

Security concerns vital to US-Caribbean relations

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In January 2005, the United Nations Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) convened in Mauritius to review the 1994 Barbados Plan of Action (BPA). Two new emerging issues - HIV/AIDS and security - were identified as threatening the sustainable development of SIDS.

The BPA focused their attention on vulnerable island states and the donor community on developmental and environmental issues, including the debilitating effects of climate change and seasonal natural disasters, which profoundly affected their sustainability and survival. The Asian tsunami and the 2004 hurricane and typhoon seasons provided a backdrop to the conference.

Although implementation of the BPA had fallen behind the targets of 1994, all concerned remained committed to the program. The review highlighted the need for more concerted and accelerated efforts by the SIDS, and increased resources and assistance from the donor community to respond to development needs exacerbated by frequent natural disasters and increasing environmental degradation.

HIV/AIDS and security were not on the 1994 agenda. Unlike recognition of the HIV/AIDS pandemic's potential to wreak havoc on the economies of many island states, counter-terrorism security-related issues were not a priority.

The events of September 11, 2001 shifted the security paradigm, bringing into focus its potential effect on sustainable development. The donor community has been slow in recognizing the security development nexus; likewise in reacting to new security dynamics on the sustainable development of SIDS.

The post-9/11 period placed urgent demands on all states to improve their security infrastructure. Many developing countries resisted the idea of expending scarce resources on counter-terrorism measures. The donor community, while concentrating on development assistance, failed to connect security to development.

In some cases donors found it politically expedient to ignore security assistance needs partly in response to some recipient countries' strong reservations to the possible diversion of development assistance to a counter-terrorism driven, rather than a development, agenda.

This has resulted in failure to recognize the effects of security deficiencies on the development prospects of island states, hence not according security an appropriate level of priority, thereby omitting security from the development agenda.

The perception is that security, particularly as it relates to terrorism, is a matter affecting a few states rather than as a critical element of sustainable development. However, this view is rapidly changing, as many now see security for island states as by no means limited to combating terrorism, but as fundamental to their economic survival.

While underscoring the potential impact of a terrorist act on an island state, and on the region in which it is located, a lack of security also provides the potential for abuse by international criminal networks.

Without international security standards in critical areas linking each island to the international community, the island becomes increasingly vulnerable to potentially disastrous consequences. It increases the possibility of being used to stage a terrorist attack against so-called "target states", and exposes it to abuse by international criminal networks for illicit traffic in arms, drug trafficking, smuggling, and money laundering.

The Mauritius conference highlighted the nexus between security and development, officially recognizing that the sustainable development of island states is threatened by security deficiencies in critical areas of their infrastructure.

Their vulnerabilities are underscored by lack of security-related expertise and resources. It is timely for the development community to recognize this correlation between security and development by targeting more resources to security capacity building.

This should be done without diverting development funds away from other critical needs, and requires the creation of new funding facilities for security. The security needs of Caribbean island states are viewed in this context.

Recognized as America's third border, the islands of the Caribbean bear a special relationship to the United States. The islands' tourism and trade, and ability to attract investment, all critical areas of their economies, require a favorable environment.

This includes security from potential terrorist attacks against the citizens and economic interests of the United States hosted by the islands. The rationale, though quite apparent, is not taken sufficiently into consideration when determining levels of funding and assistance programs for the Caribbean by the United States, other donor countries, and the international financial institutions.

The Caribbean islands, largely dependent on American tourists, stand to benefit significantly from increased tourism as American citizens shun travel to distant destinations in response to real and perceived threats to their safety. American travelers increasingly factor in security when choosing their destinations, and feel less threatened by travel closer to home.

Similarly, trading in goods and services with North America require exporting states to employ measures securing the international supply chain.

Enhanced security capacity in customs, port facilities, and migration control throughout the Caribbean islands are required in order to reduce their vulnerability to abuse by terrorists and other international criminal networks, and the potential to become a vehicle for targeting other states through smuggling of WMDs and other sensitive materials.

It includes improved security measures in airports to ensure that criminals and terrorists do not pass undetected; centralized computer data bases; travel documents meeting acceptable international standards; and security to ensure the safe berthing of, and service to cruise ships.

A number of Caribbean islands have made significant security advances, responding within their limited resources. There is considerable political will, yet much more needs to be done.

Many struggle to deal with the effects of drug trafficking and the illicit trade of firearms, both linked to the United States, which are causing significant increases in criminal activities within their territories.

Already burdened by significant debt, the devastating consequences of hurricane disasters, and the adverse terms of trade for agricultural products such as sugar and bananas, these island states have very limited resources available to them for security capacity building.

They need an increased level of assistance targeted specifically to their security deficiencies. The United States has a special interest in the security and sustainable development of the region, and an equally special responsibility to assist.

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