to the prison to respond to prisoners' demands, Reuters reported. The Helicoide facility also houses American Joshua Holt, who was jailed by Venezuela's government in 2016. Holt originally said on Wednesday that he "feared for his life" from the other prisoners, though in a later video he said, "the only people who are kidnapping me is the government of Venezuela." The U.S. Embassy in Caracas expressed concern via Twitter, saying, "Joshua Holt and other American citizens are in danger. The government of Venezuela is directly responsible for their safety and we will hold it responsible if something happens to them." The Venezuelan government detained Holt on weapons charges and conspiracy to overthrow the government, though Holt and U.S. officials have denied the claims. Venezuelan prisons are notoriously overcrowded, and a fire at a Valencia jail in March led to the deaths of 68 people, The New York Times reported.

## Former First Lady Drops Out of Mexico Presidential Race

Former Mexican First Lady Margarita Zavala dropped out of Mexico's presidential race on Wednesday, a move that could benefit conservative National Action Party candidate Ricardo Anaya, who is currently running in second place, The Wall Street Journal reported. Zavala, the wife former President Felipe Calderón, made the announcement in an interview recorded Wednesday at Televisa. The television network posted an excerpt of the program online. Zavala said she was withdrawing "out of a principle of congruence and political honesty, but also to allow the people who generously supported me the freedom to make their decision in this difficult contest." Last October, Zavala broke with the National Action Party, or PAN, and entered the race as an independent candidate following an internal dispute with Anaya. Following Zavala's announcement on Wednesday, the PAN and the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, both invited her to join their campaigns. Leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador is the front-runner, with a May 11-13 Consulta Mitofsky poll showing him with 44.5 percent support. Anaya trailed in the poll with 28 percent support, while the PRI's José Antonio Meade had 19.8 percent support. Independent candidate Jaime Rodríguez and Zavala trailed with 4 percent and 3.7 percent, respectively. Zavala has not yet endorsed another candidate, but people close to her have said that she might throw her support behind Anaya, The Wall Street Journal reported. Zavala's withdrawal came just ahead of this year's second presidential debate, which is to be held Sunday in Tijuana. Zavala's exit sparked a rally in the peso amid hopes from investors that her departure could boost the candidacies of Anaya or Meade, Bloomberg News reported. The peso recently fell to a one-year low amid investors' concern about López Obrador, who has floated proposals to delay some parts of the opening of the country's oil sector and also to cancel the project to build a new airport to serve Mexico City.

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Journalist Killed in Mexico's Tabasco State

Mexican radio journalist Juan Carlos Huerta was gunned down in his car in the southern state of Tabasco on Wednesday, the state's chief prosecutor said, Deutsche Welle reported. Authorities said the gunmen, who had sought out Huerta "to execute him," had escaped via backroads. Police shut down roads in an effort to catch the suspects. Mexico opened a record 29,168 new murder cases in 2017, and at least 32 journalists have been killed since the beginning of 2013.

## Guatemala's Morales Opens Embassy in Jerusalem

Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales inaugurated his country's new embassy in Jerusalem Wednesday, completing a move from Tel Aviv, the Associated Press reported. After Wednesday's official opening, which featured a speech by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Guatemala became the first to move its embassy following the United States' move earlier this week. The U.S. move led to protests by Palestinians, who dispute Israeli claims to Jerusalem.

## China-Based Tianqi Lithium Buys Stake in Chile's SQM

Chinese firm Tianqi Lithium reached a deal today to buy a 24 percent interest in Chilean lithium miner Sociedad Química y Minera, or SQM, for \$4.07 billion, the Financial Times reported. Tianqi takes over the shares from Canadian fertilizer giant Nutrien, which was forced to sell because of antitrust regulations. The government of former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet had filed a complaint to regulators over Tianqi's proposed \$5 billion deal for a 32 percent stake in March over antitrust concerns.

## Nicaragua's Ortega Berated in Talks With Opposition

Protesters jeered and berated Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega Wednesday in formal talks with civic groups and the country's opposition following deadly protests, the Associated Press reported. Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, arrived at a seminary on the outskirts of Managua along with a security detail of some 500 riot police for the talks, where they were met by protesters shouting, "Killers! Killers! Killers!" The talks, mediated by the Roman Catholic Church, followed a government crackdown on demonstrators, who were angry about social security cuts, in which more than 60 people were killed. Inside the event, protesters blasted Ortega. One student, Lesther Alemán, interrupted the president to shout that he must halt repression. "Order it now, at this moment, the repression of the police, of the paramilitary forces, of your party's gangs that have been massacring and killing ... In less than a month you've ruined the country; Somoza took years," said Alemán, referring to the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza, whose government Ortega's Sandinistas overthrew in 1979. Ortega responded, saying police were not repressing demonstrators, but rather trying to restore order. "You can't go around attacking police stations. Because it's not little angels out there—there are guns, too, shooting at police," said Ortega.

### ECONOMIC NEWS

## Colombia's Economy Grows 2.2% in Year's First Quarter

Colombia's economy grew 2.2 percent in the first quarter, as compared to the same period a year ago, the National Administrative Department of Statistics announced Wednesday,

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Colombia has seen an incredible increase in cocaine production since it stopped aerial spraying, though it continues to bravely confront internal criminal threats. They seize a huge amount of cocaine, but 85 percent gets out. Mexican cartels dominate the entire transnational criminal drug enterprise and are the principal criminal threat inside the United States. They produce 90 percent of the heroin and much of the meth in the United States. The United States has tried; thank God for the DEA. We have pumped \$10 billion into Columbia since 1999 with Plan Colombia and more than \$3 billion into Central America in ten years. However, the situation has never been worse. Poor Central America is a nightmare. There is no political will in the region, and the United States pays little attention to the problem. There is no hope."

**A** Gary J. Hale, drug policy expert at the Mexico Center and fellow at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice

**University:** "The seizure demonstrates that despite decades of multi-lateral counterdrug efforts between the United States and many Latin American nations, multi-ton cocaine shipments continue to make their way north, mostly uninterrupted. The continued flow of such massive amounts of cocaine call into question the efficacy and worth of U.S. assistance programs throughout the region. In the transit zone, the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) is a similar effort to the successful Plan Colombia. The difference between the success of Plan Colombia and the relatively nascent

according to Colombia Reports. The growth figure was below a consensus prediction of 2.4 percent, Reuters reported, but it was the same as a 2.2 percent forecast from Bancolombia, the country's largest bank. The country saw only 1.7 percent growth in its gross domestic product for all of 2017. Economic growth in the first quarter also was well above the 1.3

efforts of CARSI in Central America can be linked to several factors such as the lack of political will, rampant corruption and, of late, disdain for the U.S. government. The Trump administration's policy of reducing foreign aid and President Trump's personal bellicose criticism of governments in the transit zone erroneously attribute the source of cocaine

“**The Trump administration is absent on developing any additional, meaningful, cooperative counter-drug initiatives in Latin America...**”

— Gary J. Hale

to those transit nations instead of to the South American countries in the source zone. These criticisms lead those Central American nations to become tepid in their acceptance of U.S. funding and developmental assistance, and these attitudes in turn cause bilateral relationships to erode, except in counter-drug operations where the United States provides the intelligence that obligates partner nations, such as Guatemala, to act. The Trump administration is absent on developing any additional, meaningful, cooperative counter-drug initiatives in Latin America and appears to show little interest in continuing the efforts of the preceding Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations. The United States must share the blame for the lack of counterdrug policy success in

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percent growth in the first quarter of last year. On Wednesday, Bancolombia pointed to various factors for the improved growth in the first quarter of this year, including "the slowdown of inflation, the reduction in interest rates, the recovery in consumer and business confidence, the rebound in oil prices, and the greater room for maneuver from public spending."

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Latin America. Despite past assistance and funding programs offered to partner countries, significant failure can be attributed to ineffective U.S. leadership, which fails to provide long-term continuity in development of government policies that transcend the change of political parties. This is because both parties are quick to undo the work of previous opposing party administrations. Continuous policy reversals lead to inefficiencies, waste and a lack of meaningful success, generating confusion among partner nations. The inability of the United States to maintain continuity in counter-drug approaches contributes to the problem instead of helping to solve it.”

**A** **Maria Velez de Berliner, president of Latin Intelligence Corp.:** “Drug trafficking is but a component of a larger and accepted criminal ‘modus vivendi’ throughout Mexico and the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador). All cooperate with the United States on counterdrug policies because other aid from the United States, including military training, is tied to cooperation. President Trump speaks more loudly against drugs than his predecessors, threatening heavy-handed policies to counter drugs here and there. But drugs are still produced and exported to the United States because, when compared to other economic

activities, drug trafficking and criminality are the most lucrative ‘jobs’ accessible to hundreds of poor, uneducated, unskilled entrepreneurs eager to ‘make it’ regardless of risk. Drug money has supported, and continues to support and elect, presidents, senators, governors, mayors, sundry officials and powerful politicians in those countries. Economic problems should be fought with economics, not with laws and threats. Therefore, the United States should help Mexico and the Northern Triangle create legal, safe, viable and profitable job alternatives for those who see a way out of misery in drug trafficking and criminality. Also, the United States should help those countries effectively punish the higher-ups and ‘socially respectable’ individuals who look the other way and/or accept drug money, directly or indirectly, personally or through their businesses. Without the corruption, collusion and acquiescence of those who can do something about it, drug trafficking could not be the behemoth transnational criminal economy it is. The legalization of marijuana in some U.S. states and the country’s opioid epidemic leave the Trump administration on shaky ground to tell Mexico and the Triangle countries, ‘Stop drugs, or else.’ ”

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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