

Caribbean Initiative Has Its Limits

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The most profound problems that plague the countries of the Caribbean require transnational solutions. The region is both a destination and a point of transfer for everything from tourists to drugs, and as such its misfortunes are either expanding or contracting depending on forces often beyond the control of Caribbean governments.

Drug trafficking, arms trafficking and the return of deported criminals are the region's three most significant problems. In a communique after their meeting last week in Washington, President Bush and the leaders of 15 Caribbean nations agreed that they must face these threats and challenges together and build on successful partnerships to improve the region's security infrastructure.

Sometimes the region, in cooperation with the international community, gets things right, as it did this year with the World Cup of cricket. But for one incident -- the false suspicion of foul play in the death of Pakistan's coach, praise for the region's unprecedented security efforts seems deserved.

For 45 days this spring, World Cup action took place in nine nations of the Caribbean. With cricket powerhouses Pakistan, India and South Africa participating, organizers were concerned that the world's third largest sporting event would be a highly attractive target for terrorists.

Caribbean governments took the initiative early to get their military, police, customs, immigration and intelligence agencies to collaborate.

Washington, which traditionally takes a lead in counterdrug operations in the region, was asked to lend a hand.

Beginning in March of last year, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security provided training on counterterrorism, border security and other contingencies to Caribbean law enforcement agencies. Of particularly lasting significance was the fact that Caribbean governments tapped into the Advance Passenger Information System used by developed nations to screen travelers. U.S. officials confirmed that individuals on international watch lists were caught attempting to enter the region.

Official Washington seemed particularly pleased with the efforts.

Brian Nichols, director of the State Department's Office of Caribbean Affairs, said: "The Cricket World Cup was a great success logistically.

... The planning and preparation that they certainly led, and we supported, paid big dividends."

An event like the World Cup has the advantage of a neat beginning and an end that lends itself to easy determination of failure or success. The region's deeper problems are ongoing and entrenched. Their devastating effects remain largely unaddressed due to faltering international cooperation.

Andrew Morrison, lead economist at the World Bank and author of the report "Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs and Policy Options in the Caribbean," acknowledged that Caribbean countries can and have done a lot on their own. But their bigger problems -- drug trafficking, guns and deportees -- "require a response that transcends national and even regional boundaries," the report accurately argues.

Between 2001 and 2004, for instance, the United States, Canada and Britain deported an annual average of 2,700 convicts to Jamaica, more than half the country's entire prison population. This type of exportation of criminals, The World Bank warns, "could contribute to the building of transnational criminal networks." According to Morrison, the "exporting countries" would serve their own interests much better if they helped finance programs to reintegrate the deportees into their countries. Today, that cost is exclusively financed by Caribbean countries.

In recent years, U.S.-supported anti-drug efforts in Colombia have forced traffickers to find new routes for cocaine shipments, which has meant an exponential increase in cocaine passing through the Dutch Antilles. Authorities estimate that every day in 2003, an astonishing number of 80 to 100 passengers flying from the Dutch Antilles to Europe attempted to smuggle cocaine. While authorities managed to reduce that number to 10 a month by October 2005, they know that as long as European consumption continues they will never be able to declare complete victory.

Illegal drugs have brought an increased number of firearms from the U.S. to the region, increasing the availability of weapons for criminals.

Perhaps it should be no surprise that since 2002, Trinidad and Tobago's murder rate has doubled, and Jamaica now has one of the highest murder rates in the world.

The World Bank is right when it concludes that "preventing the illicit trafficking in light arms is a responsibility to be shared among the producing, selling, and destination states." The same could be said about illicit drugs that currently diverts scarce Caribbean resources from other important functions, such as crime prevention. For the time being, it seems, Caribbean nations shoulder more responsibility than they can bear.