



Testimony
of

James C. Harris III
Assistant Director
Homeland Security Investigations
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Regarding a Hearing
on

“From Cartels to Coastlines: An Examination of U.S. Federal Efforts to Confront Illicit Maritime Activities in U.S. Waters”

Before the

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security
Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement

June 10, 2025
Washington, DC

Chairman Gimenez, Chairman Guest, Ranking Member McIver, Ranking Member Correa, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, on behalf of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), we wish to express our appreciation to you for inviting us to this hearing today as well as for your time, attention, and steadfast commitment to protecting our Homeland security through your service in your respective committees.

I also thank you for the opportunity to discuss the exceptional and exhaustive efforts the men and women of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Homeland Security Investigations perform to safeguard our nation's security, public health, and economy against those criminals who seek to exploit, victimize, and compromise our great nation, our industries, and our critical infrastructure. I am truly honored to represent their exemplary service to our nation, which is proudly conducted in accordance with the principles of Honor, Service, and Integrity.

ICE Homeland Security Investigations History and Role

As one of our country's premier federal law enforcement agencies, Homeland Security Investigations, stands dedicated to protecting the United States through detecting and dismantling Transnational Criminal Organizations targeting the American people, threatening our businesses, abusing our financial institutions, and exploiting our prosperity. With our unique authorities and footprint, Homeland Security Investigations is perfectly situated to investigate and dismantle Transnational Criminal Organizations through the enforcement of over 400 federal laws. At Homeland Security Investigations, we are comprised of approximately 8,800 personnel across 243 domestic locations and more than 90 international locations, where we leverage more than 4,500 task force officers from various federal, state, tribal, territorial, local and international partners. Homeland Security Investigation's mission, as the principal investigative component of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is to combat a wide range of transnational crimes, including terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, human trafficking, child exploitation, human smuggling, and cybercrimes.

Under the Trump Administration, Homeland Security Investigations aggressively pursues investigations into criminal networks and activities which compromise the global supply chain. A key focus among these investigative efforts resides within the maritime environment. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration, *"about 99% of overseas trade enters or leaves the U.S. by ship. This waterborne cargo and associated activity contribute more than \$500 billion dollars to the U.S. GDP, generates over \$200 billion in annual port sector federal/state/local taxes and sustains over 10 million jobs."*¹ This vast amount of cargo movement allows Transnational Criminal Organizations the ability to exploit the global supply chain to smuggle contraband into the United States and around the globe.

Homeland Security Investigations works to identify, intercept, and eventually prosecute those exploiting maritime transportation and cargo supply chains. We utilize critical industry, open source, and law enforcement data, along with collaboration and information sharing among other federal, state, local, and international law enforcement agencies, to identify highly effective information to support criminal and civil investigations and enforcement activities primarily

¹ U.S. DOT Maritime Administration updated February 21, 2025
(<https://www.maritime.dot.gov/outreach/maritime-transportation-system-mts/maritime-transportation-system-mts>)

focused on the smuggling of illicit narcotics, such as fentanyl and precursor chemicals, weapons, sensitive U.S. military equipment, and dual-use technology, and the prevention of human smuggling, human trafficking, and drug trafficking.

Illegal drug smuggling is a global crime with local impacts. Illegal drugs — such as cocaine, methamphetamine, and synthetic opioids including fentanyl — largely come from other countries. Drug cartels and other Transnational Criminal Organizations employ complex schemes to evade detection as they attempt to smuggle their deadly products into the United States. Once here, local networks distribute and sell those drugs in our cities and on our streets — to our communities, our fellow citizens, and our loved ones — with devastating effects. In fiscal year 2025 alone, HSI investigations are credited with the seizure of over 501,036 lbs. of cocaine, 192,225 lbs. of precursor chemicals, 7,897 firearms, and the arrest of over 23,972 individuals.

Homeland Security Investigations fights daily to stem this terrible threat. Thanks to our efforts and those of our colleagues within DHS, illegal border crossings at the U.S. southern border are at a historic low. This has caused fentanyl seizures at our Ports of Entry to continue to fall. And as DHS personnel tighten border security at our land borders – cartels will continue to look for new ways to smuggle contraband and people into the United States, including through maritime means.

To combat those who seek to exploit our maritime environment, Homeland Security Investigations special agents work closely with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Coast Guard through interdiction and investigative efforts. With every successful interdiction – we leverage our expertise in conducting complex criminal investigations to identify the sources of supply, target the distribution hubs, and intercept financial networks to degrade and dismantle the entire transnational criminal organization.

As just one example of Homeland Security Investigation’s prioritization of maritime investigations and our commitment to partnerships, Homeland Security Investigations is a steadfast partner in the Organized Crime and Drug Enforcement Task Force’s Panama Express Strike Force. This prime example of a successful multi-agency operation is comprised of seven signatory partner agencies. Additionally, Panama Express Strike Force collaborates closely with the U.S. Department of Defense’s Southern Command Joint Interagency Task Force – South.

As an intelligence-driven, criminal enterprise combatting strike force, Panama Express Strike Force personnel have created and maintained one of law enforcement’s most robust, productive, and reliable human intelligence networks ever operated in Central and South America. The daily collection, analysis, and dissemination of highly actionable intelligence targets Transnational Criminal Organizations linked to designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. This intelligence also identifies operators involved in large-scale drug trafficking, money laundering, and related activities, primarily using maritime and air transportation conveyances.

The cycle of human intelligence employed by Panama Express Strike Force identifies Transnational Criminal Organizations operating in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean, disrupts their operations through maritime and air interdictions, develops witnesses and intelligence, and

dismantles the Transnational Criminal Organizations through strategic utilization of all developed evidence. This approach has produced historical law enforcement results.

It is important to note that drugs are not the only forms of contraband encountered in the maritime environment. Most of the cargo entering the United States from foreign countries arrives via maritime vessels. As such, Homeland Security Investigations routinely encounters counterfeit and mis-manifested cargo, which, if allowed to enter the commerce of the United States, can have devastating impacts on public safety and the U.S. economy.

Additionally, maritime human smuggling continues to pose a serious threat to both national security and human life. Human smugglers routinely exploit vulnerabilities along the United States' maritime borders, often utilizing overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels that place migrants, many of them women and children, at significant risk. These operations are frequently organized by Transnational Criminal Organizations operating off the coasts of California, Florida, and U.S. territories in the Caribbean. Homeland Security Investigations prioritizes the investigation of high-impact smuggling organizations through two key initiatives: Joint Task Force Alpha and the Extraterritorial Criminal Travel program. In coordination with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the U.S. Department of Justice Criminal Division, Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section, and other law enforcement partners, these programs focus on dedicating investigative, analytical, and prosecutorial resources to dismantle the highest priority of human smuggling organizations and their affiliated networks.

A recent example underscores the heartbreaking human cost of these Transnational Criminal Organizations. On May 5, 2025, a panga-style vessel carrying 16 migrants, including two minors, capsized and washed ashore near Torrey Pines, San Diego. Rescue efforts managed to identify six survivors but tragically, three Indian nationals lost their lives and seven others remain missing. Homeland Security Investigations is currently investigating this smuggling event.

During this investigation, as with our other investigations, Homeland Security Investigations targets every aspect of the criminal enterprise, from the recruiters and transporters to the organizers, financiers, and ultimately the leaders. This may include tracing the illicit funds used to purchase vessels, the freezing or forfeiture of connected bank accounts, the tracking of complicit commercial vessels, or the interceptions of communication devices.

These techniques, along with many others, are often most notably deployed through Homeland Security Investigation's capitalization of our unique authorities to employ a multi-layered strategy that integrates intelligence, operational coordination, and international cooperation within the task-force methodology. Traditionally exemplified through our Border Enforcement Security Task Forces units, and our Transnational Criminal Investigative Units, Homeland Security Investigations task forces bring together federal, state, local and international partners to target criminal networks along U.S. coastlines, among other threat areas. Additionally, we rely on U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine Operations, and the U.S. Navy, to ensure the rapid response capability and maritime intelligence sharing. Globally, there are 115 Border Enforcement Security Task Forces units located across the United States, Puerto Rico, Guam, Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, comprised of more than 1,500 task

force officers and personnel representing more than 200 federal, state, local, tribal, and international law enforcement agencies, and National Guard units. There are over 600 foreign law enforcement officers and prosecutors assigned to 14 Transnational Criminal Investigative Units and three International Task Force units operating in 17 countries worldwide. Together, these partnerships exponentially multiply Homeland Security Investigation's ability to affect investigative outcomes, disrupt criminal activity, and protect the Homeland and our allies. Building upon these two highly successful programs, under Executive Order 14159, signed by President Trump on January 20, 2025, Homeland Security Investigation and partners from the U.S. Department of Justice have taken steps to establish Homeland Security Task Forces, in all states and U.S. territories. Homeland Security Task Forces are charged with investigating, prosecuting, and removing criminal cartels, foreign gangs, and Transnational Criminal Organizations operating in the United States. Homeland Security Task Forces coordination of activities comes through a national coordination center in collaboration with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Administration, other federal law enforcement partners, U.S. Attorney's Offices, and relevant state, tribal, territorial, and local law enforcement agencies. Each Homeland Security Task Force targets the most prolific Foreign Terrorist Organization targets. The Homeland Security Task Force network aligns with Executive Orders 14159 and 14157 and is focused on dismantling cross-border human smuggling and human trafficking networks, especially those involving children, and enforcing U.S. immigration laws.

Conclusion

Maritime security is especially challenging as the U.S. government must protect over 12,400 miles of maritime borders. Transnational Criminal Organizations constantly probe maritime borders for gaps to smuggle people, hundreds of thousands of pounds of illegal narcotics, dangerous weapons, illicit proceeds, and other contraband into the United States. Homeland Security Investigations uses this challenge to embody the dedication and service the American people expect and deserve. Our employees strive daily to achieve our mission and to ensure the safety and security of this great nation, its people, and its economic prosperity.

Chairman Guest, Chairman Gimenez, and esteemed Committee members, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and for your continued support of Homeland Security Investigations and our efforts to safeguard America and its people by disrupting and dismantling Transnational Criminal Organizations throughout the world. On behalf of the men and women of Homeland Security Investigations, I would like to extend an invitation to the members of both committees and their staff to visit our various facilities and engage with personnel from our headquarters components located here in the National Capitol Region as well as our domestic and international offices to garner firsthand knowledge of Homeland Security Investigations' operations and the diverse array of challenges we continuously face.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.