

Navy, Coast Guard to Surge Drug-Interdiction Support to SOUTHCOM



Chief Hospital Corpsman Bianca McQueen briefs contractors on COVID-19 mitigation tactics on the flight deck of the Freedom-variant littoral combat ship USS Detroit while in port in Key West, Florida. Detroit is deployed to the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility to help counter drug trafficking. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Anderson W. Branch

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy and Coast Guard will surge ships and aircraft to the U.S. Southern Command’s area of responsibility to counter increased cartel drug running amid the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump and Defense Department officials announced.

At an April 1 press briefing at the White House, Trump announced that SOUTHCOM “will increase surveillance, disruption and seizures of drug shipments and provide additional support for eradication efforts, which are going on right now at a record pace.”

“We’re deploying additional Navy destroyers, [littoral] combat ships, aircraft and helicopters; Coast Guard cutters; and Air Force surveillance aircraft, doubling our capabilities in the region,” he added. “Very importantly, our forces are fully equipped with personnel protective equipment, and we’ve taken additional safety measures to ensure our troops remain healthy.”

[#COVID19](#) will not stop the [@DeptofDefense](#) from protecting the American people from illegal drugs. At the direction of the [@POTUS](#), additional U.S. ships, aircraft, and security forces are underway to disrupt narcotics trafficking.

pic.twitter.com/BFTbxqcFGn

– Archive: Dr. Mark T. Esper (@EsperDoD) [April 1, 2020](#)

Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at the briefing that “we came upon some intelligence some time ago that the drug cartels, as a result of COVID-19, were going to try to take advantage of the situation and try to infiltrate additional drugs into our country. As we know, 70,000 Americans die on an average annual basis to drugs. That’s unacceptable. We’re at war with COVID-19, we’re at war with terrorists, and we are at war with the drug cartels as well.”

“This is the United States military,” Milley added. “You will not penetrate this country. You will not get past Jump Street. You’re not going to come in here and kill additional Americans. And we will marshal whatever assets are required to prevent your entry into this country to kill Americans.”

Attending the briefing as well was Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who added: “This initiative is part of the administration’s whole-of-government approach to combating the flow of illicit drugs into the United States and protecting the American people from their scourge.”

Esper said the additional forces would “nearly double our capacity to conduct counter-narcotics operations in the region. Last year alone, United States Southern Command’s operations resulted in the seizure of over 280 metric tons of drugs, much of which was designated for shipment to America.”

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In a tweet that day, Esper posted a briefing slide listing in more detail the types of forces that would be surged into the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific areas off the coast of Central and South America.

The list included Navy destroyers and littoral combat ships, Coast Guard cutters, Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and Air Force E-3 Sentry and E-8 Joint STARS surveillance aircraft. The destroyers and littoral combat ships carry MH-60 Seahawk helicopters, while some Coast Guard cutters carry MH-65 Dolphin helos.